

Are British political Parties converging at the “Centre Ground”?

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Abstract

Through a focus on electoral competition between the Conservative and Labour parties at general elections from 1997-2010, this article seeks to investigate the idea, becoming increasingly prevalent in British politics, that British political parties are moving towards a point of convergence at the centre ground. The theoretical basis to party convergence is first established through an analysis of Downs’s ‘median voter theorem’, which is also contrasted with Giddens’s ‘third way’. Target audience, policy, valence and ideology are then assessed as signifiers of party positioning at each election. The article concludes that ideology continues to play a significant role in party position, and that between the period of 1997-2010, the two major British political parties remained distinct within a smaller and less varied political space situated at the centre-ground of the left-right political spectrum.

Keywords: ideology, policy, valence, median voter

Introduction

This article seeks to investigate the idea, which has become increasingly prevalent in the 1990s and 2000s, that the difference between political parties in Britain is becoming less significant and that the electorate is offered an increasingly similar package for prospective government at general elections (Hay 1999; Hindmoor 2005). The focus will be on the Labour and Conservative parties at the general elections of 1997 to 2010 as Downs's theory of party competition revolves around positioning of parties during electoral competition, and because these were the only two parties which obtained a majority vote at a general election during the period covered. The scope across these elections intends to produce a comprehensive analysis of the progression of party positioning since the accession of New Labour to power, a party synonymous with its relentless targeting of the centre ground (Hindmoor 2005). Labour had undergone significant change since its defeats in the 1980s, but by 1997 Labour's metamorphosis was complete, and it seemed the adversarial politics of the 1980s had ended (Hay 1999). There seems a broad agreement within academic literature that British political parties are becoming more similar, and that electoral competition is increasingly based on appealing to those voters believed to frequent the 'centre ground' (Hay 1999; Hindmoor 2005). The electorate has also clearly recognised this trend, as while in the 1980s 39 per cent of sampled voters believed there was 'a great deal of difference' between the two parties, this figure had fallen significantly to 23 per cent in 2005 (BES cited in Green 2011: 742). It is interesting that this figure was so low in 2005, when the Conservative party was broadly seen to continuously target its core vote, and before moderniser Cameron acceded to the leadership. The significance of change within the party under Cameron is analysed, but Blair and Cameron are used in the first chapter to introduce theories and debates about party positioning, as they are both symbolic of change and desire to position their party at the centre.

The first chapter is designed to provide a theoretical basis from which party positioning in the 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2010 elections will be analysed in the succeeding chapters. The centre ground as referred to throughout this work is established in the first chapter as a space within the left-right political spectrum where a combined approach of free market economics running alongside state provision of public services is embraced. The chapter argues that the area of political debate on the left-right scale has become smaller as there is no longer a major party which opposes neo-liberal economics, nor one which rejects state provision of welfare. However, it suggests that debate continues to exist within this space, as the

enthusiasm for state redistribution of wealth to provide public services varies between the parties. The theoretical background to party convergence at the centre ground is discussed, as Downs's 'median voter theorem' is assessed and contrasted with Giddens's 'third way', which is purported to provide a new political narrative which transcends the left-right scale of party positioning (McAnulla 2010: 289).

The subsequent chapters assess party positioning; the second chapter analyses the 1997 and 2001 elections and the third 2005 and 2010. Analysis of party positioning in 1997 and 2001 runs concurrently throughout the chapter as there is no significant position change within either party between these elections. Positioning in relation to the centre ground is analysed for both parties with regard to policy, target audience, ideology and valence theory. The chapter concludes that Labour frequented the centre ground in these elections while the Conservatives remained to the right of a more narrowly defined political space. This conclusion is also reached in the third chapter. While this chapter also uses the framework of the four signifiers of party positioning, comparisons are made regarding the Conservatives' position between the 2005 and 2010 elections. The chapter details Cameron's efforts to move his party to the centre ground in the early part of his leadership, but notes the return to a right-wing position by the 2010 election. The argument which runs throughout is that Labour has consistently held the centre ground, while the Conservatives have almost consistently frequented the right of the more narrowly defined political space.

It is important to note that the left-right scale is used throughout this work, based on the traditional concept of party positioning dependent how much a party favours redistribution to create greater equality (Inglehart cited in Hakhverdian 2010: 837). If a broader focus had been possible, it would have been useful to analyse party positioning on a vertical scale of liberalism to moral authoritarianism. Although issues which would feature on this scale are referred to in relation to party identities, this scale could have created a further depth of analysis with regard to party positioning at the discussed elections. In relation to this question, it would also have been useful and interesting to analyse the importance of leaders and political marketing at these elections. The party leader is believed to be particularly significant in valence theory, and so it would have been useful to focus on this issue to broaden the scope of this area of analysis (Clarke et al. 2011: 238). Party leaders and political marketing have become increasingly significant to electoral competition with the 'Americanisation' of post-war British politics; indeed, 2010 marked the first British election campaign which included leadership debates (Kavanagh 1995). It may have been useful to

assess the ability of political marketing to define a party's position at the centre ground, and whether the electorate was conscious of the effect of these marketing techniques on their perception of party positioning.

An assessment of political marketing would correspond with the argument that many of Cameron's attempts to be seen as representing the centre were merely electioneering, and that the Conservatives have consistently remained to the right because they continue to retain Thatcherite ideological hostility toward the state. By contrast, Labour retained ownership of the centre ground at each of the elections discussed because the party had truly embraced free market economics combined with a commitment to the principles of social justice engineered by the state through the provision of public services and welfare.

1. The 'centre ground, Downs's 'median voter theorem' and the 'third way'

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a definition of what is meant by the frequently referred centre ground, and will suggest that the embracement of a market economy combined with state intervention to provide welfare is the defining feature of the centre ground. This chapter argues that the area of political debate on the left-right scale has become smaller as both parties accept neo-liberal economics and some state involvement in the provision of public services; however, variation continues between the parties as the result of differing views on state intervention, the distribution of wealth and their position regarding the public services. It will also analyse the theoretical background to the idea of party convergence by focussing on Downs's seminal 'an Economic Theory of Democracy' (1957), and its explanatory relevance to the purported movement of Labour and the Conservatives. Downs explains movement to the centre ground as driven by the fundamental motivation of politicians to attain power. However, the negative connotations which this entails seem to contrast with Blair and Cameron's active desire to have their parties be seen as representing the centre ground. Therefore, this chapter will also investigate party movement as driven by the taking hold of the 'third way' approach, whose architect, Giddens, suggested that British politics had entered a new stage beyond the ideological left-right divide (Geyer 2003). The chapter will conclude that though both parties have clearly moved closer together as the political space has become smaller, there still remains a distinction between their positions, and thus Downs's theory is not a sufficient explanation of party movement as he alleges parties will adopt identical positions (Hindmoor 2010: 45). It will also suggest that the third

way provides a more comprehensive explanation of party movement, not least because Cameron ‘largely endorse[d] the third way narrative of British politics’, which New Labour promoted (McAnulla 2010: 290).

While third way thinking sees the traditional left-right scale as redundant in the new post-ideological era, Hindmoor argues that this horizontal axis, with most voter preferences concentrated at the centre, has been demonstrated by survey evidence as continuing to represent voter distribution in Britain (2006: 27). Distribution along this scale is generally conceived as the extent to which ‘one supports or opposes social change in an egalitarian direction’ (Inglehart cited in Hakhverdian 2010: 837). Therefore, Labour has traditionally been seen as on the left of this scale because of its support of state intervention and redistribution, while the Conservative party has been described as to the right due to its acceptance of hierarchy and inequality. An important point to note is that the position of the centre ground can change (Hindmoor 2005: 414). It is suggested that the centre ground in Britain moved to the right in the 1980s, which saw the end of a position of opposition to the market economy being held by a major British political party, and saw the entrenching of neo-liberal attitudes of individualism and aspiration in the British consciousness under Thatcher (McAnulla 2010: 298). Beech also argues that from 1997 New Labour redefined the centre ground and moved it leftwards, as equal opportunity and ‘mild redistribution’ began to be implemented, with issues such as tax credits placed at this new ‘radical centre’ (2008: 1-2; Hindmoor 2005: 414).

