

**European Forum**

The Politics of Income Redistribution.  
Factional Strife and Vote Mobilization  
under Thatcher

ROSA MULÉ

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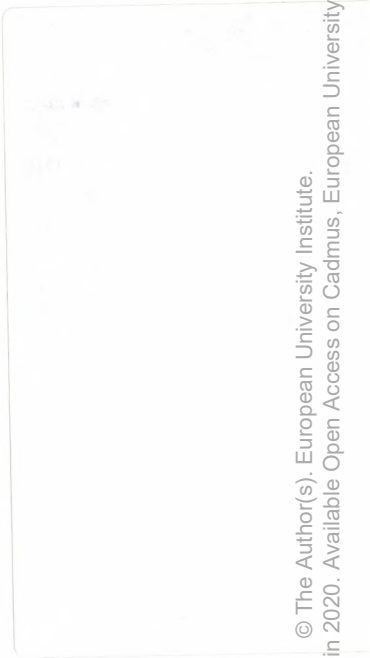


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**Mulé: *The Politics of Income Redistribution.***  
***Factional Strife and Vote Mobilization under Thatcher***

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This Working Paper has been written in the context of the 1998-1999 European Forum programme on **Recasting the European Welfare State: Options, Constraints, Actors**, directed by Professors Maurizio Ferrera (Universities of Pavia and Bocconi, Milano) and Martin Rhodes (Robert Schuman Centre).

Adopting a broad, long-term and comparative perspective, the Forum will aim to:

- scrutinize the complex web of social, economic and political challenges to contemporary European welfare states;
- identify the various options for, and constraints on institutional reform;
- discuss the role of the various actors in promoting or hindering this reform at the national, sub-national and supra-national level;
- and, more generally, outline the broad trajectories and scenarios of change.

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**The Politics of Income Redistribution.  
Factional Strife and Vote Mobilization under Thatcher**

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In the past twenty years rising income inequality has become a persistent feature of most rich industrialized countries, calling for exploratory and explanatory research.<sup>2</sup> In view of the negative implications of inequality growth for health, crime and education,<sup>3</sup> research on income inequality in liberal democracies seems to be particularly urgent.

Yet political economists have paid remarkably little attention to distributive issues.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps thirty years of economic prosperity have deflected their interest away from these issues, but they are hard to ignore today after two decades of upward inequality movements in Western countries. Studies of income distribution demonstrate that understanding inequality trends requires an assessment of government behaviour.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a paper presented at the IPSA XVII Conference 17-21 August, Seoul, 1997 and at the European University Institute, February 1999. I have greatly benefited from the detailed and constructive comments of Roger Duclos-Williams. I would also like to thank Jens Alber, Patrick Dunleavy, Wyn Grant, Christopher Hood, Piero Ignazi, Kay Lawson, Linda Luckhaus, Ian McAllister, Deborah Mitchell, Michael Moran, Brendan O'Leary and Campbell Sharman for helpful observations on previous drafts of this paper. The usual disclaimers apply. A substantial revision of the paper came while I was a Jean Monnet Fellow of the European Forum, Robert Schuman Centre, European University Institute. Material from the Family Expenditure Survey in the United Kingdom 1986 and 1991, source: Office for National Statistics is Crown Copyright. It has been made available by the Office for National Statistics through the ESRC Data Archive and has been used by permission. Neither the Office for National Statistics nor the ESRC Data Archive bear any responsibility for the analysis or the interpretation of the data reported here.

<sup>2</sup> A.B. Atkinson, L. Rainwater, T.M. Smeeding (1995) "Income Distribution in European Countries. Evidence from the Luxembourg Income Study", *OECD*; A. Brandolini (1998) "Pareto's Law and Kuznets' Curve: A Bird's-Eye view of Long-Run Changes in Income Inequality", Banca D'Italia, Research Department, Rome.

<sup>3</sup> R. Wilkinson, "The Culture of Inequality", Paper presented at the Conference on Relations Between Social Protection and Economic Performance, European Forum, European University Institute, (11-12 May, 1999); I. Kawachi and B.P. Kennedy (1997) "Socioeconomic Determinants of Health 2: Health and Social Cohesion: Why Care About Income Inequality?", *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 314, 1037-40; X. Sala-i-Martin (1997) "Transfers, Social Safety Net and Economic Growth", *IMF Staff Papers*, Vol. 44, 81-102.

<sup>4</sup> See P. Hall (1997) "The Role of Interests, Institutions, and Ideas in the Comparative Political Economy of the Industrialized Nations" in M.I. Lindbach and A.S. Zuckerman, (eds) *Comparative Politics. Rationality, Culture and Structure*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 174-287.

<sup>5</sup> A.B. Atkinson (1996) "Seeking to Explain the Distribution of Income" in J. Hills (ed.), *New Inequalities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 19-48. A. Brandolini, *Non linear Dynamics, Entitlement Rules, and the Cyclical Behaviour of the Personal Income Distribution*, Centre for Economic Performance, Discussion paper no. 84, London School of Economics.

This paper is a step towards an explanation of the redistributive impact of ruling parties. It proposes a new theoretical interpretation regarding some changes in the social security system that could have affected inequality trends in Britain in the 1980s. I control the validity of this interpretation by drawing on the available qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Several authors have underscored the potential links between social security benefits and income inequality. Atkinson,<sup>6</sup> for instance, found that in Britain the government's decision in the early 1980s to index social security benefits to prices rather than to net average earnings could account for a sizeable increase in inequality in the mid-late 1980s. In a similar vein, Johnson and Webb have calculated that application of the 1979 tax-transfer system to the distribution of household income in 1988 could have reduced the inequality index by 3 percentage points.<sup>7</sup> Direct taxes are moderately progressive but tax avoidance and measurements problems mean that transfer payments offer more reliable opportunities for redistribution.<sup>8</sup>

From the above discussion it may appear that research on income distribution will be intimately connected with social security policies. Yet the bulk of scholarly work focuses on international forces, especially trade and technological progress. According to this literature, upward inequality trends are caused by a shift away from the demand for unskilled labour and in favour of skilled workers. This structural change in the labour market is apparently triggered by the liberalization of international trade, the diffusion of information technology and fierce competition from low-wage newly industrialized countries.

The main problem with this explanation is the inability to account for cross-national variation in inequality trends. Table 1 shows that in some countries the

<sup>6</sup> A.B. Atkinson (1993) "What is happening to the distribution of income in the UK?" *Proceedings of the British Academy*.

<sup>7</sup> P. Johnson and S. Webb (1993) "Explaining the growth of UK income inequality 1979-1988", *Economic Journal*, Vol. 103, 429-35. The tax system was made more regressive. There was a shift away from direct to indirect taxation by replacing the previous split rates of Value Added Tax (VAT), 8 and 12.5 percent, with a single rate of 15 percent. The Conservative government initially cut the top marginal tax rate on earned income from 83 to 60 percent, and later reduced it to 40 percent. It also cut the basic rate of income tax from 33 to 30 percent, later reduced to 25 percent.

<sup>8</sup> S. Ringen (1987) *The Possibility of Politics*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 175.

<sup>9</sup> R. Freeman and L. Katz (eds) (1995) *Differences and Changes in Wage Structures*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press; A. Wood (1994) *North-South Trade, Employment and Inequality: Changing Fortunes in a Skill-Driven World*, Oxford, Clarendon Press; P. Gottschalk and T. Smeeding" (1997) Cross-National Comparisons of Earnings and Income Inequality", *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 35, 633-87.



upsurge was unprecedented, in others the movement was descending and yet in others it was stable.<sup>10</sup>

The sharpest increase occurred in the United Kingdom where the Gini coefficient<sup>11</sup> rose by 7.3 percentage points between 1979 and 1986. Considering the fact that income distributions change very slowly this increase must be considered substantial. However, income inequality continued to fall in Norway, Israel, Canada and France, with the percentage drop in Gini ranging from -1.3 in France to -2.5 in Norway. The data display a similar pattern for the Theil Index, which is reassuring because it demonstrates that findings are robust to the index used.<sup>12</sup>

Such variety of national experiences is *prima facie* evidence that inequality movements over the 1980s probably had a variety of causes. They suggest that national factors including economic climate (e.g. unemployment rate), social services, demographic environments as well as exposure to international trade helped to shape inequality outcomes.<sup>13</sup> Distinct national experiences might also reflect national policy profiles, the impact of national institutions and the distribution of political power within a nation. To the extent that income inequality is declared to be driven by international economic trends, it has largely been *devoid of serious analyses of its political context*.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Until recently comparisons of income distributions within countries and between countries have been hampered by the lack of comparable income data. This drawback in comparative distributional analyses has been partially offset by the release of the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) microdata sets. The salient feature of the LIS data is that a large number of income and demographic variables have been drawn from national, usually government sponsored, surveys and have been made comparable across the datasets. More confidence can be attributed to the fact that distributional outcomes are not merely the result of changing concepts and definitions imposed on the data. I have adjusted income in order to take account of household size and composition.

