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## Apathetic Landslide: The 2001 British General Election

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WITH dawn breaking on the morning of 8 June, Tony Blair flew back to the Millbank celebration knowing that Labour had achieved yet another historic victory. The election saw the return of 413 Labour MPs, almost two-thirds of the Commons. Tony Blair's second administration has an unassailable 167-seat parliamentary majority, more than Mrs Thatcher enjoyed at the apex of her success. Landslides are not uncommon in British politics: understood as a majority of about 100 seats or more, there have been 13 in the 27 general elections since 1900. But back-to-back landslides are far rarer. Given Labour's record-breaking 179-seat majority in 1997, many expected the pendulum in British politics to swing back to normal: every other temporary Labour peak (in 1929, 1945, 1966) saw a substantial fall in the subsequent election. But this time Labour MPs fell by only six. After four years dallying on the hard opposition benches, the number of Tory MPs rose by a grand total of one. Far from Blair's bubble bursting, it was not even deflated.

So what explains the remarkable scale of the second Labour landslide? The fact that the size of Blair's majority had been confidently predicted in opinion polls for months and months does not make the outcome any less puzzling or intriguing. Especially since this was the British Labour Party—characterised in the early 1980s by a shrinking working-class inner-city base, unpopular policies on unilateral disarmament, trade unions, and nationalisation, and deep internal organisational splits and factions—which many commentators had written off on the assumption that the Conservatives were 'the natural party of government'. As discussed throughout this volume, the outcome of the election is open to multiple interpretations. Theories of *political communication* focus on the month of the general election campaign and the strategic decisions taken by party leaders and campaign professionals about the battleground issue agenda, as well as the pattern of news coverage and reports in the opinion polls. Alternative theories of *economic voting* suggest that the seeds of the Labour victory could have been sown long before Tony Blair even went to the Palace, if

the performance of the Labour government, particularly Gordon Brown's macroeconomic management, was decisive for the outcome. By proving a safe pair of hands on the basics of inflation, jobs and interest rates, Labour may have overcome long-standing fears about their economic competence. Accounts based on *social dealignment* emphasise the way that Labour has reinvented itself under successive leaders since the early 1980s as a catch-all party, overcoming the limitations of its shrinking base by appealing across regional divisions and class lines. Lastly, theories of *policy mood cycles* suggest that the major changes may have occurred even earlier, based on the underlying dynamics of public opinion, and the way that parties have or have not responded to these tides, with Labour moved to capture the centre-ground of British politics, thereby becoming the least-worse choice of middle England, while the Liberal Democrats shifted towards the left, and the Conservatives remained with clear blue water on the far right.

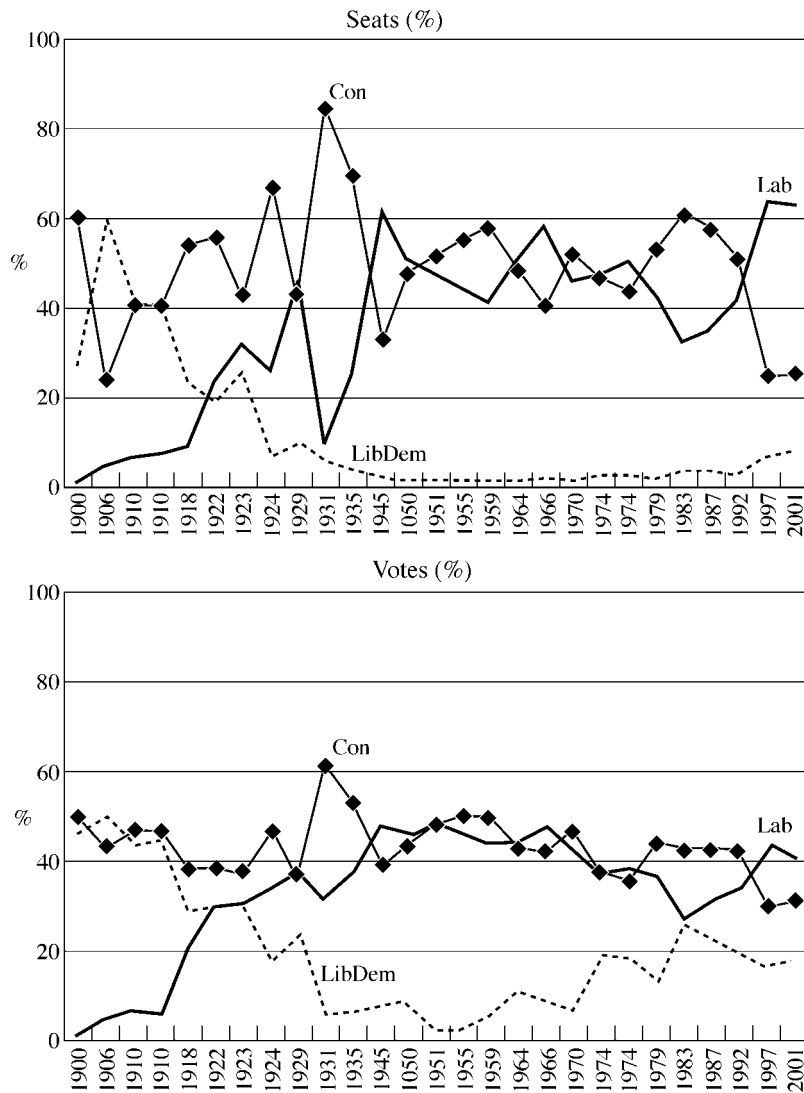
The first part of this introduction highlights and summarises the major features of the election results—with each topic covered in greater depth in subsequent chapters—including the striking impact of the British electoral system, the main reasons for the plummeting turnout, and the significant changes in party fortunes. Subsequent sections discuss alternative theories explaining the outcome, and the conclusion considers the implications for the future of British party politics.

### *A popular mandate?*

As first glance, the day after the election, the frontpage pictures of the Sunday-best Blair family outside of No. 10 and headlines trumpeting Labour predominance at Westminster suggest a groundswell of public support and a renewed mandate for an overwhelmingly popular government at a time of widespread peace and prosperity. But closer examination shows that Labour's success rested on a more fragile popular mandate.

**THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM:** First, Labour's landslide of seats was based on 40.7% of the UK vote, which was slightly lower than the share of the vote won in successive elections by Mrs Thatcher and John Major (see Figure 1). It was the workings of the electoral system that generated Labour's parliamentary success. The British system of first-past-the-post generally produces a manufactured 'winner's bonus', exaggerating the proportion of seats won by the party in first place compared with their proportion of votes. For proponents of plurality elections, this bias is a virtue since it can guarantee a decisive outcome at Westminster, and a workable parliamentary majority, even in a close contest in the electorate.<sup>1</sup> One simple way to capture the size of the 'winner's bonus'

