3

Elections and public opinion

PIPPA NORRIS

Other chapters in this book consider the record of the second Blair government on key policy issues, including the delivery of public services, the issue of constitutional reform, and the foreign policy record on Iraq and Europe. There are reasons to be skeptical about whether Tony Blair fully achieved his goals in many of these areas but on one there is no doubt whatever: if nothing else, in terms of the outcome of elections, Tony Blair will go down in the history books as the most successful Labour Prime Minister we have ever known. One of the most striking features of elections and public opinion in the UK since 1997 has been the predominance of the Labour party, in contrast to the weakness of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat opposition at Westminster, despite everything which has occurred during Blair's tenure. This electoral success is puzzling given that many polls report continued public dissatisfaction with Britain's involvement in the Iraq war, popular mistrust of Blair's leadership, and perceptions of the government's 'failure' to improve delivery of basic social services. Labour has also suffered from backbench rebellions, visible leadership rivalries, and policy divisions at the apex of government, which are often believed to damage party popularity. Tony Blair has continued to win elections despite the loss of some of his closest advisers who were thought to be the architects of his victories, including Alastair Campbell and Peter Mandelson. The puzzle of Blair's electoral success is deepened by historical comparisons, notably the extent of Conservative hegemony established under Mrs Thatcher during the 1980s, and by contrast the limited duration of previous Labour leaders in No. 10. In Britain, the Conservative party has seemed emasculated by Tony Blair although this is not a broader crisis of the right; elsewhere conservative movements and ideas remain vigorous and thriving, notably the power of the US Republican Party controlling both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.

In the light of this puzzle, this chapter aims to consider the extent of Tony Blair's electoral success since 1997 in historical perspective. We first compare the results of recent elections, and the monthly series of

published opinion polls, against historical precedents. Building on this foundation, we then analyze the relative importance of four main factors associated with voting for Labour during the 2005 general election, focusing upon the personal appeal of Tony Blair compared with the government's performance in office, the ideological location of the Labour Party in the center of the political spectrum, and the social basis of the Labour vote. We also consider the role of partisan bias in the electoral system in contributing toward Labour's electoral success. Lastly, the conclusion reflects upon the broader implications of Blair's electoral success and considers whether this pattern will continue as an enduring legacy, representing a partisan realignment which will outlast his leadership.

Tony Blair's electoral success in historic perspective

One of the most remarkable achievements of Tony Blair is the fact that no previous Labour leader has ever won re-election with a sufficient parliamentary majority to last a full second term – let alone managed to be re-elected for a third successive time. Clement Atlee's landslide victory in 1945 was followed by a majority which shrank to just five in 1950, with subsequent defeat the next year. Harold Wilson consolidated his 1964 victory by winning a majority of more than a century in 1966, before Ted Heath trumped him four years later. The 1997 general election first swept Tony Blair triumphantly into Downing Street with a massive landslide of seats, producing a majority of 178, the largest for any postwar government. The 2001 contest confirmed new Labour's ascendancy at Westminster, leaving their majority almost untouched at 167. From 2001 to 2005 the monthly opinion polls, and votes cast in the series of local, by-elections, and European election results, indicated that Blair's honeymoon with the British public was becoming stale. For these reasons, many anticipated that the May 2005 general election could well produce a close result. Indeed, the regular swing of the pendulum in post-war British politics usually brings a rotation of the parties in power. The election on 5 May 2005 broke records, however, by producing the third straight Labour victory in a row. The closest post-war parallel was Mrs. Thatcher's hat trick from 1979, 1983 and 1987. The 2005 general election returned 356 Labour members, generating a solid 66-seat parliamentary majority for the Labour government, although based on a far lower share of the vote.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the extent of Labour's success since 1997 at Westminster – and the extent of Conservative failure. The shrinkage in the number of Labour MPs in 2005, combined with a greater propensity
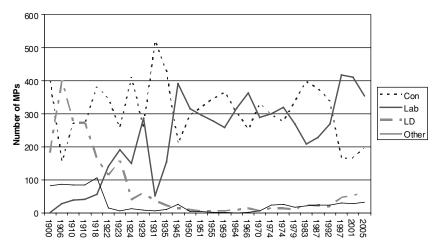
Figure 3.1. The distribution of seats in the UK House of Commons, 1900–2005
Sources: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (eds.) *British Electoral Facts 1832–1999.*
(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000) and *The British Parliamentary Constituency Database,
1992–2005.*

towards backbench rebellions, makes the government potentially more
vulnerable to problems in steering through its ambitious program of 45
new bills outlined in the Queen's speech after the election. The chapter
by Cowley in this volume documents the rise of parliamentary rebellions
on key issues such as student top up fees. Nevertheless Blair still enjoys
a more comfortable parliamentary majority than Mrs. Thatcher had in
1979, as well as a greater margin than experienced both by John Major in
1992 and by Harold Wilson in 1964 and 1974.

Figure 3.1 also demonstrates how disastrously the Conservatives were
decimated by the 1997 general election, plunging from 336 to 165
MPs under the leadership of John Major. The party flat-lined in the
next election, making a net gain of just one additional member under
William Hague. Table 3.1 indicates how the Conservatives performed
more strongly in 2005 by making 32 net seat gains under Michael Howard.
The party experienced an infusion of new blood with the entry of 53
new Conservative MPs, including three dozen challengers who defeated
Labour and Liberal Democrat members, while the remainder inherited
Conservative seats from retiring incumbents. This influx is important,
as a source of fresh energy and a broader pool of younger talent which
should help the opposition mount a more effective leadership team in
future contests. The Conservative benches rose to 197 MPs, representing
about a third of the House of Commons.