Clearly debate exists about party positioning in the 20th and 21st centuries. While critics, including Kerr, challenge the post-war consensus theory held by academics such as Addison and Kavanagh, this chapter broadly defines the progression of party positioning in post-war Britain as beginning with a post-war consensus (Kerr 1999; Kavanagh and Morris 1994). This was broken by the divergence of Labour and the Conservatives, under the leadership of Michael Foot and Margaret Thatcher, to the more extreme left and right respectively during the late 1970s and 1980s. Then followed moves towards the centre by Labour as the party modernised during the 1980s and 1990s while the Conservatives struggled with the legacy of Thatcherism, finally making committed moves toward the centre under the leadership of Cameron. This is seen in the work of Budge, whose use of coding procedures to investigate the emphasis placed on particular policies within party election manifestos in post-war Britain, supports the general trend as described above. Budge particularly notes Labour’s

shift to the centre from 1992 until 1997, with its 1997 manifesto being just to the right of the centre (cited in Adams 2001: 124).

Bevir tracks the development of Labour and its move to the centre. Firstly, he suggests that ideologies should not be viewed as fixed and reified, but as changing and developing. Thus, he argues that New Labour represents a 'refashioning of socialism to meet problems such as inflation, the underclass and the changing nature of the working class' (2000: 277). He argues that socialism represents a set of moral values rather than specific policies, and therefore appears to echo the idea proliferated by New Labour that it is 'New in our means, but Labour in our aims' (Bevir 2000: 278). This suggests that New Labour was very conscious of its move to the centre in policy terms, but was eager to emphasise that this did not represent an abandonment of its traditional leftist principles. Blair's abandonment of Clause IV is usually hailed as the pinnacle example of Labour's positional change towards the centre. Other significant symbolic changes in New Labour's stance include a change in the view of the citizen as a 'recipient of rights', with more focus on the idea of a citizen as a 'bearer of responsibilities'; these altered principles manifest in policies such as the Welfare to Work programme aimed at targeting benefit dependency, and benefit sanctions for those who refused to take up work or training (Bevir 2000: 293). While social justice remains a core principle of New Labour, it was no longer seen as 'the first call on the economy', but rather a goal towards which moves should be made when an 'efficient and competitive economy' has been secured (Bevir 2000: 290). Embracement of the market economy is the most definitive feature of New Labour's move to the centre. Labour accepted concepts such as aspiration and individualism which had become ingrained in British society during Thatcher's premiership, and celebrated the wealth created by the market economy whilst also maintaining goals based on social justice as a product of this wealth creation (McAnulla 2010: 298).

Labour's move to the centre is marked by an acceptance of competitive market economics, but the Conservatives approached the centre from the inverse position. As Labour was adopting some of the principles associated with economic neo-liberalism, Cameron strove to distance the Conservatives from its associated excessive individualism. His rhetoric on becoming leader sought to emphasise that 'there is such a thing as society', and while Cameron praised the economic modernisation of the Thatcher governments, he acknowledged that they were 'neglectful of the negative social consequences of change' (McAnulla 2010: 290). Cameron suggested that as the parties seemed to be at a consensus on

the economy, debate between them would now relate to social issues and the extent of state involvement in tackling them. Indeed, Cameron described New Labour's emphasis on 'social justice and economic efficiency as constituting common ground in British politics' (McAnulla 2010: 294). These two core ideas seem to formulate the broad parameters of the centre ground. Both parties are united in their economic approach based on a liberal market economy, with debate between the parties now revolving around ways in which wealth should be shared. Labour moved to the centre in its acceptance of the market as a generator of wealth with which to achieve its social goals, while the Conservative party moved from the right in its acknowledgement that the power of the market could lead to negative social consequences. However, as McAnulla identifies, when approaching the question of how to share wealth, the parties remain distinct, 'with the Conservatives gesturing towards devoting somewhat less of that share to state expenditure' (2010: 294). Thus, though both situated on broadly similar smaller ground, the Conservatives retain their antipathy to a large state and so remain to the right, while Labour remains committed to social goals of greater equality, but combines this with an embracement of a free-market economy, and so frequents a central position.

The above definition of the centre ground has a party or policy based focus, but Downs defines the centre ground in terms of voter preferences. His 'median voter theorem' argues that the median voter is usually situated at the centre of the left-right horizontal axis where the greatest concentration of voter preferences is located, while there is a relatively small distribution of voters at the extreme right and left points of the scale (Hindmoor 2006: 26-32). Downs argues that in competition between parties in a context where voters vote for parties closest to them on a single dimension left-right scale, political parties will adopt identical positions in order to attract the median voter (Hindmoor 2010: 45). Two key assumptions of Downs's approach are those of rationality and self-interest. Hindmoor suggests that these concepts motivate all individuals to act in a way to best achieve their goals, which are always based on self-interest (Hindmoor 2010: 42). Thus, politicians are seen to be 'instrumental, self-serving utility-maximizers' (Hay 2004: 41). Downs states that the primary motivation of politicians to attain power is not to enable them to enact particular policies, but to 'attain the income, prestige and power which comes from being in office. Thus... parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies' (Downs 1957: 28).

There are numerous criticisms of Downs's theory. Academics such as Hindmoor and Hay are prolific in their work on rational choice theory, and credit Downs's theory as a good 'starting point' for analysis of party movement, but also advance various criticisms (Hindmoor 2006: 32). Hindmoor identifies two areas in which Downs's theory appears to ring true with arguments regarding party movement. He suggests that Downs's theory that parties will move to the centre and adopt identical positions 'chimes' with left-wing claims that New Labour has betrayed its socialist past and become a clone of the Conservatives (Hindmoor 2005: 407). He also states that Downs's theory 'accords with many people's experience of elections' as it resonates with the apparent feelings of a disenchanted electorate that there is no point in voting as politicians and parties are 'all the same anyway' (Hindmoor 2010: 46). Green notes the progression of the perception of party convergence among the British public, as in 1987 39 per cent believed there was a great deal of difference between parties, while this figure was only 23 per cent in 2005 (BES cited in Green 2011: 742). Interestingly, Hay and Stoker suggest that politicians 'have bought into a public-choice-theory-inspired view of the world', which in turn has led to a culture which sees politics as a 'bad thing', and thus 'political elites have come to trust themselves less and less – offloading their decision-making powers to others' (2009: 229-230). It seems that while rational choice often observes negatively-focussed trends or makes negatively-focussed predictions, it also breeds a negative, anti-political culture in politics.

However, Lane convincingly argues that politics simply is not a suitable field of application for rational choice theory. It is far easier to apply the concept of rationality to economic scenarios than political ones as political actions cannot be described as based on purely rational reasoning due to concepts such as 'partisan loyalties often fixed in adolescence' (1995: 107). The idea that ideology retains prevalence in British politics runs throughout this work, and Kerr, along with other academics such as Buckler and Dolowitz, argues that a further concept academics feel is often downplayed and overlooked in rational choice theory is that of ideology and ideas (cited in Buckler and Dolowitz 2012: 2). He challenges Downs's suggestion that when a party is electorally successful they maintain a consistent ideology, but when they are not they simply adapt their ideology to become more like the successful party (cited in Buckler and Dolowitz 2012: 2). Indeed, Adams's analysis of Manifesto Research Group investigations finds that British politics actually works in the opposite way to Downs's theory, as parties 'have electoral incentives to differentiate their policy positions' (2001: 137). The social-psychological attachments which Downs's theory downplays or overlooks

mean that it is not possible for a party to attract the voters of a rival party by adopting their policies, and instead parties must present significantly more attractive and therefore different policies from their rivals in order to snatch the support of their natural sympathisers (Adams 2001: 132).

