

WHY PARTIES FAIL TO LEARN

Electoral Defeat, Selective Perception and British Party Politics

Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski

ABSTRACT

Multiple factors can be offered to explain the Labour victory, and Conservative defeat, in the 2001 British general election. Here we pursue an explanation based on the idea that rational vote-seeking politicians may fail to learn from electoral defeat due to selective perception. In Part I we outline the theoretical premises and in Part II consider how this framework can be applied to the context of British elections. Evidence is drawn from the 2001 British Representation Study* (BRS) involving 1000 parliamentary candidates and MPs. Comparisons are made with the British Election Studies (BES). We focus on two measures of ideological change in British politics, namely tax cuts versus spending and European integration versus independence. The evidence is laid out in Part III. The analysis supports three main conclusions: (i) on the key issues of public spending and Europe, Labour politicians remained close to the centre ground of Westminster party politics, along with the Liberal Democrats, with the Nationalist parties further towards the left, while the Conservatives remained on the far right; (ii) as a result of this pattern the Conservatives were the party furthest away from the median British voter; and (iii) one important reason for this pattern was 'selective perception', so that more Conservative politicians 'missed the target'. In concluding, we discuss the reasons for this phenomenon and the broader lessons explaining why parties fail to learn and adapt in the face of repeated massive electoral defeats.

KEY WORDS ■ elections ■ parties ■ public opinion

For the British Conservative Party to lose one election may be regarded as misfortune, to lose two seems like carelessness. Given Tony Blair's record-breaking majority in the 1997 British general election, many expected the pendulum to swing back to the Conservatives four years later. Instead, in

the May 2001 British general election, the total number of Conservative MPs rose by one. To secure an overall majority in the next general election, based on these results, the Conservatives would need a uniform national swing of 10.5 percent from Labour (Norris, 2001a), representing twice the size of any swing they have achieved during the post-war era. Moreover, in the mid-term period, in spring 2003, the Conservatives trailed behind Labour in most of the opinion polls, or at best approached level pegging, despite widespread public disquiet and Labour Party splits about the direction of Blair's leadership over Iraq, continuing problems in the delivery of public services, and a major slump in business confidence. So how do we explain this sharp and yet puzzling reversal in British Conservative Party fortunes and Blair's electoral success? After all, under Thatcher the Tory party had long seemed invincible, 'the natural party of government'. Eighteen years of Conservative rule generated studies entitled *Can Labour Win?* (Harrop and Shaw, 1989) and *Can the Tories Lose?* (Smyth, 1991), even suggestions that Britain was 'Turning Japanese' with a one-party predominant system (Margetts and Smyth, 1994). Indeed, the Party's remarkable success stretches back far further. As Seldon and Ball (1994) observed:

The Conservative party has dominated British politics to such an extent during the twentieth century that it is likely to become known as the 'Conservative century'. Either standing alone or as the most powerful element in a coalition, the party will have held power for seventy of the hundred years since 1895.

One central question raised by the outcome of the last British general election is why the Conservative Party suddenly proved incapable of turning around party fortunes in the face of two successive electoral disasters.

Multiple explanations have been offered in the literature on British parties and elections to account for Tony Blair's second successive victory, including the performance of the economy (Sanders, 2001), substantial pro-Labour bias in the electoral system (Curtice, 2001), the disenchantment of the once-faithful Tory press (Deacon et al., 2001), long-term patterns of social and partisan dealignment (Evans and Norris, 1999) and the short-term impact of the electoral campaign (Collings and Seldon, 2001; Denver, 2001; Seyd, 2001). All these factors, and more, probably played a part in determining Labour's electoral success since 1997.

Here we pursue one of the most interesting explanations based on the idea of how politicians may fail to respond to the shifts in the policy mood due to selective perception. In Part I we outline this account and in Part II discuss the available evidence of ideological change in mass and elite politics, focusing on two key election issue scales which divided the parties and featured heavily in the last campaign: tax cuts versus spending and European integration versus independence. Evidence is drawn from the 2001 British Representation Study (BRS), with responses from 1000 candidates and MPs from all parliamentary parties, including about one-third

of the current House of Commons. The position of the median voter on similar scales is estimated from the British Election Study (BES). In Part III we lay out the evidence. The results support three main conclusions: (i) on these issue scales, Labour politicians remained close to the centre ground of Westminster party politics, along with the Liberal Democrats, with the Nationalist parties further towards the left, while the Conservatives remained on the far right of the political spectrum. As a result, (ii) the Conservatives placed themselves furthest away from the median voter, a puzzle for any rational vote-calculating politician ambitious for office. (iii) The explanation for this pattern lies in selective perception, and in the way that Conservative politicians failed to identify the position of the median British voter. The final section summarizes the findings and considers the implications as to why parties may fail to learn and adapt despite repeated electoral defeats.

