



Strathprints Institutional Repository

Brandenburg, Heinz and Johns, Robert (2013) *The declining representativeness of the British party system, and why it matters*. Political Studies, n/a (n/a). n/a. ISSN 0032-3217

Strathprints is designed to allow users to access the research output of the University of Strathclyde. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. You may not engage in further distribution of the material for any profitmaking activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute both the url (<http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/>) and the content of this paper for research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge.

Any correspondence concerning this service should be sent to Strathprints administrator: <mailto:strathprints@strath.ac.uk>

The Declining Representativeness of the British Party System, and Why It Matters

Heinz Brandenburg

University of Aberdeen

Robert Johns

University of Essex

In a recent article, Michael Laver has explained ‘Why Vote-Seeking Parties May Make Voters Miserable’. His model shows that, while ideological convergence may boost congruence between governments and the median voter, it can reduce congruence between the party system and the electorate as a whole. Specifically, convergence can increase the mean distance between voters and their nearest party. In this article we show that this captures the reality of today’s British party system. Policy scale placements in British Election Studies from 1987 to 2010 confirm that the pronounced convergence during the past decade has left the Conservatives and Labour closer together than would be optimal in terms of minimising the policy distance between the average voter and the nearest major party. We go on to demonstrate that this comes at a cost. Respondents who perceive themselves as further away from one of the major parties in the system tend to score lower on satisfaction with democracy. In short, vote-seeking parties have left the British party system less representative of the ideological diversity in the electorate, and thus made at least some British voters miserable.

Keywords: representation; policy convergence; British politics; satisfaction with democracy

Crisis might be overstating the point, but party politics in Britain is not in rude health. Fewer voters report a feeling of attachment to a political party, and the proportion reporting strong attachments has declined especially sharply (Denver *et al.*, 2012, pp. 70–1). Despite an electoral system strongly discouraging votes for parties other than the Conservatives and Labour, the proportion of votes won by those parties has fallen from over 90 per cent in the 1960s to less than 70 per cent in recent elections (Denver *et al.*, 2012, p. 2). When the precipitous decline in turnout is taken into account, the electoral hold of these parties looks even shakier. Recent British Election Studies (BES) also show that feeling thermometer ratings for the Conservatives and Labour show a noticeable cooling trend, and that general evaluations of political parties and elections are not complimentary (Clarke *et al.*, 2004, pp. 290–1; 2009, ch. 8). The competition between the major parties at election time leaves a growing proportion of citizens unimpressed.

In this article we suggest that one reason is an increasingly unrepresentative party system. Ideological convergence not only leaves the major British parties less distinct and thus narrows choice; it can also leave the average voter further in terms of ideological distance from the nearest party with a realistic chance of governing. That variable – distance from the nearest major party – is at the heart of this article. We argue that it provides an additional yardstick of representation, beyond the usual concern with congruence between government and the median voter. Further, it has the potential to shape broader system orientations. Independent of election outcomes and government performance, voters may derive satisfaction with democracy from a sense that their opinions are at least represented by a contender for office.

Both the theoretical and empirical sections fall into two main parts. First, we consider how the British party system should be structured in order to maximise representation of the ideological dispersion in the electorate. Put another way: what configuration of the two major parties would minimise the average distance between voters and their nearest major party?¹ Second, we consider the extent to which this matters in terms of citizens' satisfaction with democracy. We show that the dramatic convergence of recent years has left many voters 'ideologically disenfranchised' – that is, a long distance from their nearest significant party – and that this has indeed taken a toll on democratic satisfaction. While our empirical focus is on Britain, there are grounds for expecting similar findings wherever the major contenders, in their pursuit of the median voter, have left a party system that neglects ideological diversity among voters.

Representation, Parties and Party Systems

The concept of representation is at the heart of electoral politics (Pitkin, 1972). Yet it remains contested in important respects. Outside the focus on *descriptive* representation, concerning the extent to which different segments of society, such as women and ethnic or linguistic minorities, are given a voice or a presence in parliaments (e.g. Banducci *et al.*, 2004; Celis and Childs, 2008; Pitkin, 1972, ch. 4), the emphasis of electoral researchers is largely on substantive or policy representation. Although this stems from empirical analyses of issue voting, the concern is largely a normative one, namely the extent to which parties or governments manage to represent or respond to the policy preferences of voters (Adams and Merrill, 1999; Blais and Bodet, 2006; Huber and Powell, 1994; Miller and Stokes, 1963; Powell, 2004; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999). Almost invariably, scholars have assessed dyadic relationships: between candidates and their electoral districts (Miller and Stokes, 1963), between voters and parties (Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999) or between governments and the electorate (Huber and Powell, 1994). The latter investigates whether governments enact the popular will – and how well institutional arrangements ensure as much.

In those models, the popular will is typically represented by the median voter. As Matt Golder and Jacek Stramski (2010, p. 90) summarise, 'the predominant way to conceptualize and measure citizen–representative congruence is in terms of the absolute ideological distance between the median citizen and the government'. Representation is thus understood in terms of what those authors call 'absolute median citizen congruence'.

The logic underlying these models is clear and G. Bingham Powell concludes that '[t]he appropriate normative standard for the congruence of citizens and policymakers is the position of the median citizen' (Powell, 2000, p. 164). But there are limitations to the 'commonality' approach of focusing on governments and the mean or median voter. It neglects all information about the distribution of citizen preferences – that is, about whether and how opinions vary. As such, it implies consensus, downplays ideological divisions and thus gives an incomplete account of the representative capacity of political parties. While parties are widely acknowledged as the crucial linkage between public preferences and policy making, most clearly so in the 'responsible party' model of representation (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Powell, 2004; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999), the focus remains on governments. It is by gaining office and enacting their programmes that parties

are held to represent their voters. The notion that parties might fulfil representative functions while in opposition is largely ignored.

Where studies have assessed the representativeness of political parties, as opposed to governing parties or coalitions, the concern has generally been with the dyadic relationship – specifically the policy congruence – between parties and their voters (e.g. Adams and Merrill, 1999; Dalton, 1985; Miller *et al.*, 1999; Wessels, 2011). However, alongside this dyadic approach to representation, an ‘equally valid tradition exists that views representation in terms of institutions collectively representing a people’ (Weissberg, 1978, p. 535). This tradition has long historical roots and can be traced back to political philosophers like J. S. Mill (see Golder and Stramski, 2010, pp. 95ff.) Collective representation received further theoretical consideration by Jane Mansbridge, for whom what she labelled ‘surrogate representation thus focuses not on the dyadic relation between representative and constituent but on the system-wide composition of the legislature ... and shifts normative scrutiny from constituent-oriented accountability to systemic inequities in representation’ (Mansbridge, 2003, p. 524).

This highlights two alternative and potentially contrary normative aspirations: ‘one-to-many’ representation which embodies conventional analysis of congruence between governments and citizens (or the responsible party dyad between parties or candidates and their respective voters), and ‘many-to-many’ representation which captures ‘the ideal of having a legislature that accurately reflects the ideological preferences of the citizenry as a whole’ (Golder and Stramski, 2010, p. 91). In the context of political parties, the second aspiration calls for attention not only to the representativeness of individual parties – in or out of government – but also to the representativeness of the overall *party system*.

The core difficulty in conceptualising many-to-many representation, or the representativeness of party systems, lies in the fact that voters are continuously distributed – whether normally or otherwise – across the entire ideological spectrum, whereas parties are few and (sometimes) far between. The task is therefore to establish how the distribution of a small number of parties – maybe only two and never more than single figures if we consider only pivotal parties – matches with the continuous distribution of an entire society. Golder and Stramski (2010, pp. 96ff.) deal with this by means of cumulative distribution functions (CDFs) for both citizens and party systems, and then measuring how much the area between the two CDFs differs from zero. However, this does artificially convert a highly discontinuous small-N distribution of parties into a continuous distribution, weighted by party size.