The idea that parties adopt identical policies is a particularly problematic aspect of Downs's theory. Hindmoor claims that flaws in the rational choice conception of agency, which does not allow for the possibility of individual agency, mean that theorists predict that groups of political actors will act in exactly the same way because they possess identical self-interested goals, and so any party leader would locate their party at the position of the median voter (2010: 54). The most pertinent criticism of Downs's theory is that in reality all political actors simply do not behave like this. Hay and Stoker argue that 'if there is a single character trait that sets apart those who stand for office from the rest of us it is... more likely to be a certain tendency to naive idealism than it is the tendency to the narrow pursuit of self-interest' (2009: 235). If the only desire of political actors is to attain prestige and power then there are various career options which would enable this, and to suggest that politicians have no concern at all for policy seems somewhat asinine. Though unremarkable, Hindmoor's stance on this subject is most convincing. He explains that most rational choice theorists have now come to accept that 'the most plausible explanation of most politician's behaviour is they care about both policy and votes; that they have both policy-seeking and office-seeking motives' (2006: 41). Although it is simple to suggest that the solution to a debate is that both opposing sides of the argument are relevant, in this case this is a far more convincing approach than Downs's often black-and-white principles.

The third way approach also echoes this idea of an argument running in the middle of two opposing stances. Though the third way is intended to transcend the ideological left-right divide, it would appear to sit neatly at the centre ground between these two postures (McAnulla 2010: 287). Giddens seeks to emphasise the difference between third way policies and the left-right scale, but he describes the third way as a position between the left's focus on the state and uncritical faith in welfare and the right's focus on the market and antagonism to the welfare state (Geyer 2003: 249). Therefore, linear criticisms appear to hold that rather than being beyond the left-right scale, third way positions are simply in the middle of it. Echoing the earlier definition of the centre ground, the third way approach 'advocated a "new mixed economy" that promoted a "synergy between public and private sectors, utilising the

dynamism of markets but with the public interest in mind” (Giddens cited in Geyer 2003: 249).

It could be argued that the third way approach is transcendent and not simply a middle ground because of its self-conscious efforts to present third way policies as centrist. Via the process of triangulation, two opposing principles ‘are contrasted then transcended by formulating a third position which takes elements of, and yet transcends, the original positions’ (McAnulla 2010: 293). Thus, beyond socialism which was seen to be ‘dead’ and the perceived socially divisive neo-liberalism, a ‘dynamic economy and social justice’ was presented as an alternative economic system which represented a position beyond the traditional restrictive left-right dividing lines (Giddens cited in McAnulla 2010: 293). However, this simply accords with the definition of the centre ground given in this work.

Both Blair and Cameron have sought not to simply move their parties to the psephological centre by changing their policies, but to make their policies appear centrist. McAnulla notes that Cameron has attempted to make even potentially radical policies appear centrist and uncontroversial by contextualising stances such as his morally conservative strong pro-family agenda with an acceptance of gay marriage, thus making his party appear progressive where it might otherwise have been perceived as having shifted to the right (2010: 293). Hindmoor argues that New Labour won the 1997 election because they also manipulated the perceptions of their policies; rather than simply abandoning unpopular left-wing policies and positioning themselves at the psephological centre, he suggests that New Labour not only changed policies, but changed ‘voters’ minds’ (2005: 402). New Labour was actually able to retain some traditional Old Labour policies and place issues such as tax credits on the policy agenda because they had changed voters’ beliefs about the merits of policies such as devolution, and persuaded voters that the party was positioned at the centre ground (Hindmoor 2005: 414). Geoff Mulgan, head of Blair’s Downing Street Strategy Unity, suggests that these moves were simply a way of winning elections, and did not mark an ideological revolution within the Labour Party (Leggett 2007: 347). Both Blair and Cameron’s moves to position their parties at the centre, either by contextualising policies or by changing voter’s minds, smack strongly of electioneering tactics. However, there seems to be more conviction in Labour’s position of convincing voters of the merits of their policies, than the Conservatives’ attempts to contextualise their traditional right-wing stances under the guise of being progressive. Regardless, in their attempts to position their parties at the centre, or at least present their

parties as being centrist, there appears to be more of Hindmoor's argument that politicians are concerned with both policy and votes, than Downs's belief that politicians are purely concerned with power.

Debates surrounding Blair and Cameron's motives in moving their parties to the centre ground are pertinent, as they demonstrate that the broad consensus within academia is that this move to the centre ground has certainly taken place. It is important to note that by describing parties as inhabiting the centre ground this does not mean that they must hold identical policy positions. However, it seems useful to consider party competition based within the parameters of a new, smaller, less diverse political space, but a space within which debate and divergence between the parties continues to occur. Thus, Downs's conception of the centre ground as the position of the median voter which forces parties to adopt identical positions in order to win elections simply does not hold. Adoption of the third way approach appears to be a far more useful view of party movement to the centre. Giddens's argument for a 'new mixed economy' as represented by the third way reflects the definition of the centre ground given in this chapter (Geyer 2003: 249). The political space has undoubtedly become a more restricted area of debate as there has been a broad convergence between the parties since 1997, with both accepting a market economy and state intervention in the provision of welfare. However, this work will argue that debate undoubtedly continues to exist and the parties remain distinct within this space. Labour has consistently held the centre ground from 1997 to 2010 with their true embracement of an efficient economy combined with a commitment to state intervention to create social justice. The Conservatives have also remained fairly consistently to the right of this space as a traditional right-wing anti-intervention attitude has consistently prevailed in the party despite Cameron's gestures towards the centre and efforts at decontaminating the Conservatives' image in the early part of his leadership.

2. 1997 and 2001 General Elections

As the previous chapter established, in order to enhance the electoral fortunes of their parties, Blair and Cameron wanted to steward their parties to the centre of the left-right political spectrum. However, while Labour had arguably been making moves towards this space since

its modernisation began, the Conservatives' concerted moves to the centre only really began to take hold under Cameron's leadership. This chapter will analyse party positioning in the 1997 and 2001 general elections, with analysis of the elections running concurrently throughout the chapter as this period is not marked by a significant difference in policy offerings or ideological positions of the parties between these elections. In the case of these elections, it will be argued that Labour is the party which had moved significantly to position at the centre by 1997, while the Conservatives had not undergone a corresponding modernisation or move to position themselves at the centre. The converse of this positioning argument will be suggested in the next chapter, where the legacy of the 1997, 2001 and 2005 defeats led to Cameron's attempts to have his party be seen to have moved to the centre ground by the 2010 election. The context of the parties' positions as they entered the elections, including Labour's modernisation and the degeneration of the Conservatives during Major's premiership, is detailed. The policy offerings of both parties at these elections will be established, with policy positioning forming a basis from which the target audiences of the parties in 1997 and 2001 will be explained. Conflicting theoretical stances of party positioning will then be detailed; the first will argue that a difference in policy focus reflects divergent ideological principles and identities between Labour and the Conservatives during the period, while the significance of difference, or lack thereof, between policies will be detailed using the valence approach to party competition. This chapter will conclude that Labour may have moved to the centre, but the Conservatives and Labour had not converged at the centre ground in 1997 and 2001 because the Conservatives remained to the right of the political spectrum. It will argue that an ideological and identity viewpoint provides the most convincing framework to analyse party positioning, and that there exists a definitive difference between the parties' policy motivations, reflecting their divergent ideologies and identities. In 1997 and 2001 the Conservatives remained to the right with their ideological commitment to the state remaining apart from wealth creators and refraining from significant involvement in individual or family life (Conservative Party 2001). Labour had clearly moved away from their traditional socialist roots, but remained ideologically committed to creating social justice, with their position at the centre marked by a combination of this commitment with creating an efficient economy, which accords with the definition of the centre ground given in the previous chapter.

The conscious movement of Labour to the centre ground has been widely documented and well accepted in discussion of the party's modernisation and its morphology into New Labour

(Fielding 1997; Hay 1999). After its resounding electoral defeat in 1983, Labour began a process of modernisation under Kinnock and Smith, but Blair is generally depicted as the figurehead of the modernised New Labour. Central to Labour modernisation is the party's movement to the centre, along with a disassociation from its socialist past and acceptance of some Thatcherite principles (Heppell 2008: 578). The amendment of Clause IV is consistently cited as symbolic of Labour's modernisation and its attempts to distance itself from traditional associations with greater trade union power and increases in taxes to fund higher public spending, which were seen as barriers to potential Labour voters in 'middle England' (Heppell 2008: 587). While the modernisation of Labour was clearly key to its rising electoral fortunes in the 1990s, the implosion of the Conservative government under Major undoubtedly helped. Heppell comprehensively details the declining fortunes of the Conservatives in his analysis of the degenerative tendencies of long-serving governments. Major's premiership was dogged by divisions over Europe, the loss of the Conservatives' reputation for economic competence following the UK's expulsion from the ERM on 'Black Wednesday', and a string of sleaze and sexual scandals, making the party appear hypocritical following the incorrect interpretation of Major's 'Back to Basics' speech as a directive to pursue a traditional moral authoritarian stance (Heppell 2008: 587).