I. The Theoretical Framework

Recent studies have revived interest in the issue of democratic representation and, in particular, how far elected members are responsive to shifts in public opinion. Among these accounts, James Stimson (1991) offers one of the most persuasive theories. Drawing upon these ideas, the theoretical argument we advance is based on four basic premises.

(i) Policy Moods

First, the theory suggested by Stimson assumes that we can identify distinct 'policy moods' representing powerful tides, rippling and surging through the body politic, that are capable of leading national sentiment in a consistent direction. Small shifts in public opinion may represent nothing more than random and capricious fluctuations in the polls. Other shifts, however, may gradually transform the policy mood, or the common bundling of policy preferences over time. Policy moods become evident as a consistent aggregate pattern linking attitudes towards issues so that, for example, the public gradually comes to favour a more isolationist 'Little England' role towards international affairs that links together unfavourable attitudes towards the European Union, hostility towards the euro, and further restrictions on asylum seekers. If the distribution of public opinion is imagined as a Downsian left-right continuum (Figure 1), some policy options may be located too far left or right for the public's acceptance, and the asymmetrical zone of acquiescence between them can be understood as the range of policy choices acceptable to the public. It is rational for the public to be fairly uninformed about policies located in the centre zone, given the minor differences between options, as the costs of paying attention exceed its expected benefit. The public becomes more aware of the

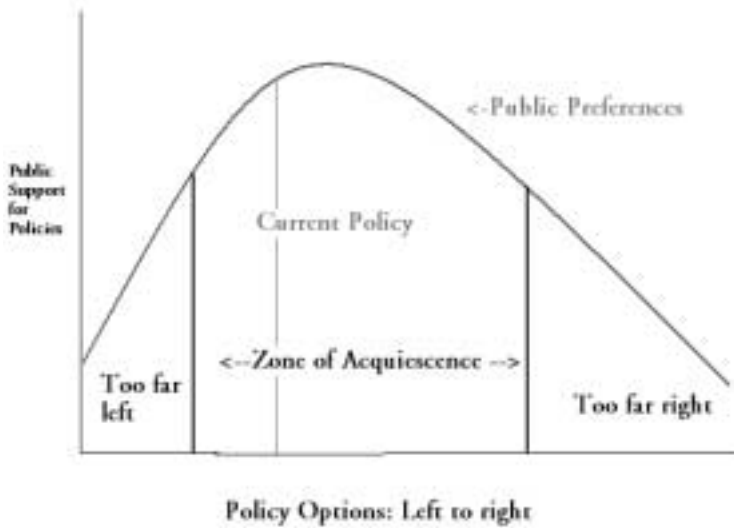


Figure 1. The theoretical model of party competition

issues if policy-makers seek to implement policies outside the zone of acquiescence.

(ii) *Dynamic Cycles*

The concept of a policy mood is not particularly novel, but Stimson's account goes one step further in assuming that changes in policy moods could display three distinct patterns: they may be the product of meandering fluctuations back and forth, like a drunken walk, or they may be consistent trends flowing in one direction over time, or alternatively they may be the result of systemic cycles in response to what government is currently doing. The distribution of policy preferences and the zone of acquiescence at mass level are not static, since, although there is some time lag, public opinion moves relative to the actions of policy-makers. The public gains experience of the impact of policy changes gradually, as they become aware of the costs and other trade-offs produced by particular government decisions that move policy towards the left or right. Cycles are particularly important for policy options that are commonly framed as trade-offs between competing public goods, such as between national independence versus further European integration. Certain changes in the public mood are understood, at least in part, as a rational response to what government actually does.

The existence of cycles in the public mood has been supported by much of the empirical evidence in the United States (Mayer, 1992; Page and

Shapiro, 1992; Wlezian, 1995). In the British case, as well, many studies based on the series of British Social Attitudes and British Election surveys have demonstrated how the British public shifted in response to Conservative government policy towards supporting additional government spending and services over further tax cuts (Crewe, 1992; Heath et al., 2001: ch. 6; Kaase and Newton, 1998; Norris, 2001c; Sanders, 1999; Taylor-Gooby, 1998). Studies also suggest that the policy mood towards membership of the European Union responded to British foreign policy. Recent evidence suggests that today the British public wants to remain within the EU, although largely unfavourable towards the euro, and most people lean towards a moderately sceptical rather than radically anti-European position towards Britain's role in the EU (Evans, 1998a, b; Evans and Jowell, 1999; Flickinger, 1994; Franklin and Wzelen, 1997; Heath et al., 2002: ch. 4).