We argue that this can be avoided by a much simpler means of conceptualising and, ultimately, operationalising party system representativeness. Basically, for any number of parties and any continuous distribution of citizens along an ideological or policy dimension, those parties can be arranged along that dimension so that *the mean distance of a citizen from his or her nearest party is minimised*. As a simple example, imagine six voters being uniformly distributed along a six-point policy dimension: that is, one located at each of the six points. If there are two parties, party system representativeness would be maximised with the two parties at points 2 and 5. No voter would be more than one point away from a party, and the total sum – and thus the mean – of voter–party distances is minimised. Thus, while party system representativeness is an aggregate-level concept, on this reading it is

operationalised via an individual-level indicator: the average distance of a citizen from his or her nearest party.

As that simple example highlights, the maximally representative party system may be quite different from any Downsian competitive equilibrium. That is the crux of our argument: that competition for votes does not necessarily preserve the normative ideal in terms of party system representativeness. Were the two parties to move to points 3 and 4 in the spectrum, the mean distance-to-nearest-party among voters at points 2–5 would be unchanged but the two voters at the extreme points would see their policy representation reduced.

Studies of party systems have rarely focused on their representative properties, let alone the version of representativeness outlined just above. Two exceptions, the studies by Gary Cox (1990) and André Blais and Marc Bodet (2006), show that proportional representation – especially in its more permissive forms – encourages not only a larger number but also a more ideologically diverse range of parties. Golder and Stramski (2010) take these analyses a stage further by distinguishing the two forms of congruence contrasted earlier. They show that, while proportional representation fails to improve absolute or relative congruence between *governments* and the citizenry, it does generate greater congruence between *legislatures* and voters. Using Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) data, they show a negative relationship between Michael Gallagher's (1991) measure of disproportionality and the degree of identity between voter and legislator distributions in a one-dimensional left–right policy space (Golder and Stramski, 2010, pp. 101–5).²

While Golder and Stramski's operationalisation of party system representativeness differs somewhat from ours, the two have enough in common that we would expect a similar pattern: that is, proportional representation would tend to reduce the mean distance between voters and their nearest party. This has clear implications for the British case. Whether or not the strongly majoritarian system results in governments that represent the median voter's policy preferences, it is unlikely to foster a party system representing the diverse preferences within the electorate. The incentives for parties to converge ideologically under such arrangements were famously set out by Anthony Downs (1957), as are the centrifugal incentives operating in proportional systems (Cox, 1990). However, the consequences of Downsian spatial logic for representation – in particular, collective representation by parties – have been less thoroughly rehearsed. We address this in the next section, paying close attention to the microeconomic underpinnings of the Downsian model and their welfare implications.

Ideological Convergence and the Representativeness of the Party System

The Downsian spatial model was derived from Harold Hotelling's (1929) one-dimensional model of economic competition. Hotelling's starting point was the tendency for markets to deviate from perfect competition in the direction of oligopoly or monopoly. That raises the question of how these few larger firms compete with one another. Hotelling's core conclusion – that firms will tend to cluster together – is perhaps better remembered than his subsidiary point, that *such clustering is socially inefficient*. The socially optimal positioning of sellers, namely that which minimises the transportation charges paid by all customers

overall, is unachievable under capitalism – this is ‘the wastefulness of private profit-seeking management’ (Hotelling, 1929, pp. 53–4). While individual sellers choose profit-maximising locations, the average customer has to travel further than if those sellers were more dispersed along Main Street.

While Hotelling’s main focus was on transportation costs, his model can be generalised beyond physical distances to other differences between products: that is, to other sources of *horizontal differentiation*. Horizontally differentiated products vary on some key dimension, such as the sweetness of cider, along which public tastes also vary. As a result, different customers prefer different products (Lancaster, 1975; Shaked and Sutton, 1987). The contrast is with *vertically differentiated* products, which vary only in characteristics like freshness that are uniformly appreciated by consumers. Preferences here are uniform in that, with prices held equal, all customers prefer the same cider (Constantatos and Perrakis, 1997; Wauthy, 1996). Hotelling shows that the products of profit-seeking firms will be less horizontally differentiated on any dimension than is socially optimal given the breadth of public tastes.

Subsequent economic literature refines this conclusion, identifying different styles of imperfect competition with different patterns of product differentiation. Under monopolistic competition, individual sellers control one particular segment of the market, cater only for the tastes of that segment, and thus are unlikely either greatly to expand their market share or to lose much of it at the margins. Such competition actually leads to *too much* differentiation in terms of the distance – however measured – between consumers and their nearest product (Lancaster, 1975, p. 585). The contrasting result outlined by Hotelling emerges when sellers adopt expansionist strategies, seeking to monopolise the sector. This requires firms to cater to common preferences across the market rather than to the tastes of different segments, and the outcome is *too little* horizontal product differentiation (Constantatos and Perrakis, 1997). It is well known that successful monopolists can hold output below and prices above the welfare-maximising points; the point here is that competition for monopoly also reduces welfare by narrowing the range of products available to consumers (Marris and Mueller, 1980, p. 50).

As noted earlier, this economic reasoning is familiar to political scientists through the Downsian spatial model, but its welfarist implications may be less familiar. The latter have been the focus of recent work by Michael Laver and Ernest Sergenti (2012; see also Laver, 2011). They depart from the simple normative assumption that a socially optimal representative system is one that minimises the sum of all policy distances between each voter and his or her closest party. Perfect representativeness (summed policy distances of zero) would only be achieved ‘if there is a party with a policy position at the ideal point of each voter’ (Laver, 2011, p. 494). This is neither achievable nor desirable: electoral markets no more approximate perfect competition than do economic markets, and in any case such fragmentation would inhibit governance. But it provides a meaningful ultimate standard, a social welfare function, against which the representativeness of party systems – modelled or real – can be judged. And it is the basis for our definition of that representativeness as the average distance between a voter and his or her nearest major party.

Laver and Sergenti (2012) go on to set out the different competitive strategies open to political parties, depending on political goals, and estimate the impact of these strategies on

the representativeness of legislatures. They distinguish three decision rules or types of party: ‘stickers’, which never change policy position; ‘hunters’, which are vote seeking and reposition opportunistically; and ‘aggregators’, which move only along with their existing support, trying to capture the ideal policy positions of current supporters rather than trying to attract new followers. Modelling the consequences of such decision rules, Laver and Sergenti (2012) and Laver (2011) find that any vote-seeking strategy results in suboptimal representation. The more vote-seeking parties that operate in a party system, the less differentiated their ideological products, and the less representative is the party system. It is aggregators, those parties that focus on representing their current supporters, which help increase representativeness of legislatures. Just as its economic equivalent emerges in monopolistic competition with a segmented market, so the closest approximations to the ideal-type aggregator are traditional parties in cleavage-based systems of segmented representation. It is therefore easy to see why the well-documented transition of many such parties into ‘catch-all’ parties (Kirchheimer, 1966) – a change from monopolistic competition between aggregators to competition for monopoly between hunters – will have weakened representativeness over time, and thus reduced social welfare.³

A final stage in Laver’s (2011) work is also important for present purposes. Since transportation charges accruing from distance from the nearest seller are the market equivalent of distances of voters from the nearest party in the policy space, Hotelling’s model pointed towards the socially ideal positioning of parties in a two-party system. And Laver calculates that, assuming a normal distribution of voter preferences, optimal representation would result from parties located ‘at about -0.8 and $+0.8$ standard deviations from the mean voter ideal point’ (Laver, 2011, p. 494). We explore such calculations further in this article, based on the actual distribution of British voters.

