Asymmetry in leader image effects and the implications for leadership positioning in the 2010 British General Election

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ABSTRACT

Using national survey data on voters' perceptions of party leaders during the 2010 British general election campaign, the authors use logistic regression analysis to explore the association between specific image attributes and overall satisfaction for each leader. We find attribute-satisfaction relationships differ in some respects between the three main party leaders, demonstrating that leader image effects are not symmetrical across leaders. We find evidence that negative perceptions have more powerful effects on satisfaction than positive ones, implying that parties should seek to determine a leader's image attribute perceptions measured against the public's expectations of them on the same dimensions. The positions that campaigners ought then to chose are those that will have the most beneficial effect in encouraging voting behaviour for each particular leader or discouraging voting behaviour for an opponent.

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Introduction

The 2010 British general election differed from previous British general elections. The campaign focussed untypically around the party leaders, and the public believed their attitudes to the leaders were more influential on their vote compared to policy issues than previously. Taking national polling data on voters' perceptions of party leaders, we use logistic regression analysis to explore the association between specific image attributes and overall satisfaction with each leader. We find that attribute-satisfaction relationships differ somewhat between the three main party leaders. This is important because it demonstrates that leader image effects need not be symmetrical across all leaders and that public perceptions that are good for one leader may not be equally good for another and that leaders may not even be evaluated on the same dimensions. We also find evidence that negative perceptions have a more powerful effect on satisfaction than positive ones. We discuss the implications of these findings for party political campaign planning in leader-focussed elections.

Background and Literature Review

The Importance of Leader Image in the 2010 Election

The British general election was held on 6 May 2010. As with the previous (2005) election, the three biggest parties secured around nine-tenths of the national vote and the leaders of those three parties were included in the nationally-televised election debates.

None of the three leaders had previously led their party in a general election. Gordon Brown, Labour Party leader, had been Prime Minister since 2007. His opponent for the premiership was David Cameron, Conservative Party leader since 2006. The least-well-known was Nick Clegg, Liberal Democrat leader; his party, the centre party in British politics, has been in third place for decades and is disadvantaged by the electoral system because its support is less geographically-concentrated than that of its two bigger rivals. Clegg was therefore not realistically a candidate to become Prime Minister, but might hold the balance of power after

an indecisive election (as, in fact, turned out to be the case). He performed exceptionally well in the first of the debates, which was the first-ever televised leaders' debate in a British election and was proclaimed its clear winner. In the immediate aftermath, his personal ratings surged, as did voting intention support for his party.

The evidence suggests public perceptions of party leaders were important in determining the final election outcome (Clarke et al, 2011). This is not unexpected; debates dominated media reporting of the campaign, almost to the exclusion of other events, and had a significant effect on voting intentions (see Kavanagh & Cowley, 2010). But even before the debates, polling suggested voters felt that leaders were a more important influence on their vote, and policy issues less so, than at previous British elections over the last quarter-century (Worcester et al, 2011). Similar "presidentialisation" of parliamentary elections has also be seen in other countries recently, e.g. Putin in 2008in Russia, Lech Walesa in Poland in 1989 and Erdoğan in Turkey from 2002.

The Strategy of Campaigning

Efficient campaigning needs tailoring to the nature of the campaign – a leader-focussed election demands different strategies from a policy-focussed one. Nevertheless, the principles should be the same. A party will try to direct attention to its strengths rather than its weaknesses; and, rather than fighting a single uniform campaign across all battlegrounds will tailor its campaigning for each separate audience so as to be more effective. In other words, it uses positioning and segmentation.

A policy-focussed campaign may depend largely on developing parts of the party's programme to have a sectional appeal and delivering targeted messages, and campaigners have long drawn on such techniques. Wring (2005:38-42) traces the prototypical usage of market segmentation in Britain to the 1922 election when it was called 'stratified electioneering'. Market segmentation was first developed as an alternative to product differentiation - the practice of developing different versions of products *a priori* to appeal to different markets (Smith, 1956) – and these lessons have been widely applied by political strategists. The same principles apply just as strongly when leaders are the campaign focus.

Positioning is the process by which communicators seek to imprint their messages on target audience members' minds (Ries and Trout, 1972). In political marketing, segmentation and

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positioning are frequently combined (see Johnson, 1971). In other words, voters are often segmented – divided into like-minded groups – based on how they perceive a particular party or leader, often through psychographic research based on voters' perceptions of party's or candidate's ideological positions (Ahmed and Jackson, 1979; Reeves, de Chernatony and Carrigan, 2006).