(iii) Rational Party Responses

Thirdly, following Stimson we theorize that in democratic societies with competitive party systems elected representatives respond fairly sensitively to policy cycles. Rational vote-seeking politicians seek to maintain popular support (and hence office) by remaining within the 'zone of acquiescence', where the public is in accord with policy proposals, rather than moving too far across the ideological spectrum to the left or right. Rational vote-seeking politicians therefore implement policy changes in terms of their perceptions of what the public wants. At a certain stage of the cycle, the theory suggests, public preferences shift in a contrary direction in response to government actions. Policy changes continue to overshoot the new public consensus, until policy-makers become aware of the shift in the public's mood and move back into line with the zone of acquiescence. If politicians fail to perceive the change in public sentiment, or fail to respond to the shift, they face the threat of electoral defeat. Nevertheless, the link between public preferences and electoral outcomes remains crude and imperfect, since parties may be returned to power on successive occasions for many reasons – like the workings of the electoral system, the personal popularity of charismatic leaders or the impact of media campaign coverage – even when the policy mood is moving against them. But in general, if seriously lagging or leading public opinion on important issues, politicians face the threat of a serious electoral penalty. It is rational for politicians to pay little attention to public opinion for much of the time, because the zone of acquiescence allows politicians considerable lassitude, especially for governing parties with comfortable majorities in the mid-term period. Minor parties facing almost certain electoral defeat in the electoral system may also rationally prioritize ideological purity over electoral expediency. But there is a substantial incentive (the ambition for government office) for politicians in the major opposition parties to pay the closest attention to public opinion when

crafting their policy programme, choosing their party leadership and marketing their party image.

(iv) The Barriers of Selective Perception

This argument suggests that where rational vote-seeking politicians are sensitive to the public mood, once leaders perceive any switch in national sentiment they will eventually tack across the political spectrum to maintain popular support. This incentive is strongest for major opposition parties. But this strategy depends upon how accurately politicians understand the shifting tides of public opinion.

Multiple organizational barriers may prevent political parties from rationally adapting to the public mood in pursuit of office (for a discussion, see Mair (1997)). Long-standing principles and symbolic traditions (such as Labour's Clause 4) are woven into each party's distinctive identity. Party organizations, like other large-scale institutions, may be unable to innovate due to bureaucratic entrenchment. Any attempt to modify policies in factionalized parties could trigger even deeper fissures. The leadership may be convinced of the need for change and yet powerless to influence the views of their party membership, if constituency workers are more concerned with the purity of ideological principles than with electoral success. Party leaders may believe that their central task is to persuade, rather than to follow, public opinion, as illustrated by Tony Blair's stance on military intervention on Iraq despite massive opposition. Parties adopting zigzag policy shifts willy-nilly may lose public trust. The recruitment process can reinforce a 'one-of-us' mentality if party members select parliamentary candidates similar in profile to existing incumbents, rather than picking representatives with broader ideological appeal to the electorate as a whole (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995).

Or alternatively – and this is the key assumption explored here – parties may be capable of reinventing themselves, but politicians may not perceive the need to change if they believe that they are already in tune with public opinion, even though they may be lagging behind or running ahead of the zone of acquiescence. Social psychological theories of selective perception hold that people's interpretations of events are slanted toward their previously held convictions. Evidence for this phenomenon is drawn from a variety of sources. Early work on selective perception emphasized the cognitive costs of holding inconsistent views (Festinger, 1957). By this account, an individual is motivated by a desire to maintain harmony among his or her beliefs. In Lord et al.'s (1979) classic experiment, opponents of the death penalty were more likely to find fault with a study suggesting that it deters serious crime; death penalty supporters were similarly resistant to a study that drew the opposite conclusion. In fact, exposure to discordant evidence only made people more set in their ways. The most influential statement of selective perception concerns the role of partisan attachments functioning

as a 'perceptual screen' for information in the electorate (Campbell et al., 1960: 133). Recent work by Zaller extends this argument, proposing that 'partisan resistance' causes voters to filter out information when it does not conform to their existing political predispositions (Zaller, 1992: 241).

There are many ways in which selective perception could operate among political elites. Successive elections could be expected to reinforce the perception that the party in government was in tune with the electorate, even if the policy mood had been gradually shifting over the years in reaction to government policy. Any electoral defeat can always be attributed to multiple scapegoats rather than to the unpopularity of the party's basic principles and programmatic policies. Of course multiple opinion polls are published in modern campaigns, as well as focus groups used by campaign professionals. But this evidence can always be discarded ('the only poll that matters is the one on the night'). In interpreting the public mood, Herbst (1995) suggests that politicians commonly follow many different cues, such as communications with activists, conversations with local constituents and debates in the news media, as much as more scientific techniques of opinion polls and focus groups. Politicians have many indications of the position of the electorate, and in the run-up to the 2001 British general election Conservative MPs may have simply discounted the accumulating gloom of opinion polls if they mistrust them in favour of other indicators of public opinion, such as contact with constituents ('people on the doorstep are overwhelmingly supportive'), editorials in the daily press or discussions with colleagues, activists and members. In social psychology, the concept of selective perception suggests that we often see what we want to see, and in particular we tend to pay greater attention to views congruent with our own, rather than those in conflict. If this common psychological mechanism operates among politicians, it suggests that they often exaggerate how far voters share their beliefs, and they pay most attention to indicators that confirm positive support ('the audience at the rally was very enthusiastic'), discounting contrary evidence ('but you can't trust the polls').