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Table 3.1. *UK general election results 2001–5*

	Share of the UK vote (%)			Number of UK MPs			
	2001	2005	Change	2001 General election	2001 notional results	2005 General election	Net change
Labour	40.7	35.2	−5.5	412	402	355	−47
Conservative	31.7	32.3	0.6	166	165	197	32
Liberal Democrat	18.3	22	3.7	52	51	62	11
Scottish National	1.8	1.5	−0.3	5	4	6	2
Plaid Cymru	0.7	0.6	−0.1	4	4	3	−1
UK Independence Party	1.5	2.3	0.8	0		0	0
Green	0.6	1	0.4	0		0	0
British National Party	0.2	0.7	0.5	0		0	0
Other	4.5	4.4	−0.1	19	19	22	3
Speaker				1	1	1	0
Turnout	59.4	60.9	1.5				
Lab to Con swing			3.3	659		646	−13
Labour majority				165	158	66	−92

(i) The actual results in June 2001. (ii) The 'notional' results of the June 2001 election when calculated under the new Scottish boundaries.

Sources: The British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992–2005; David Denver, Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (eds.) *Media Guide to the new Scottish Westminster Parliamentary Constituencies.* (BBC/ITN/PA/Sky, University of Plymouth, 2004).

But any celebration at Conservative Central Office was quickly mitigated by the realisation that, despite the seat gains, the party had made only painfully modest progress in boosting their share of popular support: winning 30.7% of the UK vote in 1997, 31.7% in 2001, and 32.3% in 2005. Indeed their performance in vote share was highly uneven across the nation, falling further in some of their weakest regions, such as Scotland and the North of England, as well as in Labour seats, while recovering best in their own seats and in the leafy suburbs and shires of the South East and Greater London. They received support from just one fifth of the total electorate. The party essentially speaks for rural England; they have only one MP in the whole of Scotland, just three in Wales, and none in Birmingham, Newcastle, Sheffield, Leeds, Liverpool, and Manchester. The following day, Michael Howard announced that he would stand down as leader, after the new leadership selection rules had been agreed within the party; the fourth Conservative leaders whom Blair had outlasted.
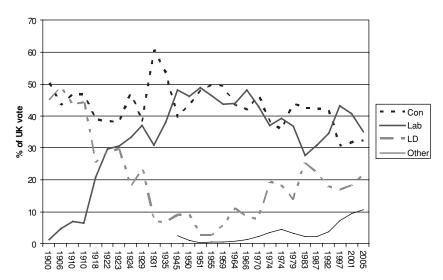
Figure 3.2. The percentage share of the UK vote, 1900–2005
Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (eds.), *British Electoral Facts 1832–1999.*
(Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000) and *The British Parliamentry Constituency Database,*
1992–2005.

The fall in the Labour Party share of the UK vote by −5.5% in the May
2005 general election did make the party far more vulnerable in sub-
sequent contests; a further 2.3% Lab-Con uniform national total swing
in the next general election would deprive the government of its overall
parliamentary majority (see Table 3.2). But the electoral challenge fac-
ing the main opposition party remains formidable. It would still take a
4.8% uniform national total swing in the next general election to make
the Conservatives the largest party in a hung parliament. And it would
take a substantial 7.6% swing to propel them back into power with an
overall parliamentary majority. The closest historical parallel would be
Mrs Thatcher's 1979 triumph over Jim Callaghan in 1979, following the
Winter of Discontent, which generated an 8.2% swing. The Conserva-
tive Party share of the vote would need to be at least a dozen points
ahead of Labour in the next general election to be assured of single-party
government.

Among the main parties, the Liberal Democrats made the greatest
progress in boosting their share of the vote in the May 2005 general
election. The party won almost six million ballots, representing 22% of the
UK vote, up 3.7% from 2001. Their share of the vote strengthened in every

Table 3.2. *Projections of seat change by uniform vote swing in the next general election*

	% UK Vote			Number of Seats					
Swing	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Other	Govnt	Parl.Maj
−1.0	31.3	**36.2**	22.0	186	**368**	63	29	Lab	90
0.0	32.3	**35.2**	22.0	197	**356**	62	31	Lab	66
1.0	33.3	**34.2**	22.0	216	**341**	59	30	Lab	36
2.0	**34.3**	33.2	22.0	231	**326**	58	31	Lab	6
2.3	**34.6**	32.9	22.0	235	**323**	57	31	–	–
3.0	**35.3**	32.2	22.0	249	**309**	57	31	–	–
4.0	**36.3**	31.2	22.0	263	**294**	58	31	–	–
4.8	**37.1**	30.4	22.0	**281**	278	57	30	–	–
5.0	**37.3**	30.2	22.0	**284**	275	57	30	–	–
6.0	**38.3**	29.2	22.0	**302**	258	56	30	–	–
7.0	**39.3**	28.2	22.0	**313**	248	55	30	–	–
7.6	**39.9**	27.6	22.0	**326**	235	55	30	Con	6
8.0	**40.3**	27.2	22.0	**332**	229	55	30	Con	18
9.0	**41.3**	26.2	22.0	**350**	214	53	29	Con	54

Note: The estimates assume a Con-Lab uniform national swing across the UK with no change in the share of the vote for the other parties.
Source: The British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992–2005.

region, especially in Scotland and the North where they made inroads into traditional areas of Labour support. After the election, the Liberal Democrats were left in a promising position to make further advances in subsequent contests, placed second in more than one hundred Labour seats, twice as many as before. But under Charles Kennedy, on 5 May the party still failed to make a decisive breakthrough at Westminster, gaining only eleven more MPs (compared with the 'notional' 2001 results) to swell their parliamentary ranks to 62. This represents their largest parliamentary representation for eighty years but nevertheless they had hoped for far more seat gains.