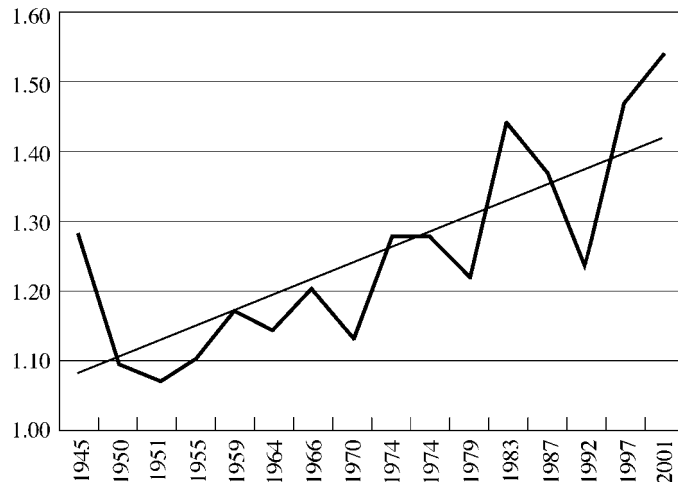
Figure 1. UK Seats and Votes, 1900–2001



Source: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts 1832–1999*, Ashgate, 2000; British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992–2001.

produced by the electoral system is to divide the proportion of votes into the proportion of seats. A ratio of 1:1 would suggest no bias at all. But as Figure 2 shows, the bias in the ‘winner’s bonus’ has fluctuated but also gradually risen since the 1950s. In this election, the winner’s bonus was the highest ever recorded in the postwar era. As well as the steady rise, there was also a step-change evident in 1974 due to the growing vote-winning power of the minor parties. This phenomenon is

Figure 2. Government's Ratio of Votes to Seats



Note: The votes—seats ratio calculated as the proportion of UK votes cast for the government divided into the proportion of UK seats held by the government. Sources: Calculated from Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts 1832–1999*, Ashgate, 2000; British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992–2001.

the product of three factors, discussed in detail later in this volume by Curtice: the geographical spread of party support, the effects of anti-Conservative tactical voting, and disparities in the size of constituency electorates. The Conservatives remain the one party that is most firmly opposed to any reform of first-past-the-post for Westminster, yet ironically they, more than Labour, might well benefit from such a development.

Even more disheartening for the Conservatives, like rolling a Sisyphian bolder up a hill, given the current electoral system, any subsequent reversal in Tory fortunes almost certainly requires more than one more heave. Depriving Labour of their overall majority in the next election needs a uniform national swing towards the Conservatives of at least 6.5% (see Table 1). A swing of 9% means that the Conservatives become the largest party. But *winning the next election requires a Lab–Con swing of 10.5% for the Conservatives to have an overall majority of one*, a Herculean task twice the size of any swing experienced by the Conservatives in the postwar era. Labour did achieve just such a massive swing in 1997 but only by virtually reinventing itself. If the Conservatives merely draw even in votes with Labour this simply won't do the trick; if both major parties got 36.2% of the vote in the next election, for example, Labour would still have 151 more seats and a comfortable majority. The bias of the electoral system is such that the Conservatives need a 13% vote lead over Labour to form the next government.

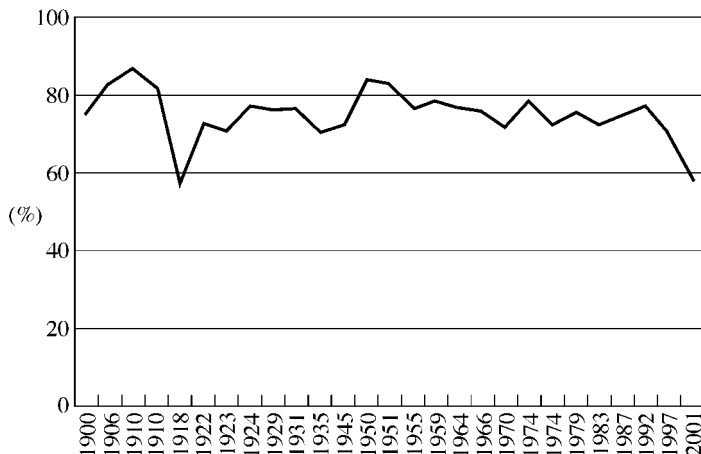
1. Projections of Seat Change By Uniform Vote Swing in the Next General Election

Swing	% UK vote			Number of seats				Govnt	Parl. maj.
	Con	Lab	LibDem	Con	Lab	LibDem	Other		
-1.0	30.7	41.7	18.3	159	416	54	28	Lab	175
0.0	31.7	40.7	18.3	166	413	52	28	Lab	167
1.0	32.7	39.7	18.3	177	406	48	28	Lab	153
2.0	33.7	38.7	18.3	184	400	47	28	Lab	141
3.0	34.7	37.7	18.3	198	388	44	29	Lab	117
4.0	35.7	36.7	18.3	208	379	43	29	Lab	99
5.0	36.7	35.7	18.3	232	357	41	29	Lab	55
6.0	37.7	34.7	18.3	249	341	40	29	Lab	23
6.5	38.2	34.2	18.3	263	328	39	29	-	-
7.0	38.7	33.7	18.3	274	317	39	29	-	-
8.0	39.7	32.7	18.3	287	306	38	28	-	-
9.0	40.7	31.7	18.3	300	293	38	28	-	-
10.0	41.7	30.7	18.3	315	279	37	28	-	-
10.5	42.2	30.2	18.3	330	268	35	26	Con	1
11.0	42.7	29.7	18.3	337	262	34	26	Con	15
12.0	43.7	28.7	18.3	352	247	33	27	Con	45

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: British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992-2001.

TURNOUT: Moreover, turnout plummeted, from 71.5% to 59.4%, the lowest since the khaki election of 1918 (see Figure 3). Four out of ten voters stayed home so that any electoral mandate was grudging and tepid, vitiating the sense that the public had given the government a fresh popular mandate and that Labour has won the electorate’s ‘hearts and minds’ for the reform of public services, for entry of Britain into the Euro, or for other aspects of the Blair project. Voting tumbled most sharply in safe Labour seats—places like Liverpool Wavertree, Stockport, Bootle—while falling far less in marginal Conservative seats such

Figure 3. UK Turnout, 1900-2001 (%)



Note: UK Turnout is based on the number of votes cast as a proportion of the eligible electorate. Sources: Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, *British Electoral Facts 1832-1999*, Ashgate, 2000; British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992-2001.

as Norfolk North and Hexham, where parties had greater motivation to mobilise support and voters had more incentive to feel that casting a ballot could make a difference to the outcome. One consequence was a reduction in the North-South divide in party support. Turnout was also stronger in Northern Ireland, with highly competitive parties offering alternative visions of the peace process. Attempts to boost participation by devices such as easier access to postal ballots failed to reverse the tide. The most plausible reason for the fall in turnout was less a dramatic crisis of British democracy, as some suggest, nor even widespread public cynicism, nor even a uniform cross-national trend, but probably the more prosaic fact that the Labour victory had been predicted in the polls and popular commentary for so long that few people felt that participating could make much difference to the outcome. Ever since 1997, poll-after-poll by the major national companies reported a 15–20 point Labour lead, with the Conservatives trailing at about 30%, and the Liberal Democrats becalmed before the campaign at about 13%. Before the polling stations had closed, one bookmaker even started paying out to punters who had placed a flutter on a Labour victory. In 1997 the country, gripped by the scale of the Conservative defeat, had stayed up on election night for Portillo. At its peak, 12.7 million people tuned into the election night specials in 1997, or about one third of the electorate.<sup>2</sup> In 2001, the country barely stayed up for the first declaration in Sunderland South: at most, the BBC and ITV drew 7.3 million viewers. Comparative evidence around the world suggests that turnout is closely associated with the pattern of party competition. Compared with more competitive contests, voting participation is usually about 10% lower in elections where the leading party has 50% or more of the popular vote in an election and others trail far behind, as the pre-election and campaign polls suggested was the case in Britain.<sup>3</sup>

