

**How Voters Evaluate Party Competence:
A Comparison Between Parties In and Out of Power**

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Abstract

Accounts of general election outcomes increasingly talk about voters comparing parties in terms of their perceived competence to manage the economy and public services. This raises the question of how voters form evaluations of party competence. Whilst it is assumed that voters form evaluations of the incumbent based on the signals provided by its current performance in office it is less clear how, in the absence of such a performance record, voters might evaluate the potential competence of the opposition. Using data from the British Election Panel Studies this paper models the process by which voters form evaluations of parties' competence to manage the economy and compares results across incumbent and opposition parties. On the basis of evidence from general elections 1992-2001 the paper demonstrates that the process of evaluation formation does differ between parties in and out of power with retrospective evaluations of economic performance influencing evaluations of the former but not the latter. Nevertheless, the paper also demonstrates that voters are capable of forming evaluations of the opposition which are more than a simple mirror image of their evaluations of the incumbent. In the absence of an up to date performance record these evaluations are based on long term partisan and ideological predispositions and the cues provided by party leaders.

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Introduction

Accounts of general election outcomes increasingly talk about parties in terms of their “fitness to govern” or their perceived competence to manage the economy and public services. It is assumed that, to some extent at least, voters make comparisons between parties in this respect; rather than simply voting for or against the incumbent depending on whether or not they are satisfied with that party’s performance in office, voters also take into account the likely prospects for the future if the opposition were to be elected and vote against the government only if they perceive there to be a credible alternative available (King 1997). In the field of economic voting in particular there are a number of studies which emphasise the importance of relative economic competence (Sanders 1996, 1999). According to these studies, party choice depends not so much on the economic performance of the current government but rather on an assessment of the relative capabilities of the incumbent and opposition parties to manage the economy in the future. This raises the important question of whether and how voters form their evaluations of relative party competence. In order to make use of such comparative judgements in deciding how to vote voters must first be able to form meaningful evaluations of the relative capabilities of the different parties to manage the economy and assess what each party would do if they were to be elected. This may be relatively straightforward in the case of the incumbent where the voter has access to a current performance record to serve as a guide. However, it is less clear how voters might form corresponding evaluations about the opposition in the absence of such information being available.

Increasingly, models of vote choice recognise that the traditional assumption of a fully informed, homogenous electorate is flawed. In the field of economic voting, for example, there is a growing body of literature which considers how the presence of informational asymmetries may affect both evaluations of economic performance and the process by which these evaluations are formed. To date, the literature has tended to concentrate on individual level heterogeneity and how informational asymmetries arising from different levels of political sophistication, media consumption etc. may influence economic evaluations (Hetherington 1996; Duch et al 2000). It has been argued, for example, that less informed voters are more likely than better informed voters to rely on partisanship or their own personal economic experiences when forming evaluations of the national economy (Conover et al 1986; Duch and Palmer 2002). However, it is important to recognise that informational

asymmetries may exist between parties as well as across individuals. The incumbency or opposition status of parties, and the fact that voters have recent experience of living under one party but not the other, provides one potentially important source of information asymmetry which may affect the ability of voters to form evaluations about the capabilities of these different parties to manage the economy. This in turn may have important consequences in terms of the relative capacity for incumbent and opposition parties to exert influence over voter choices and election outcomes.

The purpose of this paper is to model the process by which voters' form evaluations of parties' economic competence and in particular to consider how voters might go about forming evaluations of the opposition in the absence of a current performance record. In doing so the paper hopes both to be able to improve our understanding of the role that opposition parties play in voter decision making and to contribute to the growing literature on heterogeneity in vote choice. The analysis in the paper makes use of data from the British Election Panel Studies which, as well as the more usual questions asking respondents for their retrospective and prospective evaluations of the economy in general, also ask voters for their separate evaluations concerning the prospects for the economy if each of the main parties were to be elected. On the basis of evidence from the 1992 1997 and 2001 general elections the paper demonstrates that the process of evaluation formation does differ between parties in and out of power with retrospective evaluations of economic performance influencing incumbent evaluations but not those of the opposition. Nevertheless, the paper also demonstrates that voters are capable of forming evaluations of the opposition which are more than a simple mirror image of their evaluations of the incumbent. In the absence of an up to date performance record these evaluations are based on long term partisan and ideological predispositions and the cues provided by party leaders.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: Sections 2 and 3 review the existing literature on forming economic evaluations and outline some hypotheses regarding how this process may differ between parties in and out of power. Section 4 discusses the choice of dependent variable and the data to be used in the analysis. Sections 5 and 6 present and discuss the results of a multivariate analysis of economic evaluations comparing the results obtained for incumbent and opposition parties. Section 7 concludes.

