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THE ICEBERG AND THE *TITANIC*

ELECTORAL DEFEAT, POLICY MOODS, AND PARTY CHANGE

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Multiple factors can be offered to explain the Labour victory and Conservative defeat in the 2001 British general election. Here we pursue one of the most interesting explanations offered by a modified Downsian model of party competition. Part I of this paper builds on Stimson's (1991) rational choice theory of policy mood cycles and considers how this framework can be applied to the context of British elections. Part II discusses measures of ideological change at mass and elite levels, focusing on two issues at the heart of British party politics: Tax cuts vs. spending, and European integration vs. independence. Evidence is drawn from the 2001 British Representation Study (BRS), involving 1000 parliamentary candidates and Members of Parliament. Comparisons are made with the British Election Studies (BES). Part III lays out the evidence.

This study comes to three main conclusions: (1) On the key issues of public spending and Europe, Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians remained close to the center-ground of Westminster party politics, with the Nationalist parties further towards the left, and the Conservatives in clear blue water on the far right; (2) as a result of this pattern the Conservatives were the party furthest from the median British voter; and (3) one reason for this pattern was selective perception, so that Conservative politicians "missed the target." The conclusion discusses the reasons for this phenomenon, the implications for the future of British party politics, and the broader lessons for why parties fail to learn and adapt in the face of repeated electoral defeats.

To lose one election may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose two seems like carelessness. Given Tony Blair's record-breaking majority in the 1997 British general election, many expected the pendulum to swing back four years later. Instead, the total number of Conservative Members of Parliament (MPs) rose only by one. As signs of an even deeper malady, the bloody civil war over its leadership reinforced the image of a Conservative Party deeply, perhaps even fatally, divided. The new Tory leader will probably need successive general elections to come within sight of Downing Street; to secure an overall majority, the Conservatives currently need a swing of 10.5% from Labour (Norris, 2001a), twice the size of any they have achieved in the post-war era.

So how do we explain this stunning and yet puzzling reversal in partisan fortunes? After all, the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher had long seemed invincible, "the natural party of government." Eighteen years of Conservative rule generated *cri de coeurs* such as *Can Labour Win?* (Harrop & Shaw, 1989) and *Can the Tories Lose?* (Smyth, 1991)—even suggestions that Britain was *Turning Japanese* with a one-party predominant system (Margetts & Smyth, 1994). Indeed, the party's remarkable success stretches back even further. As Seldon & Ball (1994) observed, "The Conservative party has dominated British politics to such an extent during the twentieth century that it is likely to become known as the 'Conservative century.' Either standing alone or as the most powerful element in a coalition, the party will have held power for seventy of the hundred years since 1895." One central question raised by the outcome of the last British general election is why the captains of the Conservative Party suddenly proved incapable of turning around party fortunes in the face of successive electoral disasters, like the majestic *Titanic* steering steadily towards its icy grave.

Multiple explanations can be offered to account for Labour's second successive victory, including the performance of the British economy under Gordon Brown's prudent management (Sanders, 2001); substantial pro-Labour bias in the electoral system (Curtice, 2001); the disenchantment of the once-faithful Tory press (Deacon, *et al.*, 2001); the personal popularity of Blair, Hague, and Kennedy; long-term patterns of social and partisan dealignment (Evans & Norris, 1999); and the short-term impact of the electoral campaign (Collings & Seldon, 2001; Seyd, 2001; Denver, 2001). All these factors, and more, probably played a part in determining the result.

Here we can pursue one of the most interesting explanations offered in a modified Downsian model of party competition. Part I of this paper builds on Stimson's rational choice theory of policy mood cycles. Part II discusses the available measures of ideological change in Westminster and the electorate, focusing on two key election issue scales which divided the parties and featured heavily in the last campaign: Tax cuts *vs.* spending, and European integration *vs.* independence. Evidence is drawn from the 2001 British Representation Study (BRS), with responses from 1000 candidates and MPs from all parliamentary parties, including about one third of the current House of Commons. The position of the median voter on similar scales is estimated from the British Election Study (BES). Part III lays out the evidence. The study comes to three main conclusions: (1) On these issue scales, Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians remained close to the center-ground of Westminster party politics, with the Nationalist parties farther towards the left, and the Conservatives in clear blue water on the far right. As a result, (2) the Conservatives placed themselves furthest from the median voter, a puzzle for any rational vote-calculating politician ambitious for office. (3) One explanation for this pattern was *selective perception*, and the way that Conservative politicians failed to identify the position of the median British voter. The final section summarizes the results and considers the implications for the future of British party politics and the broader lessons for why parties fail to learn and adapt in the face of the repeated electoral defeats.