Labour's victory was also tempered and cautious because, at least on the more impressionistic basis of the campaign polls, the overwhelming public mood suggested a prevalent sense of tepid ennui, a potent mix of disaffection and impatience. Rather than displaying an enthusiastic endorsement of the Labour Party, the public seemed resigned to giving the government another chance to get it right this time and to fix basic public services like schools, hospitals and trains. While Blair attracted lukewarm support, there was unwillingness to forgive the Conservatives for their 18-year rule, fractious squabbling, unpopular policies and ineffective leadership. The pervasive sentiment, perfectly encapsulated in Sharon Storrer's televised harangue of Tony Blair about health services, was that Labour had been given a massive parliamentary majority in 1997, which the government squandered by overcaution and lack of courage, and by too much positive spin surrounding promises about the radical changes they were going to produce in stark contrast to the mouse that they had actually achieved. There was strong

## 2. The Share of the Vote, 1997–2001

	Percentage UK vote			Percentage GB
	1997	2001	Change	2001
Labour	43.3	40.7	–2.6	42.0
Conservative	30.7	31.7	+1.0	32.7
Liberal Democrat	16.8	18.3	+1.5	18.8
SNP	2.0	1.8	–0.2	1.8
Plaid Cymru	0.5	0.7	+0.2	0.8
Other	6.8	6.8	0.0	3.9
Turnout	71.5	59.4	–12.1	
Lab to Con swing			1.8	

Source: British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992–2001.

criticism from the centre-left that Labour had adopted Conservative limits on public spending during their first two years, when the public preferred better services, even at the cost of some tax increases. Sensing this mood, the mantra of Labour's campaign became roll-up-the-sleeves delivery, delivery, delivery on schools and hospitals, hospitals and schools. Blair's speeches emphasised how much had to be done before the railways ran on time, the NHS had more nurses and doctors, and schools more teachers and higher standards. Even after the Blair family re-entered No. 10, there was a sense of post-electoral *triste* rather than flag-waving enthusiasm.

Nevertheless, the outcome remains a solid victory for Blair (see Tables 2 and 3). Labour lost eight seats and gained two (Dorset South from the Conservatives and Ynys Mon from Plaid Cymru). They did particularly well by advancing in swathes of southern England, notably in Greater London, as well as in many middle-class suburbs and prosperous retirement areas. The electoral map has been transformed as Blair consolidated his grip over large areas of England that had seemed beyond Labour's grasp throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, increasing the Labour vote against the national trend in place like Dorset and Sussex, Wiltshire and Kent. The Conservatives gained nine seats but

## 3. Share of UK Seats, 1997–2001

	Number of seats					New Parliament after 7 June 2001	Percentage of seats
	At election 1 May 1997	At dissolution 14 May 2001	Gains	Losses	Net change		
Labour	418	419	2	8	–6	413	62.7
Conservative	165	161	9	8	+1	166	25.2
LibDem	46	47	8	2	+6	52	7.9
SNP	6	6	0	1	–1	15	0.8
PC	4	4	1	1	0	4	0.6
N. Ireland	19	19	6	6	0	19	2.9
Independent	1	1	1	1	0	1	0.2
Labour maj.	179	179				167	
Total	659	659				659	100

Note: Including the Speaker and Deputy Speaker. Source: British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992–2001.

lost eight in the process. William Hague promptly resigned; he had set himself a minimal target of thirty net gains to continue as Conservative leader. With only 166 seats, except for the 1997 election, the result represents the lowest number of Conservative MPs since 1906. Moreover, with the exception of a solitary gain in Scotland (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, from the SNP), the Conservatives remain confined to rural and suburban England, and wiped out of the rest of Scotland and Wales. Parallels are commonly drawn between the current result and Michael Foot's disastrous defeat in 1983 but, in fact, the Conservatives have far fewer MPs today than Labour had at the depths of *their* slough of despond. In 2001 the Conservatives won just 31.7% of the UK vote, their second worst result since the Great Reform Act of 1832. The elections saw a Lab-Con swing of 1.8 percentage points, but this was nowhere near the 11.6% swing required in the last election to bring the removal trucks back to No. 10.

**THE FORTUNES OF THE MINOR AND FRINGE PARTIES:** The Liberal Democrats remained firmly in third place in this election, but Charles Kennedy had good cause to break out the champagne since his parliamentary party swelled from 47 to 52 MPs, the highest number since the old Liberals in 1929. The Liberal Democrat share of the vote rose by only 1.5%, but the party deployed their limited resources strategically, consolidating Liberal Democrat support by far more than average with tactical voting in their own marginals like Kingston and Surbiton (+23.5%) and Torbay (+10.9%). The Liberal Democrats won seven Conservative seats, probably due to effective grassroots canvassing, leafleting, and get-out-the-vote drives. There is also evidence that, despite all the speculation in the press, new tactical voting had little impact in securing further seat gains: in the dozen Con-LibDem ultra-marginals (with a majority of 5% or less), the fall in the Labour vote and the rise in the Liberal Democrat vote was roughly similar to the national swing. The Liberal Democrats boosted their support in true-blue Guildford (where their share of the vote went up by 8.4%), Ludlow (+13.5%), and post-by-election Romsey (+17.5%). In contrast, the Conservatives only exacted revenge by winning the Liberal Democrats seats of the Isle of Wight and Taunton. As discussed in detail in subsequent chapters, in Scotland, the SNP lost 2% of their vote, returning only five MPs (losing one). In Wales, Plaid Cymru boosted their share of the vote by 4%, although making no net advance on their four MPs. In Northern Ireland hard-line nationalists and hard-line unionists gained seats and votes, although on a moderated platform, with the consequences for the future of the province currently remaining unclear.

The fringe parties provided minor skirmishes in the battleground: the Greens fought 145 seats but got on average only 1,135 votes per seat, with their best performances in Brighton Pavilion (with 9% of the vote)

as well as Bradford West and Hornsey Wood Green, and their greatest regional strength in Greater London and the South West. The better-funded UK Independence Party ran 423 candidates but failed to get more than 1,000 votes on average per seat, including in Dover, despite all the press coverage of the asylum issue there, proving strongest in the south-west of England. On the far right, the British National Party contested only 34 seats but they attracted considerable publicity by their results in Oldham West and Royton (6,552 votes) and Oldham East and Saddleworth (5,091), touched by heated racial conflagration during the campaign. Overall 3,294 candidates stood, or on average five per seat, slightly down on the 1997 election.

