

# **New Labour and Public Opinion: The Third Way as Centrism?**

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## **1. Introduction**

The strategic shifts in Labour's attempt to dominate the center ground of British politics started under the leadership of Neil Kinnock, strengthened with John Smith, but only received its apotheosis under Tony Blair. Like Thatcherism in the early 1980s, the project continued to evolve and take concrete shape in the early years of the Labour government. In a series of subsequent speeches Blair has sought to develop and flesh out the core components of a so-called 'third way' approach to governance. In the words of his 1998 Fabian Pamphlet: 'The Third Way stands for a modernized social democracy, passionate in its commitment to social justice and the goals of the centre-left, but flexible, innovative and forward-looking in the means to achieve them. It is founded on the values that have guided progressive politics for more than a century - democracy, liberty, justice, mutual obligation and internationalism. But it is a third way because it moves decisively beyond an Old Left preoccupied by state control, high taxation and producer interests; and a New Right treating public investment, and often the very notions of 'society' and collective endeavour, as evils to be undone' (Blair 1998:1)

Yet despite successive attempts to nail down the core ideas the meaning of the so-called third way remains elusive. Understood as an ideological project the intellectual origins of the so-called third way are open to different interpretations: as the adoption of 'soft' Thatcherism; as a return to the early roots of social liberalism; or as a genuinely new reworking of social democratic values (see, for example, Sopel 1995; Rentoul 1995; Mandelson and Liddle 1996; Giddens 1998; Driver and Martell 1998; White in this volume). In addition, it remains unclear how far the third way is a product of marketing and spin, a framing device symbolizing the abandonment of past left-wing shibboleths but lacking substance, or whether it represents a more deep-rooted phenomenon rooted in a radically transformed public philosophy of social democracy. If 'Blairism' is interpreted in terms of concrete policy initiatives then, like the first term of Thatcherism, it remains a work in progress and at this stage it is probably too early to identify its defining features.

One way to explore the nature and scope of the third way is to examine ideological shifts within the parliamentary Labour party and to consider how these relate to patterns of party competition in the British electorate. This chapter examines how far Labour has positioned itself between the traditional left and right positions on the political spectrum, and how far this development has permeated different levels of the party. Previous work has demonstrated that from 1992-97 the Labour party moved sharply center-right in its manifesto policies (Budge 1999), and towards the center in its membership (Webb and Farrell 1999). Other work has also demonstrated the emergence of a new cleavage in parliament revolving around issues of constitutional issues, where

all the parties except the Conservatives are strongly in favour of the reform agenda (Norris 1998). Building upon this foundation, we can map the ideological profile of each parliamentary party on some of the classic cleavages in British party politics, offer a plausible electoral explanation for the shift towards the center within the Labour ranks, and consider the implications for future patterns of British party competition.

## **2. Measuring Left-Right Ideology**

How far did Labour move closer towards the ideological position of the median British voter from 1992-97? And were the Conservatives out of touch with their own supporters? To consider these issues we can compare the ideological position of politicians with that of voters in the 1st May 1997 British general election. For the elite level we draw on evidence from more than 1,000 MPs and prospective parliamentary candidates surveyed in the British Representation Study (BRS) prior to the election (for technical details see Appendix A). For the electorate we utilize the 1997 British Election Study (BES) post-election cross-sectional survey (for details see the technical appendix in Evans and Norris 1999). This study examines ideological scales that asked people to identify their own position on six key issues traditionally dividing the parties. The 11-point scales measured the trade off between inflation versus unemployment; taxation versus public spending; nationalization versus privatization; integration within the European Union; gender equality; and general left-right self-placement. These represent some of the classic 'old politics' cleavages about the economy that have long divided British parties, along with the key issue of Britain's role within Europe and women's rights, which reflect 'new politics' concerns. In Western Europe the left-right self-placement scale has also been widely used as one of the most valuable ways to identify voters.