<sup>11</sup> The Gini coefficient was constructed by Corrado Gini in 1925 and is now one of the most widely used inequality indices.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed and comprehensive treatment of the methodological and theoretical issues regarding the measurement of inequality see F. Cowell (1995) *The Measurement of Inequality*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf (2nd ed).

<sup>13</sup> N. Fligstein (1998) *Is Globalization the Cause of the Crises of Welfare States?* EUI Working Papers, SPS No. 98/5; A. Glyn, "Internal and External Constraints" in D. Baker, G. Epstein R. Pollin (1998) (eds) *Globalization And Progressive Economic Policy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 391-408.

<sup>14</sup> This criticism has also been levelled to studies of the welfare state. See M. Ferrera (1993) *Modelli di Solidarietà*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 190-7.

**Table 1.** Trends in income inequality in 9 Western countries. (Household post-tax- post/transfer adjusted income\*)

Country	late 1970s early 1980s	mid-1980s	absolute change	relative change
<b>Gini coefficient %</b>				
Israel	33.7	33.0	-0.7	-2.1
United States	33.0	35.5	+2.5	7.0
Canada	32.4	31.1	-1.3	-4.0
France	30.8	30.4	-0.4	-1.3
Australia	30.2	30.9	+0.7	+2.3
United Kingdom	27.6	34.9	+7.3	+20.9
Norway	24.9	24.3	-0.6	-2.5
West Germany	23.0	26.4	+3.4	+12.8
Sweden	19.9	22.9	+3.0	+13.1
<b>Theil index%</b>				
Israel	20.3	18.7	-1.6	-7.8
Canada	17.8	16.2	-1.6	-8.9
United States	18.2	21.3	+3.1	+17.0
France	18.1	17.9	-0.2	-1.1
Australia	15.0	16.1	+1.1	+7.3
West Germany	13.9	13.5	-0.4	-2.8
United Kingdom	12.7	16.5	+3.8	+29.9
Norway	11.1	10.0	-1.1	9.9
Sweden	6.8	10.0	+3.8	+47.0

*Source:* computed by the author from the Luxembourg Income Study. Datasets for Canada 1975,1981; Israel, 1979,1986; United States 1979, 1986; France 1979, 1984; Australia 1981/82-1985/86; United Kingdom 1979, 1986; Norway 1979, 1986; West Germany 1978, 1984; Sweden 1981, 1987.

\* Income is adjusted with the OECD equivalence scale which is one of the most commonly used in developed countries for distributional assessments. This scale was suggested in the 'OECD list of social indicators' (1982) and it distinguishes only between children and adults. The 'equivalent income' is the standard of living available to each member of the household unit, assuming income pooling. Cash income is adjusted by the number of adults in a family in order to construct a measure of the level of economic welfare available to the family.

**Table 1.2.** Average value of income components as a percentage of average gross income in 9 Western countries.

Variable	USA	Israel	Canada	Australia	Norway	West Germany	UK	France	Sweden*
Wages or salaries	75.8	66	75.5	71	69.9	63.1	72	63.2	64.5
Self-empl. Income	6.7	16.8	4.5	5.6	11.1	16.7	4.5	12.1	3.7
Property income	5.8	4.4	7.2	12.5	2.7	1.1	2.7	3.6	2.7
Occup. Pensions	2.6	3.4	1.8	1.1	1.2	2.3	2.5	0.0	0.0*
Market incomes	90.8	90.5	90.1	90.1	84.9	83.3	81.7	78.8	70.8
Cash benefits	8	8.5	9.1	9.3	14.1	16.5	17.2	21.2	29.

Datasets as in Figure 1. Countries are ordering according to the proportion of cash benefits in total income, starting from the lowest.

\* In the data-collection process occupational pensions in Sweden are treated as part of transfer payments.

We know that governments may offset or exacerbate income inequality in many ways. They can intervene in the labour market by arranging an incomes policy, by setting a minimum wage or by privatizing national industries; they can modify the so-called social wage by expanding or contracting social services;<sup>15</sup> and they may alter the tax-transfer system. Of course, an enquiry into all these spheres of intervention is overly ambitious. In this paper I will have to be selective and chiefly confine myself to explaining the ability of the Thatcher government to cut social security benefits.

It is not possible to read straight from changes in the distribution of a single income component to changes in the overall distribution. Nevertheless we are able to inspect different stages of the income formation process.<sup>16</sup> To this end, Table 2 sets out the inequality index for original income (not including transfers),<sup>17</sup> and for post-transfer income between 1974 and 1991 in the UK. There are two main features worth noting in this Table:

**Table 2.** Gini coefficient (%) for selected income definitions. United Kingdom 1974-1991 (Adjusted household income).

Year	Original (pre-transfer) income (1)	Post-transfer income (2)	Reduction from transfers (1)-(2)
1974	43.3	31.9	11.4
1979	46.9	31.5	15.4
1986	53.6	34.9	18.9
1991	53.2	38.3	14.9
Percentage change			
1974-1979	+8	-1	....
1979-1986	+14	+11	....
1986-1991	-1	+10	
1974-1991	+23	+20	

Source: computed by the author from the Luxembourg Income Study.

- the Gini coefficient for original income rose almost consistently throughout the period and declined slightly between 1986 and 1991;

<sup>15</sup> There are formidable problems in assessing the redistributive impact of the social wage; see P. Saunders (1994) *Inequality and Welfare*, chapter 4.

<sup>16</sup> See J. Hills (1996) "Introduction" in J. Hills (ed.), *New Inequalities*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> I leave aside the contentious issue regarding the links between government policies and the formation of original income.

- at the same time, the Gini coefficient for post-transfer income dropped modestly between 1974 and 1979 but rose between 1986 and 1991.

These results indicate that up to the late 1970s cash transfers acted as a brake on rising inequality in the market sphere. In the 1980s, however the situation changed: the Gini coefficient for post-transfer income rose by 3.4 percentage points. The fact that the redistributive impact of transfers appears less effective in the 1980s adds weight to the contention that changes in entitlement and eligibility rules could have contributed to upward inequality trends.<sup>18</sup>

The weaker distributional role of cash transfers took place at a time when the pattern of income distribution in Britain was changing dramatically. The latest evidence of the *Rowntree Inquiry into Income and Wealth Distribution in the UK*, shows that most of the increase in income inequality occurred in the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> Because the rich were getting richer and the poor relatively poorer, the economic benefits of the Thatcher era were clearly not equally spread.<sup>20</sup> In the light of these findings it seems important to examine whether political factors influenced such uneven distribution of costs and benefits.

The paper is divided in six sections. Section I examines available vote-seeking explanations of income redistribution and then proposes an alternative view. Section II briefly sketches the policies towards low income groups implemented in the early 1980s. I concentrate on the first Thatcher term because, as I shall demonstrate, it represented a critical juncture where strategic, institutional and opposition effects combined to virtually eliminate internal opposition to tighter social security benefits. Section III explores the redistributive implications of internal governance. Section IV argues that asymmetries in social security benefits mirrored the British electoral geography. Section V looks at Opposition effects. Section VI summarizes the results and provides some guidelines for future research.

<sup>18</sup> A.B. Atkinson (1996) "Seeking to Explain the Distribution of Income"; M. Evans (1998) "Social Security: Dismantling the Pyramids?" in H. Glennerster and J. Hills (eds) *The State of Welfare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 257-307. Both Evans and Hills draw upon the Family Expenditure Survey. The compatibility of my findings based on the Luxembourg Income Study with those drawing on the Family Expenditure Survey confirms the results of a major OECD study that shows the proximity of estimates based on LIS and national datasets. See A.B. Atkinson, T. Smeeding and L. Rainwater (1995) "Income Distribution in OECD Countries: The evidence from the Luxembourg Income Study".

<sup>19</sup> J. Hills (1998) "Rowntree Inquiry into Income and Wealth Distribution in the UK, the latest evidence".

<sup>20</sup> A. Goodman, P. Johnson, S. Webb (1997) *Inequality in the UK*; A.B. Atkinson (1993) "What's Happening to the Distribution of Income in The UK?".

## I. The Politics of Income Redistribution: Theoretical Perspectives

Analysts often examine the politics of income redistribution through the lens of proximity models or political business cycles (PBC).<sup>21</sup> Scholars endorsing the Downsian framework believe that voters have specific preferences regarding redistributive policies, and that they select parties that are closest to their position in the policy space. In plurality-rule systems, if the frequency distribution of voters is single peaked, vote-seeking parties adopt policies close to the median voter.<sup>22</sup> On the assumption that median voters and median income groups overlap, proximity models posit that middle classes benefit from redistributive efforts.<sup>23</sup> Along these lines many scholars have conducted studies focusing on the median voter as the key to understanding the politics of income redistribution.<sup>24</sup>

In Britain, however, the assumption that middle classes have benefited from redistribution sharply contrasts with the shrinking size of middle income groups over the 1980s.<sup>25</sup> Moreover research findings show that in first-past-the-post systems the real contest is not for the population-wide median voter when there are

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<sup>21</sup> For a more comprehensive treatment of the party-policy link see R. Mulé (1997) "Explaining the Party-Policy Link: Established Approaches and Theoretical Developments", *Party Politics*, Vol. 3, 493-512.