2.1 Policy

Thus, the two parties entered the 1997 and 2001 elections with significantly different electoral fortunes, but it is generally held that the parties' specific policy offerings had a broad similarity (Quinn 2008; Fielding 1997). There was consistency between the 1997 and 2001 elections, as the major focuses of the election campaign in 1997 were health, education and the economy and these issues were also the most salient to voters in 2001 (Margetts 1997: 183; Butler and Kavanagh 2002: 106). This is seen in the ICM/Guardian research (2001), in which 89 per cent of participants cited the NHS as an important issue on deciding how to vote in 2001, 81 per cent stated education, and 74 per cent stated the economy. The parties' 2001 manifestos do not feature significantly different policies on health. For example, Labour proposed to 'decentralise power to give local Primary Care Trusts control of 75 per cent of NHS funding', while the Conservatives proposed to 'trust doctors and nurses, not politicians, to make medical decisions', and both parties were committed to cutting waiting times (Labour Party 2001; Conservative Party 2001). However, the difference

between the parties is seen in their ability to set the agenda on these issues. The Conservatives were reluctant to campaign on issues of education and health, which, as Michael Portillo explained on 'Newsnight', was because these were seen as "'natural" Labour issues' (Dorey 2001: 210).

Labour's lead on these salient issues meant that the Conservatives were forced to campaign on what are often described as 'core vote' issues. This was problematic for the Conservatives as their stances on the issues of immigration, asylum and Europe 'might have reflected widespread anxieties or attitudes' but simply were not highly salient for the majority of voters (Dorey 2001: 209). In 2001, the Conservatives under Hague centred much of their campaign around the banner of 'save the £', despite 75 per cent of those polled in 1997 stating that 'if the Conservative party had been more openly against Europe and the single currency' it would have made no real difference to the way they voted (ICM/Guardian 1997). Not only were these issues not salient, the Conservatives also failed to capitalise on the issue of asylum because Labour had adopted an 'authoritarian rhetoric and policies' on this subject (Wring 2001: 920). Labour also appeared to be on Tory ground as it seemed to adopt Conservative positions on education, crime and Europe, as seen in Robin Cook's promise in 1997 of there being no adoption of the single currency in a Labour first term (Fielding 1997: 26). Most significantly, Brown announced in 1997 that Labour would match Conservative spending plans in its first two years in office, along with promising that there would be no increases in tax including the basic rate of tax, the top limit of tax, nor VAT (Ibid.). Consistent with the third way approach and afforded by Labour's ability to set much of the campaign agenda, Labour was able to balance its more right-wing economic approach with its traditional focus on fair public services, with 'education, education, education' and the public services at the heart of the 1997 and 2001 Labour manifestos (Blair 1996). However, this focus on education could also be viewed in relation to Kirchheimer's description of the catch-all party, which suggests parties will formulate policies such as increasing standards in areas such as education because the majority of voters would support these measures (1966: 186). This accords with Downs's spatial model and Fielding's argument that the Labour policies of 1997 offered both 'a degree of continuity as well as change' which was designed to appeal to Labour's target voters in 'middle England' (1997: 27).

2.2 Target Audience

New Labour is famous, or infamous, for its use of focus groups representative of 'middle England' which came to 'dictate Labour's electoral strategy' (Fielding 1997: 25). Blair claimed that 'if you want to push through the kind of radical changes we're talking about you have to drive it from the centre', which Fielding interprets as the party realising it had to appeal to waverers in middle England to get into office (cited in Fielding 1997: 27). Fielding's description of Labour policy offering both continuity and change reflects its targeting of 'aspirational middle-class homeowners living in the English suburbs of the South and Midlands' who may previously have been perturbed by Labour's tax and spend reputation (Wring 2001: 918). Labour's targeting of the 'Mondeo man' of middle England formed the central plank of its modernisation strategy and seems definitive of Downs's median voter theory in its simplest understanding; the party acted rationally and targeted the median voter and thus moved to the centre in its policy offerings in order to achieve power. While it would be difficult to argue with Fielding's view that Labour targeted the centre ground to achieve power, this does not necessarily mean that a Downsian approach, where simply accession to office is the sole end, applies.

The popularity afforded by Labour's modernisation and its expanded target audience in middle England, along with its increasing reputation for governing and economic competence, meant that the Conservatives' positioning and targeting of votes was made more complex (Green 2011: 757). The general conception of Conservative strategy in opposition from 1997 to 2005 is that of a core vote strategy and lurch to right, with the focus on traditional Conservative issues in these campaigns, such as Europe, immigration, asylum and crime (Green 2011: 736). From a Downsian view, this would suggest that the Conservatives acted irrationally by moving their target of support away from the median voter to their traditional support base on the right. However, Green thoroughly and convincingly refutes the core vote strategy in her argument that 'parties facing electoral unpopularity are forced into a strategy of promoting a narrow range of their traditional strengths, representing a limited issue domain on which they have a chance of being rated more positively'; this is not synonymous with the core vote (Green 2011: 738). Hague acknowledged that the Conservatives could not win an election by focussing on health and education because Labour leads on these issues were so great. Therefore, the Conservatives' 2001 campaign was designed to focus on crime, Europe and tax with 'education as a kind of loss leader' (cited in

Green 2011: 755). This course of action was rational for two reasons. Firstly, there would be no advantage in focussing on issues on which Labour was rated highly, as this would simply serve to create more focus on these issues. Secondly, the Conservatives did not target their core vote at the sake of the median voter, as Hague was aware that ‘among the suburban voters the only issues on which we had an advantage over Labour were tax and crime and Europe, and asylum. So if they were middle England, those were still the best issues to go for them on’ (cited in Green 2011: 755). Clearly, the Conservatives had made a rational tactical decision in their target audience by analysing opinion poll data. As previously mentioned, the Conservatives’ emphasis on Europe in 2001, despite it having little effect on voter choice in 1997 and being of low salience in 2001, may have seemed irrational; however, Hague explained that Europe was an issue which could potentially win the party new votes because ‘evidence was, from surveys, focus groups etc. that most voters agreed with the Conservative position on Europe but didn’t realise it was a Conservative position. So it ought therefore... be an issue on which you can win people over’ (cited in Green 2011: 755). Both parties were clearly conscious that they should target middle England in order to be electorally successful, but Labour was far more successful than the Conservatives at doing this because of its modernisation. However, despite Labour being firmly positioned at the centre ground and securing significant leads in many policy areas, the areas on which the parties were rated strongly remained divided along traditional partisan lines. The next section suggests that ideology and the corresponding identity it creates remained distinct between the parties.

2.3 Ideology

Buckler and Dolowitz argue that ‘ideology and ideological difference remain central features of modern British politics’ (2012: 576). This section will support this view, using Seawright’s comprehensive definition of ideology as ‘a mesh of interconnected concepts, sets of principles and values that provide a belief system about human nature and society... and the political action to be taken concerning those beliefs’ (2010: 28). Historically the Conservatives have consistently taken a pejorative approach to ideology, evoking ideas of tradition and pragmatism instead (Seawright 2010: 28). Perhaps the Conservatives’ difficult relationship with ideology explains Hayton’s argument that the party struggled to ‘reposition itself after the 1997 election’ because it ‘struggled to reconcile the logic of Thatcherism with the incompatible ideas of Beveridge’ (2012: 21). While the British public had been convinced

‘of the need for a free market economy, they still wished to retain the protection offered by a welfare state’, and New Labour was more effectively able to meet this demand with its third way narrative, while Thatcherite belief in a small state continued to dominate Conservative ideology (Hayton 2012: 21).