Consequences of an Unrepresentative Party System

The title of Laver’s (2011) article, ‘Why Vote-Seeking Parties May Make Voters Miserable’, makes explicit one of the core hypotheses of this article: that the unrepresentativeness of a party system resulting from ideological convergence carries a cost in terms of citizen satisfaction with electoral democracy. There is suggestive evidence in support of this argument from Harold Clarke *et al.* (2009, pp. 300–2), whose model of democratic satisfaction included linear and quadratic terms for left–right self-placement. They found clear curvilinearity, with satisfaction highest among those placing themselves towards the centre of the scale. This is consistent with the claim that dissatisfaction is triggered partly by convergence. However, this analysis considered only self-placements, whereas our central arguments concern the relationships between voters and the party system.

A recent study by Lawrence Ezrow and Georgios Xezonakis (2011), based on twelve European countries over the period 1976–2003, undermines the notion that vote-seeking parties make voters miserable. They calculate how far in left–right terms the average party position falls from the mean voter (using Comparative Manifestos Project data for the parties and the Eurobarometer’s left–right scale for voters). The core finding from their longitudinal analysis is that, as the average party moves closer to the mean voter, satisfaction with democracy increases. This is aggregate-level evidence and, as such, does not directly address our research questions about how an individual’s perceptions of representational

distances will affect his or her satisfaction with democracy. Nonetheless, since the thrust of our argument is at odds with Ezrow and Xezonakis' (2011, p. 1171) conclusion that 'citizens are more content with convergent outcomes than with divergent ones', it is worth considering why we suspect that ideological convergence might erode satisfaction. After all, at least on a narrow conception of rationality, voters will rationally be concerned only with policy outputs and, as such, only with the representativeness of governing parties as in the standard models.

Our core argument is about voters deriving democratic satisfaction from finding some close representation of their policy preferences in parliament, whether from the opposition or the governing party. A closely related notion is encapsulated in the CSES question 'Would you say that any of the parties in [country] represent your views reasonably well?'⁴ We might reasonably expect those answering 'yes' to this question to show greater satisfaction with democracy (to some extent independently of whether the party in question reaches power). Conversely, a feeling that even the nearest party is far distant is likely to weaken any sense of electoral efficacy, and indeed Bernhard Wessels (2011, p. 106) finds that those answering 'no' were much less likely to endorse the capacity of elections to represent citizens' views. There is a parallel here with party identification. Partisanship is positively associated with satisfaction with electoral democracy, again independently of whether the party gains office (Clarke *et al.*, 2004, p. 306). Attachment to the system is fostered by a feeling, not necessarily instrumental, of connection to one of the key players. Party identification is probably stronger glue than spatial representation but, for the growing number of voters with little or no partisan attachment, the next best thing might be to feel that at least one of the parties shares their policy outlook. As we will show in the first step of our analysis, such proximity between individual voters and parties is maximised by a diverse party system, and becomes eroded under policy convergence.

The main argument, then, does not require voters to value a diverse party system as such. Party system diversity matters because, even if ideologically diverse citizens care only about proximity to their own nearest party, this proximity at the individual level can only be accomplished through policy divergence at system level. However, it is at least worth considering whether voters place a value directly on party system diversity. Economists show that merely having choices carries intrinsic satisfactions (Langer and Rodin, 1976; Ryan and Deci, 2000).⁵ Applying this to electoral politics, we might expect any given voter's appreciation of a party system to depend in part on its ideological diversity. Yet there is a caveat that applies in the electoral context, since voters often end up 'consuming' the products of a party that they did not choose. Being on the losing side in elections is known to dampen satisfaction with democracy, especially in majoritarian systems where the unwanted winner can govern alone (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Blais and G lineau, 2007). That effect seems likely to be stronger if the defeat ushers in an ideologically distant party. Whether the benefits of choice outweigh the risks is an empirical question that we address in this article. Ezrow and Xezonakis' (2011) results suggest that they do not: it was convergence, which narrows choice but also reduces risk, that was associated with greater democratic satisfaction.

That final point recalls the more restrictive account of representation with which we started. More representative party systems might be thought to come at a cost in terms

of congruence between governments and the median voter. However, any apparent tension between the two forms of representation is eased if elections are considered as a continuous process rather than individually. Over time, congruence between government and the larger public can be accomplished by alternation of left-of-centre and right-of-centre governments. As James Stimson (1991) and Christopher Wlezien (1995) show, electorates respond systematically to non-centrist policies by developing demand for the opposing view, which can result in a broadly symmetrical oscillation of administrations around the median position. Given the potential benefits of feeling represented and perceiving choice, achieving congruence through alternation may well do more for satisfaction than the alternative in which governing parties continuously take centrist positions. Electoral competition in such a party system, where the main parties have converged such that vertical differentiation is the only basis for choice, is known as valence politics (Stokes, 1963; 1992; see also Green, 2007). In the concluding section, we consider the extent to which valence competition can generate satisfaction even in an unrepresentative party system.

Hypotheses, Data and Measures

Our empirical analysis falls into two parts. First, we assess the representativeness of the British party system over the past six elections. These represent a period (from 1987 to 2010) during which both major parties have been widely seen – by commentators, by those measuring party placements via manifestos (Bara, 2010) and, as we shall see, by voters – as converging ideologically to the point where little difference remains between them. In Laver and Sergenti's (2012) terms, both parties resembled 'aggregators' in the 1980s while both moved towards the 'hunter' type throughout the 1990s and 2000s. As James Adams *et al.* (2011) show, this dramatic depolarisation among the parties has been accompanied by only modest convergence among voters. We therefore hypothesise:

H1. The *perceived* gap between the major parties is narrower than the *optimal* gap.

This amounts to an empirical test of the computational models in Laver (2011) and Laver and Sergenti (2012), measuring how far from the optimum the British party system actually falls. If this hypothesis is confirmed, then the mean distance to a voter's nearest party would be reduced if the parties moved apart.

This hypothesis is tested on BES data from those six elections. For the longitudinal analysis, representational distances are calculated using self- and party placements on an eleven-point policy scale. Respondents were asked: 'Using the 0 to 10 scale, where 0 means *government should cut taxes and spend much less on health and social services*, and 10 means *government should raise taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services*, where would you place yourself/the parties?' (Only respondents who placed themselves and both major parties on the scale were retained in the analyses.)⁶ We reverse code the scale so that, when the data are graphed, the left-wing position appears on the left. We were unable to use left–right placement scales for the longitudinal analysis because these were omitted from the earlier BES in the sequence. However, the tax–spending scale does capture a core dimension of left–right and it bears on a number of issues that were routinely salient in the elections covered.

The second stage of analysis is to test whether the hypothesised deficit in representation matters. Our primary concern is whether the closer voters perceive themselves to one of the major parties in the system the more satisfied they are with democracy (H2). Of secondary concern but also worth testing is the more speculative suggestion that those perceiving a wider gap between the major parties – and, thus, a broader ideological choice – will be more satisfied. However, our earlier arguments about monopolistic competition, along with the possibility that voters anticipate the cost of major policy reversals, suggest a turning point at which more choice no longer adds to and may even detract from satisfaction. We therefore posit and test a curvilinear hypothesis: satisfaction is greater when parties are perceived as further apart (H3a) but only up to a point (H3b).

H2. Perceived distance from the nearest major party is negatively associated with satisfaction with democracy.

H3a. Perceived distance between the two major parties is positively associated with satisfaction with democracy.

H3b. The square of perceived distance between the two major parties is negatively associated with satisfaction with democracy.