<sup>22</sup> A. Downs (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, New York, Harper & Row, 114-22; J.M. Enelow and M.J. Hinich (1984) *The Spatial Theory of Voting. An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 8-14. Vote-maximising parties will not implement redistributive policies aimed at capturing the median voter if: a) there are multiple issue dimensions; b) there is a single dimension, but the frequency distribution of voters is double-peaked and alienation/abstentions are significant; c) there is a single dimension but differential alienation/abstention across two parties; d) there are more than three parties and easy entry for new parties.

<sup>23</sup> G. Tullock (1983) *Economics of Income Redistribution*, Boston, Kluwer, 102-6.

<sup>24</sup> Vote seeking models of income redistribution are employed in B. Denters (1993) "The Politics of Redistribution in Local Government", *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 23, 323-42; T. Persson and G. Tabellini (1994) "Is Inequality Harmful for Growth?", *American Economic Review*, Vol. 84, 600-21; J. Bishop, P. Formby, W.J. Smith (1991) "Incomplete Information, Income Redistribution And Risk Averse Median Voter Behaviour", *Public Choice*, Vol. 68, 41-55; C.B. Colburn (1990) "A Public Choice Explanation For The Decline In Real Income Transfers", *Public Finance Quarterly*, Vol 18, 123-34; G.W. Scully and D.J. Slottje (1989) "The Paradox of Politics and Policy in Redistributing Income", *Public Choice*, Vol. 60, 55-70.

<sup>25</sup> F.A. Cowell, S.P. Jenkins, J.A. Litchfield (1996) "The Changing Shape Of The UK Income Distribution: Kernel Density Estimates" in J. Hills (ed.) *New Inequalities*, 49-76. These authors note that the UK income distribution during the 1980s does not have the standard textbook unimodal shape; rather, it presents a polarized bi-modal character. This aggregate change appears to reflect a greater stratification between two subgroups, the relatively rich and the relatively poor (67-8).

more than two significant candidates.<sup>26</sup> This was the case in Britain between 1981 and 1983, when the Alliance was an apparently dominant force. Proximity models therefore seem inadequate to account for changes in social security benefits in Britain.

Perhaps the political business cycle best explains the impact of vote-seeking parties on transfer benefits.<sup>27</sup> This model assumes that the 'key economic element in the electoral-economic cycle is real disposable income'.<sup>28</sup> Parties manipulate instruments of budgetary policies, such as taxation and expenditure, to achieve short-term electoral benefits. Political business cycles are typically characterized by spending cuts early in the term, followed by generous benefits later. The pattern is expected to recur cyclically, with parties deferring the costs of pre-election increases in the level of transfer benefits until after the election.

However, in Britain highly controversial decisions were taken in 1982 just one year *before* the general election of 1983: in June 1982 the earnings-related supplement for Unemployment and Sickness benefit was abolished; a few weeks later Unemployment Benefit and Supplementary Benefit paid to unemployed people (with the exception of additions for children) became taxable. These facts cast doubts on the explanatory power of PBC explanations for the British case.

The evident weakness of vote-seeking models could be strengthened by drawing upon advances in the literature on party politics. For one thing, these models conceive of a political party as a monolithic entity, a black box that mechanically filters inputs into outputs. But theoretical work on political parties has argued that parties are better understood as a particular type of complex organization comprised of many groups, subgroups and individuals.<sup>29</sup> Within party

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<sup>26</sup> G. Cox (1997) *Making Votes Count*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 231; S. Merrill, (1998) *Making Multicandidate Elections More Democratic*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 15-28.

<sup>27</sup> W. Nordhaus (1975) "The Political Business Cycle", *Review of Economic Studies*, Vol. 42, 169-90; L.J. Griffin, K. Leicht, "Politicizing Welfare Expenditures in the United States" in N. Furniss (ed.) (1986) *Futures for the Welfare State*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

<sup>28</sup> E. Tufte (1978) *Political Control of the Economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 29.

<sup>29</sup> J. Roemer (1999) "The Democratic Political Economy of Progressive Income Taxation", *Econometrica*, Vol. 67, 1-19; M. Maor (1998) *Parties, Conflicts, and Coalitions in Western Europe*, London, Routledge; H. Kitschelt (1994) *The Transformation of European Social Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; M. Laver and K. Shepsle (1996) *Making and Breaking Governments*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; K. Lawson (ed.) (1994) *How Political Parties Work*, Praeger, Westport; A. Panebianco (1988) *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; F.P. Belloni, D.C. Beller (1978) *Faction Politics: Political Parties and Factionalism in Comparative Perspectives*, Oxford, ABC-Clio, Inc: Santa Barbara; M. Duverger (1959) *Political Parties*, Methuen, Wiley;

organizations factions strive for relative dominance and interact with each other in the struggle for power. In the process, governance within the party may lead to changes in decision making rules and in the formulation of policies.<sup>30</sup>

Another key assumption of the traditional literature is the idea that public preferences set the public agenda. Oriented towards the paradigm of representative democracy and pre-given electoral constituencies conventional models stress the responsiveness of elected representatives to voters' demands. In this perspective, ruling parties merely translate the demands of society into the decision-making arena.

Such demand-side models have come under heavy fire for neglecting the autonomy of party leaders from voters.<sup>31</sup> Critics have noted that party leaders are not only vote-takers but actively engage in vote-making.<sup>32</sup> They argue that political parties are relatively autonomous actors able to devise policy packages to mobilize voters and forge new constituencies, especially after major electoral defeats.

In sum theoretical developments point to the role of political slack, the autonomy from voters that may give party leaders a margin of freedom from voters and activists. Seen in this light, it is possible that politicians engage in or alternatively neglect income redistribution without regard to the preferences of the electorate.

By drawing upon this insight I examine the extent to which social security policies in Britain were influenced by factional strife and vote-mobilization and not generated entirely by pre-given socio-economic cleavages.

The paper proposes an interpretation of social security cuts during the first

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R. Michels (1959) *Political Parties*, New York, Dover.

<sup>30</sup> D. Brady and D. W. Epstein (1997) "Intraparty Preferences, Heterogeneity, and the Origins of the Modern Congress: Progressive Reformers in the House and Senate, 1980-1920", *Journal of Law Economics and Organization*, Vol. 13, 26-49; M. McCubbins and M. Thies (1997) "As a Matter of Factions: The Budgetary Implications of Shifting Factional Control in Japan's LDP", *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 293-328; F. McGillivray (1997) "Party Discipline as a Determinant of the Endogenous Formation of Tariffs", *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 41, 584-607; G. Cox and McCubbins (1993) *Legislative Leviathan*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

<sup>31</sup> P. Dunleavy (1991) *Democracy, Bureaucracy and Public Choice*, London, Harvester Wheatsheaf; J. Aldrich (1995) *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Political Parties in America*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

<sup>32</sup> J.P. Frenreis, J.L. Gibson, L.L. Vertz (1990) "The Electoral Relevance of Local Party Organizations", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 84, 225-35; T. Iversen (1994) "The Logics of Electoral Politics", *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 27, 155-89; K. Janda, R. Harmel, C. Edens, P. Goff (1995) "Changes in Party Identity", *Party Politics*, Vol. 1, 171-96.



Thatcher government that is rooted in two claims. First, internal realignments go a long way in explaining why the real break with the past came about in social security policy. I will analyse the role of these factors through the lens of actor-centred institutionalism, which combines a focus on strategic interaction with an awareness of the structural and historical context.<sup>33</sup>

Internal dynamics, however, tell only part of the story. The second claim is that the connection between the geographical location of the principal bases of poverty and the electoral geography sheds considerable light on the asymmetries seen in social security cuts.

## II. Policies Towards Low Income Groups

It is by now clear that over the 1980s the Conservative government established new rules which made take-up benefit more limited and difficult. Since social security cuts under Conservative rule have been widely documented and analysed,<sup>34</sup> here I briefly summarize the main policy changes. Doubtlessly one of the most significant changes was the severing of the link between wage movements and benefits in the early 1980s. Instead of cash benefits rising with national prosperity at times of wage increases, they increased only in line with price inflation. This meant that their value would fall in relation to the income of those in work. Because average income increased over the 1980s, the relative value of the basic pension fell from 47 percent of average income in 1983 to 37 percent in 1990, and the number of poor pensioners below half average income rose substantially after the mid-1980s. The decline in the relative value of unemployment benefit over the period since 1983 was from 36 to 28 percent of average income.<sup>35</sup> In addition to this between 1978-9 and 1983-4 the number of social security claimants increased by 138.4 percent but spending on income-related benefits rose by only 110.6 per cent in real terms. Although the composition of claimants might have changed, the figures still indicate a real decline in the benefit per claimant.<sup>36</sup> The Social Security Act of 1986

<sup>33</sup> F. W. Scharpf (1997) *Games Real Actors Play*, Colorado, Westview Press. On the variants of institutionalism see P. Hall and R.C. Taylor (1996) "Political Science and the Three New Institutionalism", *Political Studies*, Vol. XLIV, 936-62; and R. Mulé, "New Institutionalism: Distilling Some "Hard Core" Propositions In The Works of Williamson and March And Olsen", *Politics*, Vol 3, (1999), forthcoming.