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

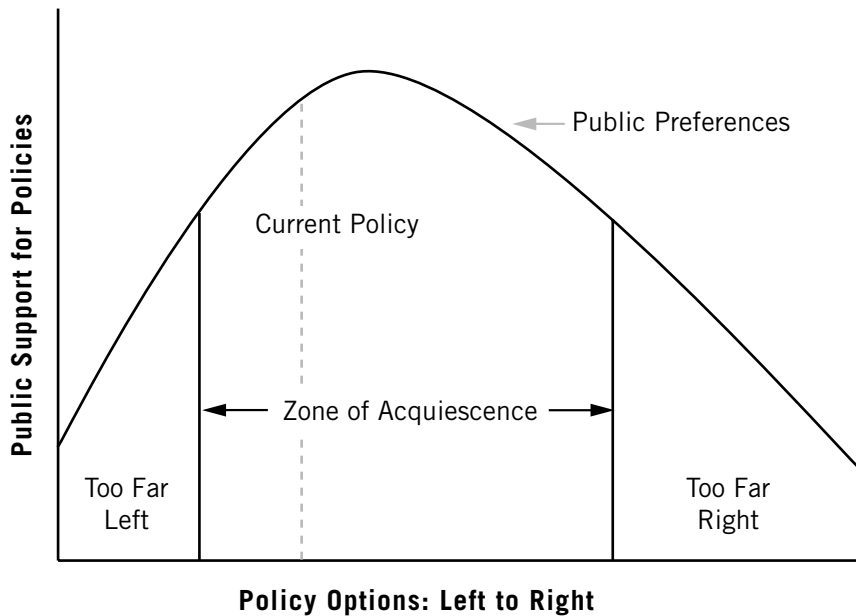
Recent accounts in the literature have revived interest in the attempt to make sense of underlying trends in mass attitudes and values, and the relationship between shifts in public opinion and the response of elected representatives. Studies have sought to discern whether changes in aggregate public opinion are relatively meaningless, random, or incoherent; or whether there are consistent patterns behind the day-to-day fluctuations monitored in a half-century of public opinion polls. Converse (1964) established the conventional wisdom, still prevalent, that most *individuals* fail to display ideologically constrained attitudes. Nevertheless a growing body of work suggests that as a whole the public is responding *en masse* to events in a reasonably coherent manner. Along these lines, Mayer examined *The Changing American Mind* (1992), Page & Shapiro focused on *The Rational Public* (1992), while Wlezien (1995) offered an account based on the idea of the American public as a “thermostat” responding quite sensitively towards the policy spigot in Washington, D.C. Elsewhere, studies have commonly focused on understanding policy moods by tracing the consistency of changes in interrelated strands of public opinion; for example, whether there were systematic shifts among the British electorate during the 1980s in response to Thatcherism (*cf.*, Heath, Jowell & Curtice, 2001). Cross-national studies have looked for consistent trends in mass attitudes towards the role of markets and the state (Goldsmith, 1995; Bore & Scarborough, 1995; Kaase & Newton, 1998; Taylor-Gooby, 1998; Feigenbaum, *et al.*, 2000). An extensive literature has also examined the relationship between the dynamics of public opinion and long-term changes in party policies, based on the content analysis of manifesto data and spatial models of party competition (for a recent review of this literature, see Budge, *et al.*, 2001). Among these accounts, James Stimson (1991) offers one of the most persuasive rational choice theories linking changes in public opinion to the activities of elected representatives. This study builds on that framework and examines the evidence for how far rational office-seeking politicians respond to public opinion, one of the core assumptions in Downsian theory (Downs, 1957). Stimson’s account is based on three basic premises.

“There are some powerful tides rippling and surging through the body politic that are capable of leading national sentiment in a consistent direction.”

Policy Moods

First, Stimson suggests that there are some powerful tides rippling and surging through the body politic that are capable of leading national sentiment in a consistent direction. In this account, like seismic tremors, surveys often detect a series of small shifts in public opinion. Some of these may represent nothing more than random and capricious fluctuations in the polls, due to matters like alternative wording or measurement, or the impact of changing circumstances caused by particular events and specific leaders. Some of these shifts, however, may cumulatively gradually transform the *policy mood*, or the common bundling of policy preferences over time. Policy moods become evident as a consistent aggregate pattern linking attitudes towards issues so that, for example, the public gradually comes to favor a more isolationist “Little England” role *vis-à-vis* international affairs that links together unfavorable attitudes towards the European Union, hostility towards the Euro, and further restrictions on asylum seekers. Policy moods essentially bundle together disparate issues into common dimensions. The distribution of public opinion can be imagined as located along a Downsian left-right continuum (Figure One) where some policy options are located too far left for the public’s acceptance, some are located too far right, and an asymmetrical zone of acquiescence exists between them with a range of palatable policy choices. The public acquiesces to policies in this area because the differences among the options are relatively minor. It is therefore rational for the public to be fairly uninformed about politics, as the costs of paying attention

FIGURE 1 THE THEORETICAL MODEL OF PARTY COMPETITION



exceed the expected benefit. The public becomes more aware of the issues if policymakers seek to implement policies outside the zone of acquiescence.

Dynamic Cycles

The concept of a policy mood is not particularly novel. But Stimson's account goes one step further in claiming that changes over time in policy moods may display three distinct patterns: They may be the product of meandering *fluctuations* back and forth, like a drunken walk; they may be *consistent trends* flowing in one direction over time; or they may be the result of *systemic cycles* in response to what government is currently doing. The distribution of policy preferences and the zone of acquiescence at mass level is not static since, though there is some time lag, public opinion moves relative to the actions of policymakers. The public gains experience of the impact of policy changes gradually, as people become aware of the costs and other trade-offs produced by particular government decisions that move policy towards the left or right. For example, if the British public initially supported privatization of the railways in anticipation of greater investment and more efficient services, and people subsequently experienced rail crashes, unaccountable endless delays, and widespread ticket shock, then the policy mood can be expected to switch leftwards towards restoring government regulation, public investment, or even state ownership.