Satisfaction with democracy is measured on the standard four-point scale from ‘very satisfied’ to ‘not at all satisfied’. Since this item is unavailable in some of the BES in our sequence,⁷ H2 and H3 are tested using the 2005 study. Since that survey also included left–right self- and party placements, we can test our core individual-level hypotheses using the ideological scale as well as the tax–spend policy dimension. In addition, the 2005 survey offers plentiful controls for multivariate modelling of democratic satisfaction. Controlling for other factors that are known to influence democratic satisfaction, and which may generate a spurious association between satisfaction and perceived ideological distances, is essential if we are to draw any causal inference about the relationship between our two key variables. All of the variables are taken from the pre-election wave of the 2005 BES.

Results

The top rows of Table 1 contain basic descriptive statistics for voter and party placements on the tax–spend scale. The mean voter has throughout this period been to the left of the midpoint of 5, indicating a general preference for increased spending on public services.⁸ However, the mean has shifted in what look like the thermostatic responses to policy anticipated by Wlezien (1995). The leftmost mean is seen in 1997 after a long period of Conservative government in which public services were seen as having been neglected; the rightmost mean is seen in 2010, during a campaign dominated by the issue of public debt. Of more direct concern here are the standard deviations which give a simple indication of ideological dispersion in the electorate. They echo the findings of Adams *et al.* (2011) that there has been only modest convergence among voters. This contrasts sharply with the next row of data which confirms that the two major parties are seen as having converged almost to the point of superimposition. Placed on average more than four scale points

Table 1: Voter Placements, Perceived Gaps between the Parties, and Distance to Nearest Major Party by Varying Gap Size

	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
Mean voter position	3.47	3.12	2.65	3.47	3.84	4.22
Standard deviation of voter positions	2.48	2.55	2.31	2.17	2.07	2.00
Mean perceived Lab-Con gap (S.E. of mean perceived Lab-Con gap)	4.16 (0.07)	4.23 (0.09)	3.35 (0.07)	1.14 (0.06)	1.04 (0.05)	0.68 (0.07)
Mean distance to nearest party if gap was ___ points	2.04	2.09	1.89	1.74	1.73	1.55
0.5	1.79	1.87	1.64	1.49	1.49	1.31
1	1.54	1.68	1.43	1.25	1.30	1.14
1.5	1.40	1.49	1.29	1.14	1.12	0.96
2	1.26	1.32	1.19	1.04	1.00	0.94
2.5	1.13	1.22	1.09	0.94	0.92	0.94
3	1.00	1.16	1.03	0.85	0.96	1.01
3.5	1.05	1.10	1.00	0.95	0.99	1.08
4	1.12	1.08	1.01	1.07	1.08	1.17
(S.E. mean distance to nearest party)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)
N	3,540	1,709	3,356	2,171	3,217	1,665

Source: BES 1987-2010 (face-to-face survey).

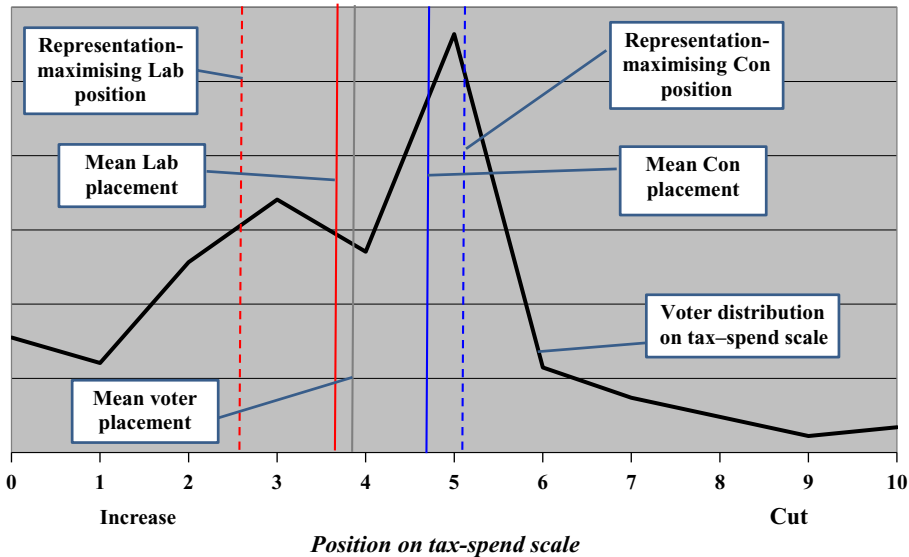
apart at the start of this period, they were barely distinguished by respondents in the 2010 BES.

The data in the lower half of the table address H1 and the broader question of how representative the British party system has been in terms of ideological dispersion over this period. For each election, and based on that year's actual distribution of voters in tax–spend policy space, we calculate a series of hypothetical mean distances between a voter and his or her nearest major party. Each mean distance is based on a scenario in which the two major parties are split symmetrically around the mean voter position on the tax–spend scale.⁹ So, for example, the figure in the bottom left corner of the table indicates that, in 1987, the voters would, on average, have fallen 1.12 points from the nearest main party had the parties been located at 1.47 and 5.47 – that is, four points apart and two points either side of the mean voter position of 3.47. Our concern is with the hypothetical gap between the parties that would minimise that mean distance. Since the precise gap will depend not only on the exact standard deviation but also other idiosyncrasies of that year's distribution, we do not simulate every possible distance between the parties but instead use half-point intervals to give a broad idea of the optimal gap between the parties. For each election, that optimal gap is highlighted in the table.¹⁰

At the beginning of the series, the contending parties were too far apart for an optimally representative party system. This is clearest in 1987 when they were perceived as more than four points apart while mean distance would have been minimised by a gap of around three. The polarisation of that period corresponds to the monopolistic competition between 'aggregators' (or perhaps even 'stickers') which leads to an over-differentiated market. This was corrected by the perceived narrowing of the Labour–Conservative gap by 1997; since then, the acceleration of convergence has opened up a representational deficit in the other direction. In 2005 and 2010, mean distance would have been minimised had the gap been around a point and a half wider. If anything, then, H1 risks understatement: the parties could have returned to 1980s levels of polarisation and this would only have improved the overall representativeness of the party system. Competition for monopoly by 'hunters' has created under-differentiation more acute than the over-differentiation of the early elections in our series.

Based on a normal distribution of voter positions, Laver (2011) estimated that the optimal party placements would be around 0.8 standard deviations from the mean voter. Since the actual distributions of voter positions are neither normal nor constant, our empirical estimations are rougher and more contingent. But we can say that, in all six elections, the optimal gap was at least slightly narrower than ± 0.8 standard deviations, although it did not narrow beyond ± 0.6 until the 2010 election. Since our upcoming analyses are based on the 2005 BES, we use that election to illustrate the calculation and the key findings so far. With a standard deviation of voter positions of around 2, and an optimal inter-party gap of 2.5 (i.e. 1.25 points either side of the mean), the optimal placements of the parties are at about ± 0.6 ($1.25/2$) standard deviations. The reason why this gap is narrower than Laver's ± 0.8 is the combination of skewness and leptokurtosis illustrated in Figure 1, which shows the 2005 distribution of voters on the tax–spend scale around their mean position of 3.84.¹¹ It also shows the mean placements of the two major parties. The clustering of the three solid lines – all within around one scale point – shows how closely the parties fall both to one

Figure 1: Comparing Mean Party Placements with Representation-Maximising Party Positions Given Voter Distribution on Tax-Spend Scale, 2005



Sources: BES 2005 (Pre-election face-to-face survey); authors' calculations.

another and (especially with Labour) to the average voter. This clustering can easily distract attention from the rest of the graph. While the mean voter is spoiled for choice, plenty of voters on both sides of the distribution fall a long way from the representational 'action'. A broader conception thus gives a less optimistic estimate of representation. Both parties fall some way within the dashed lines, which denote the party positions that would maximise representation according to the 'mean distance from the nearest major party' yardstick.