<sup>34</sup> M. Hill (1990) *Social Security Policy in Britain*, Aldershot Hants, Edward Elgar; H. Glennerster and J. Hills (eds) (1998) *The State of Welfare*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.); D.S. King (1995) *Actively Seeking Work? The Politics of Unemployment and Welfare in the United States and Great Britain*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 168-73.

<sup>35</sup> J. Hills (1998) "The Rowntree Inquiry Into Income And Wealth in The UK, the Latest Evidence", 33.

<sup>36</sup> A.B. Atkinson, J. Hills, J. Le Grand (1986) *The Welfare State in Britain 1970-1985: Extent*

abolished lower rate benefits that enabled those individuals not meeting the full contribution conditions to receive national insurance. As a result many people failed to qualify for national insurance benefit on account of insufficient contributions. In May 1986 over 800,000 of the 3 million people unemployed had insufficient contributions to receive any unemployment benefit.<sup>37</sup> Groups hit particularly badly included the young unemployed, others with variable work histories and the self-employed.<sup>38</sup> During the period 1979-1988, 17 changes in the rules governing unemployment benefits were made, the majority of which reduced their scope and coverage.<sup>39</sup> In other areas the *lack* of change was just as important. Despite the sharp rise in unemployment in the early 1980s, no variations were made to the level and duration of unemployment benefits.

Other redistributive measures limited the availability of benefits to women in general, and married females participating in the labour market in particular.<sup>40</sup> Specific changes that increased women's dependence and extent of gender inequality included variations to pensions and maternity benefits and to women's eligibility to unemployment benefits. Alterations to the States Earnings Related Pension Scheme diminished its value for elderly women and the universal maternity grant was replaced in 1987 by a means tested benefit. At the same time statutory maternity pay was introduced to be administered by employers with a new qualification test which excluded large numbers of pregnant women.<sup>41</sup> Tougher conditions to establish a claimant's availability to work afflicted women with pre-school children who had to demonstrate that they had already arrangements for child care before being entitled to benefits.<sup>42</sup> In 1980 the 9 percent cutback in the real level of child benefit affected the standards of living of lone-mothers. These measures worsened the financial hardship of women because they are a particularly vulnerable group that experiences high poverty rates.<sup>43</sup>

This attack on the culture of dependency in general, and unemployed people in particular, derived from the government's conviction that transfer benefits

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*and Effectiveness*, WSP/9, STICERD, 30.

<sup>37</sup> A.B. Atkinson and J. Micklewright (1989) "Turning the Screw: Benefits for the Unemployed 1979-1988" in A. Dilnot and I. Walker, *The Economics of Social Security*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

<sup>38</sup> A. Goodman, P. Johnson and S. Webb (1997) *Inequality in the UK*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 223-4.

<sup>39</sup> A.B. Atkinson and J. Micklewright (1989), *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> M. Hill (1990) *Social Security Policy in Britain*, Hants, Edward Elgar.

<sup>41</sup> L. McDowell (1989) "Women in Thatcher's Britain" in J. Mohan, (ed.) *The Political Geography of Contemporary Britain*, London, MacMillan, 172-86.

<sup>42</sup> H. Jone and J. Millar (eds) (1996) *The Politics of the Family*, Aldershot, Avebury.

<sup>43</sup> S. Harkness, S. Machin, J. Waldfogel (1996) "Women's Pay And Family Incomes In Britain, 1979-91" in J. Hills (ed.) *New Inequalities*, 158-80.

generated disincentives to work. Nigel Lawson, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, claimed that the social security system encouraged 'idleness and irresponsibility' and thwarted virtues of hard work and drift.<sup>44</sup> Thatcher confirmed in her memoirs the position of the government:

Both for public spending reasons and in order to deal with the "Why Work?" problem (namely, the disincentive to work created by the small disparity between in-work and out-of-work incomes), we had already agreed to tax short-term social benefits as soon as possible. In the interim we decided to reduce these benefits - unemployment, sickness, injury, maternity and invalidity benefits - by 5 percent.<sup>45</sup>

Rather than passively responding to voters' demands the Conservative government actively manipulated entitlement and eligibility rules.

This procedure was part of a broader design to reduce welfare spending. The Conservative manifesto of 1979 was committed to cutting public expenditure and to 'rolling back the state'. To be sure, welfare spending had already been curtailed under the Labour government in 1976-1979, after the International Monetary Fund made new loans conditional on the reduction of government outlays.<sup>46</sup> Hence, cutbacks in welfare spending were not new.

For this reason most authors are agreed that the real break with the past came about in social security policies.<sup>47</sup> Thatcher was distinctive because 'none of its predecessors had dared to cut social security spending'.<sup>48</sup> These developments were in stark contrast with the post-war consensus on the desirability of maintaining and expanding a comprehensive system of social insurance.

The notion of consensus in social security policy is a difficult one. There was never complete agreement between or within the main political parties, and differences of substance have pervaded all policy areas. In the field of social security, strands within the Conservative Party were critical of the whole trend to welfare statism, and a major area of disagreement between the two main parties was on social security.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in I. Gilmour (1992) *Dancing with Dogma*, London, Simon&Schuster, 125.

<sup>45</sup> M. Thatcher (1993) *The Downing Street Years*, London, Harper Collins Publ., 55.

<sup>46</sup> J. Hills (1998) "Rowtree Inquiry into Income and Wealth Distribution in the UK. The latest evidence".

<sup>47</sup> A.B. Atkinson, J. Hills, J. Le Grand (1986) *The Welfare State in Britain 1970-1985: Extent and Effectiveness*; R. Lister (1991) "Social Security in the 1980s", *Social Policy and Administration*, Vol. 25, 21-33; M. Hill (1990) *Social Security Policy in Britain*, Aldershot, Edward Elgar.

<sup>48</sup> *The Economist*, 22 December 1979, 13.

<sup>49</sup> H. Glennerster (1998) "New Beginnings and Old Continuities" in H. Glennerster and J. Hills, (eds) *The State of Welfare*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2nd ed.; A. Weale (1990) "Social

Such controversy, however, should not be overstated. Consensus had a broad denotation, it meant 'accommodation between different interests and values, which set a framework and priorities for post-war policy to which all parties in practice adhered.'<sup>50</sup>For the entire post-war period British party leaders were agreed on the definition of poverty.<sup>51</sup>Economic hardship was caused by a variety of factors, including personal misfortune, low wages, large families, disability, sickness etc., and the solution proposed was setting a national minimum standard of living.

Under Thatcher, however, the case for ensuring a minimum standard of living appeared less compelling. As discussed earlier, the Conservative government reduced the scope and level of social security benefits, worsening the relative position of beneficiaries with respect to people in work.

### III. Redistributive effects of internal dynamics

A striking feature of social security policy changes under Thatcher was the relative lack of public attention. As analysts noted, it was a matter of concern that little by little the social security system had undergone major changes of principle without any widespread public recognition.<sup>52</sup>Instead macroeconomic decisions were a dominant media theme that observers quite understandably wished to investigate.

The emphasis placed on macro-economic policy has meant that one significant question has gone largely unexplored: What effect has the struggle for relative dominance within the Conservative party had on social security policies? It is well-documented that the years from 1979 to 1982 were marked by the internal struggle for real control of the party, a time in which contradictions and dilemmas were particularly acute.<sup>53</sup>Most accounts of these inner conflicts have revolved around macroeconomic policy disputes and have paid little or no attention to their redistributive impact. For example, Bulpitt stated that the dictates of party management ensured that a link would be made with the statecraft of monetarism.<sup>54</sup>

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Policy" in P. Dunleavy, A. Gamble, G. Peele, (eds) (1990) *Developments in British Politics*, London, MacMillan, 199.

<sup>50</sup> A. Gamble (1989) "Thatcherism and the New Politics" in J. Mohan, (ed.) *The Political Geography of Contemporary Britain*, London, MacMillan, 3.

<sup>51</sup> K. Banting (1979) *Poverty, Politics and Policy*, London, MacMillan, 74.

<sup>52</sup> A.B. Atkinson and J. Micklewright (1989), *op. cit.*

<sup>53</sup> B. Jessop, K. Jennett, S. Bromley, T. Ling (1988) *Thatcherism. A Tale of Two Nations*, Oxford, Polity Press, 19.

<sup>54</sup> J. Bulpitt (1986) "The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft", *Political Studies*, XXXIV, 33.