The idea of the policy mood suggests that public opinion towards issues such as private-public partnerships, the rate of personal taxation, and levels of public spending on education and health can be expected to move roughly in parallel over time, reflecting the underlying public mood regarding the role of markets and the state. If the public becomes dissatisfied with government services, disillusioned with how the public sector responds to needs, and unhappy about high taxes, then people will come to support alternative initiatives designed to "shrink the state." If policymakers respond to the public mood by introducing a series of substantial tax cuts as well as dramatic reductions in public services (*e.g.*, health, education, and social protection) because of lower revenues, then after experiencing the trade-offs involved in this process, the public mood eventually will swing towards supporting greater public expen-

diture, even if it involves tax hikes. Similarly, if the American public initially supported Republican tax cuts over paying down the debt, and subsequently experienced a major downturn in the economy, substantial layoffs, and the government's hand in the till of Social Security savings, then opinion can be expected to swing back (too late?) in favor of greater fiscal prudence. Cycles can be expected to be particularly important regarding policy options that are commonly framed as tradeoffs between competing public goods—such as between national independence *vs.* further European integration, tax cuts *vs.* public services, and environmental protection *vs.* the cost of energy. One way out of this conundrum is for policymakers to frame credible policy options in have-your-cake-and-eat-it terms, rather than as trade-offs. For example, by suggesting that environmental protection can go hand-in-hand with lower energy costs via new technologies, or that tax cuts can raise government revenues and spending indirectly by boosting productivity and growth. The concept of cycles suggests that certain changes in the public mood are, at least in part, a rational response to changing circumstances and what government actually does.

Rational Party Responses

Thirdly—and this is the key assumption that will be tested here—Stimson theorizes that, in democratic societies with competitive party systems, elected representatives respond fairly sensitively to policy moods. Rational politicians wish to maintain popular support (and hence office) by remaining within the “zone of acquiescence” where the public is in accord with policy proposals, rather than moving too far across the ideological spectrum to the left or right where they will gain less support on valence issues on which public opinion displays a normal curve. Most politicians, therefore, implement policy changes step-by-step broadly in terms of their *perceptions* of what the public wants. They also will shape party platforms to maximize public popularity. At a certain stage, the theory suggests, public preferences shift in a contrary direction in response to government actions, although policy changes continue to overshoot the new public consensus until policymakers become aware of the shift and move back into line with the zone of acquiescence. If politicians fail to perceive the change in public sentiment, or fail to respond to the shift, they face the threat of electoral defeat. The link between public preferences and electoral outcomes remains crude and imperfect since parties may be returned to power on successive occasions for many reasons (*e.g.*, the workings of the electoral system, the personal popularity of charismatic leaders, or the impact of media campaign coverage), even when the policy mood is moving against them.

The challenge facing rational office-seeking politicians, therefore, is to hit the moving target of public opinion. Politicians may lag behind if they believe that certain policy options remain popular (*e.g.*, programs promising Thatcherite privatization or Reaganite tax cuts) based on strategies that got them elected in the past, even though the public has now shifted preferences. Alternatively, policymakers may also run ahead of public opinion (*e.g.*, if they are more enthusiastic Europhiles than the electorate). But whether lagging or leading, politicians may face an electoral penalty. Assuming that rational voters seek to maximize their utility in opting for the party closest to their issue preferences, any growing disjunction between public preferences and the actions of policymakers can be expected over the long run to produce an electoral response that “throws the rascals out” in favor of others more in tune with the national sentiment.

Ideological Barriers of Selective Perception

This account suggests that where rational politicians are sensitive to the public mood, once they *perceive* any switch in national sentiment, they will eventually move in tandem on the policy agenda to maintain popular support. But this relationship depends upon how accurately politicians understand public opinion. There are many cases where major parliamentary parties fail to move into line with public preferences, on a repeated basis, despite the salutary shock of electoral defeat. Downsian theory suggests that

“If politicians believe that they are already in tune with public opinion... then they will not understand the need for policy change.”

it is rational for the public to be inattentive to the world of Westminster for most of the time, so long as the politicians remain within the broad zone of acquiescence. And it is also rational for politicians—especially governing parties with comfortable majorities in the mid-term period—to pay little attention to public opinion for much of the time. Minor parties facing almost certain electoral defeat (like the British Greens, the UK Independence Party, or the British National Party) may also rationally prioritize ideological purity over electoral expediency. But there is a substantial incentive (the ambition for government office) for politicians in major opposition parties, especially ones that have been heavily defeated, to pay the closest attention to public opinion when crafting their policy program, choosing their party leadership, and marketing their party image in the attempt to regain the reins of power. Rational party leaders and parliamentary backbenchers hungry for office should be expected to ditch ideological stances in the face of repeated polls demonstrating their unpopularity. Yet where major opposition parties respond to major shifts in public opinion, at least in Britain, they often do so only after a considerable time lag. After all, it took the Labour party four successive elections and 18 years in the opposition wilderness before it moved back into the mainstream of British politics. And it may take just as long, or even longer, before the Conservatives recover their popular mantle. In this regard, British parties often seem more akin to majestic ocean liners heading full steam towards electoral disaster, rather than flexible skiffs able to turn on a dime. We need to understand the underlying reasons preventing rational office-seeking politicians from adopting policies more in accord with the prevailing sentiment among the electorate. *If*, for a variety of reasons, politicians fail to recognize the signs of change in the public mood, then they may become out of step with the public’s agenda and may endure the sanction of (repeated) electoral defeat.