Theoretical Background

The existing theoretical literature presents a strong case for the presence of informational asymmetries between parties in and out of power and, a priori, provides grounds for scepticism regarding the capacity of voters to evaluate the economic competence of parties in opposition. Forming judgements about the governing party is assumed to be relatively straightforward. According to the traditional reward punishment model of economic voting, current performance acts as a signal of the incumbent party's competence (Dorussen and Taylor 2002). Under the assumption that current performance serves as a reliable guide to the future, voters can simply base their expectations for the future under the incumbent on their experience of what has gone before. Empirical studies looking at the effect of prospective evaluations on party choice emphasise the importance attached to retrospective evaluations of current performance in forming judgements about the future (Fiorina 1981; Norpoth 1996). This information, which can be derived from the actual experience of living under the present government, is both certain and readily available to all voters making it a useful heuristic device (Sniderman, Brody et al. 1991; Popkin 1995). The availability of such a heuristic to aid decision making helps to explain the prominence of the reward punishment model in the economic voting literature.

However, it is much less clear how voters are to evaluate the competence of the opposition to manage the economy in place of the incumbent. In the case of the opposition, voters do not have recent experience of living under the party or a current performance record to serve as a signal. The party's last governing record was achieved at least a full election period earlier, possibly more, and since conditions and parties change, this record may no longer be a reliable guide to the party's capabilities (Downs 1957: 107). Downs argues that voters should compare the actual performance under the incumbent with "what might have been" had the opposition been in power over the same period (Downs 1957: 39-40). However, there is a clear asymmetry between the information available about the incumbent who has dealt with "real events" and the challenger who "can be judged only by talk" (Popkin 1995:29). Norpoth contends that judging "what might have been" is "by no means an easy chore and one may wonder how voters are supposed to form such an opinion with any confidence" (Norpoth 1992: 57). Whilst voters can fairly easily make judgements about the prospects for the future if the incumbent were to remain in power based on their current experiences, similar judgements about the opposition are "a matter of guesswork and speculation". In the absence of concrete evidence

regarding the ability of voters to form meaningful evaluations of the opposition independent of their evaluations of the incumbent, we must be cautious in drawing conclusions about the influence of opposition parties on electoral outcomes.

The empirical evidence to date sheds little light on the question of whether, and if so how, voters form evaluations of opposition competence. To the extent that attention is paid to how competence evaluations are formed, the focus tends to be on the incumbent and the effect of current performance. Much has been made of the significance of the ERM crisis in 1992 and the effect that this had on the reputation of the governing Conservative party (Sanders 1999). More generally, evaluations of relative economic competence are shown to be a function of retrospective evaluations of the incumbent's performance and media coverage of the economy (Sanders 1996; Sanders and Gavin 2003). No mention is made of how the strategy and nature of the opposition might affect these evaluations. Part of the problem with measuring the influence of the opposition lies in the limitations of the data used by Sanders and others. The Gallup question on economic competence asks voters only which party, Conservative or Labour, they think would best handle the situation if Britain were in economic difficulties. Forcing voters to make a definite either/or choice between the two provides us with only limited information about what the voters actually think of the different parties and their relative capabilities. It gives us no opportunity to compare and contrast how voters may form evaluations of the two individual parties or to separate out feelings towards the opposition from those of the incumbent.