Thatcher reinforced this view in her memoirs by confirming that the hardest battles were fought around economic policy choices.<sup>55</sup>

The point to note is that economic policy decisions and social policy choices cannot be easily disjointed. In the words of Francis Pym, a senior Tory figure, 'it [was] undesirable for any Government to make a hard and fast choice, or to appear to do so, between economic and social policy.'<sup>56</sup> Why then did the Conservative government not pursue a sympathetic social policy in the face of growing poverty and income inequality? It may be that the government was prepared to put up with social security cuts and rising income inequality as a necessary by-product, as they saw it, of a more general macro-economic strategy. The priority was to bring down inflation even at the price of record levels of unemployment.<sup>57</sup> The 1979 budget reflected this strategy by embracing the monetarist doctrine, based on the firm control of the money supply in the medium term.

Evidence, however, suggests that apart from macroeconomic choices other reasons were at work in social security changes. Members of the Thatcherite coalition, for instance, believed that 'egalitarianism [had] accompanied Britain's economic decline',<sup>58</sup> and therefore the cornerstone of the new strategy was 'to challenge one of the central prejudices of modern British politics, the belief that it is a proper function of the State to influence the distribution of wealth for its own sake.'<sup>59</sup> This strategy was reflected in the abolition of the Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth in 1979 that revealed the changed priority of the Conservative government towards distributional issues.

Moreover, internal dissent was not solely focused on macroeconomic strategy. Disagreement over distributive issues was often reported by the press. In March 1982 *The Times* described how 'the Government suffered one of its biggest backlash revolts of the present parliament.. when 13 Conservative MPs voted to restore the 5 per cent that was cut from unemployment benefits in 1980.'<sup>60</sup> And this revolt was 'the most determined piece of internal dissent Mrs. Thatcher [had] suffered.'<sup>61</sup> These remarks suggest that a preliminary step in understanding social security cuts requires an examination of strategic realignment within the party on the eve of Thatcherism.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>55</sup> M. Thatcher (1993) *The Downing Street Years*, London, Harper Collins Publ., 27.

<sup>56</sup> F. Pym (1984) *The Politics of Consent*, London, Hamilton, Hamish, 112.

<sup>57</sup> M. Thatcher (1993), *op. cit.*, 42.

<sup>58</sup> K. Joseph and J. Sumption (1977) *Equality*, London, John Murray, 12.

<sup>59</sup> K. Joseph, and J. Sumption (1977), *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>60</sup> *The Times*, 18 March 1982.

<sup>61</sup> *Financial Times*, 14 July 1982.

<sup>62</sup> For a thorough description of the variety of Conservative thinking see A. Aughey and P.

In charting an ideological map it is useful to bring into sharp focus the crucial internal disputes that emerged in the early 1970s before Thatcher was elected at the leadership. In a detailed survey of Conservative MPs attitudes, Crewe and Searing found that the party organization consisted of a variety of subgroups but that political thinking in some subsections could be quite highly crystallized.<sup>63</sup> There was considerable distance on the political values of two ideologically opposed groups, namely the Monday Club on the Right and Pressure for Economic and Social Toryism on the Left. Between these sharply defined ideological communities, a few more flexible groupings filled the terrain, providing a general structure of Conservative ideology based on four pillars; progressive and traditional Tories on the one hand, and liberal and corporate Whigs on the other.

Progressive Toryism had paternalistic roots. It repudiated laissez-faire, favoured programmes for reducing the extremes of poverty and wealth and espoused a vision of the state as trustee for the community. Its support for the welfare state was closely connected to its conception of community. Traditional Tories, by contrast, were cynical about social planning and skeptical about the virtues of social progress. Their primary concern was strong government and leadership. The other two pillars of the Conservative ideological structure consisted in the Liberal and Corporate Whigs who sought to preserve private property as the most effective means to achieve their aims. Liberal Whigs claimed that government intervention distorted the marketplace and undermined economic growth, while corporate Whigs believed in the economic advantage derived from a close partnership among government, trade unions and business.

From the early 1950s to 1974 the dominant coalition within the Conservative Party melded elements of corporate Whiggery with progressive Toryism. But Thatcher ascendancy to power hinged on an alternative alliance which connected liberal, free enterprise Whiggery with traditional, authoritarian Toryism.<sup>64</sup> This internal realignment brought to the fore Tory leaders less sympathetic to the welfare state than the previous ones. Jim Prior, a member of the old coalition, believed that the new alliance espoused 'a very simplistic approach...In a world increasingly interdependent and with a people used to a welfare state, it looked an unpromising scenario.'<sup>65</sup> After the advent of Thatcher to power the ideological chasm within the Conservative Party was often depicted as a battle between two camps, the pre-

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Norton (1981) *Conservative and Conservatism*, London, Temple Smith, 53-89.

<sup>63</sup> I. Crewe and D. Searing (1988) "Ideological Change in the British Conservative Party", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, 361-84.

<sup>64</sup> I. Crewe and D. Searing (1988) "Ideological Change In The British Conservative Party"; S. Smith and M.J. Ludham (eds) (1996) *Contemporary British Conservatism*, London, MacMillan, 4-12.

<sup>65</sup> J. Prior (1986) *A Balance of Power*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 119.

Thatcherite coalition, the so-called 'wets' and the alternative alliance, the so called 'dries'. Thatcher wrote in her memoirs that 'decisions came to be seen as victories by one side or the other.'<sup>66</sup> She described 'the passionate and obstinate resistance mounted by the 'wets' to the fiscal, economic and trade union reforms of the early 1980s.'<sup>67</sup> This dualism was reported by the press: 'Mrs. Thatcher was particularly infuriated at having to make "wet" decisions at the last minute to pull the government back from what seemed a certain short-term disaster.'<sup>68</sup> Yet the distinction between wets and dries is clearly an overly simplified account of the variety of Conservative dispositions. It attributes a consistency, coherence and unity which is hard to reconcile with the amalgam of interests found in the Conservative Party. However, for analytical convenience analysts often describe the internal battle under Thatcher in terms of a struggle between the 'wets' and the 'dries'.<sup>69</sup> I follow this convention, and in doing so I cannot do justice to the richness and complexity of Conservative belief.

A key point to note is that the 'dries' were a dominant minority. Few would deny that Thatcher was elected not because there was an extensive commitment to her views but rather because she was the only serious candidate willing to challenge Heath.<sup>70</sup> Estimates of the proportion of Thatcherites on the eve of the leadership contest in 1975 indicate that her supporters ranged between 10 and 25 percent.<sup>71</sup> Minority groupings are sometimes more radical than majority ones because purposive incentives develop to compensate for other incentives controlled by the larger group.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, the minority status of the dries probably enhanced their ideological spurt, so unusual among Conservative leaders. Radical policies go deeply against the grain of Conservative thinking, which was traditionally tinged with moderate

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<sup>66</sup> M. Thatcher (1993) *op. cit.*, 130.

<sup>67</sup> M. Thatcher (1993) *op. cit.*, 105.

<sup>68</sup> *The Economist*, October 1981.

<sup>69</sup> D. Butler and D. Kavanagh (1984) *The British General Election of 1983*, London, MacMillan, 32; J. Douglas (1989) "Review Article: The Changing Tide - Some Recent Studies of Thatcherism", *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 19, 409; P. Riddell (1983) *The Thatcher Government*, Oxford, Robertson, 46; C. Boix (1998) *Political Parties, Growth and Equality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>70</sup> A. King (1985) "Margaret Thatcher: The Style of a Prime Minister" in A. King (ed.) *The British Prime Minister*, London, MacMillan, 97; P. Riddell, *The Thatcher Government*, Oxford, Robertson, 21; R. Shepherd (1991) *The Power Brokers*, London, Hutchinson, 176-7.

<sup>71</sup> The classification of Thatcherites was based on responses on three values: strong government, free enterprise and discipline. See I. Crewe, D.D. Seating (1988) "Ideological Change in the British Conservative Party", 371.

<sup>72</sup> A. Panebianco (1988) *Political Parties: Organization And Power*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 3-15.

tones. Margaret Thatcher was a Conservative rarity in her readiness to identify Conservatism in unambiguous ideological terms.<sup>73</sup> The crusading fervour of the dries also helped cement their internal divisions. A large number of Conservative figures, such as Rhodes Boyson, Lord Beloff, Paul Johnson, Alfred Sherman, Alan Walters, had changed their political allegiances at least once before, and hence might be expected to do so again.<sup>74</sup> These people had been recruited from varying sources, some had been Liberals, others Labour supporters. Since their beliefs were shaped more by their antipathies than by a common positive vision, the need for a constant unifying enemy was particularly urgent for them.<sup>75</sup> Internal rivals were instrumental to the viability of the dry coalition. Hence the struggle for power inside the Conservative Party was an important factor in the new direction of social security policy.