Political parties position themselves on cognitive dimensions, e.g. rational positioning on policies on issues; affective (emotional) dimensions, e.g. based on leader/party image or around specific emotions (e.g. fear/anxiety) or conative (motivational) dimensions, based on politicians' actions (Smith, 2005). Political positioning involves creating credible and positive images of one's own political party in voters' minds whilst attempting simultaneously to convey credible and negative images of one's opponents to the same or similar voters.

Nevertheless, many positioning studies assume that the political proposition (i.e. political leaders) should be assessed on the same range of dimensions, and that those dimensions are evaluated similarly for each proposition (see for example, Johnson, 1971; Klein and Ahluwalia, 2005; Smith, 2005) when in fact many voters may not even use the same positioning attributes to assess particular candidates. Why should voters assess political parties or leaders on the same dimensions? The 2008 London Mayoral election offers an example: according to a YouGov (2008) survey one candidate, Boris Johnson, , was widely regarded as likely to be an ineffective mayor compared to Ken Livingstone and yet, in the same poll, was still the preferred candidate (and the eventual winner). How can this be? The answer may lie in the public's "expectations" (in the sense of what they demand in order to be satisfied, rather than in the sense of what they think is likely to be true).The qualities the public value may not be the same for all candidates: being seen as ineffective would have damaged Livingstone but was less damaging to Johnson since effectiveness was not one of the qualities his supporters demanded of him. It may be true that one section of the London electorate simply valued likeability above effectiveness, and that they outnumbered those taking the contrary view; but there is also a possible alternative explanation that because their expectations of the two candidates differed they judged them by different yardsticks, so that voters directly pitted Johnson's likeability against Livingstone's effectiveness in choosing between them. Traditionally, however, positioning research does not measure public expectations.

One controversial campaigning stance often considered and adopted during positioning exercises is negative campaigning – i.e. concentrating on communicating to voters an opponent's weaknesses rather than one's own strengths. It is potentially a risky strategy. Merritt (1984) argued that negative political advertising has limited value because it can damage the image of a minority party candidate employing it (a 'boomerang effect'). Accordingly, negative US campaign adverts often use anonymous announcers and surrogates to deliver negative appeals (Kaid and Johnston, 1991), because the sponsor is less likely to be identified, so reducing the likelihood of any 'boomerang effect'.

Nevertheless, negative campaigning is used frequently. In the UK context, the main three political parties have employed 'attack' advertising, an approach which tends to promote distrust of the opposing parties and candidates but which conceivably could lead to lower voter turnout (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd, 2005). According to Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd (2011), negative advertising is effective (and helps to win election campaigns) because it brings attention to the advertisements, makes them more memorable, clearer to understand, more emotionally engaging, more accessible, more likely to impact on attitude formation, and more likely to reduce voters' perceived risk. Much of the poster advertising during the 2010 election was negative, with Labour posters depicting and mocking Conservative leader Cameron while Conservative posters depicted and mocked Labour leader Brown (Burgess, 2011; Worcester *et al*, 2011).

Methodology

We explore the impact of particular aspects of a leader's image on his overall appeal, since it is on establishing or emphasising these individual characteristics – or contesting those of opponents - that a campaign can concentrate. As an overall measure of a leader's positive or negative image, we use his satisfaction score: public satisfaction with the job that each of the three main party leaders is doing is a well-established political indicator which is regularly measured between, and during, elections, and which generally proves sensitive to public mood (Worcester *et al*, 2011).

For our analysis, data from a mid-campaign Ipsos MORI poll is used, conducted on 18-19 April 2010 (the weekend after the first TV debate)**,** which included overall satisfaction ratings

and a number of other measurements of how the leaders were perceived in various respects[1]. Interviews were conducted by telephone using random digit dialling with quotas, and data are weighted to match the known national demographic profile of Great Britain[2]. The total survey sample size was 1,253 adults.

Our analysis seeks to understand how the perceived attributes of party leaders performed as predictors of overall satisfaction with their performance. A total of 11 predictor variables were included, covering a number of aspects of leader image, some of which were comparative (e.g. which leader would be best in a crisis) and others absolute (whether each leader was trustworthy or not)[3]. Unfortunately, two of these image questions were not asked about Nick Clegg, and we can only consider their effect on Brown and Cameron.

We must bear in mind that our data is a single cross-sectional 'snapshot'[4], measuring opinion at one time during the campaign, and any relationships we uncover were not necessarily true throughout the whole election period. It seems generally accepted that the first TV debate had a dramatic effect on public views of Clegg, and it may be that this survey, conducted days afterwards, reflects that and measures some fairly short-lived phenomena. Nevertheless, this does not weaken its value, since our hypothesis is not that asymmetries in leader image impact are permanently present, merely that it is possible that they arise. The immediate aftermath of a major campaign event such as the first TV debate of an election is obviously a key moment of interest, potentially pivotal to the campaign outcome, and if any effects that

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[1] The survey was a published opinion poll, not designed specifically for this study, and the choice of image attributes measured consequently reflects its original purpose. However, while the list is not necessarily exactly what we might have used given a free choice, and arguably includes some factors we would expect to be only of comparatively minor importance, it includes enough of the measures we would consider central to leader image in the 2010 election to suit our purpose.