If the parliamentary Labour party had adopted a third way strategy in the 1997 election we would probably expect to find that they had abandoned traditional socialist concerns with state ownership of industry and Keynesian public spending programs, as well as high taxation. Instead the party should have moved into the center ground on the economy, as well as taking a more pro-European stance, in line with Blair's emphasis on internationalism, while also adopting a progressive position on women's rights and gender equality.

The scales were designed to tap the actual and the perceived position of voters and elites across the left-right ideological spectrum. The BRS asked politicians to use the scales to identify their own position, and also to estimate the position of their own party's voters. Using the same issue scales, the BES asked voters to identify their own actual position and also to estimate the position of the major parties. Combining these datasets allows us to compare the actual position of voters (how they rated themselves) with the actual position of politicians. For the first time they also allow us to compare the actual with the perceived position of different actors across the British political spectrum.

## **3. Mapping Party Competition: Labour Tracking the Median Voter?**

If we map the (self-assigned) actual position of voters and politicians across the left-right ideological scale, the results in Figure 1 show that voters were fairly tightly clustered in the centre of the spectrum while politicians were more dispersed to left and right. This was not unexpected since a similar pattern was found in 1992, where the elite also proved more polarized than voters (Norris 1994).

Perhaps more interestingly for our purposes, however, Figure 1 also reveals that in the 1997 election on the overall left-right ideological scale Labour politicians were slightly closer than Conservatives to the median British voter. This provides important evidence for the adoption of a 'third way' in terms of a Labour shift towards the political center ground. And it indicates that this shift was not confined to the top ranks of the Labour leadership but was also evident in the attitudes of the party's MPs and parliamentary candidates. If the Labour party was once radically out of touch with mainstream public opinion in the early 1980s, as many commentators assume (Shaw 1994, 1996), then by the time of the 1997 election their politicians more closely reflected the prevailing ethos. Of course this, by itself, is not enough to win elections, as otherwise the Liberal Democrats, as the closest party to the median voter, would have been in power for decades. Nevertheless Labour's position on the ideological spectrum placed them in a more advantageous position than the Conservatives to maximize potential support.

[Figure 1 and Table 1 about here]

This pattern is shown in even starker relief when we turn to the position of the parties on the key economic issues that have so long divided British party politics. Figure 2 shows a consistent and revealing pattern: across all the economic issues Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians were closer to the median voter, and also closer to the average Conservative voter, than Conservative politicians. Conservative politicians proved to be furthest away from their own supporters. This gap becomes a veritable chasm when one turns to the issues of unemployment versus inflation, taxation versus spending, and privatization versus nationalization. Across all three scales Conservative politicians took a distinctive stance that was far more right-wing than that of their own supporters. In contrast, on these economic issues Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians placed themselves fairly close to each other and close to the position of the median British voter (see Figure 2 and Table 2). Indeed, *on the issue of taxation versus public spending Labour actually leap-frogged into the center ground*, leaving them flanked to the left by the Liberal Democrats (who promised raising taxes to subsidise education) and to the far right by the Conservatives. Only the contentious issue of Europe provides some exception to this picture, with Conservative politicians more closely in touch with their own supporters than either of the other major parties. The Liberal Democrats proved the most pro-European, some distance away from their own voters.

Finally, on the issue of gender equality, all parties and voters clustered fairly closely on the egalitarian end of the spectrum. If we compare the relative position of all politicians against each other in the last election on the five issue scales, Labour proved the most left-wing on only two (unemployment and nationalization). Labour took much the same position as the Liberal Democrats on gender equality, and they were the most centrist party on two issues (taxation/spending and Europe). Labour did therefore

leapfrog over their nearest rivals to take the center ground on these last two issues, a development which challenges the familiar post-war party order. And the Conservative politicians took the most clear-cut and distinctive relative position with clear blue water between themselves and the other major parties, but also, unfortunately for them, clear blue water between their stance on the economic issues and the position of their own voters.