Divisions inside the Cabinet grew steadily worse and much of the debate centred on public expenditure.<sup>76</sup> Prior's reaction to the 1979 Budget eloquently expressed this dissension: 'It was really an enormous shock to me that the budget which Geoffrey [Howe] produced the month after the election of 1979 was so extreme'.<sup>77</sup> As the economy slumped and unemployment soared the government's stubborn concern with inflation and the minimalist state provoked an outright revolt within both the Cabinet and backbenchers. In 1981 the unemployment rate stood at 13 percent and most Cabinet members were expecting less stringent monetary rules. The budget aroused open dissent among many Tory leaders. Even Torneycroft, Thatcher's own choice as party chairman, sided with the dissidents and was removed before the Annual Conference held in Blackpool in 1981.

The Blackpool Conference displayed the two faces of a divided cabinet. Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for the Environment, criticized the right-wing emphasis on independence and self help because 'self help [had] a limited meaning in an inner city community where 40 percent of the young kids may be without work'.<sup>78</sup> Controversy over the relationship between the Conservative Party and subsections of the population was sparked by different opinions regarding the party

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<sup>73</sup> P. Whiteley, P. Seyd and J. Richardson (1994) *True Blues: the Politics of Conservative Party Membership*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 127.

<sup>74</sup> A. Denham, M. Garnett (1994) "Conflicts of Loyalty": Cohesion and Division in Conservatism, 1975-1990" in P. Dunleavy, J. Stanley (eds), *Contemporary Political Studies*, Political Studies Association of the UK, 270-7.

<sup>75</sup> A. Denham, M. Garnett (1994) "Conflicts of Loyalty": Cohesion and Division in Conservatism, 1975-1990", 271.

<sup>76</sup> R. Behrens (1980) *The Conservative Party from Heath to Thatcher: Policies and Politics, 1974-1979*, Farnborough, Saxon House, 70.

<sup>77</sup> J. Prior (1986) *A Balance of Power*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 119.

<sup>78</sup> *The Times*, 16 October 1981, 2.



image. As mentioned earlier, hardliners wished to mould it as the party of free-market principles, initiative and duty; while the 'wets' believed that the government should not relinquish its responsibility for acting as a brake on income inequality.

Arguably, however, the most significant aspect of the Blackpool Conference was the surfacing of the dilemma of sequential elections. Before proceeding further, it should be noted that there are two distinct definitions of sequential elections in the literature. One refers to successive *national* elections, the other, which is less frequently employed, concerns elections of different *types* of constituencies, such as MPs, activists and voters. In this paper I use the second definition.

The dilemma of sequential elections surfaced in 1975 when the reselection rules of the Conservative leader raised her/his dependence on the party. Until then the leader of the Conservative Party was not subjected to reselection. From 1975 the Conservative leader had first to ensure re-election as leader and therefore satisfy the wishes of the faithful MPs. Comparative research on the leadership selection shows that the process of ensuring reselection may constrain the behaviour of those selected.<sup>79</sup> Sequential elections exemplify the quandary of party leaders because in order to gain or retain office leaders must win the favours of different types of constituencies. The fact that Margaret Thatcher was directly dependent on the favours of the Conservative MPs heightened her sensitivity to the views of backbenchers, 'the probability of removal may be low; but the risks to the individual [leader] are high'.<sup>80</sup> The uncertainty created by sequential elections emerged during the Blackpool conference:

The unease of Tory members of parliament [contrasted] strongly with the loyalty and enthusiasm of constituency delegates for Mrs. Thatcher, and more particularly for Thatcherism. The ..more applause she won at Blackpool the less appeal she had to the broader electorate watching television.<sup>81</sup>

Had the Conservative leader satisfied the wishes of moderate Cabinet ministers and those of the wider electorate, she would have annoyed the party's rank-and-file.

Thatcher skilfully deployed different sources of power to quell the revolt within the party. First, she immediately appealed to party activists in order to mobilize their support. In her words:

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<sup>79</sup> M. Marsh (1993) "Introduction: Selecting the Party Leader", *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 24, 229.

<sup>80</sup> A. King (1991) "The British Prime Ministership in the Age of the Career Politician", *West European Politics*, Vol.14, 29.

<sup>81</sup> *The Economist*, 17 October 1981, 29.

The dissenters in the cabinet had been stunned by the 1981 budget proposals. It was clear that the Party in the country must be mobilized in support of what we were doing. The forthcoming Central Council of the Conservative Party provided an opportunity for me to do this... I got a good reception. For the moment at least, the Party faithful were prepared to take the heat and back the government.<sup>82</sup>

Such demagogic appeal to activists helped to boost the party membership, after years of relentless decline. Thatcher paid close attention to the rank-and-file desires and attitudes, and in this way she made them feel more important for the party organization. Since the early 1980s Conservative members have been feeling more influential in the decision-making process of the party organization.<sup>83</sup> Thatcher gauged the mood of many Conservative activists correctly. 'Above all', wrote the *Times*, 'Mrs. Thatcher has given voice to many grassroots Tory views about unions, law and order, scroungers and capital punishment.'<sup>84</sup> The Tory leader was especially popular among young Conservative members who were more committed to political principles. Young Conservative activists were less favourable to the redistribution of income and wealth and less supportive of government expenditure to relieve poverty.<sup>85</sup> Therefore Thatcher was able to promote and reinvigorate the loyalty of party members through attacks on scroungers and on the welfare state.

Another strategy Thatcher deployed to ease internal strains was to relax public expenditure. Growth in government outlays in the early 1980s was doubtlessly the effect of automatic stabilizers, but it was also the outcome of discretionary policy driven by internal opposition: 'The relenting on cuts took some of the edge off the cabinet anger.. It is regarded as signalling the start of the 'wet appeasement.'<sup>86</sup> A similar strategy was probably followed in 1982 when the Conservative government asked the Central Policy Review Staff to report on measures apt to resolve the problem of ever-increasing public expenditure. When the Policy Review proposed to dismantle the welfare state they found a determined rejection from cabinet members. The prime minister's press office issued a denial that Mrs Thatcher had anything to do with the plan.

All this means that faced with the pragmatics of power, the Conservative leader restrained her policy ambitions. As Shepherd remarks, Thatcher always tempered her radicalism with an overriding desire that the Conservatives should

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<sup>82</sup> M. Thatcher (1993) *The Downing Street Years*, London, Harper Collins Publ, 138-9.

<sup>83</sup> P. Whiteley, P. Seyd, J. Richardson (1994) *True Blues: the Politics of Conservative Party Membership*.

<sup>84</sup> 11 March 1986.

<sup>85</sup> P. Whiteley, P. Seyd, J. Parry (1996) *Labour and Conservative Party Members 1990-1992: Social Characteristics, Political Attitudes and Activities*, Aldershot, Dartmouth.

<sup>86</sup> *The Economist*, 24 October 1981, 29.

hold office with her as their leader.<sup>87</sup> By first appealing to the party faithful and then by pacifying the 'wets', Thatcher was able to forge an internal alliance based on strong vertical ties (between leaders and members) and on relatively solid horizontal ties (between Conservative MPs). In this way Thatcher could retain the leadership despite the fact that she had joined a minority coalition.

The equilibrium within the Conservative ranks, however, became gradually more precarious. Profound divisions over macroeconomic policies were aggravated by sharp differences in social security policy. Peter Bottomley, the Conservative MP for Woolwich West, complained that unemployment benefits were 'now worth less than at any time in the past decade. The last thing we can afford is to be accused of dishonesty.'<sup>88</sup> When 18 Conservative MPs voted against the refusal to restore benefits cuts in 1981, the government's majority fell to eight. Rebels included Dennis Waltern, Cyril Nebyon and Julian Critchley, five others abstained. It was clear that any further pressure would risk splitting the party asunder.

Tensions reached a climax in the summer of 1981 during the discussions preparing the budget. Fierce reactions to the Budget acted as a springboard for a Cabinet reshuffle. In September 1981 the Prime Minister dropped three well-known wets, Ian Gilmour, Lord Privy Seal, Christopher Soames, Leader of the Lords and Mark Carlisle at Education, and brought in three men on whom she could rely, Norman Tebbit, who was appointed Minister of Employment, Nigel Lawson, Minister of Energy and Norman Fowler, who became Minister of Health and Social Security.

### *Institutional effects*

As the recession wore on, internal turmoil exploded and the cabinet's cohesion began to break down. At this critical point some key institutional features sustained Margaret Thatcher from losing control of policy-making. It is widely believed that Westminster systems concentrate a disproportionate amount of power on prime ministers. As Thatcher remarked, the constitutional role of UK Prime Ministers in appointing and reshuffling their Cabinets is 'undoubtedly one of the most important ways in which a prime minister can exercise power over the whole conduct of government'.<sup>89</sup> Another institutional feature that helped Thatcher to marginalize internal dissidents was the strong institutionalization of the Conservative Party. A strongly institutionalized party is highly centralized and combines the major resources of power in the hands of the dominant coalition.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> R. Shepherd (1991) *The Power Brokers*, London, Hutchinson, 178.