If selective perception plays an important role for political leaders as well as for the mass public, in the case of British elections this theory suggests that the Conservative Party may have failed to revise its policy programme to any major degree in 2001, despite its massive electoral defeats in 1997, at least in part because many Conservative politicians misperceived the changed position of the median British voter, and also misjudged the location of its own voting base. The core of the Conservative campaign in the last election revolved around the twin pledges of tax cuts and Euroscepticism. In this regard, Conservative politicians may have believed that they were offering popular policies in the 1997 and 2001 general elections, even when they were far from their strategic optimal position, because the zone of acquiescence had moved leftwards since the Thatcher era. Selective perception may explain why Conservative politicians misunderstood the shift in the policy mood, stranding them too far to the right of the zone of

acquiescence, despite the plethora of monthly polls published from 1997 to 2001 repeatedly demonstrating the unpopularity of the Conservative policies (Crewe, 1992, 2001). By contrast, the theory suggests that the Labour and Liberal Democratic parties may have been more centrally located within the zone of public acquiescence, and less likely to mistake the position of their supporters due to problems of selective perception.

II. Data and Evidence

We can turn to British survey evidence to understand whether an important reason for the Conservative defeat was their failure to read the policy mood correctly, as the theory suggests, and whether the mechanism of 'selective perception' led Conservative politicians to misinterpret the current balance of public opinion. Evidence to test these claims is available from the 1997 and 2001 British Representation Studies (BRS), surveys sent to all parliamentary candidates and MPs standing in the British general election for all parties with parliamentary representation. In early spring 2001, before the official campaign got underway, the BRS was mailed to 1,859 candidates selected by the main British parties (excluding the Greens, BNP, UK Independence party, and other minor parties or independent candidates without parliamentary representation). In total, 1,085 politicians had replied by the end of June 2001, representing a response rate of 58.4 percent (for full details and the questionnaires see www.pippanorris.com). Although the response rate was (as usual) higher among parliamentary candidates than MPs, the study includes about one-third of the current House of Commons, and it is broadly representative by party. The results can be compared with other surveys in this series, the 1997 British Representation Study (BRS-97) (N. 999), and the 1992 British Candidate Study (N. 1,658). Attitudes among the general public and the location of the median voter can be compared using identical items in successive British Election Studies.

The BRS contained multiple items monitoring political attitudes and values, the political background of politicians and their social origins. Here we focus on the standard 10-point scales asking politicians to identify where they placed themselves on six major issues, and also where they placed the position of four other groups (their constituency party, party leader, parliamentary party and party voters). The scales concerned some of the core issue cleavages in British party politics, such as jobs versus prices, nationalization versus privatization, European integration versus independence, taxes versus spending and women's equality versus home role, as well as the generic left-right ideological scale. This initial paper is limited to examining the evidence on just two scales, tax cuts versus public spending on health and social services and European integration versus independence (for the items, see Appendix A). These were selected for analysis on the grounds that these were two of the most important political issues that deeply divided

the major British parties in the last election campaign, tapping into the classic left–right economic dimension of the role of the market versus the state, and the nationalist–internationalist dimension of Britain’s role within the European Union. In MORI public opinion polls conducted during the campaign, the issues of healthcare and education were ranked as the top two most important problems facing the country. Content analysis of press coverage found that these issues featured heavily in the campaign coverage (Norris, 2001a: Table 4; Deacon et al., 2001). Europe featured as less important among the public, but it received even higher priority in the news media, dominating much of the campaign headlines. Moreover, there are good theoretical issues for selecting these scales as tapping the two-dimensional issue space in British politics, with these items representing proxy measures for the horizontal left–right or socialist versus laissez faire traditional economic dimension, and the cross-cutting nationalist–internationalist dimension that has heightened in importance with the simultaneous process of globalization and devolution.

Using identical measures, the post-election cross-sectional BES asked voters to identify their own position, and to place the parties, on the issue scales. Unfortunately, despite the centrality of these issues to party politics, only one of the scales was included in the 2001 BES (public spending versus tax cuts), and the European scale was amended to destroy comparability over time. On Europe we have to rely on the 1997 BES to identify the position of the median voter, despite the fact that this may have shifted during the last four years. The issue scales both ranged from left (0) to right (10).