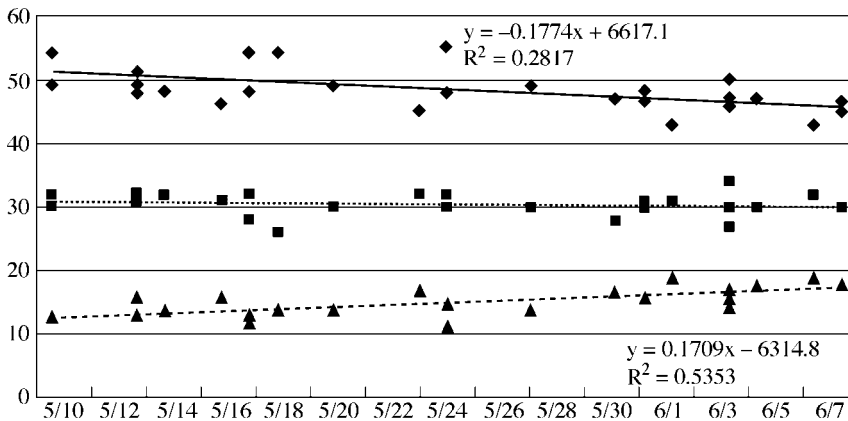
### *Explaining the Labour landslide*

THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN: Did the campaign matter? There are many reasons why it could potentially have made an important difference to the outcome. Theories of dealignment suggest that today the British electorate has become far more detached from their partisan and social roots.<sup>4</sup> If tribal loyalties have withered, this suggests that many voters have become more willing to switch party based on the appeal of particular issues and leaders, the messages and images communicated via the mass media, and short-term events occurring during the month-long campaign. The recent literature in political communications, which once stressed 'minimal effects', has similarly come to recognise that campaigns do have the *potential* capacity to matter both for civic engagement and for political persuasion.<sup>5</sup> These general assumptions also permeate accounts provided by many journalists and popular commentators who emphasise that the heart of the problem facing the Conservatives was bound up in the campaign, including the unpopularity of William Hague as a leader, unable to connect with the British public. The strategy of using resolutely old-fashioned soap-box oratory and gut instincts in the days of professionalised political marketing, and the fact that the Tory campaign fought aggressively, and perhaps even successfully in achieving media headlines early in the campaign, but on the wrong agenda. The Conservatives banged on about the Euro, asylum seekers, tax cuts, and crime, in a dialogue of the deaf, while the public remained more concerned about schools and hospitals. The Conservative Party machine showed evidence of organisational disarray at the grass roots, eroding activism, and reduced revenues, all of which meant that Smith Square was probably out-spun, out-organised and out-spent by Labour's Millbank machine. Conservative Party membership has plummeted from an estimated 756,000 in 1992 down to 400,000 in 1997, then to about 330,000 today. The Conservatives also faced an uphill task in getting their message across in this election because most of the press had turned against them, with *The Times* and the *Economist* endorsing Labour for the first time in their histories (see Deacon, Golding and Billig this volume), and the opinion polls had

predicted their wipe-out for four years (see Crewe). In this perspective, the campaign was principally to blame for the defeat, but the Conservative Party retains the capacity to spring back to life as 'the natural party of government' with the prospect of solid gains under new leadership. The party has been radically reconstructed before: under Benjamin Disraeli after 1846, Winston Churchill a century later, and Margaret Thatcher in the mid-1970s.

But in practice did the month-long campaign change any hearts and minds, or merely function to reinforce long-standing preferences and consolidate partisan dispositions? The British Election Study (BES) campaign tracking 'rolling' thunder survey, with daily samples conducted by Gallup, suggests minimal shifts registered during the campaign from 14 May until 6 June in leadership popularity, likelihood of voting, and issue preferences. There was evidence of flagging interest during the middle of the campaign but this recovered again by polling day. The survey evidence, from the published campaign polls by MORI, ICM, Gallup and NOP, suggests that Conservative support, like an ER patient, essentially flat-lined. Electoral flux may have occurred, as people vacillated, but this did not result in a strong tidal flow in Conservatives fortunes. At the same time, there was a perceptible improvement in support for the Liberal Democrats at the expense of Labour, as shown by Figure 4 summarising trends in voting intentions throughout the campaign where Liberal Democrat support rises from about 13% at the start to 18% at the end. Yet as Denver discusses later, the exact reasons for this improvement are not clear. It may be the result of their greater media exposure during elections, due to the rules of party balance governing television news and current

Figure 4. Campaign Opinion Polls, 2001



Note: The figure includes data from all published national opinion polls by the major companies (MORI, NOP, ICM, Gallup) from 8 May until 6 June 2001 and the regression line representing the best fit of the trends.

affairs during elections. Or the gain could be attributed to the systematic bias of positive news coverage in their favour, as documented in content analysis of newspapers by Echo Research.<sup>6</sup> Or the explanation may rest on their high-energy, low-budget, no-frills campaign headed by Charles Kennedy. What is clear, however, is that no matter how much the Conservatives managed to set the news agenda in the early stages by focusing aggressively on their 'keep the pound', anti-asylum seekers, and tax-cutting campaign, no matter the Labour flubs and flurries of the St Saviour's and St Olave's one-spin-too-many launch, the Prescott Punch and the Storrer harangue, the Conservatives failed to gain momentum with the public. This does not imply that alternative campaign strategies, issue agendas, and leadership images during the general election campaign could not have improved Conservative fortunes. The initial results of experimental research suggests that different patterns of news coverage and party election broadcasts could have a significant impact on what the public learnt about the major issues during the election, as well as levels of party support.<sup>7</sup> But in practice, given the strategies adopted by parties and the news media, this potential was never realised. There is a growing body of evidence that campaigns *can* make an important difference; whether they *do* is another matter.

OR THE ECONOMY, STUPID: Econometric models provide an alternative tack. In this view, elections are rarely won or lost in the space of a month-long campaign. Instead government popularity is a predictable function of the 'pocket-book' economy and how well most people feel that they have been doing in the run up to polling day.<sup>8</sup> Commentators on the centre-left commonly criticised the constraints on the public purse under Gordon's Brown's 'Iron Chancellorship', and the fact that spending on services like health and education dipped below the levels set by the previous Major government. Nevertheless, leaving aside for one moment the issue of public spending, the 'dog that didn't bark' during the election was Labour's macroeconomic performance. The standard bread-and-butter indicators on the economy tell the story. Inflation as measured by the retail price index was 2.1% in May, falling slightly over the previous 12-months and lower than the European Union average. Mortgage bills fell in May with a cut in interest rates. Jobs continued to grow in Britain with the ILO unemployment rate standing at 5% in spring 2001, down 0.7 on a year earlier, and the number of people claiming unemployment-related benefits also fell.<sup>9</sup> With the combined 'misery index' in single digits, the performance of the pocket-book economy looked reasonably rosy. Retail sales in May 2001 were up, showing their highest annual growth for four years. The United States experienced a slump in November 2000, triggered in large part by the bursting of the 'dot.com' high-tech bubble, as well as the Bush administration's use of the 'r' word (recession) to justify a \$1.35

## 4. The Issue Agenda in the British Campaign, 2001

Issue	Public opinion	Rank		
		Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat
Healthcare	1	1	4	3
Education	2	3	5	2
Law and order	3	7	6	9
Pensions	4	15	11	6
Taxation	5	4	2	1
Public transport	6	10	14	11
The economy	7	5	7	8
Unemployment	8	18	27	29
Immigration/asylum	9	12	3	10
Europe	10	2	1	5

Note: see Table 1. The figures give the rank for the 'most important problem' in the MORI poll of public opinion published in *The Times* on 7 June and the rank in how much issue coverage of parties was devoted to each issue in the daily newspapers. Source: Echo Research, [www.echoresearch.com](http://www.echoresearch.com).

trillion tax cut, and this American slow-down did depress sectors of the British economy like telecoms. Nevertheless overall, compared with the US or EU, Britain's economy remained buoyant.