The results so far confirm that, in recent British elections, many voters have been faced with two options for government that are rather remote as well as hard to distinguish ideologically. The next task is to assess whether this matters for democratic satisfaction and other indicators of attachment to electoral democracy. We begin with two ordered logistic regression models of satisfaction with democracy in the 2005 BES. Our main predictors of interest are the distances measuring the representativeness of the party system: to the nearest major party and between the two major parties. The two models reflect alternative bases for calculating representational distances: the tax-spend scale analysed so far; and the left-right scale unavailable in earlier BES but included in the 2005 survey. Guided by previous analyses, we also control for party identification, political and social trust, economic evaluations, political interest and efficacy, and socio-demographic variables (Anderson and Tverdova, 2001; Clarke *et al.*, 2004, ch. 9; Zmerli and Newton, 2008).¹² The results are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Ordered Logistic Regression Models of Democratic Satisfaction

	<i>Left–right distances</i>		<i>Tax–spend distances</i>	
	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>
Distance to nearest party	–0.13***	0.04	–0.11***	0.03
Perceived Lab–Con distance	0.02	0.03	–0.04	0.03
(Perceived Lab–Con distance)²	0.00	0.01	0.02**	0.01
Conservative ID	0.12	0.15	0.03	0.12
Labour ID	0.39***	0.14	0.37***	0.12
Other party ID	–0.17	0.15	–0.14	0.12
Trust Westminster parliament	0.23***	0.03	0.22***	0.02
Trust politicians generally	0.10***	0.03	0.08***	0.03
Trust local MP to work hard	0.21***	0.05	0.19***	0.04
Attention to politics	–0.06***	0.02	–0.02	0.02
Influence on politics	0.08***	0.02	0.08***	0.02
Retrospective economic evaluations	0.33***	0.05	0.39***	0.05
Social trust	0.15***	0.02	0.13***	0.02
Age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Female	–0.05	0.09	–0.07	0.08
Ethnic minority	–0.16	0.17	–0.06	0.15
Terminal education age	–0.06**	0.03	–0.06**	0.03
(Threshold = 1)	0.81	0.33	0.89	0.26
(Threshold = 2)	2.97	0.33	3.05	0.27
(Threshold = 3)	6.67	0.36	6.90	0.30
Cox/Snell R ²	0.24		0.24	
<i>N</i>	2,101		2,811	

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: BES 2005 (pre-election face-to-face survey).

Looking first at the left–right results, we find clear support for H2 but none for either element of H3. Holding constant a wide range of other indicators of system attachment, we find that a voter’s left–right distance from his or her nearest major party has a significant negative effect on his or her reported satisfaction with democracy. However, echoing Ezrow and Xezonakis’ (2011) finding, ideological convergence does not trigger dissatisfaction by narrowing voters’ choices. Perceptions of the ideological distance between the two major parties were not associated with democratic satisfaction. The representational shortfall has to do with individuals’ demands for policy proximity rather than their preferences for how the party system should be structured. Whether or not parties are too close to each other, they are too far from many of their voters.

H2 is just as resoundingly confirmed in the analysis based on tax–spend policy distance. Again, distance from the nearest party was significantly and negatively associated with satisfaction. Since we have already seen that the parties have converged so as to increase this

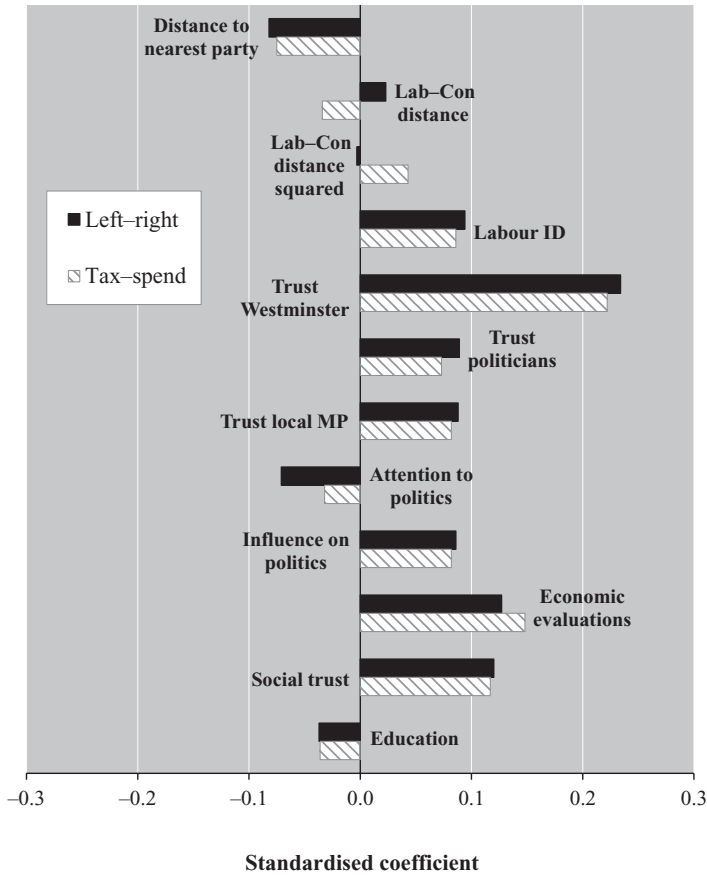
average distance, Laver's fear that vote-seeking parties may make voters miserable is thus realised empirically. However, the null findings in terms of Labour–Conservative distance are not fully replicated. The quadratic term for this inter-party distance is significant and, contrary to the prediction in H3b, it is positive. And the linear term, though not quite significant, is negative and thus also takes the opposite form from that hypothesised. It seems that, at least on this policy dimension, voters would like the parties to be either very close or very distant. In order to shed some more light on this surprising finding, we re-ran the models separately for subgroups distinguished by their party identification. The results are reported in Appendix Table A1. They show that the positive effect of the quadratic term for intra-party distance proved significant only for supporters of 'other parties'. A speculative suggestion is that this group includes supporters both of the Liberal Democrats, who prefer parties to hug their own centrist position, and of the smaller and typically more distinctively left- or right-wing parties who would prefer a clearer ideological choice.¹³

The task now is to assess the size of the nearest-party effect that was consistent and significant in both regressions. Effect size can be assessed in absolute and relative terms. For the former, we used the left–right distance regression to calculate predicted probabilities of being in each category of democratic satisfaction, and to see how these vary by distance. Of those placing themselves in the same left–right position as their nearest party, 64 per cent are predicted to fall into the 'fairly satisfied' category, and the probability of being 'very satisfied' (8 per cent) is greater than that of being 'very dissatisfied' (6 per cent). Among the roughly one in eight respondents who fall three or more points from their nearest party, just 49 per cent were predicted to be 'fairly satisfied' and the 'very satisfied' (4 per cent) were likely to be outnumbered by the 'very dissatisfied' (15 per cent). In so far as vote-seeking parties have increased the proportion of the electorate falling such long distances from their nearest major party, which is what our earlier longitudinal analysis suggests, then they have indeed made some voters miserable.

Illustrating the relative effect size is complicated by the difficulty of comparing coefficients in logistic models. We therefore take advantage of the fact that ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with the same data yield virtually identical substantive conclusions (see Appendix Table A2), and instead use standardised coefficients from those analyses as the basis for comparison. The coefficients for variables significant in either the left–right or the tax–spend analysis are shown in Figure 2. The graph shows some familiar results from the literature on satisfaction with democracy: pronounced positive effects of political and social trust, of supporting the governing party and of favourable economic evaluations. Nonetheless, the coefficients for distance from nearest party are comparable in size to most in the model (including those, such as for trust in politicians and political efficacy, which are likelier to be inflated by endogeneity). In sum, and irrespective of the basis for calculating distances, the effect of distance to nearest major party is not only statistically significant but far from negligible in size.