III. Analysis of the Results

First, what is the distribution of party competition in the last election? The two issue scales of tax cuts versus public spending and EU unity versus independence can be combined into a two-dimensional map (Figure 2). We can locate the mean position of the parties broken down into three subgroups: the incumbent MPs re-elected in 2001, the ‘new’ MPs elected in 2001 but not in 1997 and the parliamentary candidates who failed to be elected in 2001. It should be noted that many of the ‘new’ MPs are actually ‘retreads’ who had earlier careers at Westminster (Cowley, 2001), but who proved unsuccessful in 1997. Analysing these subgroups also helps us to understand the impact of the last election as it shows the process of cohort change. The position of the median voter can be identified on these scales, and the position of those who voted for the major parties, based on the 1997 BES.

The map of British party competition reveals the pattern at a glance. Most strikingly, Conservative politicians are clustered in the bottom right-hand quadrant, as the most eurosceptic group and the most right-wing on the

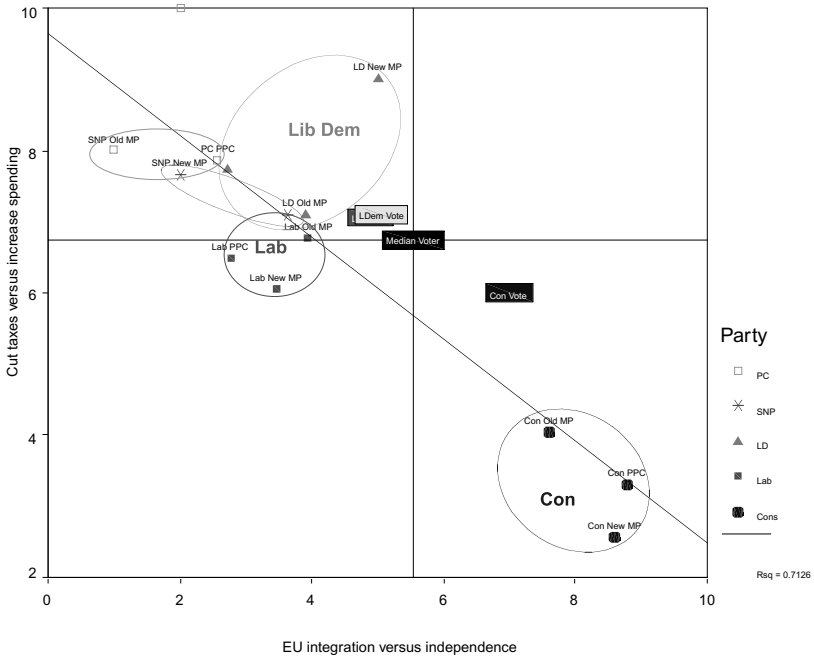


Figure 2. The map of British party competition, June 2001

Notes: Where politicians and voters place themselves on the following 10-point scales.
 Q ‘Some people feel that government should cut taxes and spend much less on health and social services. Other people feel that government should put up taxes and spend much more on health and social services. Using the following scale. . . . where would you place yourself?’
 Q ‘Some people feel that Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union. Other people feel that Britain should do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union. Using the following scale’ . . .
New MPs: Parliamentary Candidates elected in June 2001; *Old MPs:* Incumbent MPs re-elected in June 2001; *PPCs:* Parliamentary Candidates not elected in June 2001.
Sources: The British Representation Study 2001; The British Election Study 1997 (EU) and 2001 (tax cuts v. spending).

economy. This is not surprising, but the location of the new MPs suggests that they are even more anti-European and more pro-tax cuts than incumbent MPs. The impact of the last election has therefore been to push the Conservatives even further down this road towards the right, rather than returning towards the centre ground of Westminster politics. In contrast, Labour politicians are clustered in the centre of the landscape, with the new Labour MPs slightly more middle-of-the-road on public spending (although also slightly more pro-European) than the incumbents. Labour was flanked by the groups of nationalist politicians scattered in the top left-hand corner of the map. Labour are also close to the Liberal Democrats, who are more

Table 1. Distance between politicians and the median British voter

<i>Tax-spend scale</i>	<i>Actual position of politicians 2001</i>	<i>Distance from the actual position of the median British voter in 2001</i>
Conservative	6.7	+3.4
Labour	3.5	+0.2
Liberal Democrat	2.3	-1.0
SNP	2.9	-0.4
Plaid Cymru	2.0	-1.3
ALL	4.0	+0.7

<i>EU scale</i>	<i>Actual position of politicians 2001</i>	<i>Distance from the actual position of the median British voter in 1997</i>
Conservative	8.6	+3.1
Labour	3.3	-2.2
Liberal Democrat	2.8	-2.7
SNP	3.6	-1.9
Plaid Cymru	2.5	-3.0
ALL	4.9	-0.6

Notes: The 'actual position' represents where politicians and voters each reported their own location on the 10-point scales.