There are some studies which concentrate specifically on modelling support for opposition parties as distinct from the incumbent (Spencer, Dunn et al. 1991; Norpoth 1992; Clarke, Stewart et al. 1998). They look at the importance of economic performance, leadership evaluations and political events in determining support for the opposition. However, these studies also suffer from limitations. First, they are conducted at the aggregate level using opinion poll data and so can tell us little about how individual voters form evaluations. Second, the dependent variable is vote intention allowing researchers to look only at the factors which affect the final decision to choose one party over another. In this paper we are interested in looking specifically at the steps in the decision making process which precede this choice i.e. how individual voters form their evaluations of the competence and capabilities

of the different parties. What is needed is a systematic comparison how individual voters form their evaluations of incumbent and opposition party capabilities prior to deciding how to vote based on survey data which asks voters for their separate evaluations of the different parties.

Evaluating Party Competence: Some Hypotheses

In thinking about how the informational asymmetries between incumbent and opposition parties might affect economic evaluations two broad possibilities present themselves. First of all, it is possible that the focus of voter attention is primarily on the incumbent and that evaluations of both parties are largely determined by the success or failure of the current government in managing the economy. As discussed above, under the reward punishment model, recent performance is assumed to act as a signal of the governing party's competence and serve as a reliable guide to the future. Hence, we would expect to observe that, the more favourable voters' retrospective evaluations of the economy are, the more optimistic they will be about the future prospects for the economy if the incumbent party were to be re-elected. For the opposition, current performance, over which the party has had no control, provides no such clues as to the party's competence. However, we may still observe a relationship between retrospective performance evaluations and evaluations regarding the economic prospects under the opposition. A poor performance by the incumbent will tend automatically to cast the alternative presented by the opposition in a more favourable light. If things are going badly under the incumbent, a change in government will seem more attractive and may automatically lead voters to be more optimistic about the prospects for the economy under the opposition. Alternatively, if things are going well under the incumbent, voters will tend to be less confident of the opposition's chances of making further improvements. Party competence evaluations may simply be mirror images of one another such that a negative view of economic performance under the current incumbent automatically leads voters to be more optimistic about the future prospects under the opposition and vice versa.

H1a: The worse the evaluation of the incumbent's current performance the less optimistic voters will be about the prospects for the future under the incumbent

H1b: The worse the evaluation of the incumbent's current performance the more optimistic voters will be about the prospects for the future under the opposition.

Alternatively, it may be that voters make use of other sources of information to form independent evaluations of the likely performance of the economy under the opposition. In the absence of a current performance record on which to base their evaluations one important source of information may be long term partisan and ideological predispositions. The main alternative to the reward punishment model of economic voting, the issue priority model, argues that, rather than automatically voting for (against) the incumbent during periods of economic success (difficulty), voters compare the issue priorities of the various parties and vote for the party they believe is most committed to dealing with the particular economic problem at stake. Judgements regarding parties' issue priorities are made on the basis of parties' ideological positions and their long term associations with particular constituencies of voters (Mishler, Hoskin et al. 1989; Dorussen and Taylor 2001). Of course, these judgements are subject to revision depending on how the parties actually perform once in office. However, it remains the case that ideological or partisan cues remain important in determining voters' expectations for the future under different parties. This may particularly be the case for expectations regarding parties in opposition; in the absence of current information with which to update longer term perceptions, voters' may fall back on their ideological pre-dispositions. Existing research looking at the formation of general economic evaluations suggests that levels of political information and sophistication influence the extent to which partisanship influences evaluations with less informed voters more likely to make use of partisan cues (Duch, Palmer et al. 2000). Under the assumption that voters are likely to be less well informed about the opposition than the incumbent, long term heuristics such as partisanship and ideological position may be more important in influencing perceptions of the opposition than the incumbent.

H2a: Economic expectations will be influenced by long term partisan and ideological pre-dispositions.

H2b: In the absence of up to date information regarding the party's current performance, these long terms cues will be more important when forming evaluations of the opposition than the incumbent.

However, when it comes to forming independent evaluations of opposition party competence voters are not restricted to looking at long term predispositions. There are a number of shorter run factors which might serve as proxy indicators of current party competence providing voters with more up to date

information about parties in opposition even in the absence of a governing record. One important source of information may be voters' general perceptions about the party's image, for example whether the party is seen as being united or divided. It is traditionally assumed that a divided party is an electoral liability and that, *ceteris paribus*, voters prefer parties which are united (Butler and Stokes 1974). Ball (2003) argues that "disunity suggests that the opposition will not operate effectively if it is returned to office". Party leaders may also serve as an important guide to the likely performance of their party, strong leadership improving the chances that the party will be capable of effective government if elected. Given the prominence of major party leaders and the coverage they receive in the media it should be relatively easy for voters to form opinions of both the incumbent prime minister and opposition party leaders and to make comparisons between them (Nadeau et al. 1996). In his examination of the factors affecting opposition popularity during the 1980's Norpoth (1992) argues that leadership may be especially important in influencing support for opposition parties in the absence of a current performance record and the information it provides.