Multiple barriers may prevent political parties from throwing out their ideological and policy baggage and adapting to the public mood in pursuit of office (for a discussion, see Mair, 1997). Long-standing principles and symbolic traditions (such as Clause 4) are woven into each party’s identity. Like many large-scale institutions, parties experience organizational conservatism that thwarts radical innovations or reinventions. Parties may have become so factionalized (over Europe, for instance) that any attempt to adopt more moderate policies could threaten to generate still deeper party fissures and splits. The leadership may be convinced of the need for change, and yet powerless to influence the views of the party overall. Constituency true-believers (*e.g.*, Labour’s Militant faction, Conservative Euroskeptics) may be more concerned with the purity of ideological principles than with electoral success (the better-dead-than-Red strategy). Honorable members may believe that their central task is to persuade and lead, rather than follow, public opinion. Parties adopting zigzag policy shifts may lose public trust (*e.g.*, the “new Coke” re-branding disaster). The candidate recruitment and selection process can reinforce a “one of us” mentality that leads party members to pick true believers conforming to the existing model, rather than representatives with broader appeal to the electorate as a whole (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995).

Or alternatively, if politicians believe that they are already in tune with public opinion, even through they may be lagging behind or running ahead of the zone of acquiescence, then they will not understand the need for policy change. This is one of the most intriguing propositions. Electoral defeats can always be attributed to multiple scapegoats—the attractions of the leader, the effectiveness of party campaign, bias in the media, the state of the economy—rather than to the unpopularity of the party’s basic principles and programmatic policies. Modern campaigns are rife with opinion polls and focus groups. But this evidence can always be discarded (“the only poll that matters is the one on election night”). In interpreting the public mood, Herbst (1995) suggests that politicians should rely on communications with activists, conver-

sations with local constituents, and debates in the news media to supplement such polls and focus groups. The point is that there are many indicators of the electorate's mood. And in the run up to the last election, Conservative MPs may simply have discounted the accumulating gloom of opinion polls in favor of more positive indicators of public opinion (e.g., gut reactions, commentary in the daily press, or discussions with colleagues and activists). In social psychology, the concept of selective perception suggests that we often see what we want to see; we tend to pay more attention to views congruent with our own. If this common psychological mechanism operates among politicians, it suggests that they often exaggerate how deeply voters share their beliefs, and that they pay most attention to indicators that confirm positive support ("the audience at the rally was very enthusiastic"), while dismissing contrary evidence ("but you can't trust the polls").

This proposition suggests that the Conservative Party may have failed to revise its policy program to any major degree after the 1997 election—and that about one third of the parliamentary party may have subsequently opted for a shift towards the right in the party leadership—at least in part because many Conservative politicians misperceived the position of the median British voter and misjudged the location of their own voting base. In other words, Conservative politicians may have believed that they were offering popular policies in the last two elections, even when they were miles from their target, because public opinion has moved on since their memorable Thatcher glory days. And this despite the plethora of monthly polls published between 1997-2001 which repeatedly demonstrated the unpopularity of the Conservative Party and its policies (Crewe, 2001). Studies, many based on the series of British Social Attitudes surveys, have revealed longer term trends in the public's overwhelming preferences for additional government spending and services over further tax cuts (Taylor-Gooby, 1998; Kaase & Newton, 1998; Sanders, 1999; Norris, 2001c; Heath, Jowell & Curtice, 2001, Ch.6). Another large body of work has suggested that the British public wants to remain within the European Union (EU) (though people are largely unfavorable towards the Euro) and that most people hold a moderately skeptical rather than radically anti-European position towards Britain's role in the EU (Flickinger, 1994; Franklin & Wzeliem, 1997; Evans, 1998a; Evans, 1998b, Evans & Jowell, 1999; Heath, Jowell & Curtice, Ch.4). Despite the weight of polling evidence, it is curious that the core of the Conservative campaign in the last election revolved around the twin pledges of tax cuts and Euroskepticism. Why?

DATA AND EVIDENCE

We can turn to survey evidence to understand whether an important reason for the Conservative defeat was the Party's failure to read the policy mood correctly, as the theory suggests, and whether the mechanism of "selective perception" can lead policymakers to misinterpret the current balance of public opinion. Evidence to test this claim is available from the 1997 and 2001 British Representation Studies (BRS), surveys sent to all parliamentary candidates and MPs standing in the British general election for all parties with parliamentary representation. In early spring 2001, before the official campaign got underway, the BRS was mailed to 1859 candidates selected by the main British parties (excluding the Greens, BNP, UK Independence Party, and other minor parties or independent candidates without parliamentary representation). By the end of June 2001, 1085 politicians had replied, representing a response rate of 58.4 percent (for full details and the questionnaires see "<http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris.shorenstein.ksg/data.htm>"). Although the response rate was (as usual) higher among parliamentary candidates than MPs, the study includes about one third of the current House of Commons, and it is broadly representative by party. The results can be compared with other surveys in this series, the 1997 British Representation Study (BRS-97) (n=999), and the 1992 British Candidate Study (n=1658). Attitudes

among the general public and the location of the median voter can be compared using identical items in successive British Election Studies.