Trends in public opinion

Nor was the 2005 general election a fluke; instead it reflects a broader pattern of Labour predominance according to many indicators. The standard
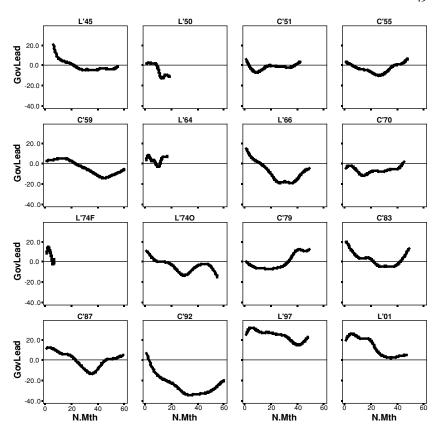
Figure 3.3. The government lead over the main opposition party, 1945–2005
Source: Estimated based on voting intentions expressed in Gallup polls 1945–1999 and
MORI polls 2000–2005.

measures of party popularity in the monthly opinion polls usually report
that after a post-election honeymoon period, governments often expe-
rience a mid-term slump in support. This well-known electoral cycle
has been found in Britain and elsewhere.[1] Figure 3.3 illustrates the gov-
ernment's lead in voting intentions over the main opposition party in
the series of monthly opinion polls published in Britain since the war
by Gallup and MORI.[2] The time series has been standardised for each

[1] Andrew Gelman and Gary King, 'Why are American presidential election polls so variable
when votes are so predictable?' *British Journal of Political Science* 23 (1993): 409–51.
[2] It should be noted that Gallup discontinued their series in 1999. The MORI monthly
polls may produce some discontinuity in the post-war series but nevertheless when both

administration against the month in office. The horizontal line across each graph indicates whether the government ends in positive or negative territory against its main rival. The dip in support is found throughout the series although the precise timing is unpredictable; sometimes it occurs earlier, sometimes later. Most administrations usually stage a subsequent recovery as polling day nears, and they then go on to win the subsequent general election, for example the Conservatives under Harold Macmillan in 1959, or again under Mrs. Thatcher in 1986–87. Others, however, continue to hemorrhage support, or at least fail to mount a sufficient bounce back, for example Harold Wilson's second administration in 1966–70, or John Major's government after the ERM debacle in September 1992.

Does support for Tony Blair's government fit the general pattern? A comparison of the graphs illustrates how far the government's lead from 1997 to 2001 defied trends; Blair's lead over the opposition was more substantial than any other postwar administration, remaining in positive territory throughout. There was indeed a slow slide then a dip during this period (with the nadir in September 2000, around the time of the fuel crisis), but Labour support recovered sharply as the 2001 general election approached. The second Blair administration experienced a stronger and more sustained fall in the Labour lead, starting around the 20th month. Nevertheless once again Blair defied political gravity by remaining ahead of the Conservatives throughout this period.[3] No other prime minister in postwar history has retained his or her lead over the opposition party through one administration, let alone two. Obviously the government's lead was reduced during Blair's second term, and moreover this pattern could be attributed to Conservative weakness as much as Labour's popularity. But the government's lead still remains unprecedented in the last half century since polling records began.

By-elections, local and regional elections, and European elections

What of other types of contest? Was Labour equally successful? Here the evidence remains more mixed. There were only half a dozen by-elections since 2001, in part because the government has been careful to avoid

companies were publishing monthly polls of voting intentions, there was a strong correlation between both series. Where two or more polls of voting intentions were published by each company in a month, the figures used reflect the average for each month.

[3] There was one month (September 2004) where the average of the MORI polls recorded a −1% Labour lead, but this was within the margin of sampling error and not part of a general trend from 2001–5.

Table 3.3. *By-elections 2001–5*

Constituency	Date	*Seat Change*	*Change in % share of the vote*			
			Con	*Lab*	*LD*	*Turn*
Ipswich	22/11/2001	*Lab hold*	−2.1	−8.0	7.2	−16.9
Ogmore	14/2/2002	*Lab hold*	−3.7	−10.1	−4.0	−40.6
Brent East	18/9/2003	*LD Gain*	−2.0	−29.4	28.5	−13.7
Birmingham Hodge Hill	15/7/2004	*Lab hold*	−2.7	−28.4	26.1	−10.0
Leicester South	15/7/2004	*LD Gain*	−3.4	−25.2	17.7	−16.4
Hartlepool	30/9/2004	*Lab hold*	−11.2	−18.5	19.2	−10.4
MEAN 1979–1983	17		−11.4	−10.9	18.3	−14.5
MEAN 1983–1987	16		−13.9	0.4	12.3	−10.0
MEAN 1987–1992	23		−11.0	−0.8	−0.6	−17.5
MEAN 1992–1997	17		−19.9	7.4	5.0	−23.8
MEAN 1997–2001	*13*		−0.6	−11.1	4.6	−27.8
MEAN 2001–2005	**6**		**−4.2**	**−19.9**	**15.8**	**−18.0**

Source: UK Election Statistics: 1918–2004. House of Commons Research Paper 04/61 July 2004.

these contests by encouraging older or ill Labour MPs to retire in general elections. The six by-elections which were held since 2001 were all in Labour seats with majorities of 20% or more in the previous general election (see Table 3.3). Labour retained four of these seats, although its share of the vote fell (especially in Birmingham Hodge Hill), while the Liberal Democrats gained Brent East (with a Lab-LD swing of 29%) and Leicester South (with a 21.5% Lab-LD swing). The historical benchmarks show that the government's share of the by-election vote fell by −11.1% from 1997–2001, about the same as Mrs. Thatcher experienced during her first term. The Labour vote fell by almost twice as much (−19.9%) since 2001, similar to the scale of the losses experienced by the Major government and by the second Wilson administration. This could have

been a cause of concern to Tony Blair but, contrary to previous periods, however, the Conservatives made no vote gains in any of the by-elections held since 2001, and it was the Liberal Democrats who emerged with the most cause for satisfaction.