While a *causal* effect of ideological distance can only be inferred, there are reasons for confidence in such inference. The model is quite well specified¹⁴ and indeed includes some variables, such as efficacy, that could well be causally posterior to perceptions of representation. The effect of distance to the nearest party on satisfaction was robust against different

Figure 2: Significant Effects (Standardised Coefficients) in OLS Models of Satisfaction with Democracy



Source: BES 2005 (Pre-election face-to-face survey).

specifications; indeed, the results in Table 2 closely resemble the bivariate relationships between these variables. Moreover, concerns about endogeneity are eased by the use of an indirect measure of voter-party distance. A respondent already dissatisfied with democracy might well answer ‘no’ to the CSES question about whether any of the available parties represents their views. Yet our measure is based on separate placement questions, less immediately connected to the dependent variable.

Conclusions

Towards the end of his landmark article, Hotelling remarks that the tendency to convergence extends well beyond the economic markets that he has discussed so far:

In politics it is strikingly exemplified. The competition for votes between the Republican and Democratic parties does not lead to a clear drawing of issues, an adoption of two strongly contrasted positions between which the voter may choose. Instead, each party strives to make its platform as much like the other's as possible. Any radical departure would lose many votes, even though it might lead to stronger commendation of the party by some who would vote for it anyhow. Each candidate 'pussyfoots', replies ambiguously to questions, refuses to take a definite stand in any controversy for fear of losing votes. Real differences, if they ever exist, fade gradually with time though the issues may be as important as ever (Hotelling, 1929, pp. 54–5).

The central message of our research is that Hotelling's evident exasperation is shared by at least some voters. Ideological convergence beyond a certain point – and, in Britain at least, that point was passed long ago – comes at a cost in terms of citizens' satisfaction with electoral democracy. This is because it leaves the party system as a whole less representative of the ideological diversity within the electorate as a whole. Voters do not appear to prize ideological diversity for its own sake. Satisfaction with democracy was not enhanced by a perception that the two major parties were ideologically distinct (perhaps because the position of a less preferred party is thought irrelevant, or perhaps because the benefits of choice are cancelled out by the risk of an ideologically distant party gaining power). The reason that convergence erodes satisfaction is that it leaves voters, on average, further from the nearest major contender for office.

Two points are worth emphasising about our findings. First, satisfaction is not a specifically electoral dependent variable. Ideological proximity, and the resulting feeling of being represented, generates a sense of system support. Second, the results were strikingly consistent across the tax–spend and left–right analyses. Both scales have merits as a basis for calculating representational distances. Left–right ideology has the advantage of generality, offering a broader basis for representation than a specific issue like taxes and spending. However, the policy scale has the advantage of concreteness. Few voters think readily in abstract ideological terms and one consequence is that left–right self-placements show less dispersion than the tax–spend and other policy scales, with confused respondents flocking to the midpoint. Yet despite these substantive and distributional differences, both measures show the same association between voter–party distance and dissatisfaction.

The fact that voters only prize ideological diversity in so far as it provides them with a proximate party does not mean that such diversity is unimportant. Given the prevailing dispersion in the electorate, the individual-level representativeness that we have shown to generate satisfaction can only be accomplished through a more ideologically diverse party system. This conclusion emerges from viewing the two parts of our analysis in conjunction. The regression models in Table 2 show that voters more distant from the nearest major party are less satisfied. And the longitudinal analysis in Table 1 shows that average distance from the nearest major party is a function of the ideological distance between those parties. While, before 1997, convergence in a hitherto over-differentiated party system increased mean proximity and hence representativeness of the party system, the further convergence since then has put ever more distance between many voters and their nearest contender for

government. We can reasonably infer that the vote-seeking strategies of British parties have contributed to dissatisfaction with democracy.

Our results clash with Ezrow and Xezonakis' (2011) aggregate-level finding that, across European party systems, an increase in dispersion was greeted with *declining* satisfaction. One possible reason for the clashing results is that ours is specific to ideologically convergent two-party systems. Perhaps multiparty systems, especially under proportional representation, continue to exhibit the kind of monopolistic competition that we also found for Britain in the pre-New Labour era, and which can actually lead to over-differentiation. In such instances, convergence (up to a point) actually helps by reducing the mean distance from voters to their nearest party, and thus improving the representativeness of the party system. Testing this conjecture means replicating our individual-level analysis across countries (and ideally also across time). Comparative analysis would also allow us to distinguish distance to the nearest major party from distance to the nearest parliamentary party. With so few parties in Britain (and the only other serious player in Westminster elections falling ideologically in between the two major parties), there was no scope to identify whether voters are satisfied simply by having their views represented in parliament or whether they need at least the prospect of having those views represented in government.

Another distinction necessarily elided in this article is between spatial and social representation. The evidence that voters actually think in spatial terms is scanty and it could be that our ideological distances are a clumsy proxy for what many voters see as the real representational deficit, namely the lack of a party serving the interests of 'people like them'. Indeed, the term 'catch-all parties' was coined to describe social rather than spatial convergence, and the former – parties moving beyond their socially segmented electorates to appeal across such divisions – is just as close an analogy to the shift from monopolistic competition to competition for monopoly. Addressing these ideas empirically would require new data with different kinds of measures of representational distance.

Meanwhile, our results carry normative implications for competition in the depolarised British party system. The valence or 'performance politics' model, which has become the dominant framework for understanding voting behaviour and party competition (Clarke *et al.*, 2004; 2009; Green, 2007), is an electoral version of vertical differentiation as described above. Parties compete only in terms of their capacity to deliver *common* goals. Moreover, just as vertical differentiation offers less choice than horizontal differentiation unless consumers' tastes are assumed to be identical, so valence competition offers less choice unless all voters are assumed to share the same policy preferences. As we have seen, the latter assumption is untenable. There has been some convergence in the electorate but there remains ideological diversity. Voters are not only interested in competence and delivery, even if the structure of party competition offers them little other basis for choice. To pursue Hotelling's example: some voters continue to like their cider a good deal sweeter than others do but everyone has to make do with a medium-sweet option while the parties compete only on consensual priorities like freshness.

So it is not surprising that at least some voters are dissatisfied with valence-based party competition. It also suggests limits on the capacity of valence competition to restore and strengthen satisfaction with democracy. As Clarke *et al.* (2009, p. 19) assert:

If there is an incipient ‘crisis of political engagement’ in contemporary Britain, then its solution lies largely in the hands of the parties and in the politicians themselves. By performing – by finding solutions to critical policy problems – they not only help themselves as vote-seeking, would-be officeholders; they also contribute to the health of British democracy.

The powerful effects of economic and other performance evaluations in their models of democratic satisfaction provide strong backing for this assertion. Yet the picture is incomplete. Some voters do not simply want ‘solutions’; they want a certain type of solution that is consistent with their values and preferences. Even if performance is consistently good, those voters will remain at least somewhat disgruntled at the lack of a party that represents those preferences. And since voters tend on the whole to regard performance as uninspiring, their need for that sense of being represented is redoubled.