The BRS contained multiple items monitoring politicians' political attitudes and values, political background, and social origins. Here we focus on the standard 10-point scales asking politicians to identify where they placed *themselves* on six major issues, and also where they placed the position of four other groups (their constituency party, party leader, parliamentary party, and party voters). The scales (see Appendix A for format) concerned some of the core issue cleavages in British party politics, such as jobs *vs.* prices, nationalization *vs.* privatization, European integration *vs.* independence, taxes *vs.* spending, and women's equality *vs.* home role, as well as the generic left-right ideological scale. This paper is limited to examining the evidence on just two scales: Tax cuts *vs.* public spending on health and social services, and European integration *vs.* independence. These were selected for analysis on the grounds that they were two of the most important political issues that deeply divided the major British parties in the last election campaign. They tap into the classic left-right economic dimension of the role of the market versus the state, and the nationalist-internationalist dimension of Britain's role within the European Union. In Market and Opinion Research International (MORI) public opinion polls conducted during the campaign, the issues of healthcare and education were ranked as the top two most important problems facing the country. Content analysis of press coverage found that these issues featured heavily in the campaign coverage (Norris, 2001a, Table Four; Deacon, *et al.*, 2001). Europe featured as less important among the public, but it received even higher priority in the news media, dominating much of the campaign headlines. Moreover, there are good theoretical reasons for selecting these scales as tapping the two-dimensional issue space in British politics; these items representing proxy measures for the horizontal left-right or socialist *vs.* *laissez faire* traditional economic dimension, as well as the cross-cutting nationalist-internationalist dimension that has risen in importance with globalization and devolution.

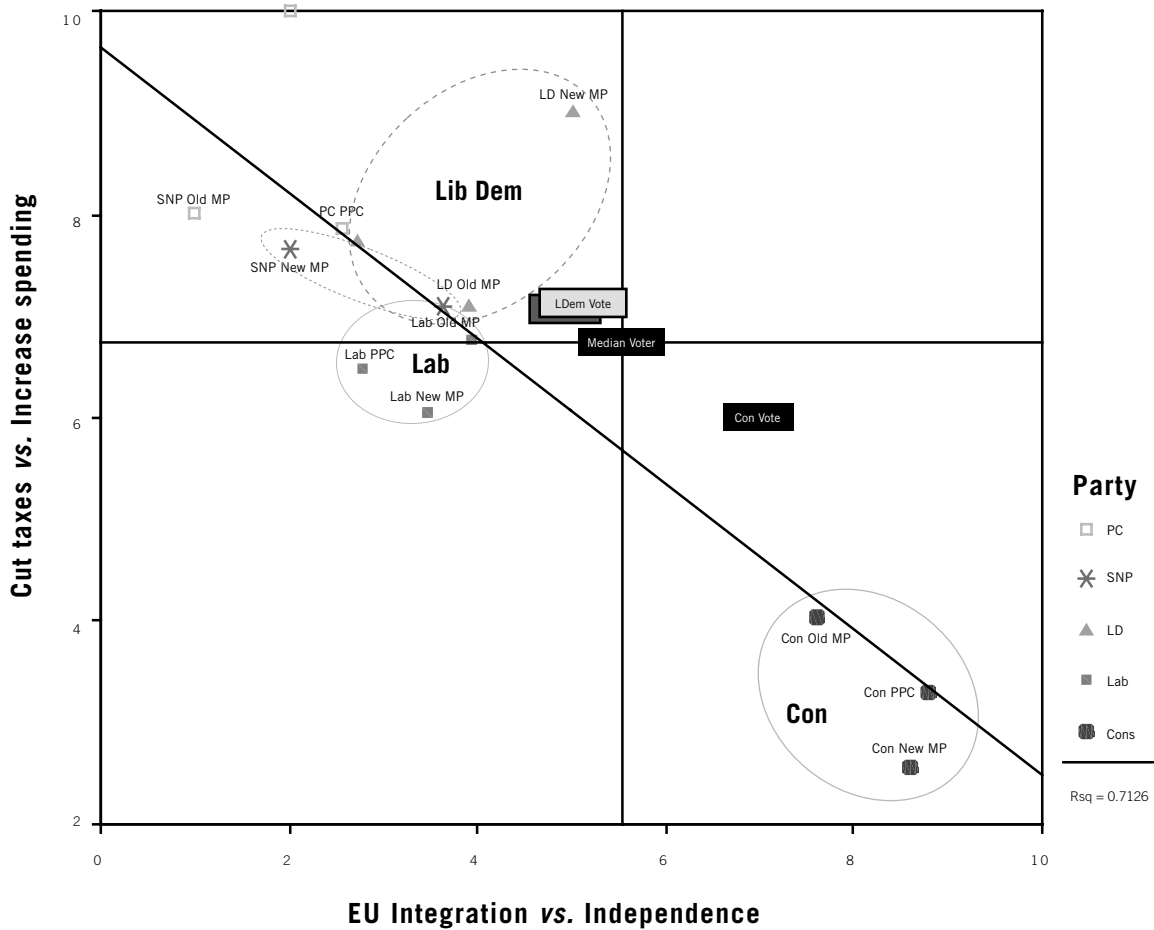
Using identical measures, the post-election cross-sectional BES asked voters to identify their own position, and to place the parties, on the issue scales. Unfortunately, despite the centrality of these issues to party politics, only one of the scales was included in the 2001 BES (public spending *vs.* tax cuts), and the European scale was amended to destroy comparability over time. On Europe we have to rely upon the 1997 BES to identify the position of the median voter, despite the fact that this may have shifted during the last four years. The issue scales both ranged from left (0) to right (10).

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

First, what is the distribution of party competition in the last election? The two issue scales of tax cuts *vs.* public spending and EU unity *vs.* independence can be combined into a two-dimensional map (Figure Two). We can locate the mean position of the parties broken down into three sub-groups: The incumbent MPs re-elected in 2001; the "new" MPs elected in 2001 but not in 1997; and the parliamentary candidates who failed to be elected in 2001. It should be noted that many of the "new" MPs are actually "retreads" who had earlier careers at Westminster (Cowley, 2001), but who proved unsuccessful in 1997. Analyzing these subgroups also helps us to understand the impact of the last election because we can see the process of cohort change. The position of the median voter can be identified on these scales, as can the position of those who voted for the major parties (based on the 1997 BES).