H3a: The more positive voters' evaluations of the party's general image and its leaders, the more optimistic voters will be about the prospects for the future under that party.

H3b: In the absence of a current performance record to provide a source of information, leader and party images will be more important in determining expectations regarding the opposition than the incumbent.

Measuring Competence: The Dependent Variable

To test the various hypotheses outlined above requires survey data recording voters separate evaluations of the different incumbent and opposition parties. In this paper we are specifically interested in how voters evaluate the parties' competence to manage the economy. The standard survey questions asked regarding economic evaluations do not usually allow us to make comparisons between parties; voters are asked only for their retrospective or prospective evaluations of the economy over the last (next) twelve months without mention of particular parties. However, an opportunity to compare how voters rate the economic capabilities of the different parties is provided by the British Election Panel Studies (BEPS). In the pre-election wave of the 1987-1992, 1992-1997 and

1997-2001 panels voters are asked for their prospective evaluations of the economy first if the Conservatives were to win the next election and then if Labour was to win.¹ Voters' responses were coded along a 5 point scale ranging from "will get a lot stronger" to "will get a lot weaker".² We can compare how voters' economic evaluations differ depending on the party involved and, taking the responses to these questions as an indicator of perceived competence, model the different factors affecting the evaluations of each party.

The questions asked in the BEPS provide a unique opportunity to ascertain how voters' form evaluations of opposition parties' capabilities as compared with those of the incumbent. The fact that questions ask voters for their evaluations of each of the main parties separately and allow for a range of responses along a five point scale provides us with considerably more information about voters' relative assessments of the two parties than questions which simply ask voters which party they think would be best able to manage the economy (as is the case in Gallup polls as well as some other BES surveys including those conducted for the 1983 and 2001 elections). Relevant data is available for the 1992, 1997 and 2001 elections allowing us to check the reliability of estimates by comparing results under a range of different circumstances, including a change in incumbent between 1997 and 2001. One potential limitation of relying on this measure of competence is that attention is restricted to the two main parties with no thought given to how voters might evaluate the third party. However whilst we do need to be aware of the potentially important role of the Liberal Democrats in determining voter choices, in practice it is the comparison between the capabilities of the Conservatives and Labour i.e. those parties which might realistically be expected to win the election and so have responsibility for managing the economy which will be central to most voters' decision making.

To date, little use has been made of the data provided by the BEPS on voters' evaluations of the economy's prospects under the different parties or other similar questions which ask voters' for their evaluations of likely performance under the opposition. One reason for this may be because of concerns about how informative responses to such questions are likely to be. There is growing evidence that economic evaluations, particularly prospective evaluations, are likely to be endogenous and a reflection rather than determinant of party choice (Wlezien, Franklin et al. 1997; Evans and Andersen 2004). The problem of endogeneity is likely to be especially acute when the questions ask

voters to form evaluations about particular parties. There is a possibility that opposition evaluations will turn out to be merely a reflection of partisan predisposition and/or a simple mirror image of incumbent evaluations. However, these are propositions which the BEPS data allow us to test empirically with potentially important consequences for our understanding of the role of opposition parties in determining voter choices.