Appendix

Table A1: Tax–Spend Distance Effects from Ordered Logit Models of Democratic Satisfaction: By Party Identification

		<i>Party identification</i>				
		<i>All</i>	<i>Con</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>None</i>
Left–right	Distance to nearest major party	−0.13*** (0.04)	−0.09 (0.07)	−0.10* (0.06)	−0.32*** (0.07)	−0.05 (0.08)
	Distance Lab–Con	0.02 (0.03)	−0.00 (0.05)	−0.03 (0.05)	−0.08 (0.06)	0.11* (0.06)
	(Distance Lab–Con) ²	0.00 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)
	Cox/Snell R ²	0.24	0.17	0.21	0.25	0.26
	<i>N</i>	2,101	552	768	444	337
	Tax–spend	Distance to nearest major party	−0.11*** (0.03)	−0.07 (0.06)	−0.12** (0.05)	−0.23*** (0.06)
Distance Lab–Con		−0.04 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	−0.08 (0.06)	−0.11* (0.06)
(Distance Lab–Con) ²		0.02** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.04** (0.02)	−0.02 (0.03)
Cox/Snell R ²		0.24	0.19	0.21	0.22	0.27
<i>N</i>		2,811	726	1,009	506	570

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: BES 2005 (pre-election face-to-face survey).

Table A2: OLS Regression Models of Democratic Satisfaction

	<i>Left–right distances</i>			<i>Tax–spend distances</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Distance to nearest party	–0.05***	0.01	–0.08	–0.04***	0.01	–0.08
Perceived Lab–Con distance	0.01	0.01	0.02	–0.01	0.01	–0.03
(Perceived Lab–Con distance)²	–0.00	0.00	–0.00	0.01**	0.00	0.04
Conservative ID	0.07	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.02
Labour ID	0.14***	0.04	0.09	0.13***	0.04	0.09
Other party ID	–0.03	0.05	–0.02	–0.02	0.04	–0.01
Trust Westminster parliament	0.07***	0.01	0.23	0.07***	0.01	0.22
Trust politicians generally	0.03***	0.01	0.09	0.02***	0.01	0.07
Trust local MP to work hard	0.07***	0.02	0.09	0.06***	0.01	0.08
Attention to politics	–0.02***	0.01	–0.07	–0.01*	0.01	–0.03
Influence on politics	0.03***	0.01	0.09	0.03***	0.01	0.08
Retrospective economic evaluations	0.10***	0.02	0.13	0.12***	0.01	0.15
Social trust	0.05***	0.01	0.12	0.04***	0.01	0.12
Age	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.01
Female	–0.01	0.03	–0.00	–0.01	0.02	–0.01
Ethnic minority	–0.06	0.05	–0.02	–0.02	0.05	–0.01
Terminal education age	–0.02**	0.01	–0.04	–0.02*	0.01	–0.04
(Constant)	1.47***	0.10		1.46***	0.09	
R ² (adj.)		0.25			0.24	
N		2,101			2,811	

* $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: BES 2005 (pre-election face-to-face survey).

(Accepted: 6 December 2012)

About the Authors

Heinz Brandenburg holds a PhD in Politics from Trinity College Dublin. He is currently Lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Aberdeen. His research interests are in the fields of political communication and electoral politics. His research has previously appeared in, among others, the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Party Politics*, and the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties (JEPOP)*. Heinz Brandenburg, Department of Politics and International Relations, Edward Wright Building, University of Aberdeen AB24 3QY, Scotland, UK; email: h.brandenburg@abdn.ac.uk

Robert Johns is Senior Lecturer in Politics in the Department of Government at the University of Essex. His research interests are in the fields of public opinion and political psychology. Robert was a member of the team that carried out the Scottish Election Studies in 2007 and 2011, and he has worked and published on a number of other survey

projects. Robert Johns, Department of Government, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, Essex CO4 3SQ, UK; email: rajohn@essex.ac.uk

Notes

An earlier version of this research was presented at the Elections, Public Opinion and Parties conference in Exeter, September 2011. We thank participants in that panel for their comments and suggestions. We are also grateful to Michael Laver, Lawrence Ezrow, Marcel van Egmond and three anonymous reviewers for discussions and contributions which have greatly improved the article.

- 1 For our purposes, there are only two 'major' parties: Labour and the Conservatives. This is partly because they are the leading contenders for government. At least until the closing stages of the 2010 general election campaign, the Liberal Democrats were not widely or plausibly seen as candidates for office. The other reason for considering only the two largest parties is that we are concerned with ideological dispersion and the Liberal Democrats (and their predecessor parties) have not contributed in this respect, being generally seen by voters as occupying an intermediate position.
- 2 Blais and Bodet (2006, p. 1243, emphasis added) suggest that, in PR systems, 'parties are less centrist, and this increases the overall distance between voters and parties'. But their measure of distance is between voters and the *governing* party or parties, and so their findings are not at odds with those of Golder and Stramski (2010).
- 3 These centrifugal pressures are reflected in the fact that, in the competitive environment simulated by Laver and Sergenti (2012), aggregators also have lower survival chances than hunters.
- 4 This dyadic perspective is different from the conventional approach to party-voter congruence. In the latter, the party is the unit of analysis. Its position is given, and representation is measured as the average ideological proximity of the voters it attracts. Since our units of analysis are citizens, we take their positions as given and then measure representation as the distance from the nearest party.
- 5 The effect is non-monotonic in that extra choices beyond a certain point cause cognitive overload and reduce satisfaction. But that turning point usually arrives at a large (double-digit) number of choices (Scheibehenne *et al.*, 2010), many more than are available in settled party systems.
- 6 The proportion of respondents thus omitted from the analyses varies across the different election years but is typically in the range of 10–15 per cent. This hefty proportion confirms that a significant minority of voters struggle to conceive of politics in ideological terms, even when prompted to do so by survey questions (see Converse, 1964). However, although it means a loss of cases, this non-response does not disrupt our main purpose which is to assess whether, among those who *can* locate themselves and the parties, voter-party distances have increased and in a way that erodes satisfaction with democracy.
- 7 This rules out aggregate-level modelling of satisfaction with democracy over time. In any event, there are too few time points for the kind of model estimated by Ezrow and Xezonakis (2011) to test whether characteristics of the party system have an independent effect on the level of democratic satisfaction.
- 8 This persistent finding has met with scepticism, particularly after the 1992 election in which the rejection of Labour seemed to belie reported public willingness to pay more tax. However, since we are concerned with *differences* among parties and voters in scale placements, it is not a problem if the mean voter's position is biased to the left.
- 9 In reality, of course, parties do not split symmetrically around the mean or median voter. Typically, one party (and by no means always the election winner) is closer to the mean voter. The fact that the ideological 'centre of gravity' of a party system may fall at a distance from the average voter constitutes another potential shortfall in representation. However, since we are concerned with the dispersion rather than the central tendency of party positions, it makes sense to hold the latter constant by placing the parties with respect to the mean voter placement rather than the scale midpoint of 5. For the same reason, we do not calculate actual mean distances between voters and their nearest major party for each election. That distance is also a function of the ideological centre of gravity of the party system, whereas we need to calculate the effect of dispersion on distances, holding central tendency constant.
- 10 The large BES samples mean that the standard errors around these perceived distances are quite tight. So any noticeable difference between the perceived gap between the parties, and the optimal gap given voters' locations, is statistically significant – very clearly so in the case of the most recent elections. This provides formal confirmation of H1: the perceived gap has indeed gone from significantly wider (1987) to being significantly narrower (since 2001) than the optimal gap.
- 11 The bimodal aspect of the distribution is typical for such scales where, in addition to the 'true' central tendency of opinions, there is usually a pronounced spike at the midpoint. This could reflect a genuine preference for the status quo; it could equally reflect satisficing, namely the search for a pat response that avoids the need for deeper thinking about the question (Krosnick, 1991; Zigerell, 2011).
- 12 Income is left out of the model because there are so many missing values that including it would mean an unacceptable reduction in sample size. In any case, its effect was non-significant when included.
- 13 We can confirm the first part of this conjecture: among Liberal Democrat supporters, there was only a negative linear effect of perceived Labour–Conservative distance and no quadratic effect. Unfortunately, the data set includes too few supporters of the other smaller parties to provide an adequate sample for estimating this multivariate model.
- 14 The model compares well in terms of pseudo- R^2 with others in the literature (e.g. Clarke *et al.*, 2004, p. 306).