A positive distance shows that politicians locate themselves to the right of the median voter. A negative shows that they are to the left.

The tax-spend scale ranges from left to right, i.e. from cut taxes and spending (0) to put up taxes and spending (10).

The Europe scale ranges from left to right, i.e. from unite fully with the EU (0) to protect independence from the EU (10).

Sources: The 2001 British Representation Study (N.960); The 2001 (Tax cut versus spending) and 1997 (EU) British Election Study.

left-wing on public spending (reflecting the official Liberal Democrat manifesto commitment to raising personal income tax to spend on education and health public services), although they are more dispersed on the European scale. In short, just as Bara and Budge (2001) found that Labour had become the centre party in 2001, based on the official manifesto data, so the attitudes of politicians confirms this pattern. The change has not just occurred on official paper but also reflects how MPs and candidates see themselves.

Equally importantly we can map the position of the median British voter on these scales and where voters placed themselves (see also Table 1). The figure shows that Labour was relatively close to the median British voter, especially on the priority that should be given to public spending rather than cuts in taxation, although they were slightly more pro-European than the average citizen. The position of Labour and the Liberal Democrat politicians were also fairly close to the position of their own voters in 1997. In contrast,

Conservative politicians were located further away from both their own Conservative voters, from the Liberal Democrat voters they may have hoped to attract, and from the median British voter in 1997. The group of Conservative politicians was 3.4 points away from the median voter on the tax-spend 10-point scale and 3.1 points away in the Europe scale. The newest group of Conservative MPs was stranded furthest away from the electorate, with clear blue water between them and the voters they most need to increase popular support for their party. It appears that the zone of acquiescence moved in recent years and the Conservatives have lagged behind.

Moreover, this pattern is not idiosyncratic, instead it reflects and confirms the evidence found in previous British elections. Mapping the actual position of voters and politicians across the left-right ideological scale in 1992 and in 1997 also found that voters were more tightly clustered in the centre of the political spectrum, while politicians were more dispersed to left and right (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Norris, 1999). These previous studies also revealed that at the time of the 1997 election the average Labour politician was closer to the median British voter than the average Conservative politician. Lacking elite-level surveys, we can only speculate about the attitudes and values of politicians in earlier elections. But if in the late-1970s and early-1980s Labour had become out of touch with mainstream public opinion, as the manifesto data suggest, by the time of the 1997 election Labour politicians closely reflected the prevailing ethos. Of course this, by itself, is not enough to win elections, as otherwise the Liberal Democrats, as the party closest to the median voter, would have been in power for decades. Many factors lead to electoral success beyond rational issue voting, such as the popularity of leaders, the state of the economy and the campaign coverage in the news media. Nevertheless, Labour's shift to centre-right from 1992 to 1997 placed them in an advantageous position to maximize popular support, and Blair maintained this position in 2001, while Conservative politicians placed themselves at a disadvantage, fishing for votes far beyond where they were located. Moreover, the new Conservative MPs who entered in the last election were even further away from the centre ground of Westminster politics than the rest of the parliamentary party.

Table 2 shows the change in the ideological position of politicians from 1997 to 2001. On the tax-spend issue, there was a modest shift towards the centre ground among all parties, with the Conservatives moving slightly centre-left, while the others moved slightly centre-right. As a result, the dispersion of parties across the spectrum on this issue slightly closed. The Conservatives therefore increasingly recognized the need for greater public spending on health and education. Nevertheless, the party remained stranded far to the right of all other parties on this issue, whereas Labour was in the centre of the political spectrum, flanked by the Liberal Democrats and nationalists to the left. The Conservative Party did change on this issue during the first Labour administration, but not enough, given their original starting point. On the European issue all parties drifted towards a

Table 2. Change in the political elite, 1997–2001

<i>Tax-spend scale</i>	<i>Actual position of politicians 1997</i>	<i>Actual position of politicians 2001</i>	<i>Change 1997–2001</i>
Conservative	7.9	6.7	–1.2
Labour	2.6	3.5	+0.9
Liberal Democrat	2.4	2.3	+0.1
SNP	2.1	2.9	+0.8
Plaid Cymru	1.2	2.0	+0.8
ALL	4.0	4.0	0.0

<i>EU scale</i>	<i>Actual position of politicians 1997</i>	<i>Actual position of politicians 2001</i>	<i>Change</i>
Conservative	8.2	8.6	+0.4
Labour	2.5	3.3	+0.8
Liberal Democrat	1.5	2.8	+1.3
SNP	2.5	3.6	+1.1
Plaid Cymru	1.2	2.5	+1.3
ALL	4.0	4.9	+0.9

Notes: The ‘actual position’ represents where politicians reported their own location on the 10-point scales.

A positive change shows a shift to the right and a negative shows a shift to the left.

The tax-spend scale ranges from left to right, i.e. from cut taxes and spending (0) to put up taxes and spending (10).