Not surprisingly the issue of macroeconomic *performance* (as distinct from levels of public spending and taxation) did not feature as a major concern among the public; in MORI polls published on 7 June, when the public was asked about the most important problem facing the country, the economy was ranked seventh and unemployment eighth, with inflation not even included in the top ten issues (see Table 4). In the news media's agenda, as well, economic performance issues rarely played a prominent role. Echo Research's content analysis of the press revealed that taxation and spending were heavily featured in the news, but unemployment was hardly mentioned at all. The analysis in this volume by Sanders takes a closer look at this issue and the extent that the 'pocket book' economy influenced patterns of party support. But according to the standard view presented in economic theories of voting, at a time of widespread peace and prosperity, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for any Conservative leader, no matter how determined, charismatic and popular, to mount an effective challenge to the Labour government. In this sense, oppositions do not 'win' elections, but governments can certainly lose them.

**THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL DEALIGNMENT:** But by itself a strong economic performance, while facilitating a Labour victory, fails adequately to explain the scale of the Conservative defeat and their failure to advance in previous areas of the country where they were strong throughout the 1980s. One popular explanation lies in theories of social dealignment—that Labour was able to reach beyond its core base to maximise support from all sectors of society. Catch all parties appeal beyond particular areas of the country or their class base to form an electoral coalition attracting widespread backing.

The geography of the vote, and in particular the closure of the

## 5. The North–South Divide

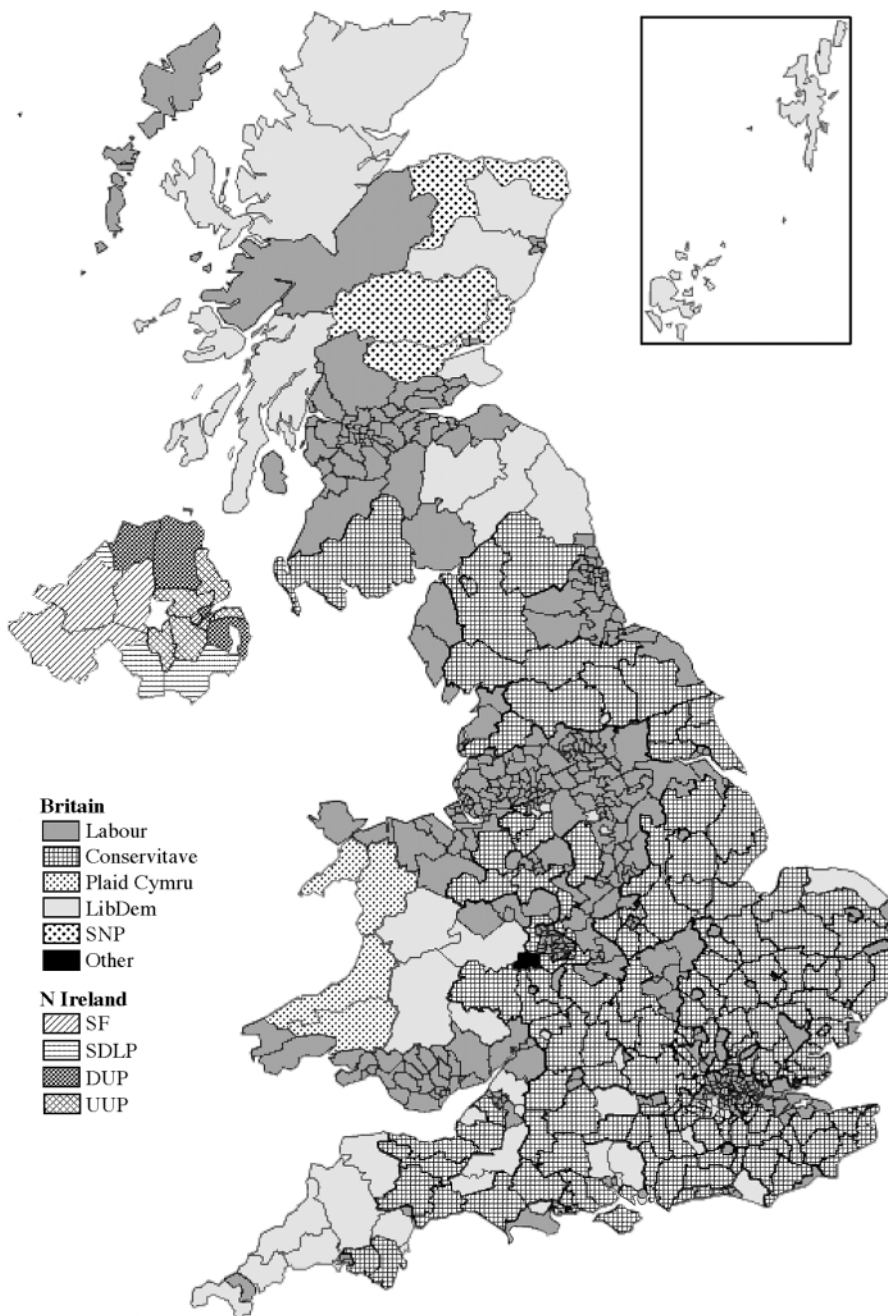
Year	Conservative vote (%)			Labour vote (%)		
	North	South		North	South	
1992	30.7	69.2	100%	50.6	49.4	100%
1997	29.0	70.9	100%	46.5	53.4	100%
2001	28.3	71.6	100%	45.0	54.9	100%

Note: The figures measure the proportion of Conservative and Labour votes from the South and the North. The South equals Greater London, the South East, South West, East Anglia and Midlands. The North equals the remainder of Britain. Source: British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992–2001.

North-South divide for Labour, was critical to the outcome. Closer analysis revealed that vote gains for the Conservatives were wastefully distributed, so that in most of their target seats the Conservatives fell back rather than advancing. By appealing to their hard-core base of elderly true believers in the English countryside, the Conservatives failed to attract many waverers by an anti-Euro, pro-tax cut platform. The Tory vote rose by 2.6% in Conservative-held seats, but by only 0.17% in Labour-held seats, and it actually fell (by –0.15%) in Liberal Democrat-held constituencies. The North-South divide can be summarised most simply by measuring the proportion of votes that Labour and the Conservatives each get from the South and the North (see Table 5). Since 1992 Labour has strengthened support in the South, as they have gathered votes outside of their city bastions like Liverpool, Glasgow and Newcastle. In 2001, Labour got almost six million votes in the South and almost five million in the North. In contrast, the Conservatives remain confined to middle-England: they won almost six million votes in the South but only 2.4 million in the North (see Figure 5).