[Figure 2 about here]

What explains this phenomenon? Why should Labour have moved towards the center and why should the Conservative parliamentary party have remained so far from their supporters on the economy? If all politicians shift positions strategically along the ideological spectrum to maximize their vote, as Downsian theory suggests [Downs 1955], then the failure of Conservatives to capture the center ground poses an interesting puzzle.

One important clue to this phenomenon lies in the perceptual error of how politicians saw voters. We can compare the actual position of voters (where they rated themselves) with how politicians perceived them (in Table 2). In turn, we can also compare the actual position of politicians (how they rated themselves) with how voters perceived them (in Table 3). The difference between the actual and the perceived represents the 'perceptual error'.

[Table 2 about here please]

The results show a strikingly consistent pattern that provides important insights into party competition. Table 3 demonstrates that across all the scales except Europe at the time of the 1997 general election *politicians generally believed that the electorate was more right-wing than voters was actually the case*. This misplacement was found in all parties but the perceptual error was far stronger among Conservative politicians, who believed that their own voters were far more right-wing than was actually true. In contrast, Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians estimated the position of their own voters remarkably accurately. Conservative politicians proved out of touch with the attitudes of their core supporters on the core economic issues including the pursuit of further privatization programs and the priority of tax cuts over public spending.

[Table 3 about here please]

This raises the question of why the Conservatives were not damaged even more badly by their economic policies. One answer to this is shown if we examine how politicians rated their own position, compared with how voters perceived them. Again the actual position of Labour and Liberal Democrat politicians corresponded remarkably well with how most voters perceived them, the size of the perceptual errors are extremely low on all issues except the EU. But once more the perceptual errors concerning the Conservatives were larger than for other parties, which may have prevented the party from losing even more support than they actually did. Conservative voters believed that Conservative politicians were more moderate than was in fact the case. What this pattern suggests is a self-reinforcing projection that was particularly marked in the Conservative party, as voters and politicians tended to perceive each other as closer to their own

attitudes and values than was the case. Therefore the misperception of Conservative voters and politicians to some extent cancelled itself out.

#### **4. Why Did the Conservatives Not Shift Back to the Center?**

If Labour was able to occupy the center ground so effectively this was not only because of its own willingness to shift policy and attitude, but also, as we have seen, because of the apparent unwillingness and/or inability of the Conservatives to offer serious competition for the center ground. What explains the failure of the Conservatives to do adopt the ration vote-maximizing strategy that would move them back to the center? Answering this question is important not only for analyzing the result of the 1997 British general election, but also for understanding the real limits on how far any party, in Britain or elsewhere, can shift ground ideologically in the face of electoral pressures. How difficult will it be for the Conservatives to move back to the center and offer a credible centrist alternative to New Labour's self-styled third way approach to government? Four possible interrelated reasons may plausibly limit any party's ideological movement.

Firstly, spatial theories of electoral competition emphasize that party leaders can only move their party along the left-right spectrum to a limited extent, at least in the short term (Budge, Robertson and Hearl 1987). One of the most important reasons for this 'stickiness' concerns party images, since politicians gradually come to be associated in the public mind with 'ownership' of certain issues. Hence social democratic parties are usually positively associated with welfare policies concerning health, pensions and education, while parties of the right are conventionally seen as stronger on the issues of defence and crime. Images can be carefully crafted by political communications, and the last election saw growing use of the techniques of strategic news management and political marketing (Norris et al. 1999). Nevertheless in the short-term, given the pattern of issue ownership, if parties try to change their historic policy commitments too fast then the danger is the loss of credibility and trust, as parties are suspected of becoming 'all things to all voters' just to court support. John Major carried the legacy of 18 years of Conservative government whereas opposition parties travel light without such ideological baggage. Clearly, this obstacle to the emergence of a new Conservative centrism should diminish over time.