An area of similarity between the parties is seen in Labour’s claims that ideological conflicts between the left and right were no longer relevant to modern society (Smith and Smith 2000: 465). Both parties accepted the neo-liberal economic model, with Labour courting business and the City, and both also accepted the role of the state in providing public services (Wring 2001: 919). This leads Hay to claim that Britain had become a ‘one vision polity’, where a second consensus around neo-liberalism had formed subsequent to the post-war consensus. He suggests Labour proposals to match Conservative spending plans in its first two years in office meant that ‘the electorate was presented with a fiscally austere *fait accompli* regardless of the outcome of the [1997] general election’ (1997: 372, 377). While the idea of a new neo-liberal consensus is useful and accords with one of the main arguments of this article that the political space had become smaller around the centre ground, the idea that the outcome of the 1997 general election would lead to an identical government regardless of which party won is perhaps too cynical and difficult to accept. Hay’s article was written in 1997, and so Beech has the advantage of time in his argument that while in 1997 Labour appeared to accept the ‘Thatcher- Major Settlement’, by 2001 Labour had ‘made government interventionist again... the expansion in size, cost and remit of the public sector...in contradiction to the neo-liberal idea of rolling back the size, remit and moral responsibility of the state’ (2008: 1, 8). While this argument is convincing and highlights the ideological differences between the parties, it is also possible to refute Hay’s claims by highlighting ideological difference between the parties from 1997. Smith and Smith’s analysis of the 1997 manifestos notes that both parties identify Thatcher’s election in 1979 as the ‘beginning’ of British history. The Conservatives retained their commitment to Thatcherism by highlighting an unqualified record of success, the main reasons for which were ‘portrayed as the privatisation of public services, lower taxes, reduced government spending, curbing the power of unions, private investment in cities’ (2000: 464). Thus, in 1997 they offered more of the same. In accordance with their ideological commitments to the power of the markets and anti-interventionism, their manifesto claims ‘the state must get out of the way of wealth creators’, with tax cuts proposed to control public spending (Conservative Party 1997).

Labour's 1997 manifesto pragmatically acknowledges Conservative achievements, but also highlights the socioeconomic cost of some Conservative measures (Smith and Smith 2000: 464-465). Richards argues that New Labour had not challenged the values of the Thatcher-Major years and remained 'surprisingly restrained', as in five years in government Labour raised public spending at a slower rate than the Conservatives did over 18 years (cited in Orr 2005: 378). However, consistent with the definition given of the centre ground, this approach was balanced with traditionally Old Labour principles enacted in government, such as the introduction of the minimum wage in 1999 and nursery provision (Hindmoor 2005: 412). In accordance with the third way, Labour accepted the neo-liberal economic model, but also retained its ideological commitment to providing quality universal welfare and public services, described as Labour's 'proudest creation' (Blair 1997). Ideological differences are also seen between the parties in their vision of society. Blair's rhetoric accords with the centrist third way idea of combining aspiration and social justice, when he claims that Britain should be 'one nation in which our ambition for ourselves is matched by our sense of compassion... decency and duty towards other people' (1997). This contrasts with the Conservatives' traditional right-wing focus on government remaining out of the way of the individual and family, seen in Major's vision that 'sometimes no taxes are right... Many people in our country build up savings long after they have enough for their own needs. One reason they do that is to pass on the fruits of their life's work to their children and grandchildren... So, over time, our next target is to remove the burden of inheritance tax' (Major 1996).

2.4 Valence

While a focus on the economy and its relationship with the public sector was used above to highlight ideological difference between Labour and the Conservatives, the economy is also a classic valence issue. In contrast to Downs's spatial model, Stokes suggests that there is 'widespread agreement' among 'virtually everyone' on certain valence issues such as the economy, education, healthcare and crime (Clarke et al. 2011: 238). Thus, Smith argues that competition between the parties revolves around debate not about policy ends but means, and who is most competent at achieving broadly agreed ends (2005: 1140). As Hay suggested, both parties were committed to a neo-liberal economic model, but by 1997 and 2001 Labour was now the party which had achieved a reputation for economic competence, one which the

Conservatives had lost under Major's premiership. Labour was able to return Conservative taunts it had faced since the 1980s, that "the sums don't add up", as in 2001, the Conservatives promised both to match Labour's spending increases in health and education and also make £8 billion tax cuts (Dorey 2001: 210). Dorey argues that Labour was successful in 1997 and 2001 because it had won the British public's trust in its competence across a wide range of issues, which would support valence theory (Dorey 2001: 210). Indeed, opinion polling in 1997 showed that 20 per cent of respondents felt that the Conservatives would be best suited to targeting the country's problems while 36 per cent said Labour (IpsosMORI 1997). However, ICM/Guardian polling (1997) actually had the Conservatives at 33 per cent and Labour at 31 per cent when respondents were asked which party had the best economic policies. This would seem to suggest that there was more to Labour's success than merely its strength on valence issues and gaining a reputation for economic competence. Ideology seems to be more at play than valence in 1997 and 2001. Dorey's work conflicts with valence critics as he argues that 'a shift in public attitudes towards "tax-and spend"' had occurred, which saw the electorate become increasingly concerned about the state of public services following 'two decades of cutbacks and cash limits' imposed by the Conservatives (2001: 209). Thus, a clear ideological divide between the parties was evident. Labour was successful because its agenda 'reflect[ed] and reinforce[d] public opinion in prioritising increased public expenditure', while there remained an ideological disjuncture between the electorate and the Conservative party which appeared to represent its traditional commitment to tax cuts (Dorey 2001: 209)

Valence theory can be further critiqued through policy comparisons between the two parties. It would be naïve to argue that there were dramatic differences in policy across the board as there is a general academic consensus that the parties had moved closer in policy terms, but there were significant policy differences between the parties in areas thought to be classic valence issues. On education, in 1997 Labour ruled out a return to the 11-plus as it 'divides children into successes and failures at far too early an age', and proposed to set pupils according to ability in order to benefit 'high-fliers and slower learners alike. The focus must be on levelling up, not levelling down' (Labour Party 1997). By contrast, the Conservatives pledged to 'give more talented children, from less well-off backgrounds, the opportunity to go to fee-paying schools by expanding the Assisted Places Scheme', and to create a 'grammar school in every town' when this was desired by parents (Conservative Party 1997). The parties' stances on education seem to reflect perhaps the most fundamental ideological

difference between them; Labour is committed to equality of opportunity while the Conservatives accept inequality and divisions of pupils to allow the successful to advance. Clearly, a valence approach does not take account of these ideological differences.

2.5 Conclusion

This section has sought to argue that ideology remains highly relevant to British politics in comparison to valence theories, and that the parties remain ideologically distinct. While Labour had undoubtedly moved to the centre ground in terms of policy, target audience and ideology by accepting neo-liberal economics, it also retained its commitment to state intervention in the provision of quality public services. In comparison, despite a broad policy consensus between the parties, the Conservatives' image and electoral fortunes meant that it was unable to appeal to middle England as Labour did. The party struggled to reconcile its continued right-wing ideological commitments to tax cuts, less intervention in individual and family life and in the creation of wealth, with a changed political climate which was more accepting of moderate tax-and spend, a climate to which Labour's centrist third-way narrative was far more relevant.

3. 2005 and 2010 General Elections

While 1997 and 2001 marked elections where Labour had moved to the centre in terms of policy, target audience and ideology, the Conservatives remained fairly statically to the right with regard to ideology and target audience, although as discussed this was somewhat forced by their electoral fortunes. Preceding the 2010 election Cameron made a concerted effort to alter the Conservatives' identity and have his party seen as having moved to the centre ground. This chapter will first detail the significance of valence issues in both elections, suggesting that the valence approach is not sufficient as it would not account for the changes which occurred within the Conservative party between the 2005 and 2010 elections. Thus, the chapter will note the differing positions of the Conservatives in terms of target audience, policy and ideology between 2005 and 2010, while Labour remained consistently positioned at the centre despite the change of leadership. Positioning regarding ideology will be discussed in this section in relation to its ability to form a party's identity.