Another test of government support was the election to the European Parliament, held under a regional list PR system on 10 June 2004. Labour suffered a fall in their share of the votes and seats (down 5.4% and 6 MEPs, respectively, compared with 1999). But once more ex-Labour deserters did not flock towards the Conservative Party, which actually experienced an even worse slump in their share of both votes (−9%) and seats (−8). Instead the main victor to emerge was the UK Independence Party, which had adopted the strongest Euro-skeptic stance. UKIP rose into third place in their share of the vote, and almost doubling its vote share (to 16.1%), sending a dozen MEPs to the Brussels parliament they seek to abolish. The 1999 contests had been greeted in Britain with overwhelming apathy; voter turnout was 24%, the lowest in Europe. In 2004, turnout increased to 38.2%, which may be attributable, at least in part, to the fact that these were held simultaneously with the local contests, as well as to the extension of postal voting, and to voters' perceptions that they had a wider choice of parties and policies.[4] Blair therefore lost support in the European contests but, as in by-elections, this did not benefit his main opposition rival. So long as any slump in government support flows to different parties in different contests, this poses far less of a threat to the government.

The local elections also present mixed fortunes for each of the main parties. The picture is particularly complicated to interpret because of the way that different types of councils in England, Scotland and Wales are elected in alternative years. The easiest way to evaluate standardised trends in party performance in these contests is to compare the Rallings and Thrasher estimated national share of the vote since 1997, based on the change in the share of the vote in a sample of wards, as shown in Figure 3.4. The trends suggest that Labour suffered a 14-point fall in its share of the vote from 1997 to 2000, reflecting the more modest erosion in vote intentions that we have already observed as gauged in the monthly opinion polls during this period. The 1999 local elections were a particularly bad result for Blair, as Labour lost over 1000 councillors to the Conservatives. This was followed by a very positive result for the Conservatives in 2000 under William Hague, when they gained almost 600 local

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[4] John Curtice *The 2004 European Parliamentary Elections in the United Kingdom* (London: The Electoral Commission, 2004). Also available at www.electoralcommission.org.uk.
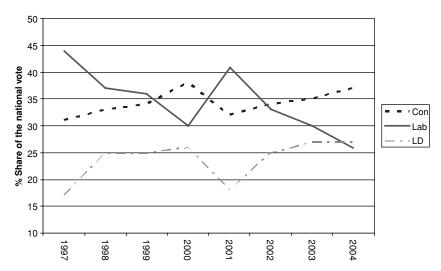
Figure 3.4. Estimates of the national share of the vote in local government elections, 1997–2004

Source: UK Elections Statistics: 1918–2004. House of Commons Research Paper 04/61. July 2004.

seats. The following year, however, Labour recovered their share of the local vote in the simultaneous local and general elections. The government slid back into second place in the vote in 2002, with modest seat losses, before falling further into third place in 2004. In historical context, the Labour Party share of the national vote in the 2004 local council elections, at 26%, was the lowest they had ever achieved since estimations were first calculated based on the 1979 local government reorganisation.[5] The Conservatives benefited from this slump, with 37% of the vote in 2004, although this was slightly less than William Hague achieved in 2000 before going down to defeat in the general election. The 2004 local elections saw the Labour Party losing 461 seats and eight councils, including Newcastle, Swansea and Leeds. The Conservative gained 259 seats while the Liberal Democrats gained 137. The loss of Labour votes in local contests, and their third place rank, therefore generates stronger challenges to the thesis of Blair's electoral success. This erosion of support is politically important for control of town halls up and down the land; both of the main opposition parties have benefited by gains in local councils and in seats. Local

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[5] Although the Conservative share of the national vote was estimated to be lower (25%) in 1995.
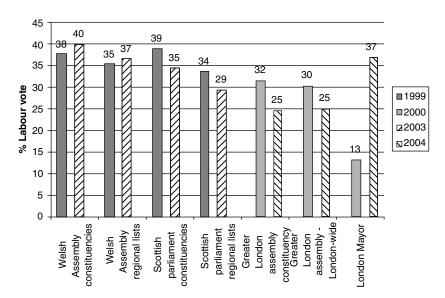
Figure 3.5. Labour's performance in regional contests
Source: UK Elections Statistics: 1918–2004. House of Commons Research Paper 04/61.
July 2004.

councillors form a grassroots base which can be a long-term springboard
to national power, as this widens the pool of experienced activists who can
be selected as parliamentary candidates. As both the 2000 and 2004 results
demonstrated, however, the performance of the main parties in local elec-
tions proved a poor predictor of their support at subsequent Westminster
contests.

There are also complicated patterns when interpreting support for Blair
indicated by the election results since 1997 to the devolved bodies. This
includes contests for the Scottish parliament and the National Assembly
for Wales held in 1999 and 2003 under the Additional Member system
of election, the Greater London Assembly election in 2000 and 2004, and
the London Mayoral Supplementary Vote elections in 2000 and 2004.
Although the national media often wants to regard these as second-order
referenda on government performance, in fact the particular outcome may
be strongly influenced by local circumstances, including the use of differ-
ent electoral systems, regional patterns of party competition, and salient
issue concerns in each area, such as evaluations of the performance of
Holyrood parliament north of the border, and the public's reaction to the
congestion charge introduced for London by Ken Livingstone. Figure 3.5

provides a simple summary of the Labour results in these contests. Their
support goes up slightly in Wales, but down in Scotland and the London
Assembly, while the result of the Mayoral election in London was heavily
influenced by Ken Livingstone's switch from Independent in 2000 back
to Labour in 2004.

The reasons for Blair's success

So why has Tony Blair managed to achieve such remarkable electoral suc-
cess, a feat which eluded his predecessors? And, can it be established that
it was Blair's leadership and personal appeal which was essential for elec-
toral success in May 2005, rather than other plausible reasons, including
the policy performance of the government, the ideological location of the
Labour Party, or the social basis of the Labour vote?