<sup>88</sup> *The Times*, February 1982.

<sup>89</sup> M. Thatcher, (1993), *op. cit.*, 25.

<sup>90</sup> A. Panebianco (1988) *Political Parties: Organization and Power*, 130-41.

The joint effect of Prime Ministerial prerogatives and party institutionalization contributed to mollify internal resistance to Thatcherite policies. In the end, Thatcherite ideas prevailed and social policy ceased to be a divisive issue among MPs.<sup>91</sup> Hence the first Conservative term represented a critical juncture that set the conditions for the direction of social security policies in the 1980s.

### III. Electoral Geography And Vote-Mobilization

It is important to appreciate that cutbacks to social security benefits were not uniformly applied to client groups. In 1981, for example, the government increased pensions in line with inflation plus an additional two percent for the amount by which 1981's inflation was underestimated, whereas unemployment benefits were indexed without getting the extra two percent. Thus, the Conservative government at least ensured that the real value of pensions did not decline.<sup>92</sup>

The higher priority given to the elderly *relative* to other claimants is reflected in the consistently declining proportion of pensioners requiring means tested help for their living costs, which fell by 2.8 percentage points between 1979 and 1990.<sup>93</sup> This drop was partly the result of increasing receipt of private and occupational pensions paid in addition to state pension. By contrast in the same period the percentage of unemployed with no unemployment benefit rose by 21.6 points.<sup>94</sup> The composition of the poorest income group shows a declining proportion of poor elderly over the 1980s but a higher proportion of unemployed.<sup>95</sup>

One explanation for this asymmetry is found in the geographical location of the principal bases of poverty and vote distribution. The emergence of 'two nations',<sup>96</sup> with Conservative voters disproportionately living in the south and Labour supporters more concentrated in the north, was part of a trend that had been going on for twenty years. Since the mid-1960s there has been a long-term movement towards Labour in the north, in Scotland and in most urban areas and

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<sup>91</sup> J. Garry (1994) *The Internal Politics of the British Conservative Party and Margaret Thatcher's Position as Leader*, Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Galway.

<sup>92</sup> J. Hills (1988) *The Rowntree Inquiry into Income and Wealth Distribution in the UK. The latest evidence.*

<sup>93</sup> M. Evans (1998) "Social Security: Dismantling the Pyramids?" in H. Glennerster and J. Hills (eds) *The State of Welfare*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 275.

<sup>94</sup> M. Evans (1998), *op. cit.*, 278.

<sup>95</sup> A. Goodman, P. Johnson, S. Webb (1997) *Inequality in the UK*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 98-110.

<sup>96</sup> B. Jessop, K. Jennett, S. Bromley, T. Ling (1988) *Thatcherism. A Tale of Two Nations*, Oxford, Polity Press.

towards the Conservatives in the rest of England and in rural areas. This pattern continued in the 1980s, sharpening even further the socio-geographical cleavage between Conservative and Labour. Table 3 shows that the geography of voting was reflected in the distribution of seats in the English regions. In 1983 Conservative held more than seven times the number of seats gained by Labour in the south, whereas in the north Labour secured the majority of seats.

**Table 3.** Distribution of seats in the English regions\* 1983

	Conservative	Labour	Alliance
South-East	162	27	3
South-West	44	1	3
<b>Total South</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>6</b>
East Anglia	18	1	1
East Midlands	38	8	-
West Midlands	36	22	-
<b>Total Midlands</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>1</b>
Yorks and Humberside	24	28	-
North West	36	35	2
Northern	18	26	2
<b>Total North</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>4</b>

\* The English Regions are the eight Standard Regions as defined by the Registrar General

The electoral geography coincided with the geographical location of the principal bases of poverty. In the south the poor were the most likely to be elderly; poverty in the north was more likely to be associated to redundancy and joblessness.<sup>97</sup> In the north the number of beneficiaries grew from 15.7 percent in 1979/1980 to 20 percent in 1983/1984, an increase of 4.3 percentage points, while in the south-east it increased from 9.4 percent to 9.7 percent, a rise of 0.3 points.<sup>98</sup> Clearly higher unemployment, low paid jobs and poverty were of different magnitude and significance in the two regions.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>97</sup> A. Green (1996) "Aspects of the Changing Geography of Poverty and Wealth" in J. Hills, (ed.) *New Inequalities*, 265-91.

<sup>98</sup> A. Walker, C. Walker (1987) *The Growing Divide. A Social Audit 1979-1987*, 47-8; A.E. Green (1996) *op. cit.*, 265-92; R.J. Johnston and C.J. Pattie (1989) "The Changing Electoral Geography of Great Britain" in R. J. Johnston and C.J. Pattie (eds) *The Political Geography of Contemporary Britain*, London, MacMillan, 51-68. The spatial distribution of poverty, is of course, more nuanced than the account offered in this paper. As the very few studies on the topic show, there are urban-rural differences, as well as differences between large metropolitan centres (cf. A.E. Green (1996) *op. cit.*, 265-92, and M. Noble and G. Smith (1996) "Two nations? Changing Patterns of Income and Wealth in Two Contrasting Areas" in J. Hills (ed) *New*

If we look at the voting patterns among pensioners in Table 4 we note that between 1979 and 1987 Conservative voting among pensioners holds up at around 47 percent while Labour voting drops by almost 13 percentage points; by contrast, if we inspect the voting patterns among the unemployed we see that Labour voting consistently rose, with an increase of about 20 percentage points during the first two Thatcher terms.

**Table 4.** Voting patterns among unemployed and pensioners. United Kingdom, 1974-1987

	Feb. 1974	Oct. 1974	1979	1983	1987
<b>Unemployed</b>					
<i>Conservative</i>	10.5	21.4	42.3	22.5	18.1
Labour	65.8	60.7	42.3	52.0	62.0
Lib/Alliance	18.4	10.7	15.0	23.1	18.1
Other	5.3	7.1	0.0	2.4	1.8
<b>pensioners*</b>					
Conservative	47.2	41.6	49.7	47.3	46.0
Labour	37.4	39.9	38.0	31.2	28.0
Lib/Alliance	14.0	16.9	10.2	20.1	25.3
Other	1.5	1.6	2.1	1.3	0.8

Source: calculated by the author from I.Crewe, N.Day, A. Fox, *The British Electorate 1963-1987*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), various tables.

\*aged 65-75

This differential pattern of voting between unemployed and pensioners is puzzling. We have seen that both groups experienced large falls in their absolute standards of living; and yet Conservative voting continues to hold up among pensioners.

One way of interpreting these results is to view both the pensioners and the unemployed as members of risk categories. In Baldwin's definition 'Risk categories are actors identified and given interests in common by their shared relations to the means of security, by their stake in or against the redistribution of risk promised by social insurance.'<sup>100</sup> It is reasonable to believe that pensioners compared themselves

*Inequalities*, 292-320. By the same token, the geographical distribution of seats is more varied than simple north-south, see J. Curtice and M. Steed (1984) *Appendix 2: An Analysis of the Voting* in D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*, London, MacMillan, 333-73.

<sup>100</sup> P. Baldwin (1990) *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare*

with other risk categories, such as the unemployed, and thus were less dissatisfied with Conservative rule.<sup>101</sup>

These voting patterns indicate that redistributive costs and benefits might have been apportioned between sub-groups of risk categories in order to mould electoral coalitions in specific areas of the country. We can describe this strategy as arithmetical particularism that relied on making sectional appeals, either to different social groups or to different geographical areas.<sup>102</sup> Arithmetical particularism enabled Conservative leaders to adjust social relativities by penalizing the unemployed while being more protective towards pensioners.

Arithmetical particularism helped Thatcher to capitalize on the different patterns of dependence on supplementary benefits. The north had a higher proportion of individuals living in poor households.<sup>103</sup> The economically fortunate were instead living in the South and formed a sizeable proportion of what Galbraith dubbed the 'contented electorate'.<sup>104</sup> Although the north-south divide pre-dates the 1980s,<sup>105</sup> Walker claims that the Conservative government 'has helped to widen and deepen these divisions, sometimes to a catastrophic extent'.<sup>106</sup> My analysis supports this conclusion by indicating that discretionary policies altered the economic realtivities between state-dependent groups living in the north and in the south.

The government not only adjusted relativities between risk categories but also wooed middle classes with housing policy and tax policy. Much has been written about how the Conservatives encouraged council tenants to buy their homes by offering favourable terms that presided over one of the biggest booms in the housing market ever experienced.<sup>107</sup> Middle income classes benefited from taxation policy, especially from the shift to indirect taxation, and from access to universal

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*State 1875-1975*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 11-2.

<sup>101</sup> For a different interpretation see A. Heath (ed.) (1991), *Understanding Political Change*, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 168.

<sup>102</sup> Krieger uses the term arithmetical particularism but does not apply it to social security benefits. J. Krieger (1986) *Reagan, Thatcher and the Politics of Decline*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 86.