While the change in Labour leader from Blair to Brown by 2010 did not correspond with any significant positional changes, Cameron's leadership is generally thought to be characterised by an apparent movement to join Labour at the centre ground (McAnulla 2010: 287). However, this section will also present a contrasting view which argues that the Conservative party under Cameron's leadership remains influenced by Thatcherism, and therefore to the right of the political spectrum.

3.1 Valence

In 2005, the distance between Labour and the Conservatives on valence issues continued. As Dorey notes, there was consistency between the 1997, 2001 and 2005 elections, as Labour again led the Conservatives on valence issues the most highly salient to voters (2006: 152). Labour was more trusted than the Conservatives by 15 per cent on education and health issues, with leads of 9 per cent on tax, and 21 per cent on managing the economy, the classic valence issue (IpsosMORI 2005b). Healthcare and education were the most highly salient issues in 2005, with 67 per cent and 61 per cent of respondents citing healthcare and education respectively as vital in deciding their vote, while only 35 per cent felt the economy was very important to deciding their vote (IpsosMORI 2005a). Though the economy was of low salience in 2005, Labour had significant leads on each of these issues, which valence theorists would argue is key to the party's 2005 electoral success. The impact of valence on Labour's fortunes could be of particular significance in 2005, as Johnson and Pattie argue, despite the damage caused to Labour's and particularly Blair's reputation following Iraq, the party was electorally successful because it was judged to be more competent (2011: 298).

By 2010, the financial crisis had significantly changed the political landscape, and Clarke et al. argue that a valence model 'provides a strong explanation of voting decisions' in 2010, 'as the issue agenda of British politics was dominated by concerns about the perilous state of the country's economy...a quintessential valence issue' (2011: 237, 243). Other valence issues of health and education were now a lower priority (Quinn 2010: 407). The political debate surrounded which party would best address economic problems and when cuts to public spending should be made, with the Conservatives advocating immediate cuts to reduce the deficit, and Labour cautioning against rapid early cuts in case this resulted in a double-dip recession (Quinn 2010: 407). While the economy is consistently cited as an example of a valence issue, and thus an issue which illustrates broad agreement and similarity between the

parties, it could be said that this debate about when and how to cut is evidence enough of an enduring distinct ideological divide between the parties, and the Conservatives' ideological commitment to shrink the state.

The valence framework confines analysis of the parties' positions to a rather narrow debate about their competence on particular issues, with differing positions dependent on how highly each party was rated on competence. The only distancing between parties that a valence approach would take into account between 2005 and 2010 would be that the Conservatives had made ground on valence issues while Labour had begun to lose its reputation for economic competence (Green 2010: 103). This seems far too narrow a view as it does not take into account the significant attempts made by Cameron to modernise his party in terms of its identity and target audience in order to compete with Labour at the centre ground.

3.2 Target Audience

A movement to mirror Blair and target voters at the centre ground is as key to Cameron's modernisation tactics as it was to Blair's, although the two leaders experienced differing degrees of success in this movement. Cameron's identification of the necessity for movement was created by the Conservatives' association with targeting their core vote in 1997 and 2001 (Green 2011: 736). Again in 2005, the Conservatives continued to campaign on traditional issues such as immigration and asylum. As noted in the previous chapter, the Conservatives struggled to position themselves with the median voter because of their electoral fortunes and those of their opponents. This continued to be the case in 2005 due to Labour's success at 'stealing Conservative clothes on their issues', such as matching Conservative policies of efficiency cuts in the public services, or championing choice in health and education as the Conservatives did (Smith 2005: 1140). Smith suggests that the Conservatives' concentration on immigration and asylum is therefore 'understandable' as it was their one clear lead issue over Labour (Smith 2005: 1140). However, by 2005, immigration and asylum had become the most salient issue for the electorate, so the Conservatives' strategy seems rational in Downsian terms, and may have begun to reap reward (Dorey 2006: 149). However, despite leading on the issue which was most important in 2005, in the eyes of the electorate Labour remained the party closer to the median voter in 1997, 2001 and 2005 while the Conservatives continued to be placed to the right (Quinn 2008: 181). For example, while 18 per cent of survey respondents placed Blair at the centre of the left-right scale in 2005, only 8

per cent placed Howard at the centre; similarly, 11 per cent placed the Labour party at the centre, while 6 per cent did the Conservatives (YouGov 2004). However, Quinn also found that the electorate detected a convergence between the parties on policy, particularly on law and order and tax and spend (2008: 188). Clearly in 2005 there was still a significant factor which distinguished the parties from each other in the eyes of the electorate despite perceived similarities in policy; Quinn identifies this factor as the Conservatives' 'negative public image' (2008: 195). Conservative modernisers felt that the party could have fared better if it had emphasised more 'socially liberal and inclusive "one nation" principles and policies', rather than essentially appealing to its core vote, which reinforced the Conservatives' 'nasty party' image in middle England (Dorey 2006: 155).

Moderniser Cameron realised that this negative public image, which made the party seem right-wing, had to be tackled in order to appeal to voters at the centre. Gamble claims that Cameron's strategy 'imitated in important respects the strategy of New Labour', suggesting Cameron was indeed the heir to Blair in the sense that he realised that in order to be electorally successful a party must occupy the middle ground and keep their opponents off it (2010: 62). Thus, much as Labour had sought to offer both continuity and change to appeal to middle England by pledging to match Conservative spending plans in 1997, in 2007 Osborne announced 'a Conservative government would match Labour's projected public spending plans for the next three years' (Fielding 1997: 27; BBC News 2007). This announcement was clearly designed to reassure voters at the centre, who favoured quality public services over tax cuts (Dorey 2001: 209). Brown was successful in defining his opponents in their traditional clothes as anti-government intervention, with taunts such as 'I say to our opponents: those who don't believe in the potential of government shouldn't be trusted to form one' (Brown 2008). Thus, the Conservatives' announcement to match Labour spending intended to illustrate that 'the charge from our opponents that we will cut services becomes transparently false' (Osborne cited in BBC News 2007). Despite their efforts, the Conservatives failed to reassure those voters at the centre. Dorey argues that voters becoming disillusioned with Labour and Brown did not translate into significant enthusiasm for the Conservative party, as it 'had still not convinced enough voters that it had sufficiently and genuinely changed since the 1980s and 1990s', and was unable to secure a majority at the 2010 election (2010: 402). He also notes that the 'big society' election campaign tagline 'struggled to articulate a clear and positive political narrative' which could enthuse voters (Dorey 2010: 402). Ultimately, distance remained between the Conservative party and the

majority of voters at the centre ground because the ‘pre-election emphasis on massive public expenditure cuts and possible tax rises was an unwelcome message to a British electorate that was not as concerned with reducing the public debt as the Conservative leadership’ (Fisher and Wleizen 2011: 124). Despite Labour’s dwindling popularity, the party remained more strongly associated with the protection of public services, which was also a higher priority for those voters at the centre than it was perceived to be for the Conservative party (Dorey 2001: 209).

3.3 Policy

The Conservatives’ preoccupation with reducing the deficit illustrates the biggest difference in policy terms between the discussed elections. While in the parties’ 2001 and 2005 manifestos emphasis was on ‘social elements’ with low emphasis on the economy, by 2010 the major focus of the election was reducing the deficit (Bara 2006: 271; Evans 2010: 336). As in 1997 and 2001, it is generally thought that the 2005 election marked similarity between the parties’ policy offerings (Quinn 2008: 183). Comparative Manifesto Project research finds policy convergence between Labour and the Conservatives from 1997-2005, while ‘Labour occupied traditional Tory territory on economic management, defence and crime’ (Quinn 2008: 183). However, the issues on which the parties had significant leads remained divided along partisan lines as they did in 1997 and 2001. As Smith argues, Labour retained its point of difference, or policy on which it had a significant lead over the Conservatives, on health and education, and also framed the issue of public spending in 2005 (2005: 1140). While the Conservatives attempted to illustrate distance between the parties in health and education ‘by emphasising not the service quality but choice therein’, Labour neutralised these attempts by also depicting itself as ‘the champion of choice’ (Smith 2005: 1144). While Labour dominated on ‘their’ traditional issue of the public services, the Conservatives ‘set the agenda’ on issues such as immigration and asylum, traditionally associated with the party (Smith 2005: 1137). These issues were regarded to be at the centre of the Conservatives’ 2005 campaign, which could have been advantageous as these issues were the most salient to voters (Dorey 2006: 49; Kavangh and Butler 2005: 76). However, this policy focus heightened the Conservatives’ image problems as the right-wing ‘nasty party’, and research by Lord Ashcroft found that ‘voters had a more negative view of the Conservative Party at the end of the campaign than they did at the beginning’ (cited in Smith 2005: 1140).