Social and partisan cues

Ever since Butler and Stokes, traditional structural accounts have long
emphasised the importance of the social background of electors as strong
predictors of voting behaviour in Britain.[6] In particular, during earlier
decades, social class and long-term partisan attachments were thought to
exert a critical influence in determining Labour and Conservative Party
support. Since the early-1970s, however, numerous studies in Britain and
elsewhere have emphasised a process of social and partisan dealignment,
where voters have become more detached from traditional loyalties.[7] This
process is likely to have been accelerated by Blair's emphasis that Labour
needed to develop a broad cross-class coalition in middle-England, with
policies which proved attractive to university-educated public sector pro-
fessionals, such as social workers, teachers, local government officials, and
doctors, as well as to the shrinking Labour base of skilled and unskilled
blue collar workers in manufacturing industry. There have also been
important developments in the other social characteristics of British vot-
ers, with the rise of the gender-generation gap, where younger women

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[6] David Butler and Donald Stokes. *Political Change in Britain* (New York: St Martin's Press,
1974).

[7] See, for example, Ivor Crewe and Katarina Thomson, 'Party loyalties: dealignment or
realignment?' in Geoffrey Evans and Pippa Norris (eds.) *Critical Elections*. (London: Sage
Publications, 1999). See also Geoffrey Evans, Anthony Heath and Clive Payne, 'Class: Labour
as a catch-all party?' in Evans and Norris (eds.) *Critical Elections*.

have increasingly shifted towards the Labour Party.[8] Accordingly we need
to see how far social background and Labour Party identification continue
to predict Labour support.

Straddling the centre ground

Classic Downsian explanation of voting behaviour emphasises the loca-
tion of the parties across the political spectrum and their closeness to the
median voter.[9] For Downs, rational voters select the party closest to their
policy preferences and rational parties compete by positioning themselves
to greatest advantage, given the normal distribution of public opinion
on the major issues. According to this perspective, one plausible reason
for Labour's success is the way that Blair dragged the party towards the
center of party competition.[10] This process started earlier; from 1983
onwards, under the leadership of Neil Kinnock and John Smith, the
Labour Party gradually located itself clearly in the middle of the polit-
ical spectrum, abandoning its tribal socialist loyalties and advocacy of
the unpopular policies of redistributive taxes, trade union power, and
subsidies for nationalised industries. The transformation of the Labour
Party clearly preceded Tony Blair, but he probably took this strategy fur-
ther and faster than would have occurred under his predecessors. Blair's
strategy adopted the LBJ adage: hold your friends close, and your ene-
mies even closer. Like a chameleon, he ruthlessly stole any popular new
ideas from other parties and claimed them for himself. He embraced
constitutional reform from the Liberal Democrats, pro-business policies
from the Conservatives, and devolution from the nationalists. The one
bold, risky, and historic initiative based on deep convictions which he
did make in foreign policy – to support President George Bush in the
Iraq war and to commit British troops in this conflict, proved so unpop-
ular with the public and his party that it deeply damaged his personal
popularity and trust in his leadership. In response to Blair's centrist strat-
egy, the Liberal Democrats leapfrogged over Labour by gradually shifting
leftwards under Charles Kennedy's leadership, advocating the abolition

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[8] Pippa Norris. 'Gender: a gender-generation gap?' in Evans and Norris (eds.) *Critical
Elections.*

[9] The classic argument is presented in Anthony Downs. *An Economic Theory of Democracy.*
(New York: Harper and Row, 1957). See also James M. Enelow and Melvin Hinich (eds.)
The Spatial Theory of Voting (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[10] Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski. 'Why parties fail to learn: electoral defeat, selective
perception and British party politics.' *Party Politics* 10(1) (2004):85–104.

of student top up fees and their replacement by higher public spending on universities, substituting local property taxes for a local income tax, adopting the most pro-European stance, and becoming the fiercest critic of Britain's intervention in the Iraq war. Meanwhile the Conservative Party became punch-drunk from Blair's electoral triumphs since 1997, emasculated by its disastrous fall from the glory Thatcher days, and confused by its faltering steps back to power. Uncertain how to regain public popularity, William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith, and then Michael Howard have vacillated uncertainly and schizophrenically between emphasising compassionate and moderate conservatism committed to public spending, and alternatively pursuing a line of clear blue water with Blair, by adopting more hard-line right-wing policies, including Thatcherite tax-cutting and anti-immigration rhetoric.

The performance of the Labour government

Yet positional accounts have come under strong challenge, in particular from theories emphasising the importance of the public's evaluation of government performance. Such accounts are most common in the literature presenting economic theories of voting behaviour but they do not necessarily rest upon economic criteria alone.[11] Other chapters in this volume evaluate the broader record of the second Labour administration. The government promised improvements in a wide range of policy areas, including the delivery of better public services in health, education and transport, the attempts to modernise the constitution, and changes in transatlantic and European relations determining Britain's role in the post-9/11 world. Some commentators, notably Toynbee and Walker, highlight the success of government initiatives, in schools, hospitals, and the pocket-book economy.[12] Devolution was enacted. The Good Friday Peace Settlement was agreed. The minimum wage was implemented. Extra teachers and nurses were provided. New hospitals and clinics were built. Crime fell. Overseas aid rose. Perhaps most importantly, under Gordon Brown, Labour developed a reputation for competent macroeconomic management, combining fiscal prudence with solid economic growth. Britain's prosperity during the Labour years has been a remarkable

[11] See, for example, Michael Lewis-Beck. *Economics and Elections: The major Western democracies.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988).

[12] Polly Toynbee and David Walker, *Better or Worse? Has Labour Delivered?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).

success story, especially compared with the performance of major rivals such as France, German and Italy, as well as the European Union as a whole.

Was this the basis of Labour's electoral success on 5 May? In particular, the investigators of the 2001 British Election Study presented a strong case that what mattered for voting behaviour in that contest was less the ideological location of the main parties than the public's satisfaction with the performance of the Labour government on important issues.[13] Similarly, during the 2005 campaign, when people were asked which party was best on a range of policy areas, polls reported that Labour had a strong lead over the Conservatives on most issues, particularly those of greatest concern to the public: health, education, and the economy. By contrast, the Conservatives were only ahead of Labour on two issues: asylum-seekers and immigration, and crime.[14] In this perspective, people voted for the Labour Party primarily because they were regarded as the more competent team to deliver the services which people were most concerned about in Britain.