[2] Northern Ireland was excluded since the major UK parties do not field candidates there.

[3] Full details of question wordings can be found at www.ipsos-mori.com.

[4] Ideally, it would have been even more interesting had we been able to track the relationships throughout the campaign, and aggregating multiple polls would also have given us a more robust sample size; unfortunately this was the only survey conducted during the campaign which used these questions.

we find were caused by the debate then their existence is all the more relevant to a campaign manager needing to know how campaigning can manipulate image and its impact.

For our analysis we used binary logistic regression, with the dichotomous satisfied/dissatisfied measurement as the dependent variable[5]. All our predictor variables were categorical, but there was more than one way we could code them. For the absolute measurements which were asked separately about each leader - trustworthiness and "like him"/"not like him" – we had a simple binary variable with an additional don't know option for each leader; since there were significant numbers of don't knows, we decided it made most sense to use "don't know" as the reference category, therefore giving us a measure of the effect of each of the substantive responses separately. For the nine comparative descriptions, however, where respondents could choose any of the leaders or "none of them"/don't know, we took the simplest option, treating them as a purely binary variable for each leader, i.e. either that leader was picked as best fitting that description or he was not.

The first stage was simply to construct the most powerful multivariate models predicting satisfaction with each of the three leaders from the answers about that leader, using only the variables contributing significantly to that leader's satisfaction model. This gave some indication of the relative power of the different image attributes as predictors of satisfaction and provided an interesting comparison of the positive and negative aspects of perceptions about trustworthiness and likeability.

However, this does not allow us to make reliable comparisons between the relationship between satisfaction and any given variable for the different leaders. While we could have built parallel models for each leader using the same predictors and compared the coefficients, this would have involved using answers from the same respondents for each of three leaders rather than independent samples for each. Unless satisfaction with each leader is statistically independent of satisfaction with the other leaders (an unlikely proposition), this could lead to

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[5] "Don't know" answers, relatively few in each case, were treated as missing cases and omitted from the analysis.

under-estimates of the relevant standard errors and to false positives when searching for significant differences between effects[6].

We chose instead, therefore, to randomly divide our sample into three equally-sized sub-samples, and within each sub-sample we consider only responses relating to one of the leaders; we could therefore construct separate models for each leader and compare them without there being any overlap of respondents. This allowed us to make direct comparisons of the relationship between satisfaction and the predictor variables for each of the three leaders and test for statistical significance. The drawback was that the sample size for each leader was just over 400, so that only substantial effects could be detected and the margin of error in measuring the size of the effects is large. As a way of mitigating this, and of making fullest use of the information available to us in the dataset, we repeated the exercise twice, using a different assignment of leaders to respondents on each occasion. Our tables show the findings from each analysis separately, and allow them to be compared.

To conduct each analysis, the three sub-samples were recombined into a single dataset, so that for each respondent we had a measurement of satisfaction (with one of the three leaders), 11 image attribute variables (each referring to that same leader) and an extra variable identifying which leader was under consideration by that respondent. We were then able as a first step to construct a model measuring the general relationship between each image attribute and satisfaction. By adding to this model an interaction term between each attribute and leader identity, we could therefore also detect and test the strength of any differences between the leaders in the effect of particular image attributes on their satisfaction ratings.

Because our concern is more with the practical questions facing a campaign manager than with uncovering the detailed sociological dynamics underlying voting behaviour, we chose to look for leader-specific effects in the relationships between single image attributes and overall image, rather than proceeding directly to a multivariate model. Almost all the image variables we measured are not only highly correlated with leader satisfaction but are also highly correlated with each other. This is not surprising since it is unclear in which direction causation runs in leader image (i.e. whether leader image attributes and leader satisfaction are

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[6] Essentially, the impact would be as if the sample had been clustered.

in a formative or reflective indicator relationship, see Diamontopoulos and Winklhofer, 2001). All image variables, and satisfaction, probably express to some degree one or more common latent underlying attitudes to the leader. It is likely that many voters have formed some of their specific image impressions of the leaders as a result of being well- or badly-disposed towards them rather than these being primary attitudes that build into an eventual positive or negative verdict.