Cameron wanted to tackle this negative image. He sought to create a shift in policy focus on becoming leader, identifying ‘new areas of concern for the party, such as the NHS and the environment’, with the symbolic change in the parties’ logo highlighting its green credentials (Evans 2011: 51). Cameron also advocated policy such as the ‘quality of life agenda’, claiming ‘GWB (general well-being) was just as important as (GDP)’, and ‘professed [a] desire to establish a new partnership with professionals in the public sector’ (Dorey 2010: 403-404). This clearly mirrored New Labour’s policy of public-private partnerships, and was designed to orchestrate a corresponding shift to the centre (Wring 2001: 918). However, following the financial crisis, the differences between the parties became clear. The recession dominated the issue agenda at the 2010 election, with debates surrounding the scale and pace of cuts, leading Quinn to predict that ‘the next few years will be dominated by argument over economic credibility and the size of the state’, which could be said to echo debates of the adversarial 1980s (2011: 407, 411). Indeed, despite early gestures at policy change from Cameron by focussing on peripheral issues such as the environment and ‘GWB’, the fundamental partisan differences between the parties concerning the role of government were clear. The Conservatives blamed the economic problems Britain faced on ‘big government’ and ‘New Labour’s relentless and reckless increases in public expenditure’, while Labour warned against a Conservative government which remained committed to tax cuts for the richest and cutting services such as Sure Start, EMA and school building programmes (Dorey 2010: 407; Brown 2008).

3.4 Ideology/identity

Both parties can be seen attempting to define their opponent’s identity, clearly this is often pejorative, but the ideology which underlies each party’s position obviously plays an important role in creating a party’s identity. In line with their traditional association with the public services, by 2005 Labour could boast of huge increases in NHS spending (Kavanagh and Butler 2005: 78). Along with being identified as the champions of the public services and NHS, the Conservatives accused Labour of ‘stealing their clothes’ on the issue of choice, which enabled the party to solidify its hold of the centre ground, and which Smith suggests forced the Conservatives back to their traditional focus on immigration and asylum (2005: 1140). Quinn argues that the focus on immigration of Crosby’s ‘dog-whistle politics’ in the 2005 campaign ‘crystalized’ the Conservatives’ identity as nasty, selfish, old-fashioned and only concerned about the rich and those on the right-wing (Denham and O’Hara 2007: 184;

Quinn 2008: 193). By contrast, as overseers of an efficient economy combined with increased spending in the public services, Labour were seen as modern, caring, supportive of a more socially plural Britain and located at the centred ground where most voters placed themselves (Quinn 2008: 193). After Cameron's election as leader in 2005, his modernisation programme worked to tackle these negative associations and attempted to gain the identity Labour had achieved for his own party.

There are two main strands of thought which relate to Conservative and Labour positioning following their respective modernisation processes. As Gamble states, New Labour is either interpreted as continuing Thatcherite paradigms, or as having metamorphosed through an ideological and policy renewal in line with the third way approach (2010: 58). Similarly, the Conservative party under Cameron is either seen as having moved to the centre ground through a 'detoxification' of its right-wing identity or as continuing to be significantly influenced by Thatcherism (Dorey 2007, 2010; Evans 2010; Gamble 2010).

Gamble argues that Cameron identified that in order to be electorally successful parties need to be at the centre ground and keep their opponents off it, a realisation which he describes as the revival of Conservative statecraft and flexibility which had been lost since 1997 (2010: 63). To this end, Dorey suggests Cameron sought to modernise and move his party ideologically beyond Thatcherism (2010: 403). This involved 'a repudiation of, and occasionally apology for' a number of features of the Thatcher-Major years, including hostility to the public sector, the Poll Tax, and intolerance of same-sex couples (Dorey 2010: 403). This process of identity renewal also entailed attempts to make the party appear more socially aware, inclusive and representative of broader society. There was a greater focus on issues such as 'general well-being', a 'broader definition of poverty' focussing on relative poverty which could prevent people partaking in 'cultural and social activities that the majority enjoyed', and claiming that 'there is such a thing as society' (Dorey 2010: 403-404, 406). However, Cameron was also sure to follow this claim by insisting 'it's just not the same thing as the state', and thus sought to create an identity for the Conservative party as beyond the individualism and market-focus of Thatcherism, but also an alternative to 'New Labour's top-down, target driven and micro-managed approach' (Dorey 2010: 406). This has led to various descriptions of the party's new identity under Cameron as a Conservative "third way"... "Civic Conservatism"... [or] "compassionate Conservatism" (Willets and Streeter cited in Dorey 2010: 406). While Dorey appears to accept that a modernisation of the

Conservatives' identity had taken place by 2010, he notes that despite Cameron's claims of modernisation and social liberalism, he was also a major author of the 2005 asylum and immigration-focussed Manifesto (2007: 139).

While the changes within the Conservative party which Dorey notes were clearly designed to illustrate a significant identity change within the party, this section will support Evans' (2010) argument that Cameronism is actually far closer to Thatcherism than a Conservative version of the third way, and that the Conservatives continue to be positioned to the right of the political spectrum with Labour at the centre. Although Cameron's early leadership, with its gestures toward social diversity and a modernised vision of society, may have seemed closer to a more centrist approach, with the onset of the financial crisis the Conservatives entered the 2010 election campaign with a traditional Conservative right-wing attack on the state and big government. Kerr suggests Cameron is the heir to Blair, but accepts that Cameron's anti-statism distinguishes him from Blair (cited in Evans 2010: 328). Cameron highlighted differences between the Conservatives and New Labour when he suggested that social responsibility distinguishes his party from Labour (Evans 2010: 335). In Thatcherite-style, Cameron's vision of society 'consisted of individuals who lived together in local communities. These communities... were being destroyed by the corrosive power of "big government"' (Evans 2010: 331). He attempted to shift Labour from the centre ground, claiming that Labour remained committed to its traditional maintenance of government interference in peoples' lives, with claims such as 'I am certain that government is a big part of the problem- its size has now reached a point where it is actually making our social problems worse...that's because by trying to do too much, it has drained the lifeblood of a strong society- personal and social responsibility' (Cameron 2010). This may mark a development in the Conservatives' electoral strategy as they tried to shift Labour from the centre ground, rather than simply accusing Labour of stealing their policies as was seen in the three previous elections (Evans 2010: 335). However, this approach also serves to solidify the Conservatives' identity as enduringly committed to a smaller state, as seen in their desire to make immediate spending cuts and in the 'big society' election narrative. Evans suggests that Cameron remains strongly influenced by Thatcherism, its associated anti-statism and emphasis on individual and social responsibility (2010: 328). The Conservatives' intention to shrink the public sector in favour of the private and voluntary sectors, and the desire to 'roll forward the frontiers of society', has quintessential Thatcherite suspicions of big government,

despite its attempt to deflect from the idea of ‘rolling back the frontiers of the state’ (Evans 2010: 334).

While it is argued that the Conservatives remained to the right despite Cameron’s gestures at modernisation in order to bring about identity renewal, the Labour party under its new leader retained its centrist identity in 2010. As McAnulla notes, those hoping for a shift in policy or ideology focus following Brown’s accession to the leadership were disappointed (2010: 287). Just as in 1997, the party retained ‘its commitment both to fairness and to business’ (Brown 2008). Charges from the left that Labour had abandoned its traditional principles could be answered by the party’s record of massive increases in public spending, particularly in education and the NHS (Gamble 2010: 67). However, consistent with the parties’ balanced, centrist approach Labour ‘did continue neo-liberal policies and worked to promote prosperity within that framework’ (Gamble 2010: 67). The party did not stray from its focus on the markets as the best generator of wealth, and under Brown continued to court business as it had done under Blair.