Another possible reason for party stickiness in shifting to the center rests in the limited control that leaders can exercise over their party machine. Modern mass-branch parties are complex organizations rather than unitary actors. Short-term radical ideological change incurs potential problems of internal party fragmentation and factionalism, since the leader needs to carry the parliamentary party and grassroots membership with him or her. As shown by the deep divisions over Europe, John Major proved powerless to heal the Conservative rifts. The more recent attempt to abandon some Thatcherite icons by the deputy Prime Minister, Peter Lilley, was regarded as outrageous heresy by many backbenchers. Any attempt by Hague to move the party back towards the center on the economy, thereby perhaps appearing to the right-wing to undermine the legacy of Thatcherism, might prove equally fraught. After all, the evolution of Labour's ideological move towards the center ground had taken four

successive election defeats. Perhaps the Conservative government required the shock of hard opposition benches to adjust their electoral strategy. We cannot conclude, however, that one such electoral shock will be enough to convince them of the need for a centrist realignment.

In addition, perhaps the demonstrable electoral success of Thatcherism encouraged all politicians to assume that public opinion was more right-wing than was actually the case. Certainly this seems the most plausible explanation for why *all* parties exaggerated the extent to which the public favoured tax cuts rather than public spending.

Finally, the most plausible explanation for why the Conservatives failed to move back to the center is that, quite simply, they did not realize quite how far their party platform had become out of touch, particularly on the economy, with their grassroots supporters and with public opinion more widely. Downsian analysis of electoral competition assumes that electoralist parties attempt to gain popularity by moving to the centre of the ideological spectrum. But any effective party strategy to maximize support requires politicians to pinpoint public opinion fairly accurately. The results of this analysis suggest that the Conservatives were more mistaken in their perception of their supporters than politicians in other parties.

We can only speculate at this stage about the causes of this intriguing phenomenon. This perceptual error may have been due to the Conservative government having been in power for eighteen years, which may have made them increasingly ideologically dogmatic and out of touch with their grassroots supporters and public opinion. In opposition Labour had employed all the black arts of political marketing to get in touch with the electorate. After 1992 Labour realized that elections are not usually won or lost in the official campaign, and they subsequently designed their strategy for the long-haul. Opinion polling was carried out regularly from late 1993. Philip Gould and Deborah Mattinson conducted a programme of focus group research to monitor reaction to Labour's policies, including daily groups during the 1997 campaign. Strategy meetings were conducted almost daily from late 1994, tackling Labour's weaknesses on taxation, trade unions, and crime well before the official campaign came close. Labour renewed their interest in constituency campaigns with strategic targeting of key voters under the guidance of Millbank Tower. For two years before polling day, a Labour task force was designed to switch 5000 voters in each of 90 target marginals. Those identified as potential Labour converts in these seats were contacted by teams of volunteers on the doorstep, and by a canvassing operation run from twenty telephone banks around the country, coordinated from Millbank during the campaign. Information from the canvassing operation, especially issues of concern raised by voters, was also fed back to Philip Gould, to help shape Labour's presentations. Labour's long climb back to power, which involved such exercises as the 'Labour Listens' campaign, may have made them their electoral antennae more sensitive to the nuances of public opinion.

Certainly William Hague's recent attempt to emulate the 'Labour Listens' exercise suggests that he recognizes its value in principle. But all the 'town-hall' meetings and 'meet-the-people' sessions are useless unless the Conservatives learn from the feedback by revising their policy platform and thereby recapturing the middle ground. The evidence so far is that under William Hague the party has been more preoccupied by

reorganizing central office, and changing some aspects of party presentation and communication, rather than tackling the thorny issue of new policies. Indeed, in terms of the divisions over Europe, Hague has opted to adopt a more hard-line stance, rather than moving towards a softer compromise over Britain's future adoption of the euro. The Conservative party's continuing overdraft and financial restrictions means that they are also unable to afford extensive public opinion polling and the services of professional political consultants to road-test new themes and issues. To some extent public meetings, dispatching shadow ministers on an Away-Day out to the provinces, are a cheap and easy alternative to systematic polling and market research. In the mid-term of the Labour government, the evidence from monthly opinion polls, from the June 1999 European elections, and from by-elections like Eddisbury, is that there are only faint stirrings of a revival in Conservative fortunes. These stirrings may be sufficient to encourage the Conservatives to believe that, because they lost so much support in the 1997 election, by the usual law of swings and roundabouts they will almost inevitably recover some of middle-England in the next general election, *if* they batten down the hatches on sleaze, if they polish up their presentation, and, above all, if Blair stumbles. This is a not unreasonable expectation. But Conservatives should look over their shoulder and recall that in 1979 Callaghan was slaughtered by the swing to the Conservatives, but Labour even fell further into the abyss in 1983, before clawing back a slow, painful recovery. By all the usual expectations, Labour's massive majority should be reduced in the next general election, but as we can see from the mid-term polls there is nothing inevitable about this.