Table 1a: Prospective Evaluations of Economy under Incumbent and Opposition (% respondents)

	1992		1996		2001	
	G	O	G	O	G	O
Economy will...						
Be stronger	37.9	25.6	22.0	25.7	35.5	21.3
Stay same	39.7	27.1	49.3	40.4	41.9	33.9
Be weaker	19.1	44.0	25.3	28.8	21.0	41.2
N	1323	1323	1668	1668	2312	2312

Table 1b: Comparing Evaluations of Economy under Incumbent and Opposition

	1992	1996	2001
% respondents more optimistic about prospects for economy under...			
Incumbent	51.3	34.3	46.1
Opposition	29.4	32.9	22.7

A look at responses to the economic expectations questions over the three elections 1992-2001 confirms the now familiar story of how the parties' relative standing as regards the economy changed over this period. In 1992 despite largely negative evaluations of the country's recent economic performance, the Conservatives still had the edge in this area with over 50% of voters more optimistic about the prospects for the economy under a Conservative government. In contrast, by 1997, although retrospective evaluations of the economy were more positive than they had been in 1992, the Conservatives were damaged by the ERM crisis and no longer held the upper hand with regard to the economy; prospects for the future were evaluated similarly under both parties. By 2001 a strong economy had helped Labour to cement its new reputation for economic competence whilst voters retained negative views of the Conservatives with the result that nearly 50% of respondents were more

optimistic about the prospects for the economy under a Labour government. Looking at people's prospective evaluations under the two parties highlights the potential importance of considering people's perceptions of the economic competence of the opposition as well as the incumbent. Voters hold strong opinions about the opposition; in both 1992 and 2001 more people were pessimistic about the prospects for the economy under the opposition than were optimistic about its prospects should the incumbent party be re-elected. Furthermore, these opinions can change significantly from one election to the next, between 1992 and 1997 for example people's opinions regarding the likely consequences for the economy of a Labour government improved considerably, with potentially important consequences for the parties' electoral fortunes.

Table 2: Opposition Evaluations by Attitude Towards Incumbent (% total respondents)

1992:

Incumbent	Opposition			N
	Get Better	Stay Same	Get Worse	
Get Better	2.3	5.6	10.8	252
Stay Same	13.8	13.6	11.3	525
Get Worse	27.0	7.0	2.8	502
N	582	359	339	

1997:

Incumbent	Opposition			N
	Get Better	Stay Same	Get Worse	
Get Better	2.1	6.1	11.8	343
Stay Same	9.2	26.4	12.1	819
Get Worse	15.1	7.1	3.1	447
N	448	681	455	

2001:

Incumbent	Opposition			N
	Get Better	Stay Same	Get Worse	
Get Better	5.2	10.4	20.8	853
Stay Same	8.3	17.8	13.9	957
Get Worse	7.3	5.2	7.1	462
N	485	778	968	

Preliminary bivariate analysis suggests that opposition evaluations are more than a simple mirror image of incumbent evaluations. Table 2 presents cross-tabulations of voters' expectations for the economy under the two parties in each election year. It is clear that party matters; voters tend to evaluate the prospects for the economy differently under Labour and Conservative with less than a third of respondents giving identical opinions for both parties (these respondents are placed along the left right diagonal in the tables). However, evaluations are by no means entirely divided along party lines; it is not necessarily the case that voters who are pessimistic about the prospects for the future under the incumbent will automatically be optimistic about the opposition or vice versa. In 2001 for example 7.1% of respondents thought that the economy would get worse over the next 12 months whichever party won the election.

Further evidence that voters' evaluations of the opposition are not a simple reflection of their evaluations of the incumbent is provided in Table 3 which displays the results of correlating prospective evaluations of the economy under the opposition with various other variables including the corresponding evaluation of the incumbent as well as evaluations of opposition party leaders and voter opinions regarding the opposition party's general image.³ We see that evaluations of opposition competence are at least as closely associated with voters' opinions concerning what the opposition party has to offer in terms of leaders etc. as they are with voters' attitudes towards the incumbent. This is particularly the case in 2001 when the bivariate correlation coefficient between opposition economic prospects and evaluations of opposition leaders (0.54) is over twice the magnitude of the coefficient between opposition prospects and incumbent prospects (-0.24).