The map of British party competition reveals the pattern at a glance. Most strikingly, Conservative politicians are clustered in the bottom right-hand quadrant, as the most Euroskeptic group and the most right wing on the economy. This is not surprising. But the location of the new MPs suggests that they are even

FIGURE 2 THE MAP OF BRITISH PARTY COMPETITION, JUNE 2001



NOTES

Where politicians and voters place themselves on the following 10-point scales:

Question: "Some people feel that government should cut taxes a lot and spend much less on health and social services. Other people feel that government should put up taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services. Using the following scale...where would you place yourself?"

Question: "Some people feel that Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union. Other people feel that Britain should do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union. Using the following scale..."

NEW MPs: Parliamentary Candidates elected in June 2000; OLD MPs: Incumbent MPs re-elected in June 2001; PPCs: Parliamentary Candidates not elected in June 2001.

SOURCES

The 2001 British Representation Study; The British Election Study 1997 (EU) and 2001 (tax cuts vs. spending).

TABLE 1 DISTANCE BETWEEN POLITICIANS AND THE MEDIAN BRITISH VOTER

TAX-SPEND SCALE	ACTUAL POSITION OF POLITICIANS 2001	DISTANCE FROM THE ACTUAL POSITION OF THE MEDIAN BRITISH VOTER IN 2001
Conservative	6.7	+3.4
Labour	3.5	+0.2
Liberal Democrat	2.3	-1.0
SNP	2.9	-0.4
Plaid Cymru	2.0	-1.3
ALL	4.0	+0.7

EU SCALE	ACTUAL POSITION OF POLITICIANS 2001	DISTANCE FROM THE ACTUAL POSITION OF THE MEDIAN BRITISH VOTER IN 1997
Conservative	8.6	+3.1
Labour	3.3	-2.2
Liberal Democrat	2.8	-2.7
SNP	3.6	-1.9
Plaid Cymru	2.5	-3.0
ALL	4.9	-0.6

NOTES

- 1 The “actual position” represents where politicians and voters each reported their own location on the 10-point scales.
- 2 A positive distance shows that politicians locate themselves to the right of the median voter. A negative shows that they are to the left.
- 3 The tax-spend scale ranges from left to right, *i.e.*, from cut taxes and spending (0) to raise taxes and spending (10).
- 4 The Europe scale ranges from left to right, *i.e.*, from unite fully with the EU (0) to protect independence from the EU (10).

SOURCES

The 2001 British Representation Study; The British Election Study 1997 (EU) and 2001 (tax cuts vs. spending).

more anti-European and more pro-tax cut than incumbent MPs. The impact of the last election has therefore been to push the Conservatives even farther down this road toward the right, rather than returning toward the center ground of Westminster politics. In contrast, Labour politicians are clustered in the center of the landscape, with the new Labour MPs slightly more middle-of-the-road on public spending (although also slightly more pro-European) than the incumbents. Labour is flanked by the groups of nationalist politicians scattered in the top left-hand corner of the map. Labour is also close to the Liberal Democrats, who are more left wing on public spending (reflecting the official Liberal Democrat commitment to raising personal income taxes to spend on education and health public services), although more dispersed on the European scale. In short, just as Bara & Budge (2001) found that Labour had become the center party in 2001, so the attitudes of politicians confirms this pattern. The change has occurred not simply on official paper; it reflects how MPs and candidates actually see themselves.

Equally important, we can map the position of the median British voter on these scales, including where voters placed themselves. Table One shows that Labour was relatively close to the median British voter,

TABLE 2 CHANGE IN THE POLITICAL ELITE, 1997-2001

TAX-SPEND SCALE	ACTUAL POSITION OF POLITICIANS 1997	ACTUAL POSITION OF POLITICIANS 2001	CHANGE 1997-2001
Conservative	7.9	6.7	-1.2
Labour	2.6	3.5	+0.9
Liberal Democrat	2.4	2.3	+0.1
SNP	2.1	2.9	+0.8
Plaid Cymru	1.2	2.0	+0.8
ALL	4.0	4.0	0.0

EU SCALE	ACTUAL POSITION OF POLITICIANS 1997	ACTUAL POSITION OF POLITICIANS 2001	CHANGE 1997-2001
Conservative	8.2	8.6	+0.4
Labour	2.5	3.3	+0.8
Liberal Democrat	1.5	2.8	+1.3
SNP	2.5	3.6	+1.1
Plaid Cymru	1.2	2.5	+1.3
ALL	4.0	4.9	+0.9

NOTES

- 1 The “actual position” represents where politicians reported their own location on the 10-point scales.
- 2 A positive change shows a shift to the right and a negative shows a shift to the left.
- 3 The tax-spend scale ranges from left to right, *i.e.*, from cut taxes and spending (0) to raise taxes and spending (10).
- 4 The Europe scale ranges from left to right, *i.e.*, from unite fully with the EU (0) to protect independence from the EU (10).