Not only did geography become less important in predicting Labour support, social class eroded as the classic-defining cleavage in twentieth-century British politics. Blair made further inroads into the leafy suburbs of Brent North, Enfield Southgate, Wimbledon and Bristol West. At the same time Labour support drained away most where it did not matter, in safe Labour seats, like Birmingham Perry Bar, South Shields, and Leicester East where, rather than defecting, Labour voters stayed home in massive numbers. Social dealignment is shown by comparing party support against the socio-economic profile of constituencies provided in the 1991 Census. The correlations in Table 6 confirm that as usual the Labour vote remained strongest in the last general election in bedrock working-class seats. Nevertheless, the change in the share of the vote from 1997 to 2001 reveals that, in contrast to the national swing, Labour support swelled in middle-class constituencies with many professional, managerial and skilled white-collar residents, as well as in suburban areas of homeowners. In contrast the Labour vote eroded consistently in working-class neighbourhoods, especially urban areas with many poorer residents living in council estates. The aggregate MORI campaign poll confirms these patterns at individual level, with

Figure 5. The UK Electoral Map, 2001



## 6. Vote by Type of Seat

% Of each socio-economic group	2001			Change 1997–2001		
	Con	Lab	LibDem	Con	Lab	LibDem
I: Professional	.441	-.436	.339	-.259	.164	
II: Managerial and technical	.661	-.676	.384		.230	-.090
IIIN: Skilled non-manual	-.308			-.379	.126	.136
IIIM: Skilled manual	-.181	.429	-.309	.287	-.204	-.086
IV: Partly skilled	-.530	.499	-.295	.093	-.235	
V: Unskilled	-.716	.480	-.241	-.085	-.231	.123

Note: The figures represent the correlation between the 2001 share of the vote (and the change in the share of the vote 1997–2001) and the demographic characteristics of the seat derived from the 1991 Census. Only significant correlations (with probabilities greater than .05) are reported. Source: British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992–2001.

class voting falling further from 1997 to 2001 (see Table 7). The middle-class professionals and managers split 39:30 in favour of the Conservatives, but Labour enjoyed a slight edge with the C1's and a substantial lead among the working-class, although the Labour vote fell most (–4%) among unskilled manual workers. It remains to be seen whether this pattern is confirmed in the BES but the poll strongly suggests that class voting is withering away in British politics. As Evans suggested in the 1997 election,<sup>10</sup> the most plausible reason is Blair's strategy of straddling the centre-ground, promising improved public services but no rise in income tax, a safe pair of hands handling the economy but better health and education. By this careful ideological balancing act, Labour has succeeded in creating a catch-all party, losing some traditional support, but gaining substantially in middle-England.

Parties can try to broaden their appeal through many different strategies including crafting specific policies designed to be popular with particular groups like pensioners or parents with young children, framing their campaign messages and images to make the party appear socially diverse, such as in their manifesto document, and selecting parliamentary candidates drawn from all sectors of society. In this latter regard, Labour and the Liberal Democrats remain far more socially inclusive than the Conservative Party. The social profile of the new Parliament continues to remain, as ever, predominately white, male, and middle-class. The 99 new members reflect the professionalisation of the political-class, drawn largely from backgrounds in local government and party staffers, as well as the usual sprinkling of lawyers, journalists and teachers. That being said, more ethnic minority candi-

## 7. Vote by Class

	2001			Change 1997–2001		
	Con	Lab	LibDem	Con	Lab	LibDem
Middle-class (AB)	39	30	25	–2	–1	3
Lower middle-class (C1)	36	38	20	–1	1	12
Skilled working-class (C2)	29	49	15	2	–1	–1
Unskilled working-class (DE)	24	55	13	3	–4	0

Source: MORI Aggregate Campaign Polls (N. 18,657).

## 8. Profile of Parliamentary Candidates for the Major Parties, 2001

	Con N	Lab N	LibDem N	Total N	Con %	Lab %	LibDem %	Total %
Non-incumbents	501	260	596	1357	78.5	40.7	93.6	61.2
Woman	92	146	135	373	14.4	22.8	21.1	16.8
Ethnic minority	16	20	28	64	2.5	3.1	4.4	2.9
ALL	639	640	637	2216				

Source: British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992–2001.

dates (64) stood for the major parties than ever before, although most faced hopeless contests (see Tables 8 and 9). As analysed in detail later by Saggat, a dozen Asian and black MPs were returned to Westminster, up three from 1997. Ethnic minority MPs now constitute 1.8% of the House of Commons, compared with about 5.5% of the electorate. In general, Asian and black candidates in all three major parties did slightly less well in vote swings than the national average, suggesting that they may face an additional electoral hurdle, although this may also be attributable to the type of seat they fought. As discussed further by Lovenduski, 644 women candidates stood for Parliament, constituting about one in five candidates (19.3%). Overall 118 women were returned to Westminster, or 17.9, slightly fewer than the record 120 elected in 1997. The swing in the vote experienced by women candidates in the major parties was similar to the national average. The lack of progress in women's representation was due to low levels of incumbency turnover; only 78 MPs retired and only 20 seats changed hands, producing only 99 new MPs (the lowest standardised annual turnover in the postwar era). Moreover, where Labour MPs did stand down, few women inherited these seats, because Labour had abandoned the use of all-women shortlists in its target constituencies. Recognising this problem, the Labour manifesto and the Queen's speech for the new Parliament promised to introduce legislation allowing parties to adopt positive strategies to increase the representation of women in future. In addition, Labour women MPs have been gaining in experience, seniority and reputation; seven entered Cabinet, the highest proportion ever, including heading heavy-weight spending ministries. 'Blair's babes', these women are not. The selection of candidates from every walk of life can only help to make Parliament more socially representative but in this regard, as in many others, the Conservative Party needs to re-examine its selection process so that it widens its appeal to all sectors

## 9. Profile of Elected MPs for the Major Parties, 2001

	Con N	Lab N	LibDem N	Total N	Con %	Lab %	LibDem %	Total %
New MPs	34	40	14	88	20.5	9.7	26.9	13.9
Woman MPs	14	94	5	113	8.4	22.8	9.6	17.9
Ethnic minority MPs	0	12	0	12	0.0	2.9	0.0	1.9
ALL	166	413	52	631				

Source: British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992–2001.

of the electorate, rather than picking the typical public school, Oxbridge-educated men who fail to connect with the concerns of the ordinary public.

PARTY COMPETITION AND THE PUBLIC MOOD?: Yet as ever answers to one question raise more puzzles. In particular, if Labour was able to take advantage of social dealignment by broadening their base and widening their appeal, and this strategy clearly worked so successfully in the 1997 election, why did the Conservatives fail to learn these lessons and follow in the same path? Theories of party competition suggest that if something works to one party's electoral advantage (negative advertising, telephone canvassing, professional political marketing), after a natural lag, others ambitious for office should adopt the same tactics, producing a level playing-field in subsequent elections. The unpopularity of the strategies followed by William Hague's Conservatives could hardly have been a surprise: every monthly poll had carried the same message for four years. The answer to this conundrum may rest with the dynamics of public opinion and the way that Labour learnt to connect with the public mood from their long years on the opposition benches so that they now straddle the centre-ground of British politics, flanked by Liberal Democrats to the left and the Conservatives to the right (see Bara and Budge this volume).

Recent studies have attempted to make sense of whether changes in mass opinion are relatively meaningless, random or incoherent, or whether there are consistent patterns behind the day-to-day fluctuations monitored in a half-century of public opinion polls. One of the most persuasive theories has been developed by James Stimson who suggests that there are some powerful tides rippling and surging through the body politic that can lead national sentiment in a consistent direction.<sup>11</sup> In this account, like seismic tremors, surveys often detect a series of small shifts in public opinion. Some may represent nothing more than capricious fluctuations caused by particular events. Some shifts, however, may cumulatively 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 role for Britain that links together critical attitudes towards the European Union, anti-globalisation, and support for stricter controls over asylum seekers.