References

- Adams, J. and Merrill, S. (1999) 'Modeling Party Strategies and Policy Representation in Multiparty Elections: Why are Strategies so Extreme?', *American Journal of Political Science*, 43 (3), 765–91.
- Adams, J., Green, J. and Milazzo, C. (2011) 'Has the British Public Depolarized along with Political Elites? An American Perspective on British Public Opinion', *Comparative Political Studies*, 45 (4), 507–30.
- Anderson, C. J. and Guillory, C. A. (1997) 'Political Institutions and Satisfaction with Democracy: A Cross-National Analysis of Consensus and Majoritarian Systems', *American Political Science Review*, 91 (1), 66–82.

- Anderson, C. J. and Tverdova, Y. V. (2001) 'Winners, Losers, and Attitudes about Government in Contemporary Democracies', *International Political Science Review*, 22 (4), 321–38.
- Banducci, S. A., Donovan, T. and Karp, J. A. (2004) 'Minority Representation, Empowerment, and Participation', *Journal of Politics*, 66 (2), 534–56.
- Bara, J. (2010) 'The 2010 Manifestos: Was It Only "The Economy, Stupid"?' Paper presented at the Elections, Public Opinion and Parties Conference, Colchester, 10–12 September.
- Blais, A. and Bodet, M. A. (2006) 'Does Proportional Representation Foster Closer Congruence between Citizens and Policy Makers?', *Comparative Political Studies*, 39 (10), 1243–62.
- Blais, A. and Gélneau, F. (2007) 'Winning, Losing and Satisfaction with Democracy', *Political Studies*, 55 (2), 425–41.
- Celis, K. and Childs, S. (2008) 'Introduction: The Descriptive and Substantive Representation of Women: New Directions', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 61 (3), 419–25.
- Clarke, H. D., Sanders, D., Stewart, M. C. and Whiteley, P. (2004) *Political Choice in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Clarke, H. D., Sanders, D., Stewart, M. C. and Whiteley, P. (2009) *Performance Politics and the British Voter*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Constantatos, C. and Perrakis, S. (1997) 'Vertical Differentiation: Entry and Market Coverage with Multiproduct Firms', *International Journal of Industrial Organization*, 16 (1), 81–103.
- Converse, P. E. (1964) 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics', in D. E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent*. New York: Glencoe, pp. 206–61.
- Cox, G. W. (1990) 'Centripetal and Centrifugal Incentives in Electoral Systems', *American Journal of Political Science*, 34 (4), 903–35.
- Dalton, R. J. (1985) 'Political Parties and Political Representation: Party Supporters and Party Elites in Nine Nations', *Comparative Political Studies*, 18 (3), 267–99.
- Denver, D., Carman, C. and Johns, R. (2012) *Elections and Voters in Britain*, third edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Downs, A. (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper.
- Ezrow, L. and Xezonakis, G. (2011) 'Citizen Satisfaction with Democracy and Parties' Policy Offerings: A Cross-National Analysis of Twelve European Party Systems, 1976–2003', *Comparative Political Studies*, 44 (9), 1152–78.
- Gallagher, M. (1991) 'Proportionality, Disproportionality and Electoral Systems', *Electoral Studies*, 10 (1), 33–51.
- Golder, M. and Stramski, J. (2010) 'Ideological Congruence and Electoral Institutions', *American Journal of Political Science*, 54 (1), 90–106.
- Green, J. (2007) 'When Voters and Parties Agree: Valence Issues and Party Competition', *Political Studies*, 55 (3), 629–55.
- Hotelling, H. (1929) 'Stability in Competition', *Economic Journal*, 39 (153), 41–57.
- Huber, J. D. and Powell, G. B. Jr (1994) 'Congruence between Citizens and Policymakers in Two Visions of Liberal Democracy', *World Politics*, 46 (3), 291–326.
- Kirchheimer, O. (1966) 'The Transformation of Western European Party Systems', in J. LaPalombara and M. Weiner (eds), *Political Parties and Political Development*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 177–200.
- Krosnick, J. A. (1991) 'Response Strategies for Coping with the Cognitive Demands of Attitude Measures in Surveys', *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 5 (2), 213–36.
- Lancaster, K. (1975) 'Socially Optimal Product Differentiation', *American Economic Review*, 65 (4), 567–85.
- Langer, E. J. and Rodin, J. (1976) 'The Effects of Choice and Enhanced Personal Responsibility for the Aged', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 34 (2), 191–8.
- Laver, M. (2011) 'Why Vote-Seeking Parties May Make Voters Miserable', *Irish Political Studies*, 26 (4), 489–500.
- Laver, M. and Sergenti, E. (2012) *Party Competition: An Agent-Based Model*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mansbridge, J. (2003) 'Rethinking Representation', *American Political Science Review*, 97 (4), 515–28.
- Marris, R. and Mueller, D. C. (1980) 'The Corporation, Competition, and the Invisible Hand', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 18 (1), 32–63.
- Miller, W. E. and Stokes, D. E. (1963) 'Constituency Influence in Congress', *American Political Science Review*, 57 (1), 45–56.
- Miller, W. E., Pierce, R., Thomassen, J., Herrera, R. and Holmberg, S. (1999) *Policy Representation in Western Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pitkin, H. F. (1972) *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.
- Powell, G. B. (2000) *Elections as Instruments of Democracy*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press.
- Powell, G. B. (2004) 'Political Representation in Comparative Politics', *Annual Review of Political Science*, 7, 273–96.
- Ryan, R. M. and Deci, E. L. (2000) 'Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being', *American Psychologist*, 55 (1), 68–78.
- Scheibehenne, B., Greifeneder, R. and Todd, P. M. (2010) 'Can There Ever be Too Many Options? A Meta-analytic Review of Choice Overload', *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37 (3), 409–25.
- Schmitt, H. and Thomassen, J. (eds) (1999) *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shaked, A. and Sutton, J. (1987) 'Product Differentiation and Industrial Structure', *Journal of Industrial Economics*, 36 (2), 131–46.
- Stimson, J. A. (1991) *Public Opinion in America: Moods, Cycles, and Swings*. Boulder CO: Westview.
- Stokes, D. E. (1963) 'Spatial Models of Party Competition', *American Political Science Review*, 57 (2), 368–77.
- Stokes, D. E. (1992) 'Valence Politics', in D. Kavanagh (ed.), *Electoral Politics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 141–64.
- Wauthy, X. (1996) 'Quality Choice in Models of Vertical Differentiation', *Journal of Industrial Economics*, 44 (3), 345–53.

- Weissberg, R. (1978) 'Collective vs. Dyadic Representation in Congress', *American Political Science Review*, 72 (2), 535–47.
- Wessels, B. (2011) 'Performances and Deficits of Present-Day Representation', in S. Alonso, J. Keane and W. Merkel (eds), *The Future of Representative Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 96–123.
- Wlezien, C. (1995) 'The Public as Thermostat: Dynamics of Preferences for Spending', *American Journal of Political Science*, 39 (4), 981–1000.
- Zigerell, L.J. (2011) 'Midpoint Misperceptions on 1–10 Scales', *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 23 (2), 205–13.
- Zmerli, S. and Newton, K. (2008) 'Social Trust and Attitudes toward Democracy', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 72 (4), 706–24.