SOURCES

The 2001 British Representation Study; The 1997 British Representation Study.

especially on the priority that should be given to public spending over tax cuts, But the Party was slightly more pro-European than the average citizen. The position of Labour and the Liberal Democrat politicians was also fairly close to the position of their own voters in 1997. In contrast, Conservative politicians were located farther away from their own Conservative voters, from the Liberal Democrat voters they may have hoped to attract, and from the median British voter in 1997. The group of Conservative politicians was 3.4 points away from the median voter on the tax-spend 10-point scale, and 3.1 points away in the Europe scale. The newest group of Conservative MPs was stranded farthest away from the electorate, with clear blue water between them and the voters they most need to increase popular support for their Party. It appears that the zone of acquiescence has moved in recent years and the Conservatives have lagged behind.

This pattern is not idiosyncratic. Instead, it reflects and confirms the evidence found in previous British elections. Mapping the actual position of voters and politicians across the left-right ideological scale in 1992 and in 1997 also found that voters were more tightly clustered in the center of the political spectrum, while politicians were more dispersed to left and right (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Norris, 1999).

These previous studies also revealed that, at the time of the 1997 election, the average Labour politician was closer to the median British voter than the average Conservative politician. Lacking elite-level surveys, we can only speculate about the attitudes and values of politicians in earlier elections. But if in the late 1970s and early 1980s Labour had become out of touch with mainstream public opinion, as the manifesto data suggests, by the time of the 1997 election Labour politicians closely reflected the prevailing ethos. Of course, this alone is not enough to win elections; if it were, the Liberal Democrats, as the party closest to the median voter, would have been in power for decades. Many factors besides rational issue voicing lead to electoral success—for instance, the popularity of leaders, the state of the economy, and campaign coverage in the news media. Nevertheless, Labour's shift center-right from 1992 to 1997 placed it in an advantageous position to maximize popular support. Blair maintained this position in 2001, while Conservative politicians placed themselves at a disadvantage, fishing for votes far beyond where they were located. Moreover, the new Conservative MPs who entered in the last election were even more distant from the center ground of Westminster politics than the rest of the parliamentary party.

Table Two shows the change in the ideological position of politicians from 1997 to 2001. On the tax-spend issue, there was a modest shift towards the center ground among all parties, with the Conservatives moving slightly center-left and others moving slightly center-right. As a result, the dispersion of parties across the spectrum on this issue closed somewhat. The Conservatives increasingly recognized the need for greater public spending on health and education. Nevertheless, the Party remained stranded far to the right of all other parties on this issue, whereas Labour was in the center of the political spectrum, flanked by the Liberal Democrats and nationalists to the left. The Conservative Party did change on this issue during the first Labour Administration—but not enough, given their original starting point. On the European issue, all parties drifted toward a slightly more skeptical position, with the Conservatives again being by far the most extreme. Labour was located roughly in the middle.

Selective Perception

How do we explain this puzzle? Downsian theory assumes that major opposition parties with ambitions for government will move toward the median voter in the pursuit of votes. But any successful vote-casting strategy requires that politicians first identify where these voters are located. Of course, as discussed earlier, Downsian theory could be wrong if Conservative ideologues have taken over the ship's command and displaced Conservative pragmatists. Politicians may not be rational office-seekers, after all. But another explanation is that many Conservative politicians may have simply misunderstood and lagged behind the shift in the policy mood.

We can test this proposition by seeing where politicians placed their voters on the same scales. In particular, we can investigate whether the distance between the actual position of voters (in 1997) and where politicians placed the perceived position of voters (in 2001) was greatest in the Conservative Party. If so, then problems of selective perception may have led the Conservatives astray and blinded them to the pressing need to revise their policies and program. The analysis in Table Three shows the selective perception measure, calculated as the position where groups of politicians placed their own voters and the actual position of party voters. Again it should be noted that at present (given the limitations of data) the position of voters is based on the 1997 BES, assuming that there has been no significant shift from 1997 to 2001. This limitation may introduce systematic errors, but it seems likely to minimize—rather than exaggerate—the estimates of perceptual error if public opinion continued its past trajectory from 1997 to 2001. This preliminary analysis will be confirmed with the 2001 BES data, once available. Interpretations of the final column are straightforward: The greater the size of the difference coefficient, the larger the perceptual error by politicians. The results confirm that of all parties, the Conservative politicians proved

TABLE 3 POLITICIANS' PERCEPTIONS OF VOTERS

TAX-SPEND SCALE	POLITICIANS' PERCEPTION OF VOTERS 2001 (i)	VOTERS' ACTUAL POSITIONS 2001 (ii)	PERCEPTUAL BIAS (i)-(ii)
Conservative	6.1	4.0	+2.1
Labour	4.4	2.9	+1.5
Liberal Democrat	3.3	2.9	+0.4
SNP	3.8	3.8	0.0
Plaid Cymru	2.4	3.5	+1.1
ALL	4.5	3.3	+1.2

EU SCALE	POLITICIANS' PERCEPTION OF VOTERS 2001 (i)	VOTERS' ACTUAL POSITIONS 1997 (ii)	PERCEPTUAL BIAS (i)-(ii)
Conservative	8.5	6.9	+1.6
Labour	5.7	4.9	+0.8
Liberal Democrat	4.6	5.1	-0.5
SNP	4.4	5.0	-0.6
Plaid Cymru	3.3	4.7	-1.4
ALL	6.2	5.5	-0.7

NOTES

- 1 The "actual position" represents where voters reported their own location on the 10-point scales.
- 2 The "perceptual bias" is the difference between columns (i) and (ii). A positive coefficient indicates that politicians believe voters to be more right wing than they are. A negative coefficient indicates that they believe voters to be more left wing than they are.
- 3 The tax-spend scale ranges from left to right, *i.e.*, from cut taxes and spending (0) to put raise taxes and spending (10).
- 4 The Europe scale ranges from left to right, *i.e.*, from unite fully with the EU (0) to protect independence from the EU (10).