The Europe scale ranges from left to right, i.e. from unite fully with the EU (0) to protect independence from the EU (10).

Sources: The 2001 British Representation Study (N.960); The 1997 British Representation Study (N.965).

slightly more sceptical position, and again the Conservatives proved by far the most extreme on this issue, with Labour located roughly in the middle of the road.

Selective Perception

How do we explain this puzzle? Downsian theory assumes that major opposition parties with ambitions for government will move towards the median voter in the pursuit of votes and therefore office. But any successful strategy of casting for votes requires that politicians can identify where these are located. Of course Downsian theory could be wrong, for many different reasons, already discussed, if Conservative ideologues have taken over the ship’s command and displaced Conservative pragmatists. Politicians may not be rational office-seekers. But another explanation is that many Conservative politicians may have simply misunderstood and lagged behind the shift in the policy mood.

Table 3. Politicians' perceptions of voters

	<i>Politicians' perceptions of voters 2001</i> (i)	<i>Voters' actual positions 2001</i> (ii)	<i>Perceptual bias (i)-(ii)</i>
<i>Tax-spend scale</i>			
Conservative	6.1	4.0	+2.1
Labour	4.4	2.9	+1.5
Liberal Democrat	3.3	2.9	+0.4
SNP	3.8	3.8	0.0
Plaid Cymru	2.4	3.5	+1.1
ALL	4.5	3.3	+1.2
	<i>Politicians' perceptions of voters 2001</i> (i)	<i>Voters' actual positions 1997</i> (ii)	<i>Perceptual bias (i)-(ii)</i>
<i>EU scale</i>			
Conservative	8.5	6.9	+1.6
Labour	5.7	4.9	+0.8
Liberal Democrat	4.6	5.1	-0.5
SNP	4.4	5.0	-0.6
Plaid Cymru	3.3	4.7	-1.4
ALL	6.2	5.5	-0.7

Notes: The 'actual position' represents where voters reported their own location on the 10-point scales.

The 'perceptual bias' is the difference between columns (i) and (ii). A positive coefficient indicates that politicians believe voters to be more right-wing than they are. A negative coefficient indicates that they believe voters to be more left-wing than they are.

The tax-spend scale ranges from left to right, i.e. from cut taxes and spending (0) to put up taxes and spending (10).

The Europe scale ranges from left to right, i.e. from unite fully with the EU (0) to protect independence from the EU (10).

Sources: (i) The 2001 BRS (N.960); (ii) The 2001 (Tax cut versus spending) and 1997 (EU) British Election Study.

We can test this proposition by seeing where politicians placed their voters on the same scales, and in particular whether the distance between the actual position of voters (in 1997) and where politicians placed the perceived position of voters (in 2001) was greatest in the Conservative Party. If so, then problems of selective perception may have led the Conservatives astray and blinkered them to the pressing need to revise their policies and programme. The analysis in Table 3 shows the selective perception measure, calculated as the position where groups of politicians placed their own voters and the actual position of party voters. Again it should be noted that at present, given the limitations of the data, the position of voters is based on the 1997 BES, assuming that there has been no significant shift from 1997 to 2001. This limitation may introduce systematic errors, but it seems likely to minimize the estimates of perceptual error, rather than exaggerating

it, if public opinion continued its past trajectory from 1997 to 2001. Interpretations of the final column are straightforward: the greater the size of the difference coefficient, the larger the perceptual error by politicians. The results confirm that of all parties the Conservative politicians proved widest off the mark on both issues, as they believed that their voters were more right-wing than was actually the case. On the 10-point scale, the Conservatives misplaced their own voters by 2.1 points on the tax-spend scale and by 1.6 points on Europe. Labour politicians also thought that their supporters were slightly more right-wing than was the case, but they were more accurate in their estimates. The minor parties tended to see voters as slightly more favourable towards tax cuts and more positive towards Europe than voters saw themselves. Therefore, if there is a systematic tendency for politicians to see voters in their own image, leading to misleading targeting, this selective perception appears more apparent in the Conservative Party than elsewhere.

Conclusions and Discussion

In the 2001 election the British Conservative Party did experience an overall net gain of one seat, not a further loss, but remarking that it could have been worse is like saying that the Titanic maiden voyage was a success because a few passengers survived on life rafts. To summarize the argument used to explain their defeat, and Labour's success, the core premises in this study are that:

- Some changes in public opinion can be regarded as consistent shifts in the overall policy mood linking together different dimensions of public policy.
- Far from being static, the predominant policy mood shifts dynamically in response to government actions.
- Rational politicians seeking electoral office aim to keep in step with the predominant policy mood, responding to perceived changes in public opinion (after a time lag) by adopting policies which keep them within the 'zone of acquiescence', in order to gain power.
- Due to ideological barriers and problems of selective perception, politicians can misidentify the prevailing policy mood and fail to respond to changes in public opinion despite the shock of successive electoral defeats.