The idea of a policy mood is not particularly novel. But Stimson's theory goes one step further in claiming that changes over time in these policy moods may display three distinct patterns: they may be the product of meandering *fluctuations* back and forth, like a drunken walk, or they may *consistent trends* flowing in one direction over time, or alternatively they may be the result of *systemic cycles* in response to

government actions. Stimson suggests that in democratic societies most policy-makers are fairly sensitive to policy moods, since they wish to maintain electoral support 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. Most politicians therefore implement changes step by step broadly in terms of their *perceptions* of what the public wants. The distribution of policy preferences at mass level, however, is not stable since, although there is some time lag, public opinion also 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 actions. If the British public initially supported the sale of British Rail, for example, in anticipation of greater investment and more efficient services, and they subsequently experienced rail crashes, unaccountable endless delays, and widespread ticket shock, then the policy mood can be expected to switch towards restoring government regulation, public investment, or even state ownership. At a certain stage, the theory suggests, public preferences shift in a contrary direction, although policy changes continue to overshoot the new public consensus, until politicians become aware of the shift and move back in line with the zone of acquiescence.

If this theory can be applied more widely to understanding the outcome of the British election it suggests that the underlying public mood can be expected to reflect what government actually does. Where the public becomes dissatisfied with the state of public services, disillusioned with the power of public sector unions, and angry about levels of taxes, then, as in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they can be expected to support Thatcherite initiatives designed to 'shrink the state'. After successive governments responded to the perceived public mood by introducing a series of substantial tax cuts but also dramatic reductions in public services like health, education, and social protection. After experiencing the trade-offs involved in this process, over time the public mood eventually swung towards supporting greater public expenditure, even at the price of tax rises.

The available evidence testing this thesis in the context of the British election remains limited at this stage. Nevertheless, four important indicators provide support for the theory. First, analysis by Bara and Budge later in this volume demonstrates party competition among the three major British parties, established by content analysis of their official manifestos. The pattern shows that in from 1997 to 2001 *Labour and the Conservatives did shift slightly towards the left in their official policy platforms*, notably by policies stressing the delivery of better public services. As a result, by the last election all major parties were positioned relatively close together in the centre-right of the political spectrum, with the smallest gap between Labour and the Conservatives since the Butskellite fifties.

Evidence from the 2001 British Representation Study helps explain why this shift occurred. The survey conducted just prior to the election asked more than 1,000 parliamentary candidates and MPs in all British parties to place themselves on six 10-point scales ranging from left (0) to right (10). A similar survey was conducted in 1997. The results in Table 10 show that by the time of the 2001 election most Conservative politicians placed themselves slightly centre-left compared with where most Conservative politicians placed themselves in 1997. That is to say, *the overall policy mood within the parliamentary party moved modestly leftwards*, in line with the shift in their official manifesto policies. This pattern was found consistently across five different issue scales, such as privatisation vs. nationalisation, tax cuts vs. public spending, and jobs vs. prices, with the party only moving rightwards on the question of greater unification or independence from the European Union.

Moreover, the evidence from the BRS surveys suggests that one reason why Conservatives politicians moved may have been their *perception that Conservative voters had also shifted left during these years*. The surveys also asked politicians to estimate where their voters were located on the same issues scales. Tables 10a and 10b shows that Conservative politicians believed that they were usually to the right of their own voters on most issues, especially economic ones, although they believed that they were more egalitarian on the issue of women's equality. But the pattern also confirms that in 2001 Conservative politicians placed their supporters slightly to the left of where they placed them in 1997 on four out of six issues, particularly giving greater priority to public services rather than to tax cuts. The only issue where Conservative politicians believed that their supporters had shifted rightwards was the EU. Hopeful candidates and MPs thought that they were moving in step with the mood of their voters. It is not clear whether the Conservative shift towards the left, found in the parliamentary party

10a. Changes in How Conservative Politicians see Themselves and Their Voters, 1997 and 2001

	Own position on scales			Perceptions of Conservative voters		
	1997	2001	Change 1997–2000	1997	2001	Change 1997–2000
Jobs vs. prices	6.37	6.10	-0.27	5.89	6.02	+0.13
Nationalisation vs. privatisation	8.88	8.13	-0.75	7.44	7.19	-0.25
Public spending vs. tax cuts	7.87	6.66	-1.21	7.10	6.09	-1.01
EU unite fully vs. independence	8.22	8.64	+0.42	8.30	8.57	+0.27
Women's rights	3.14	1.87	-1.27	4.33	3.48	-0.85
Left-right scale	7.34	7.10	-0.24	7.19	7.15	-0.04

Note: The figures represent the mean scores where Conservatives candidates and MPs placed themselves on the issue scales, and where they perceived Conservative voters were located on the same scales, immediately prior to the 1997 and 2001 campaigns. The 10-point scales ranged from 0 (left) to 10 (right). A negative coefficient indicates a shift towards the left while a positive coefficient indicates a shift towards the right. Number of Conservative candidates and MPs in the surveys: 285 in 1997 and 351 in 2001. Full details of the questions and survey can be found at [www.pippanorris.com/data](http://www.pippanorris.com/data). Source: Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris, *The British Representation Study, 1997 and 2001*.

10b. Perceived Differences Between Conservative Politicians and Conservative Voters, 1997–2001

	1997			2001		
	Con politicians	Perceived voters	Con Diff.	Con politicians	Perceived voters	Con Diff.
Women's rights	3.14	4.33	-1.19	1.87	3.48	-1.61
Left-right scale	7.34	7.19	+0.15	7.10	7.15	-0.05
EU unite fully vs. independence	8.22	8.30	-0.08	8.64	8.57	+0.07
Jobs vs. prices	6.37	5.89	+0.48	6.10	6.02	+0.08
Public spending vs. tax cuts	7.87	7.10	+0.77	6.66	6.09	+0.57
Nationalisation vs. privatisation	8.88	7.44	+1.44	8.13	7.19	+0.94

Notes and Sources: See Table 10a.

and in official party policy, was actually reflected in the Conservative message and leadership speeches during the campaign, still less whether it was evident to most observers of the party. Nevertheless, at a more subtle and deeper level, a modest ideological drift back towards the centre of British party politics was evident.

Yet the question remains whether the Conservative Party had moved sufficiently far back towards the centre-ground in the 2001 election to recapture support, particularly if they were chasing a public mood that has continued to move further leftwards. Full analysis about public opinion will only be possible once comparable issue scale data is available from the British Election Study. But initial evidence from a series of published opinion polls, such as the BBC/ICM election survey, suggests that compared with the Thatcherite ethos of the late 1970s and early 1980s, *today the public mood in Britain has swung quite far back towards the left on the economic and social agenda.*<sup>12</sup>

The conventional wisdom suggests that British voters would punish politicians that envisaged tax increases, and in the last election the major parties provided the electorate with an exceptionally clear-cut choice that allows us to test this proposition in a 'natural' experiment. The Conservative manifesto promised to introduce £8 billion pounds worth of tax cuts, and indeed this was their major election theme, repeated throughout their campaign, alongside being anti-Euro and seeking a clamp-down on asylum seekers. In contrast, Labour pledged to maintain the status quo with no increases in income tax (although Gordon Brown and Tony Blair maintained a fuzzy stance about other taxes). The Liberal Democrat platform highlighted a proposed 1p in the pound tax rise to pay for increased spending on education and social services. The BBC/ICM election poll tested the popularity of the Liberal Democrat hypothecated tax proposal and found that the majority of the public (58%) expressed approval for the idea of tax rises with money spent on schools. And majority support was found across all social groups by gender, age and class, with about three-quarters of Liberal Democrat and Labour voters approving, along with even 41% of Conservatives (see Table 11).