Multivariate modelling measures the effect of one factor while all other inputs are held constant, but this is not a realistic assumption in real-life campaigning. If the perception of Gordon Brown's trustworthiness were to change, to take one example, we would expect that this would also have an effect on whether people liked him or not – a manager choosing to position his campaign around changing or emphasising one attribute must assume that there may also be knock-on effects on other perceptions. It is this overall systemic impact of one changed perception that the campaign manager wants to know in choosing his strategy, rather than the subtleties of the process by which it takes place. If the only way to make the leader appear more likeable, for example, is to paint him as a loveable rogue who will run the country well but can't be trusted, the campaign manager needs to know whether this will have an overall positive or negative effect. This is what is captured by modelling separately for each attribute rather than by modelling simultaneously for all of them.

We consider each of our 11 available image attribute variables separately. In each case, we first use only the variable and leader identity as predictors, then we test the effect of adding an interaction term between the two. If the effect of adding the interaction term is statistically significant, then this image attribute has a differential effect on satisfaction with different leaders. (We show a detailed worked example to illustrate how this operates before presenting the full table of results.)

Results

Our first step is to use the entire sample to build straightforward binary logistic regression models predicting satisfaction with each of the three leaders (see Table 1). In each case, the model presented is the most powerful we could find using the available variables but omitting

any variables that made no statistically significant contribution to the model[7]. While several variables appear in each of the models, some appear in some but not in others – for example, "best understands world problems" is a significant predictor for Cameron but not for Brown, while "best to lead in the economic crisis" predicts for Brown but not for Cameron. Clegg's model is different again, though here it must be remembered that two of the 11 variables were not available as the original survey questions had not referred to Clegg.

[TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

It is tempting initially to take the differences between these models as evidence per se that image attributes apply differently to the different leaders. However, this might not be true. Very small differences in relationships, well within the margin of error, might cause one variable to appear a stronger predictor than another and affect which attributes appear in the model. Even if we force the same variables into each model, comparison of the coefficients is not straightforward because we would not be comparing three independent samples but the same sample effectively interviewed three times. Our conclusions will be much more robust if we can reach them by comparing samples without any overlap in respondents; this is the next step.

However, we draw one finding of importance from this initial analysis (which the succeeding analysis, with its smaller sample sizes, is less suited to exploring.) The two "absolute" attributes, trust and liking, both allow a direct comparison of positive and negative effects on the same scale: we can tell whether liking a leader seems to have a stronger or weaker upwards impact on satisfaction than the downwards effect of disliking him, and similarly whether being judged trustworthy is as powerfully beneficial as being judged untrustworthy is detrimental. (In each case, we are comparing the difference between a positive or negative answer and a 'don't know' answer; note that we coded the answers as a categorical variable,

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[7] Note that where categorical variables are used in this sort of model, not all the terms may be significant even if the variable as a whole makes a significant contribution to the model. For example, in Table 1 the "likeability" variable is significant for Cameron, but the significant element of this is the difference between "do not like him" and "don't know". The difference between "like him" and "don't know" is not significant, meaning that the coefficient for "like him" should be ignored: although the figure is negative the finding is within the "margin of error" and may arise if the effect is zero or is small and positive as well as when it is small and negative.

so that no implied ordering of response categories is in any way incorporated into the analysis.)

The findings have considerable potential importance for campaign planning. For both Brown and Cameron, negative perceptions seem to have a substantially more powerful impact than positive ones. In Cameron's case, being disliked and being judged untrustworthy both had a significant negative effect whereas the contrary effect was not big enough to be significant. For Brown, being seen as not trustworthy was an ever stronger negative predictor, although at least in his case the positive and negative effects of being liked or not liked were apparently roughly equal. Perhaps equally relevant, the negative effects for Cameron were stronger than the positive effects for Brown, and vice versa.

For Nick Clegg, by contrast, we find the opposite. In his case, the coefficient expressing the link between being seen as trustworthy and higher satisfaction is twice the strength of the link between being seen as not trustworthy and lower satisfaction. In the more intuitive terms of odds ratios, being seen as not trustworthy halved the odds on being satisfied with Clegg's performance, but being seen as trustworthy multiplied the odds by more than four-and-a-half.

What this seems to establish very clearly is that a single image attribute does not necessarily have a symmetrical effect when operating in different directions. In other words, if we were to take two equally-sized groups of voters with no opinions on, say, the trustworthiness of a given candidate and convince one group that he was trustworthy and the other that he was not, we could reasonably expect that their overall opinions of him would move in opposite directions but we should not necessarily assume that they would move by the same amount. In campaigning terms, the negative perception might sway more (or fewer) votes than the positive perception. This may (not) depend on what other opinions those voters already hold about the candidate. But it is worth noting that in the cases of Brown, Cameron and Clegg the differences have been found to be independent effects in a multivariate analysis – i.e. they are not driven by different underlying impressions corresponding to any of the other image attributes measured.