The model of policy cycles suggests that if policy-makers tilt too far in the direction of either markets or the state, then given the complex trade-offs involved, public opinion can be expected gradually to shift the balance of policy preferences back towards the centre ground. But until this shift is recognized, in a lagged process policy-makers may continue to follow what they believe to be public preferences, even though in fact the policy mood may have changed.

Working within this theoretical framework, this study examined the

empirical evidence for selective perception, based on analysis of the 2001 BRS. The results suggest three main findings:

- On the key issues of public spending and Europe, in the 2001 British general election Labour politicians remained close to the centre ground of party politics, along with the Liberal Democrats, with the Nationalist parties further towards the left, while the Conservatives remained on the far right of the political spectrum.
- As a result of this pattern, during the 2001 election the Conservatives were the party located furthest away from the median British voter.
- One reason for this pattern was selective perception, so that Conservative politicians ‘missed the target’ as they misunderstood the position of Conservative voters and the location of the median voter.

The evidence that has now accumulated over successive elections indicates that there are consistent and reliable findings about the map of party competition in Westminster politics, and the relationship between this pattern and the outcome of the 1997 and 2001 British general elections. Although we lack comparable direct evidence among political elites in earlier eras, this account could also contribute towards understanding previous election results in Britain. There are many studies suggesting that British public opinion shifted towards the right on many social and economic issues during the 1970s (Crewe, 1992; Heath et al., 2001). By the time of the 1979 election, this led the Labour Party to locate themselves too far to the left for the median voter, to the benefit of Mrs. Thatcher. The account developed in this study suggests that the Labour Party may have taken successive elections to ‘catch up’ with the position of the median British voter, before eventually ditching unpopular policies towards the nationalization of industry and trade unions, in part because of the psychological barriers of selective perception. For many years, Labour politicians failed to learn the lessons of their defeat, symbolized by the policy shift towards the left in 1983, before the party moved back towards the centre zone of public opinion in 1987 and 1992 (Bara and Budge, 2001).

This study does not claim that a single explanation provides a satisfactory way of understanding the outcome of the 1997 and 2001 British general elections. The electoral system, in particular, contributed significantly to the way that Labour’s 40.7 percent of the UK vote in the 2001 election was translated into an unassailable 167-seat majority and a massive landslide in the Commons (Curtice, 2001), along with many other factors (Norris, 2001). Nevertheless, the account provided in this study does fit the evidence and provides a reasonable story giving an important part of the explanation. The irony is that although selective perception limited the strategic campaigns of Conservative vote-seeking politicians, selective perception among the electorate may have limited the damage since, despite the campaign, large swathes of the public remained ignorant of the Conservative position on Europe and tax cuts (Norris and Sanders, 2001). Voters consistently believed

that the Conservatives were more middle-of-the-road than was the case. The evidence suggests that if the public had known the policy positions of the Conservatives more accurately, and if they had voted rationally based on these issues, the party could have become even more unpopular. The Conservatives face multiple problems – of membership, of organization and of leadership. But the study provides substantial evidence that ideological patterns of party competition have structured and contributed towards Conservative failure, and Labour success, in the past two elections. The Conservatives lost, not just because of Hague's image, the Millbank machine, or the economy, but also because they did not understand what was necessary in order to win. As in therapy, the first step towards recovery is to recognize a problem. The second is summoning the will to change. Until these blinkers are stripped, it seems unlikely that the Conservatives will take the first steps towards restoring their electoral fortunes.

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PIPPA NORRIS is the McGuire Lecturer in Comparative Politics at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. She has published almost 30 books, the most recent of which are *Democratic Phoenix* (2002), *Rising Tide* (2003) and *Electoral Engineering* (2004), all for Cambridge University Press.

ADDRESS: John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA. [email: Pippa_Norris@Harvard.edu]

JONI LOVENDUSKI is Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, London University. She has published *Contemporary Feminist Politics* (1993), *Political Recruitment* (1995) and *Feminism and Politics* (2000).

ADDRESS: School of Politics and Sociology, Birkbeck College, Malet Street, London WC1e 7HX, UK. [email: j.lovenduski@bbk.ac.uk]

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Appendix A. Issue scale questions

The format used for the issue scale questions in the BRS 2001 and the BES was as follows:

29. Some people feel that getting people back to work should be the government's top priority. Other people feel that keeping prices down should be the government's top priority. Using the following scale . . .												
Getting people back to work	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Keeping prices down
Where would you place your view?												
Your constituency party?												
Your parliamentary party?												
Your party leader?												
Your party's voters?												

32. Some people feel that Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union. Other people feel that Britain should do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union. Using the following scale . . . where would you place your view . . . ?

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