More evidence of attitudes towards public spending is available in Gallup polls that have regularly used the trade-off question asking:

## 11. Public Support for Left-Right Policy Issues

	Should	Should not	Diff.	% should		
				Con	Lab	LD
Increase taxes and spend the money on schools	58	35	+23	41	71	79
Bring the railways back into public ownership	65	21	+44	56	70	74
Get private companies to run NHS hospitals	26	65	-39	43	25	13
Get private companies to run more state schools	30	58	-28	42	26	20

Note: Q. 'Would you say that the government should or should not . . .'. Source: BBC/ICM Research Election Poll, 30 May–4 June 2001 (N. 2000).

People have different views about whether it is more important to reduce taxes or keep up government spending. How about you? Which of these statements comes closest to your own views:

- Taxes being cut, even if it means some reduction in government services such as health, education and welfare.
- Things should be left as they are.
- Government services such as health, education and welfare should be extended, even if it means some increases in taxes.

The trends in Gallup polls during the last twenty years show that in 1979, when Mrs Thatcher first came to power, about half the British public favoured maintaining public services even at the expense of tax rises, while the remainder were fairly evenly divided between maintaining the status quo and enjoying tax cuts.<sup>13</sup> During the rest of Mrs Thatcher's term of office, however, the proportion that preferred maintaining public services steadily rose, until the peak in 1995 when almost three-quarters opted for better public services even with tax rises. The policy mood appears to have reacted against the direction of government's policies, by demanding today that investment in education, health and welfare should be prioritised now over the pocket book economy. In the June 2001 general election, when the BBC/ICM poll repeated this question, *only 4% of the British electorate (and only 6% of Conservative voters) favoured tax cuts and less spending on health and education*, while 56% preferred increased taxes and spending. Moreover, among the major parties, it has already been established that it was the Liberal Democrats who registered the most consistent rise in support during the campaign. If tax rises were once thought anathema to electoral popularity, it appears that the public mood has swung so far in Britain that this is no longer so. Yet the campaign run by both Conservative *and* Labour politicians, recalling the apparent popularity of Thatcherism in the 1980s, may be out of touch with the new zone of acquiescence.

What of the Labour proposals to bring private companies into the running of state schools and into the National Health Service? An expansion of private–public finance initiatives was announced in Labour press conferences and leadership speeches during the campaign, as a way to attract private investment while maintaining into

public services free at the point of delivery, as well as being mentioned briefly in the manifesto. The Queen's speech has reiterated some of these ideas and although attracting considerable debate, and opposition from public sector unions, the way that this proposal is going to be implemented in schools and hospitals remain to be worked out. Nevertheless, there is evidence in the BBC/ICM election poll that the initial response of the public has been extremely hostile towards these proposals. People were asked whether they approved of the idea that the government should or should not get private companies to run NHS hospitals and to run more state schools. The results in Table 10 show that the majority of the public opposed these policies, with the greatest opposition (65%) towards private companies running NHS hospitals. Disapproval was widespread throughout all sectors of the public, including in the case of health care, half of all Conservative voters and 80% of all Liberal Democrats. If the Blair government does go ahead with the proposals to expand private-public finance initiatives in schools and hospitals, for pragmatic reasons because this will raise public sector investment in the short-term, it appears that Labour face an uphill battle in persuading the British public of the merits of this case, especially among their own supporters. There is convincing evidence that in the late 1970s and early 1980s nationalisation was one of the main millstones hanging around Labour's neck, and subsequently ditched in the modernisation process. Yet, at least in the case of railways, at the time of the last election the BBC/ICM poll shows that dispirited by broken down trains, fatal crashes and unreliable services, almost two-thirds of the public favoured bringing the railways back into public ownership. Most remarkably, even a majority of Tories agreed. At the same time we cannot assume that the public mood is fixed on these issues, anymore than it was fixed in the past, and if the government goes ahead with proposals for private-public partnership agreements, and if (and this is a big 'if') the health, education and transport services are seen to work better as a result of these initiatives, then by the time of the next election opinion may shift in its favour. But the size of the challenge facing the government should not be underestimated.

### *Conclusion*

What are the implications of this analysis for the future of British party politics? The theory of policy moods and cycles suggests that where parties are sensitive to public opinion, once they *perceive* the switch in national sentiment, then they will eventually move in a tango tandem on the policy agenda, to maintain popular support. But politicians may move only sluggishly, misjudging the extent of the shift in the public mood, for a variety of possible reasons; Conservatives may have reasoned that public opinion polls are often unreliable, so it is better to trust gut instincts than scientific mumbo-jumbo. In interpreting the

public mood, politicians may 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 like opinion polls and focus groups. After all Conservatives recall that Mrs Thatcher had been returned to power throughout the 1980s on a platform of tax cuts, and it is not wholly irrational to assume that the public continue to support these initiatives, that they may simply lie by reporting socially-acceptable attitudes in surveys. Politicians may feel that if they ditch basic principles and established brand images in get-votes-quick schemes, like the disastrous launch of New Coke, they are in danger of losing all public trust. As in a complex tango, leaders may feel that their job is to lead, not follow. Ageing Tory Party activists, in particular, as true believers, may act as an anchor-dragging ideological revisions, particularly if parties are failing to attract new blood at grass-root levels. By picking other like-minded souls as Tory candidates, the parliamentary party may drift rightwards, even if the public mood moves centre-left. If the Conservative Party proves unable to reinvent itself, unable to grasp that they have gradually moved out-of-step with the public's zone of acquiescence, then politicians face the sanction of (repeated) electoral defeat, like shock therapy. The link between public preferences and electoral outcomes inevitably remains crude and imperfect, since left-wing or right-wing parties may be returned to power on successive occasions for many reasons like the workings of the electoral system, even when the policy mood is moving against them. Nevertheless, in the longer term, any growing disjunction between public preferences and the actions of policy-makers can be expected to produce an electoral response favouring others more in tune with the national mood.

The theory of policy moods and cycles provide important insights into the strategies adopted by both the Conservatives, *and* to a lesser extent the Labour Party, even in the face of the survey evidence that the public zone of acquiescence has shifted to opt for higher public spending even if it means tax increases. More research is required to flesh this theory out fully, in particular, at elite-level we still need to understand why ambitious politicians, seeking office, so often fail to read the policy mood correctly, and how the mechanism of 'selective perception' and ideological blinkers lead policy-makers to misinterpret public opinion.<sup>14</sup> But, if this account is true, it suggests that one major reason for the failure of the Conservatives in the last election is the broad cycles in the policy mood, with the public responding to changed circumstances and what government actually does to alter the balance between the public and private sectors. In particular, if in a series of steps parties 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 Conservatives perceive this shift, in a lagged process they may

continue to follow what they believe to be public preferences, even though in fact the policy mood may have changed more radically. Despite their massive landslide of seats, or indeed because of it, Labour may fall into a similar trap by promising privatisation of public services. The apathetic landslide does not mean that the public was persuaded of many core aspects of Labour's platform; merely that they mistrusted the Tories more because they were even further away from the contemporary national sentiment, stranded unreconstructed in their glory days of the 1980s, uncomprehending that the tide has rapidly flowed past them, becoming as unfashionable as power shoulder-pads, Jane Fonda's legwarmers, and Geeko's 'greed is good'. In many ways this theory does help to explain what has happened in the tide of public opinion in Britain in recent decades, and the way that the Conservatives, and so some extent Labour too, have lagged behind the national sentiment. The British public spoke in the last election: it remains to be seen how far politicians listened and learnt the right lessons.

Pippa Norris

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