Blair's appeal

The key question is whether the third Labour term can also be attributed to the personal appeal of Tony Blair, over and above the ideological position of the party and Labour's performance in office. Considerable debate surrounds the question of leadership effects on voting behaviour; some theorists have argued that British elections have become increasingly 'presidential' with a growing focus during the campaign on the personality, experience, and qualities of the party leaders.[15] Popular commentators and journalists often attribute considerable importance to how the public judged the leaders, including how far any erosion of trust in Tony Blair might damage Labour's prospects. Yet at the same time the literature has often reported that party leaders exert only a minimal effect on voting choices in Britain, once party preferences are taken into account.[16]

[13] Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne C. Stewart and Paul Whiteley, *Political Choice in Britain* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004).

[14] Christopher Wlezien and Pippa Norris. 'Whether campaigns matter and why', in Pippa Norris and Christopher Wlezien (eds.) *Britain Votes 2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[15] Michael Foley. *The Rise of the British Presidency* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1993).

[16] Anthony King (ed.), *Leader's Personalities and the Outcome of Democratic Elections* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

To compare the relative importance of each of these factors, we can draw upon data derived from the 2005 BES Rolling Campaign Panel Survey. The dependent variable for the analysis is whether someone reported voting Labour or not, based on the third wave of the survey conducted immediately after polling day. The independent variables are measured using the first wave of the survey, conducted just before the official campaign was launched in early-April.[17]

There are numerous indirect ways that Blair's leadership could matter, notably by positioning the Labour Party in the center ground of Westminster politics, as well as by spearheading the reforms improving the delivery of public services. In terms of *direct* effects, however, leadership effects on voting behaviour are usually understood in terms of affective feelings towards the personal qualities of each of the party leaders, such as public perceptions of their honesty, veracity, and likeability. In particular, the Conservatives focused a good deal of attention during the campaign on Blair's personal character, with Michael Howard going so far as to call Blair a liar in his parliamentary statements over the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Loss of trust in the prime minister was emphasised by the press as a critical Achilles heel for Labour. In turn, Labour responded in kind, with personal attacks directed against Michael Howard and Oliver Letwin. Character also featured in the Liberal Democrat campaign, with considerable emphasis on Charles Kennedy's likeability. Accordingly feelings towards Tony Blair were tapped for analysis by affective measures of three specific leadership qualities which are commonly regarded as important to voters, each measured using eleven-point scales: how far Blair was regarded as competent, responsive, and trustworthy, as well as by a more general 'feeling thermometer' summary assessment gauging how far people liked Tony Blair.

To compare these measures against the importance of the ideological location of the main parties, we can analyze their perceived position on the classic issue of taxation and public services. This issue summarises much of the debate between left and right in British politics and the trade-off between taxes and services played an important role in the 2055 campaign, notably by the forced resignation of Howard Flight in the Conservative Party in the debate over their tax-cutting or spending priorities. The position of parties on this issue was measured in the survey using an 11-point scale, where people could pick a point ranging from '*government*

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[17] Full details of the survey, methodology, and questionnaire can be found at www.essex.uk/bes.

should cut taxes a lot and spend much less on health and social services' (0) on the right to '*government should raise taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services*' (10) on the left. Respondents were asked to indicate their own position on the scale, and then to identify the position of each of the main parties. From this, we can calculate the perceived distance of each voter from each party on taxes and public services. In Downsian theory, rational voters support the party closest to their own preference.

Lastly, performance theories argue that what matters to voters is 'delivery, delivery, delivery' on issues of concern to the electorate, such as health and education. In this regard, parties seen as competent at managing the economy and public services should gain most votes. Economic voting accounts suggest that given Britain's economic growth, combined with low inflation and unemployment, it was essentially Gordon Brown who won the election for Labour, not Tony Blair. Retrospective economic evaluations, without any reference to the party in government, included judgments whether economic conditions had got worse or better during the previous twelve months, both in the respondent's own household and in Britain as a whole. Prospective economic evaluations were measured by how far people thought that the financial situation in their own household and in the country would get better or worse during the next twelve months. After testing these items using factor analysis, the retrospective and prospective measures were added together into a single scale of economic performance. Moreover performance theories also emphasise that in May 2005 other issues besides the economy were commonly cited by the public on their list of concerns about the most important problem facing the country, including the priority given to health care and education. To assess this, the general performance of the government was gauged by a scale constructed from questions which asked people to evaluate how well the present government had handled a series of issues, using 5-point responses from 'very well' to 'very badly'. The survey included evaluations of the government's handling of the issues of crime in Britain, the education system, the number of asylum-seekers coming to Britain, the NHS, the risk of terrorism in Britain, the condition of Britain's railways, the economy in general, the situation Iraq, the level of taxation, and pensions.

The models in Table 3.4 use binomial logit where the dependent variable is voting for Labour v. not voting for Labour, using the weighted BES data from the pooled campaign panel survey. Model 1 includes age, education, gender, and occupational status, as well as partisan

Table 3.4. *Predictors of voting Labour, May 2005 general election*

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	Sig.	s.e.	B	Sig.	s.e	B	Sig.	s.e.	B	Sig.	s.e.
Social background and party identification												
Age	.01		.01	-.01		.01	-.01		.01	-.01		
Gender	-.13		.09	-.21	*	.10	-.16		.11	-.27	*	
Education	.01		.01	.02		.01	.03	*	.01	.03	*	
Occupational status	-.03		.02	-.02		.03	-.02		.03	-.04		
Labour party identification	2.05	***	.13	1.29	***	.15	1.15	***	.15	1.00	***	
Leadership												
Blair's leadership affect scale				.14	***	.01	.14	***	.01	.08	***	
Ideological proximity to parties on taxes v. sending												
Labour							.03		.03	.04		
Conservative							-.09	***	.02	-.04	*	
Liberal Democrat							-.11	***	.03	-.12	***	
Performance												
Labour government performance										.11	***	
Economic evaluations										.07	***	
Model Summary												
Nagelkerke R^2	.10			.47			.50			.53		
Percentage correctly classified	75.1			81.3			81.7			83.3		