The next step is to consider each of the 11 image attributes in turn, and to test whether its effect on leader satisfaction is uniform or if it differs between leaders. For this purpose, we divide our sample into three, and within each third look only at the answers as they relate to

one of the leaders. Doing this allows measurement of the size of the general effect of that attribute on satisfaction (disregarding which leader is under consideration), and separately measures any further effect arising from that attribute having a different effect for different leaders, which will appear in the regression equation as an interaction term. To get full value from our dataset, we repeat the analysis with a different assignment of respondents to leaders, and compare the results; in fact we perform each analysis with three different leader-respondent assignments.

Consider a worked example, testing the relationship between satisfaction and the image variable "Best understands Britain's problems". Our sample is divided into A, B and C groups: for the A group, we take the value of the "satisfaction" variable from their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with Gordon Brown, and the value of the "Best understands Britain's problems" variable is 1 if they said that Brown best understood those problems, 0 otherwise. Similarly in the B group we consider only responses about David Cameron, and in the C group about Nick Clegg. Membership in the A, B or C group is included as a categorical variable "leader".

First we run a simple logistic regression predicting the value of "satisfaction" from the values of "leader" and "Best understands Britain's problems" – the results are shown in the top half of Table 2. As expected, the image statement has a significant positive effect on satisfaction. There are also significant leader effects for Cameron and Clegg compared with Brown, indicating that there are systematic differences in satisfaction with the three leaders which go above and beyond what can be explained by differences in opinion on who best understands Britain's problems.

[TABLE 2 NEAR HERE]

We now run a second model which includes terms for the interactions between "leader" and "Best understands Britain's problems" – these interaction terms are measurements of any difference in the effect of that image attribute between one leader and another. We find that the new model is more powerful than the old one (the increase of 14.3 in the model chi-square for an additional 2 degrees of freedom shows that adding the interaction terms makes a statistically significant improvement to the model). In fact only one of the two interaction terms is statistically significant – there appears to be a real difference between how strongly

being seen as the leader with the best understanding of Britain's problems is related to satisfaction with Gordon Brown on the one hand and Nick Clegg on the other. Clegg's interaction term is negative, indicating that this attribute has less effect on satisfaction with him than with Brown. The interaction term for Cameron is almost zero, meaning that there is virtually no difference as far as the survey can show between the effect of this attribute on him and on Brown.

We can now consider the results for all the predictor variables (see Table 3). The three analyses, each based on a different assignment of respondents to leaders, are shown side-by-side for easy comparison. Figures given for each variable within the table are coefficients, which allows the most straightforward comparison of the size of positive and negative effects. For clarity of presentation, only the coefficients for the variables being investigated are shown – the leader variables and the constants in each model are omitted. In the left half of the table, the figures are for the models including no interactions. In the right half, interaction terms have been added: where the figures are in italics, the new model is not a statistically significant improvement on the model without interactions, but is shown for comparison with similarly specified models which were significant when a different leader/respondent sample was used.

Naturally, given the small sample sizes, there is considerable variation between the three data runs in the size of the estimated coefficients. Nevertheless, only in one case are they actively contradictory, showing significant effects in opposite directions. More frequently, an effect is shown as significant in one run of the data and not in another. This is because the size of the effects we test is close to the margin of sensitivity of the analysis. Where we find an effect reported as significant in one run, and not significant but with the same vector in the others, we can conclude that the effect is small but real. We need to be more cautious where the direction of the apparent effect is inconsistent, even if the *significant* effects are only in one direction, but none of these debateable cases proves to be material to our conclusions.

Each of the 11 variables when separately tested proved a good general predictor of satisfaction, being statistically significant in all three data runs, and always in the expected direction. The strongest of the predictors of satisfaction when measured in this general sense is "most capable" leader, with an odds ratio estimated between 12.1 and 22.2.

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[TABLE 3 NEAR HERE]

Next, we added an interaction term to test for any differential leader effect. In every case, adding the interaction term significantly improved the model in at least one of the three data runs and the figures in the non-significant cases are perfectly consistent with the significant ones. For each of the nine comparative statements, there is at least one significant interaction term and all the significant effects are in the same direction. The clearest case, "most likely to promise anything to win votes", finds a significant effect in all three data runs: the public were naturally less likely to be satisfied with a leader for whom they believe this is true, but the negative effect was much less strong on Nick Clegg, and somewhat less strong on David Cameron, than it was on Gordon Brown. Again, being seen as "most out of touch" was marginally less serious for Cameron than for Brown, and far less serious for Clegg who may have been untouched by it altogether. Looking at positive descriptions, being seen as having the best understanding of world problems was even more positive for Cameron than for Brown, but probably far less valuable for Clegg. On the other hand, Cameron got less benefit when seen as best to lead the country out of the economic crisis than did Brown. (This question was not asked about Clegg.)