SOURCES

The 2001 *British Representation Study*; *The British Election Study 1997 (EU) and 2001 (tax cuts vs. spending)*.

widest of the mark on both issues; they believed that their voters were more right wing than was actually the case. On the 10-point scale, the Conservatives misplaced their own voters by 2.1 points on the tax-spend scale and by 1.6 points on Europe. Labour politicians also thought that their supporters were slightly more right wing than was the case, but they were more accurate in their estimates. The minor parties tended to see voters as slightly more favorable towards tax cuts and more positive towards Europe than voters saw themselves. Therefore, if there is a systematic tendency for politicians to see voters in their own image, leading to misleading targeting, this selective perception appears more apparent in the Conservative Party than elsewhere.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In the 2001 election, the Conservatives did experience an overall net gain of one seat, rather than a deeper loss. But remarking that it could have been worse is like saying that the *Titanic* voyage was a success because a few people survived on life rafts. One explanation for the Conservatives' defeat is offered by Downsian models of party competition. To summarize the argument, the core premises in this account are that:

- 1 Some changes in public opinion can be regarded as consistent shifts in the overall policy mood linking different dimensions of public policy;
- 2 Far from being static, the predominant policy mood shifts dynamically in response to government actions;
- 3 Rational politicians seeking electoral office aim to keep in step with the predominant policy mood, responding (after a time lag) to perceived changes in public opinion by adopting policies which keep them within the “zone of acquiescence,” in order to gain power; and
- 4 Despite the shock of successive electoral defeats, ideological barriers and problems of selective perception may still lead politicians to misidentify the prevailing policy mood and fail to respond to changes in public opinion.

The model of policy cycles suggests that if policy-makers tilt too far in the direction of either markets or the state, given the complex trade-offs involved, then public opinion can be expected gradually to shift the balance of policy preferences back towards the center. But until this shift is recognized, policymakers (in a lagged process) may continue to follow what they believe to be public preferences, even though in fact the policy mood may have changed.

Working within this general theoretical framework, the current study examined the empirical evidence for the last proposition about selective perception, based on analysis of the 2001 BRS. The results suggest three main findings:

- 1 On the key issues of public spending and Europe, Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians in the last election remained close to the center-ground of Westminster party politics, with the Nationalist parties farther towards the left, and the Conservatives in clear blue water on the far right;
- 2 As a result of this pattern, the Conservatives were the party furthest from the median British voter; and,
- 3 One reason for this pattern was selective perception, so that Conservative politicians “missed the target.”

Clearly, additional research must be done in order to substantiate other aspects of this theory. The BRS contains many indicators of political attitudes and values on a variety of policy issues (*e.g.*, Europe, the economy, social policy, and constitutional reform), which remain to be examined to understand the dimensions of party ideology in more depth. We also can break down the analysis of selective perception more finely by considering how the political and social background of politicians could affect this process—for example, whether patterns of selective perception varied by parliamentary cohort, by marginality of seats, by legislative roles adopted, and by career prospects for advancement. Ideological trends at Westminster can be analyzed by merging the series of BRS datasets to monitor changes in the attitudes and values of MPs from 1992 to 2001.

So, many questions remain. Nevertheless, the evidence that has now accumulated over successive elections indicates that there are consistent and reliable findings to map contemporary party competition in Westminster politics, and that there is a relationship between this map and the outcome of the last two British general elections. This study does not claim that monocausal explanations are sufficient to understand Labour's success. The electoral system, in particular, contributed significantly to the way that the Party's 40.7% of the vote in the last election was translated into an unassailable 167-seat majority and a massive landslide in the Commons. And though many commentators also attribute defeat to the campaign led by Conservative William Hague, this seems to blame the messenger for the message. For despite the campaign, large swathes of the public remained ignorant of the Conservative position on Europe and tax cuts (Norris & Sanders, 2001). Voters consistently believed that the Conservatives were more middle-of-the-road than was the case. Indeed, the evidence suggests that if the public had paid closer attention to the Conservatives' policy positions and if people had voted on these issues, the Party could have become even more unpopular.

“ Remarking that it could have been worse is like saying that the *Titanic* voyage was a success because a few people survived on life rafts.”

The Conservatives face multiple problems—of membership, of organization, and of leadership. But this study provides substantial evidence that ideological patterns of party competition have structured and contributed to Conservative failure and Labour success in the last two elections. The Conservatives lost not just because of Hague's image, the Millbank machine, or the economy, but also because they did not understand what was necessary in order to win. As in therapy, the first step towards recovery is to recognize a problem. The second is summoning the will to change. Until these blinders are removed, it seems likely that the Conservatives are doomed to repeat themselves, if not as farce, then as tragedy.

APPENDIX A: ISSUE SCALE QUESTIONS

The format used for the issue scale questions in the 2001 BRS and the BES was as follows:

29. Some people feel that getting people back to work should be the government's top priority. Other people feel that keeping prices down should be the government's top priority. Using the following scale...												
Getting people back to work	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Keeping prices down
Where would you place your view												
Your constituency party												
Your parliamentary party												
Your party leader												
Your party's voters												

32. Some people feel that Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union. Other people feel that Britain should do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union. Using the following scale...where would you place your view...?

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