<sup>103</sup> U.K. Boroovah, P.P.L. McGregor, P.M. McKee (1991) *Regional Income Inequality and Poverty in the United Kingdom*, Aldershot, Dartmouth, 98.

<sup>104</sup> J.K. Galbraith (1993) *The culture of Contentment*, London, Penguin, 15.

<sup>105</sup> E. Fiedhouse (1995) "Thatcherism and the Changing Geography of Political Attitudes", *Political Geography*, Vol. 14, 3-30.

<sup>106</sup> A. Walker and C. Walker (1987) *The Growing Divide. A Social Audit 1979-1987*, 13.

<sup>107</sup> R. Jowell, J. Curtice, A. Park, L. Brook, K. Thompson, C. Bryson (1997) *British Social Attitudes. The 14th Report*, Aldershot, Ashgate; P. Dunleavy, C. Husbands (1985) *British Democracy at the Crossroads*, London, Allen and Unwin.

benefits.<sup>108</sup> Social engineering thus produced a major growth in Conservative voting among manual worker households.

This paper adds to those works the finding that alterations in cash benefits under Thatcher were also politician driven. Arithmetical particularism coupled with the adjustment of social relativities promoted alliances between sections of the middle class and beneficiaries. New electoral coalitions were forged by policy manipulations that explicitly denied benefits to specific groups while granting them to other less stigmatized groups. This view supports the contention that Conservatives engaged in vote mobilization to build the electoral coalition that kept them in power.<sup>109</sup>

## V. Opposition Effects

The process of coalition building among sections of the electorate was facilitated by weak interparty competition. Divisions within the Labour Party over proposals of internal constitutional change absorbed the energies of the Labourites. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Labour's strategy shifted further to the left. Such policy radicalization opened a political vacuum in the centre of the ideological space, soon filled by the formation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). For the first time, three national parties fought every seat. Throughout 1981 and 1982 the SDP in alliance with the Liberal Party produced sweeping by-election successes, and was an apparently dominant force in shaping public opinion.<sup>110</sup> Although the establishment of the SDP inflicted heavy damage on the Labour Party, about 14% of alliance voters identified with the Conservative Party and a much higher proportion would probably have voted straight Conservative had there been no SDP alternative.<sup>111</sup> In the 1983 general election, of the supposedly most winnable eighty

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<sup>108</sup> Over the 1980s, professional and managerial classes tempered the Conservative governments' attacks on the welfare state by protecting universal social services, such as the National Health Service. See R. Klein (1995) *The New Politics of the National Health Service*, London, Longman; J. Le Grand and D. Winter, "The Middle Classes and the Defence of the British Welfare State" in R.E. Goodin and J. Le Grand (1987) *Not only the Poor*, London, Allen and Unwin, 147-69. For a different perspective see P. Pierson (1994) *Dismantling the Welfare State? Reagan, Thatcher and the Politics of Retrenchment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press and for a critique to Pierson see J. Alber, *Selectivity, Universalism, and the Politics of Welfare Retrenchment in Germany and the United States*, paper presented at the 92<sup>nd</sup> annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, August, 1996.

<sup>109</sup> C. Boix (1998) *Political Parties, Growth and Equality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>110</sup> I. Crewe and A. King (1998) *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

<sup>111</sup> I. Crewe and A. King (1998) *op. cit.*, 290.



seats by the Alliance all but two were held by the Conservatives.<sup>112</sup>

Entrance in the electoral arena of a new political rival tempered internal opposition because several Tory moderates were acutely vulnerable to the Alliance's advance in their constituencies. As one observer noted, by '1981 an election was within sight, and the rise of the SDP/Liberal Alliance was worrying the wets', especially as many of them were, by chance, most exposed to the Alliance's advance in their constituencies'.<sup>113</sup> Between 1979 and 1983 the Alliance won three out of four by-elections from Tory seats. In October 1981, it took the Tory seat of Croydon, North West; in November the by-election in the Conservative stronghold of Crosby produced a swing of 25 percent and returned to parliament Shirley Williams, a prominent leader of the SDP. In March 1982, another SDP leader, Roy Jenkins, gained the Tory seat at Glasgow Hillhead. This success seemed to be related to the moderate image projected by the Alliance.<sup>114</sup> Losing hope of gaining centrist votes, the 'wets' restrained their bitter rivalry. This attitude is compatible with research findings showing that in representative democracies when electoral competition intensifies, internal wrangling wanes.<sup>115</sup>

A further challenge to security of tenure in the course of the 1979-83 parliament was the implementation of the most radical constituency boundary revision for over 60 years, which left only 66 constituencies completely unchanged.<sup>116</sup> Although the boundary revisions created more seats winnable by the Conservative Party it destabilized the position of a number of current MPs.<sup>117</sup>

Finally the Falklands war boosted Conservative support and established Thatcher in her political leadership. The landslide victory of 1983 and the demise of the 'wets' as internal opponents meant that 'the politics of interest, of faction, of groupings and collaborations within the party, which a leader might ignore at her peril, had entirely vanished'.<sup>118</sup> Modifications in the electoral arena thus became an asset for Conservative right-wingers.

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<sup>112</sup> D. Butler and D. Kavanagh (1984) *The British General Election of 1983*, 80.

<sup>113</sup> P. Riddell (1983) *The Thatcher Government*, Oxford, Robertson, 46-7.

<sup>114</sup> J. Rasmussen (1983) "The Alliance Campaign. Watersheds, and Landslides: Was 1983 a Fault Line in British Politics?" in A. Ranney (ed) *Britain at the Polls, 1983*, Duke University Press, Durham, 81-107.

<sup>115</sup> W.D. Berry and B.C. Canon (1993) "Explaining the Competitiveness of Gubernatorial Primaries", *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 55, 454-71. L. Atkeson (1993) "Moving Toward Unity", *American Political Quarterly*, Vol. 21, 272-89.

<sup>116</sup> For this reason it is impossible to make an exact comparison between the constituencies in 1979 and in 1983.

<sup>117</sup> D. Butler and D. Kavanagh (1984) *The British General Election of 1983*, 227.

<sup>118</sup> H. Young (1991) *One of us: A Bibliography of Margaret Thatcher*, London, MacMillan, 332.

## Conclusions

Over the 1980s income inequality in Britain grew faster than in many other countries, suggesting that national factors played a crucial role. This paper examined some of the driving forces behind changes in social security benefits. It offered a new interpretation regarding the redistributive role of a ruling party based on the notion of political slack. First, I applied the idea that the party policy link is intelligible primarily in the light of intraparty dynamics. By looking inside the black box it was possible to see how strategic repositioning within the Conservative Party affected changes in transfer policies. The minority status of the Thatcherites was one element behind their ideological drive and behind the break with the past in social security policies. In addition to this, the dilemma of sequential elections raised Thatcher's threat perception and her dependence on backbench opinion. Sequential elections thus facilitated the internal compromise on social security benefits between 1979 and 1981. At this stage internal opposition was buoyant and the Thatcherites were still in quest for legitimacy, so they whittled down proposed benefit cuts.

My approach demonstrates that an exploration of internal governance sheds light on the radicalization of the 'dries' as well as on the sudden u-turn in social security policy. It shows that the assumptions of the unitary actor model neglect important factors such as the dynamics between minority and majority factions or the effects of sequential elections, and thus suggest that the model is inadequate.

A further contribution of this paper is to point out that political leaders are entrepreneurs endowed with a relative margin of freedom from voters. Such freedom enables them to design redistributive policies aimed at forging new coalitions of voters. In this sense redistributive policies may be politician. I argued that Thatcher was able to fabricate new alliances between people in work and pensioners by capitalizing on the geographical distribution of poverty. The Conservative leader engaged in sophisticated applications of arithmetical particularism, whereby specific state-dependent groups, such as the unemployed, were penalized while others were protected. The government manipulated redistributive policies to mobilize sections of the electorate into a winning coalition of voters. Thatcherism is distinctive in its dramatic illumination that leaders may attempt to coax the public towards themselves.

My account indicates that institutional features and opposition effects may sustain or constrain the relative autonomy of party leaders from voters and activists. The essence of the Westminster system coupled with a strong party institutionalization contributed to the demise of opposition within the Conservative Party. Moreover, weak electoral competition turned into a liability for Tory rebels

and helped to sanction their final defeat. The paper concentrated on the first Thatcher term because it represented a critical juncture where strategic, institutional and opposition effects combined to virtually eliminate internal opposition.

The analytical narrative presented in this paper departs from the traditional manner in which we have studied the phenomenon of the redistributive impact of parties. It points to the fact that party leaders are able to design policies that build or recraft public opinion in order to outflank their internal rivals as well as to manufacture electoral coalitions. In this way my interpretation qualifies dominant approaches that view redistributive policies as merely a response to pre-given social constituencies or explain inequality trends as solely the outcome of external pressures. My aspiration here is not to write a definitive account of the redistributive role of the Thatcher government but rather to demonstrate the possibility and utility of an alternative approach to understanding cuts in social security benefits.

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