For the two absolute judgments, the situation is less clear. On trustworthiness, adding the leader differential effect makes a significant improvement to the model in only one of the three data runs, but the other two data runs have no significant or near-significant figures diverging from the one with significant findings, and we might.. conclude that there is indeed a differential effect, with Cameron's satisfaction rating less closely linked with whether he is seen as "not trustworthy" than Brown's, but the evidence is weak. In the case of likeability, we find significant effects running in directly contradictory directions in two data runs probably because of the small sample size of some of the compared respondent groups.

We experimented further by combining the various predictors simultaneously into a multivariate model, seeing which have an independent predictive effect with other factors held constant. However, the results were consistent with what we have already found, again showing clear evidence of the existence of differential leader effects, although the small sub-

sample sizes meant that some of the effects were not statistically significant. Since this does not add substantially to the findings , we omit this analysis here for reasons of space.[8]

Discussion

Our findings are two-fold. First, we have discovered that the relationship between the image attributes we measured and satisfaction with the leaders is neither uniform nor symmetric: different image attributes may be of differing importance to different leaders. Second, positive impressions may not directly counter negative ones: for the major party leaders, in fact, negative impressions have tended to be more powerful than positive ones where we have been able to make a direct comparison. Both conclusions have important implications for directing an election campaign in which leader image is a significant factor.

At this stage it is important to remind ourselves that statistical associations do not prove a simple causal link. The fact that we have chosen one perception as our dependent variable and another as an independent variable does not necessarily imply that it is straightforward to devise a campaign which will change the latter and affect the former in accordance with the equations we have derived. At best, such survey analysis will suggest to the campaigner avenues to explore – it may take practical experimentation to discover how easily a given perception will change or how its salience can be manipulated.

Our first finding is that the association between overall satisfaction and many individual facets of leader image vary systematically by leader. Although strictly we should not interpret this as the latter causing the former, in terms of the practical assumptions that a campaign planner should make, it is not unreasonable to think of this in terms of certain perceptions being more valuable (or more dangerous) to some leaders than to others.

Our findings suggest that, assuming it is possible to do so, changing any of the 11 image perceptions we measured in the right direction would help at least one of the three leaders. But it would help them unequally. Every perception apart from being trustworthy has less effect on Nick Clegg than on the other two leaders; Brown gains more than Cameron from being seen as best in a crisis and best to lead the country out of the economic crisis, but

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[8] Full details are available from the authors.

suffers more if he is seen as likely to promise anything to win votes; for Cameron, being seen as understanding world problems is his strongest card. By implication, the optimal campaigning strategies may differ for different leaders, both in optimal positioning of the campaign and in how the messages can be communicated most effectively. It does not look safe for a practical campaigner to proceed as if all leader effects must be symmetric.

Our second finding, taken from the simple models where we used the whole sample to compare the effect of the positive and negative perceptions for the two image attributes where we measured both, is that the positive and negative aspects of any given image attribute are not necessarily symmetrical. For David Cameron, lack of trust was more powerful than trust and being disliked more powerful than being liked; for Gordon Brown, being distrusted was again more powerful than being trusted (and the discrepancy much bigger than in Cameron's case), though on being liked or disliked the evidence was inconclusive. Finally, and by contrast, for Nick Clegg being seen as trustworthy was a much better predictor than being seen as not trustworthy.

For the two major parties, it looks as if negative campaigning should be more effective than positive campaigning. There are two aspects to this. The first is that, for either of the two major party leaders, equal volumes of positive and negative messages would not be expected to cancel each other out but to leave a net negative impression; by implication, the more public attention is turned towards the leaders, the lower their standing will be. Second, comparing the figures for the two leaders, changing underlying opinions negatively against one's opponent is more productive (in terms of the satisfaction gap) than changing the same number of opinions positively about oneself. Is it any wonder that "attack ads" are so popular with election strategists round the world?

Given that such asymmetries seem to exist on the practical level, what can we say about their underlying causes? With only the evidence of a single election to judge by, we cannot tell whether the differential effects on the leaders that we have found here are dictated by their personalities, their roles or the particular circumstances of the election. Consider Nick Clegg's case. As leader of the third party, and not realistically a candidate to become Prime Minister, it might easily be that voters inherently view him differently from Brown and Cameron, making different demands of him, so that their judgment of satisfaction with the

way he is doing his job is naturally dependent on different criteria. Such differences might perhaps be a constant between elections.

But Clegg was also much the least well-known of the three leaders and at the time of the survey had just succeeded (through his performance at the debate) in projecting a positive image of himself onto what was previously a tabula rasa. Perhaps, therefore, differences in background levels of unpopularity for the three leaders and the presence (absence) of negative assumptions about their abilities and motives mean that, even when answering identical survey questions about each, the respondents are not making equivalent judgments. Or it may be that the unspoken assumptions behind the responses twist their meanings.