Note: The table present the results of binary logistic regression analysis where the dependent variable is whether the respondent voted for Labour or not. Model 1 enters social background and party identification, understood as long-term stable cues in voting behaviour. Model 2 adds the scale measuring affective feelings towards Tony Blair. Model 3 adds the ideological proximity of voters to parties on the taxation v. spending scale. Model 4 adds the indicators of government performance, and the economic evaluation scale. See text for details of the construction of these scales. P ≤ .05, ** P ≤ .01, *** P ≤ .001.
Source: British Election Study 2005, *Rolling Campaign Panel Survey*, weighted N. 2843

identification with the Labour Party, since these factors are all commonly regarded as closely associated with Labour support. Of these, only Labour Party identification proved to be consistently and significantly related to voting Labour in 2005. The results suggest that after applying these controls, the personal assessment of the qualities of Tony Blair were significantly related to voting for Labour, including evaluations of his competence, trustworthiness, responsiveness, and likeability. Knowing just two factors – whether someone identified with the Labour Party and whether they were positive towards Tony Blair – could predict 47% of the variance in the Labour vote. Model 3 and 4 enter the remaining factors, including ideological proximity and the performance measures. Closeness to the Conservative or Liberal Democrat positions on taxes and spending reduced the probability of voting Labour, as expected, although proximity to Labour on these issues proved insignificant. Lastly, positive evaluations of the Labour government's performance on a range of policy issues, as well as rosy economic evaluations, also increased the probability of voting Labour. Nevertheless although Model 3 and 4 slightly strengthen the summary statistics, the improvement of fit proved very modest. While none of the potential explanations common in the literature can be dismissed on the basis of this analysis, what the results demonstrate is that attitudes towards Tony Blair's leadership exert a significant effect on voting Labour, even when controlling for a wide range of alternative factors which are commonly thought to explain Labour's popularity.

The electoral system

So far we have considered the factors contributing towards Labour's share of the vote. What matters for the outcome, however, is not simply popular support but also the distribution of seats at Westminster. This raises the question: how far did Blair's victory in May 2005 depend upon the workings of the electoral system and what factors contributed towards electoral bias in this contest? Majoritarian electoral systems, including the single member plurality system of First-Past-the-Post used for Westminster contests, are intended to generate a 'manufactured majority' for the party in first place. This type of electoral system aims to turn even a close result in the popular vote, such as Harold Wilson's wafer-thin victory in 1964, into a solid working parliamentary majority for the party in government. It is intended to facilitate a decisive outcome where the party with the largest share of the vote forms a single-party cabinet,

producing 'strong' government, clear accountability, and transparent decision-making. Such a system allows the winning party to implement their manifesto policies and to take difficult decisions during their term in office, when assured of the support of their back-benchers, without the need for post-election negotiations and compromise with coalition partners. Proponents of majoritarian systems argue that the bias is also intended to reduce the representation of minor parties, especially those such as the BNP and the Greens with voting support widely dispersed across constituencies. The effective vote threshold facing fringe parties and independent candidates reduces parliamentary fragmentation and penalises extremist factions, such as the radical right. But the disproportionality in the UK electoral system does not necessarily operate equitably for the main parties: since the 1950s, it has been characterised by systematic bias towards the Labour Party. This disproportionality is a product of the regional distribution of the party strength, malapportionment (differences in the size of electorate within parliamentary constituencies), patterns of differential turnout, and any anti-Conservative tactical voting, where votes are exchanged among Liberal Democrat and Labour supporters.[18]

The Scottish Boundary Commission's revision of the constituencies north of the border sought to address some of the causes of malapportionment. In the past, in recognition of their distinctive interests and concerns, Scotland and Wales were over-represented at Westminster in terms of the size of their population, primarily benefiting Labour as the strongest party in these regions. Following the introduction of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, the government decided to reduce the number of MPs at Westminster drawn from these regions. The Scottish Boundary Commission was required to use the electoral quota in England (69,934 electors) to determine the number of Scottish constituencies in the House of Commons. The new boundaries, which came into effect just before the UK general election, reduced the number of Scottish seats from 72 to 59. The average size of the constituency electorates in the region rose from 55,337 in 2001 under the old boundaries to 67,720. Based on calculating the 'notional' results of the 2001 election, the net impact of the introduction of the new boundaries was estimated to cut the number of Scottish Labour MPs automatically by ten, while simultaneously reducing

[18] See Ron Johnston, Charles Pattie, Danny Dorling and David Rossiter, *From Votes to Seats* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001).

the number of Scottish MPs at Westminster for the Liberal Democrats, SNP and Conservatives by one each.[19]

Despite these boundary revisions, Figure 3.5 shows that in fact, rather than diminishing, the disproportional votes-to-seats ratio for Labour increased again slightly in 2005. The votes-seats ratio for the government was commonly fairly modest during the 1950s and 1960s, at the height of two-party politics. A majoritarian electoral system can be fairly proportional in its outcome where there are only two main parties, for example in the United States House of Representatives. The government's votes-to-seats ratio rose greatly in 1983, when voting support for the Liberal-Social Democratic Alliance surged and Labour reached its modern nadir. But the ratio sharply increased to 1.46 with Blair's victory in 1997, then rose again slightly in 2001 and in 2005, when it reached 1.56. This represents the greatest disproportionality in the government's votes-to-seats ratio in Britain during the post-war era.