## **5. Conclusions**

This analysis carries some important implications for understanding the results of the 1997 general election, for patterns of British party competition, as well as for Downsian theories of party competition. On the basis of this analysis we can conclude that the traditional pattern of party competition was transformed on the economy by Labour's move towards the center ground of the British political landscape. Spatial theories of electoral competition assume that 'catch-all' parties have the capacity to gain popularity by moving strategically to the centre of the ideological spectrum (see, for example, the discussion in Kitschelt 1994). The most plausible explanation of why Labour moved centre-right is that, in accordance with this spatial theory, it rationally adopted an electoralist strategy to gain the votes of 'Middle England' after eighteen years in the opposition wilderness. It remains to be seen how far the Conservatives learn these lessons and start to return home to their supporters.

## Appendix A: The 1997 British Representation Study

The 1997 British Representation Study (BRS) is the second in a series of national surveys of parliamentary candidates and MPs from all major parties standing in British general elections. In mid-summer 1996 a mail survey was sent to 1,628 candidates selected by the main British parties (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid Cymru, and Green). In total 999 politicians replied, representing a response rate of 61.4 percent. The survey includes 272 MPs elected into the May 1997 parliament, (or 43 percent of all British MPs), distributed as a representative cross-section by party (for details see the Technical Appendix and [www.ksg.harvard.edu/people/pnorris](http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/people/pnorris)). The results can be compared with a similar survey, the 1992 British Candidate Study, involving 1,658 politicians in the previous election (Norris and Lovenduski 1995). Attitudes among the politicians can be compared with the electorate using the 1997 British Election Study.

### ISSUE SCALES

The following items were included in the 1997 BRS and the 1997 BES.

Q24: Some people feel that getting people back to work should be the government's top priority. These people would put themselves in Box 1. Other people feel that keeping prices down should be the government's top priority. These people would put themselves in Box 11. Other people have views in-between. Using the following scales...where would you place your view?

Q25: Some people feel that government should put up taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services (1). These people would put themselves in box 1. Other people feel that government should cut taxes a lot and spend much less on health and social services. These people would put themselves in Box 11. Other people have views in-between. Using the following scale

Q26: Some people feel that government should nationalize many more private companies. These people would put themselves in Box 1. Other people feel that government should sell off many more nationalized industries. These people would put themselves in Box 11. Other people have views somewhere in-between. Using the following scale... Where would you place your view.

Q27: Some people feel Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union. These people would put themselves in Box 1. Other people feel that Britain should do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union. These people would put themselves in Box 11. Other people have views somewhere in-between. Using the following scale... Where would you place your view.

Q28: Recently there has been discussion about women's rights. Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry and government. These people would put themselves in Box 1. Other people feel that a woman's role is in the home. These people would put themselves in Box 11. Other people have views somewhere in-between. Using the following scale... Where would you place your view.

Q23: In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Using the following scale, where 1 means left and 10 means right, where would you place yourself..

Identical items are also carried in the 1997 BES.



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Note: The directors of the 1997 British Election were Anthony Heath, Roger Jewell, John Curtice and Pippa Norris and the research was funded by the ESRC. The 1997 British Representation Study was directed by Pippa Norris in conjunction with the CREST team, with fieldwork conducted at the University of East Anglia, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. I am most grateful to all my colleagues at CREST and East Anglia for collaborating on this dataset.

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