Moreover, there may be a real inherent difference between the effect of changing image for a leader at the extremes of popularity or unpopularity and one on whom the public are divided. There is something of a tendency to assume a straight line relationship between survey variables, perhaps because the analysis models are easy to apply, but such straight-line relationships may apply only within certain limits. For an already popular leader, the pay-off from further accretion of positive image attributes may be less than for an unpopular one – a law of diminishing returns. But does it apply equally to all aspects of image, or does their relative effectiveness vary depending on a leader's overall standing? We would need data from many elections to disentangle such an effect from any other types of leader differential effect but the proposition seems plausible.

Any differences may also owe something to the positioning and effectiveness of the campaigning already undertaken by the time of this mid-election survey. We should consider that by the time our survey was conducted the election was only two-and-a-half weeks away. The campaign had been underway for months, and public opinions of the leaders had quite likely already been shaped by the direction of that campaigning. Similarly, by this stage in the campaign there had already been a great deal of negative advertising against both Brown and Cameron; the stronger association of negative than of positive messages with overall satisfaction with Cameron and Brown may merely reflect the successful impact of such campaigning.

The existence of both these forms of asymmetry in the public's assessments of the party leaders points to a complexity in public opinion which is seldom allowed for. While it is well

understood that the decision-influencing factors in an electoral decision make up a complex multi-dimensional space rather than conforming to the simple Downsian model (Downs, 1957) with a single dimension, there may still be an implicit assumption that any component within this operates on a uni-dimensional basis: a candidate is either strong or weak on a given issue, say, and while positioning may direct the electorate's attention and increase or decrease the weight of influence of a particular dimension on the overall decision, the scale itself remains unaltered. An improvement on a given scale still improves the overall situation of each candidate, and a worsening weakens it. We assume that the entire process can be modelled as a regression, and that effective campaigning might alter either the value of a factor or its coefficient, but leaves the fundamental structure of the equation unchanged; further, we expect that the same regression can model satisfaction with all the competing leaders.

But if so, we are assuming a symmetry that does not exist. Our findings suggest this model is not an accurate one. Voters/consumers do not evaluate choices on the same dimensions with 'the winner' scoring highest on these dimensions: different factors might affect different candidates differently we postulate, because people do not necessarily evaluate all the party leaders using the same criteria. For one candidate it might be vital to be liked, for another more important to be trusted; and for one candidate being positively trusted may be essential while for a rival it might be sufficient not to be actively distrusted.

The implications of these findings for campaigning strategy in a leader-focussed election are profound. Our findings suggest that existing ways of undertaking positioning research in political marketing fail to measure and account for voters' expectations of candidates on certain image-attribute dimensions, and that these are necessary to calibrate those same image-attribute positions uncovered in traditional positioning research. Interestingly, the measurement of expectations versus service quality evaluations in traditional services marketing research is commonplace (see Parasuraman, Zeithmal & Berry, 1988) but this is not the case in political marketing research. The problem of not measuring expectations on image-attributes is further exacerbated by the fact that extant positioning research is potentially misleading as party executives may be seduced into believing particular image-attributes are more important than they really are.

The conclusion is that public opinion about leaders or candidates can be complex and unpredictable and that this complexity and unpredictability has the potential to affect the effectiveness of a political campaign. The campaigner who relies on gut instinct, experience or copying his or her predecessors is likely to be disadvantaged compared with one able to conduct effective research before the campaign and during its progress. It is an essential part of good political positioning that the positions that are chosen are those that will have the most beneficial effect in terms of voting behaviour – an image which is positive and credible but which does not win over voters is an ineffectual one. Such sophistication already exists in the commercial sphere. Political marketing therefore needs to keep pace with the commercial world.

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Table 1: Models predicting satisfaction with each leader

	Brown		Cameron		Clegg	
	Coeff-icient (log odds)	Odds ratio	Coeff-icient (log odds)	Odds ratio	Coeff-icient (log odds)	Odds ratio
Likeability (reference=DK)						
Do not like him	−0.83	0.44	−1.68***	0.19	(n/a)	
Like him	+0.76	2.14	−0.44	0.64	(n/a)	
Trustworthiness (reference=DK)						
Not trustworthy	−2.11***	0.12	−1.01**	0.37	−0.70*	0.50
Trustworthy	−0.59	0.56	+0.60	1.82	+1.53***	4.63
Best in a crisis	+0.55*	1.74				
Best understands world problems			+1.15***	3.14		
Most capable leader	+1.12***	3.05	+1.19***	3.28	+0.95**	2.60
Most likely to promise anything to win votes	−0.76***	0.47	+0.36*	1.43		
Performed best in TV debates					+0.91***	2.48
Best to lead in economic crisis	+0.82***	2.27			(n/a)	
Constant	−0.20		+0.68		+0.30	