The projections of seat change by a uniform total vote swing also illustrate the bias in the electoral system. If the Conservative and Labour parties gain about the same share of the vote in the next general election, 33.5%, then Labour remains in power with an overall parliamentary majority. By contrast, as Figure 3.3 shows, for there to be a new Conservative government with an overall parliamentary majority, the Conservative share of the vote need to rise to about 40%, with the Labour vote share squeezed down to their 1983 nadir at around 28%. The constituency boundary revisions due to go into effect in Wales and England before the next general election will alter these calculations, to compensate for population changes since the 1992 revisions. It is estimated that these changes will probably reduce the number of Labour seats by about ten, while reducing the Conservative seats by about six. But this will not compensate for all the sources of electoral bias existing in the British system.

Conclusions and discussion

This chapter has demonstrated the unprecedented electoral success which Labour has enjoyed under the leadership of Tony Blair. As a consequence, no previous Labour leader has ever enjoyed such untrammeled control at Westminster and such an opportunity to cast his stamp on the history

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[19] David Denver, Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (eds.), *Media Guide to the New Scottish Westminster Parliamentary Constituencies* (BBC/ITN/PA/Sky, University of Plymouth, 2004).

books. Critics charge that despite his electoral success, Tony Blair has seemed disinclined to spend his vast political capital, at least during his first two administrations, to launch grand landmark initiatives and to gain more than modest micro-policy achievements.[20] Clement Attlee will always be credited with the creation of the modern welfare state and the National Health Service. The Thatcherite revolution will forever be indelibly associated with privatisation, trade union reform, and a radical free market shake-out of the British economy. With a comparable landslide, after eight years in power, it still remains unclear what lasting and distinctive legacy will be associated with Blair. Having announced that he would stand down before the next general election, as if in fear of this assessment by history, with one eye on the clock, Tony Blair launched into a frenzy of activity immediately after the May 2005 election, announcing an ambitious program of 45 bills in the Queen's speech. These domestic initiatives were in addition to a whirlwind series of visits on the world stage, including acting as head of the G-8 with an agenda focused on climate change and the plight of Africa, and taking over as President of the European Union during the crisis of the proposed constitution.

Irrespective of his policy record, one achievement which will be indelibly linked to Blair's name in the history books will be the way that, under his leadership, Labour became elected for three successive terms. The Conservatives were not just trounced in 1997, but also soundly defeated in 2001 and 2005, despite some modest seat gains in the last general election. This was no small feat, given the way that Labour's prospects were been written off during the early-1980s, at their nadir, as an outmoded party saddled with a shrinking social base and membership, old-fashioned socialist dogma, and unattractive policies.

Was there a trade-off between policy and electoral success? This is difficult to analyze systematically; if so much energy in the Blair government had not been devoted to maintaining public popularity, as monitored by the paraphernalia of focus groups, opinion polls, and spin doctors, might there have been a flowering of bolder, more decisive, and more imaginative ideas and policies? We cannot know. What has been insufficiently understood, however, is how far Blair's unprecedented electoral success, and the lack of radical policy achievements during his first and second administrations are, in fact, perhaps intimately related. What links these

[20] Trevor Smith. 'Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.' Themes of Tony Blair and his Government. *Parliamentary Affairs*. 56 (2003): 580–96.

is the centrist strategy which new Labour adopted, which both catapulted Blair into power in 1997 and which simultaneously tied his hands in terms of visionary policy change. So cautious moderation, located in the center of Westminster politics, has proved both a blessing and a curse for Blair. It has been the bedrock of his popular success and yet the limit of what he can do with his popularity. Blair's middle-of-the-road strategy located closest to the average voter, combined with Brown's economic management skills, and Blair's personal appeal, all contributed towards enduring electoral success. The one risky venture which clearly strayed far away from British public opinion – the Iraq adventure – illustrates the dangers of adopting policies which are clearly deeply unpopular at home. In this interpretation, it is not so much that policy was sacrificed by Blair to the alter of electoral success, but rather that the type of electoral success which Blair enjoyed brought a limited mandate for introducing radical policy change.

Will the electoral success of the Labour Party prove an enduring legacy which will outlast Blair's leadership? This is a complex issue to assess but there is little evidence for partisan realignment, understood as a process requiring long-term changes in the proportion of the electorate who identify with Labour, instead party loyalties continue to weaken over successive elections in Britain, as elsewhere.[21] In successive BES surveys, the proportion of the British electorate who identify very strongly with any party, and the proportion who identify very strong with the Labour Party, have both eroded slightly since 1997, not strengthened. A more persuasive case can be made that Labour has been forging a broader social coalition, at least in some regards, including proving increasingly popular among women and among younger voters. Nevertheless, in the modern dealigned electorate, Labour's electoral success remains contingent rather than fixed through life-long loyalties. The party leader who succeeds Tony Blair inherits favorable odds, but far from any certainty, that Labour could well win a fourth term, albeit with a reduced majority. In particular, Labour remains vulnerable to two potential dangers in the next general election. One is the political fallout from a serious economic down-turn, where the government's reputation for competent economic management is tested and found wanting by the public. Such a crisis could be triggered by a wide range of unexpected events, for example, a sudden bursting of the housing market bubble, an American-led major

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[21] Russell Dalton and Martin P. Wattenberg (eds.), *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrialized Democracies* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000).

recession due to government over-spending and a weakening dollar, or a Middle East crisis in the house of Saud limiting the flow of oil to the West. If Gordon Brown steps into Blair's shoes, as expected, any eventual economic downturn, if serious, might make Labour more vulnerable to being blamed for any economic problems, not less. The other danger facing Labour comes from the location of the opposition parties, particularly if the Conservatives successfully shift back aggressively towards the center-right, perhaps under new leadership, or if the Liberal Democrats return to their original position in the middle of the political spectrum. For all these reasons, while Blair's electoral success was indeed remarkable, given the historical precedents, it still remains an open question whether it will form the basis of a lasting realignment in British party politics.