3.5 Conclusion

The change in Labour leader did not produce a corresponding change in policy or ideological focus for the party at the 2010 general election compared with the three previous elections discussed. A similar argument has been advanced in this chapter with regard to Cameron’s leadership. While Labour continued to frequent the centre in terms of target audience, policy and ideology, the Conservatives remained to the right of the centre ground within a narrower political space in 2010. Despite Cameron’s attempts to move his party to the centre with regard to policy and target audience during the modernisation of the early part of his leadership, the onset of the financial crisis saw the Conservative party return to its ideological commitments to anti-interventionism and a smaller state. However, the Conservatives’ focus on reducing the deficit by cutting public services was at a disjuncture with public opinion, which was less concerned than the Conservative party about reducing Britain’s debts (Fisher and Wlezien 2011: 124). Despite the Conservatives’ best efforts to fuel hostility towards both the Labour party and public services spending by suggesting that the economic problems Britain faced were caused by ‘excessive public sector expenditures’ under Labour, the Conservative party still failed to secure a victory in 2010 against a long-serving party with an unpopular leader (Clarke et al. 2011: 252). Labour was further disadvantaged as the

Conservatives began to close the gap between the parties regarding competence on valence issues such as health and education, sometimes leading on the economy (Green 2010: 95). It is not possible to contest valence theory based on these competence figures alone because the difference between the parties was marginal, perhaps reflecting the outcome of a hung-parliament at the 2010 election. However, it has already been established that a valence approach would fail to take into account the attempted identity changes within the Conservative party between 2005 and 2010. As noted, these attempts were largely abandoned and the Conservative party entered the 2010 election much as it had done in the three previous elections, in a right-wing position, and failed to secure a majority. Therefore, this chapter argues that identity and thus ideology continue to play an important role in British politics as the Conservatives did not win in contest against a significantly damaged opposition because their ideological commitments did not reflect the attitude of the British electorate, which had come to favour public services spending over tax cuts under 13 years of centrist Labour government (Dorey 2001: 209).

4. Conclusion

As Hay notes, political debate in Britain was significantly changed by the modernised Labour party's accession to power in 1997 (1999: 105). While Labour had languished in opposition since 1979, following the 1997 election the Conservatives experienced 13 years in opposition, and only re-entered government as part of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats in 2010. New Labour had set new parameters in their centrist positioning and capturing of middle England, which the Conservatives finally attempted to replicate under Cameron, even if this attempt was short-lived. Discussion regarding convergence between the parties was changed by Labour's victory in 1997. While it is almost entirely accepted that Labour had moved to the centre, debate exists about whether this move represented an acceptance and embracement of Thatcherism, or the creation of a 'novel, dynamic and modernising social democracy' (Hay 1999: 105).

Interestingly, Gamble argues that New Labour actually failed to achieve the initial aims it set for itself. He states the party entered the 1997 election with the aim of creating a new politics, at the heart of which would be a 'strong self-governing society...the role of the state... would be enabling, seeking to help... businesses and voluntary associations to be independent and self-governing, rather than trying to impose outcomes from above' (2010: 63). However, he

suggests Labour failed to achieve its aims, and instead presided over ‘considerable increases in government interference and government monitoring’ along with huge increases in public spending (Gamble 2010: 65). Thus, while on one level New Labour in government did continue within a neo-liberal economic framework, simultaneously it could be viewed as ‘a rather orthodox social democratic government in its devotion to increasing public spending, using the conventional instruments of the command state to do so’ (Gamble 2010: 67). The idea of these two opposing positions running simultaneously together reflects the argument made throughout this article that Labour truly occupied the centre ground because it embraced principles of both the left and right, and combined them in its approach. The idea which Gamble advances of New Labour actually being socially democratic is perhaps not one held by many, particularly those on the left, and contrasts with Labour policies such as its commitment to continue Conservative plans based on raising £1.5 billion from privatisation receipts if it was successful in 1997 (Fielding 1997: 31).

New Labour’s balancing of left and right wing principles has been argued throughout this article as evidence of its centrist position, and also its embodiment of the third way. However, this reference is to a specific selective perception of the third way used in this work; that it actually represents a position on the left-right scale, and does not transcend it. While this work supports the idea that Labour represented the third way principles of a ‘dynamic economy and social justice’, it maintains that the left-right scale of political competition, and the force of ideology, continue to play a significant role in British politics (Giddens cited in McAnulla 2010: 293).

Downs’s spatial theory of party competition conforms to the traditional left-right scale, and argues that the median voter is situated at the centre of this scale (Hindmoor 2005: 20). It would be difficult to suggest that New Labour’s conscious courtship of middle England and the Conservatives’ concerted targeting of voters at the centre ground under Cameron did not have significant Downsian echoes. However, while a Downsian framework does appeal in its simplicity and apparent ability to observe broad trends in party competition, it contains many flaws. Contrary to Downs’s theory of party competition, this article has argued that Labour and the Conservatives simply have not converged at the median voter. It is possible to refute this argument in two ways; firstly, by arguing that this analysis has shown that while the political parties have consciously targeted the median voter as Downs predicts, they are also capable of defining the position of the median voter.

While Downs's theory argues parties must adapt to the political environment, it has been suggested here that Labour adapted its environment by changing voters' minds as to the merits of its policies and its vision of society (Hindmoor 2005: 413). Thus, the Conservative party was out-of-touch with the electorate and languished in opposition, and while it appeared Cameron was conscious of the modernisation his party must undertake in order to adapt to this new environment, his party remained separated from the majority of the electorate who were not as preoccupied as the Conservatives about the national debt (Fisher and Wlezien 2011: 124). Secondly, it has been argued throughout that though the space of political debate of the left-right scale may have become smaller, the parties have not converged. It is argued that ideology continues to play a significant role in electoral competition. While Labour had undoubtedly changed significantly, it continued to retain its ideological commitment to social justice engineered through the state, despite the combination of this commitment with an acceptance of neo-liberal economics. Conversely, the Conservatives' ideological opposition to a large-scale state has been seen at each of the four elections covered. This would suggest that the parties continue to be motivated by different principles, and were not simply prepared to abandon their distinct visions for government because they were purely motivated by a self-interested desire to achieve power as Downs would argue (Downs 1957: 28).

The concept of rationality also plays significantly in valence theory, which suggests that electoral competition now predominantly revolves around which party voters judge to be the most competent at dealing with particular issues. This explanation to party competition has also been critiqued throughout this article. While it has been acknowledged that the arena of competition has become smaller, valence theory suggests that much of political competition is no longer adversarial, and that distance between the parties simply revolves around the means of achieving the same ends, and the competence of the respective parties at achieving these ends (Smith 2005: 1140). This idea has been challenged by suggesting that the party ends are not always the same; for example, while some may argue that the debate surrounding the pace and scale of cuts in 2010 marked a classic valence issue, this work has argued that this does represent a significant difference between the parties, particularly as it is evidence of the Conservatives' anti-state ideology. Also, it is noted that valence theory fails to account for the changes within the Conservative party between the 2010 election and the preceding three elections. While the idea that the Conservative party had not changed significantly between these elections is proposed, it is important to note that Cameron

initially did make efforts toward moving to the centre ground and valence theory as a tool of analysis would not take these attempts sufficiently into account.

The main argument of this work has been that though the area of political competition has become smaller as no party opposes either neo-liberal economics or the role of the state in the provision of some welfare, the parties remain ideologically distinct within this space, and ideology continues to play a significant role in party positioning in Britain. It has been argued throughout that at each of the elections covered; Labour has remained positioned at the centre ground because of its embracement of a free market economy combined with the role of the state in engineering social justice through the provision of welfare and public services. At each of the four elections, the Conservative party has remained to the right of this smaller political space because of its continued ideological resistance to the state and high levels of public spending. Clearly, the area of political debate has become smaller and parties have become more similar, certainly in the area of policy. However, it could be argued that a general disengagement and disenchantment with politics following issues such as the expenses scandal has led to an opinion of politicians as institutionalised into a particular climate at Westminster, which has little relation to the experiences of the majority of people in Britain, thus also contributing to the dwindling number of voters who perceive a difference between the political parties since the 1980s.

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