***=significant at 99.9%, **=significant at 99%, *=significant at 95%
(n/a)=These variables not available for Clegg as they are based on questions referring only to Brown and Cameron

TABLE 2: Satisfaction and "Best understands Britain's problems" - regression

	Coefficient (Log odds)	Odds ratio	
Model without interactions (Chi-sq 464.8, 3 df)			
Best understands problems facing Britain	+2.59	13.35	***
Leader (reference=Brown)			
Cameron	+1.36	3.88	***
Clegg	+3.02	20.44	***
Constant	−1.77	0.17	***
Model with interactions (Chi-sq 479.1, 5 df)			
Best understands problems facing Britain	+2.90	18.26	***
Leader (reference=Brown)			
Cameron	+1.47	4.36	***
Clegg	+3.33	28.03	***
Interactions			
Cameron by Best understands	−0.06	0.95	
Clegg by Best understands	−1.87	0.15	***
Constant	−1.91	0.15	***

***=significant at 99.9%, **=significant at 99%, *=significant at 95%

Table 3: Univariate predictors of satisfaction

	Coefficients (log odds) without differential leader effects			Coefficients (log odds) with differential leader effects (Reference=Brown)		
Sampling	First	Second	Third	First	Second	Third
Likeability (reference=DK)						
Do not like him	−1.54**	−2.08***	−1.86***	−2.83***	−1.03	−1.19
Like him	+1.30**	+0.58	+0.84	+1.02	+1.55*	+1.43*
Do not like him*Cameron				+2.07*	−2.31*	-2.10
Like him*Cameron				+0.36	−2.12*	-1.95
Trustworthiness (reference=DK)						
Not trustworthy	−1.73***	−1.54***	−1.02***	−3.38***	−1.73**	−1.58*
Trustworthy	+1.21***	+1.29***	+1.65***	+0.26	+1.19*	+1.35
Not trustworthy *Cameron				+2.63**	−0.20	−0.12
Trustworthy *Cameron				+1.49	−0.02	−0.42
Not trustworthy *Clegg				+1.87	+1.00	+1.46
Trustworthy *Clegg				+0.98	+0.33	+0.90
Best understands problems facing Britain	+2.59***	+2.33***	+2.26**	+2.90***	+2.57***	+2.18***
Best understands *Cameron				−0.06	−0.34	+0.65
Best understands *Clegg				−1.87***	−1.01	−0.63
Would be best in a crisis	+2.92***	+2.40***	+2.19***	+3.52***	+2.39***	+2.38***
Best in a crisis *Cameron				−1.35**	+0.17	−0.04
Best in a crisis *Clegg				−1.56	−1.16	−1.88***
Best understands world problems	+2.59***	+2.30***	+1.99***	+2.63***	+2.13***	+1.97***
Best understands *Cameron				+0.07	+0.45	+1.17*
Best understands *Clegg				−0.92	+1.16	−1.84***
Most out of touch with ordinary people	−1.73***	−1.73***	-1.61***	−2.18***	−2.14***	−2.24***
Most out of touch*Cameron				+0.64	+0.40	+0.77*
Most out of touch*Clegg				+1.17*	+2.54**	+2.61***
Most capable	+3.10***	+2.78***	+2.50***	+3.75***	+2.83***	+2.56***
Most capable *Cameron				−1.07*	+0.01	+0.21
Most capable *Clegg				−2.52***	−0.93	−1.27*
Most likely to promise anything to win votes	−1.18***	-1.49***	-1.34***	−1.86***	−1.99***	−1.73***
Promise anything *Cameron				+0.86*	+0.73*	+0.44
Promise anything *Clegg				+1.60**	+1.03*	+1.26*
Best understands fine details of policies	+2.03***	+2.14***	+1.93***	+2.08***	+1.89***	+2.07***
Best understands *Cameron				+0.16	+0.82*	−0.42
Best understands *Clegg				−0.87	−0.22	−1.69***
Performed best in the debate	+1.58***	+1.39***	+1.56***	+2.55***	+1.63**	+1.67***
Best in debate *Cameron				−0.90	−0.08	−0.83
Best in debate *Clegg				−1.50**	−0.50	+0.17
Best to lead country out of economic crisis	+2.60***	+2.48***	+2.24***	+3.21***	+2.86***	+2.59***
Best economic *Cameron				−1.15**	−0.73*	−0.70

***=significant at 99.9%, **=significant at 99%, *=significant at 95%