Table 3: Bivariate Correlations between Opposition Evaluations and Other Variables

	1997	2001
Incumbent Expectations	-0.46	-0.24
Incumbent Retrospections	-0.35	-0.16
Opp Leader Evaluations	0.49	0.54
Opp Party Image	0.52	0.54
N	1562	2201

Multivariate Analysis

A multivariate analysis of the factors affecting voters' evaluations of the economy will be conducted using data taken from the 1987-1992, 1992-1997 and 1997-2001 British Election Panel Studies. Separate models will be run for evaluations of the incumbent and opposition parties in each of the three elections and the models compared in terms of their overall fit and the size of the contribution of particular independent variables. Respondents' economic evaluations are coded along a 1- 5 scale (1-3 in 1992) ranging from get (a lot) worse to get (a lot) better. Because the dependent variable comprises a limited number of ordered categories an ordered logit model will be used in place of OLS regression (Duch and Palmer 2002). Like linear regression, the ordered logit model takes account of the particular ordering of the responses along a single dimension but does not impose assumptions about the distance between categories and allows the probability of moving from one category to differ across categories.⁴ Ordered logit models present some difficulties of interpretation as the marginal effects of the independent variables are not equal to the coefficients. However, marginal effects can be calculated in terms of easily understood probabilities using the statistical package Clarify and such probabilities are presented below.⁵

A range of independent variables will be included in the model. The effect of long term predispositions on evaluations will be tested via variables for partisanship and the respondent's left right position. Partisanship is included as a dummy variable equal to one if the respondent identifies with the party in question and 0 otherwise whilst left right position is measured using a 6-item Likert scale running from 1 to 5 where 1 is equivalent to giving the most left wing response to all items and 5 is equivalent to giving the most right wing response for all items.⁶ Evaluations of the current state of the economy are included in the form of individuals' retrospective evaluations of what has happened to both the general economy and their own personal financial situation over the last 12 months. Evaluations are measured along separate five point scales ranging from got a lot worse to got a lot better.⁷ The effect of competence "proxies" such as evaluations of a party's overall image or its leaders are also considered. Attitudes towards party leaders are measured according to whether the respondent believes a particular leader would make a good prime minister with responses coded on a four point scale ranging from "very good" to "not at all good". The party image score is a simple additive scale ranging from +3 to -3 depending on how respondents' rate the party in terms of its capacity for strong government, party

unity and ability to keep its promises. Each negative response scores -1, each positive response scores 1 whilst don't know or neutral responses scores 0.

In addition to these main explanatory variables, a number of control variables are included. These include controls for several demographic characteristics which might be expected to affect economic evaluations namely occupational class, educational qualifications and region. Dummy variables indicate whether the voter is from the South of England, has a degree or is a member of the salariat.⁸ Building on the existing research modelling subjective economic perceptions which demonstrates the importance of information differentials, variables are also included to take account of voters' levels of political sophistication. The analysis of the 1997 and 2001 elections contains indicators of political knowledge (measured according to the number of correct answers given in a short civics test) and interest in politics, a composite measure based on voters' self-reported interest in politics and the attention they pay to political stories in the newspapers and the television news (again self reported). Long run factors such as demographic characteristics are measured in the first wave of the relevant panel whilst shorter run factors (including current economic and party evaluations) were measured in the pre-election wave of the panel alongside the dependent variable.

Tables 4-6 below present the results from modelling the factors affecting voters' prospective evaluations of the economy under the two parties. Looking first at the overall fit of the models we can see that the model successfully identifies sources of systematic variation in voters' economic expectations; there is a significant reduction in the deviance to be explained as evidenced by the X^2 statistic whilst the model ensures a 10-15% reduction in error when it comes to correctly predicting respondent evaluations.⁹ Furthermore, this is the case when looking at evaluations of the opposition as well as evaluations of the incumbent. We might have expected that, with voters having less information available to them regarding the likely performance of the opposition, the model would be less successful at predicting opposition evaluations. In fact, the various goodness of fit statistics do not differ substantially between the two parties. In 1997 and 2001 (though not in 1992) the R^2 statistic is lower for the opposition as is the percentage of cases correctly predicted. However, across all three elections, the percentage reduction in error the model provides is very similar for the two parties. The

fit statistics provide reassuring evidence that voters are capable of making non-random assessments of the opposition's economic capabilities.

Table 4: Factors Affecting Economic Expectations 1992 (ordered logit regression)

	Incumbent		Opposition	
	B (S.E)	Δ	B (S.E)	Δ
Party ID	0.75*** (0.18)	0.12	1.13*** (0.19)	0.18
Ideology	0.66*** (0.11)	0.36	-0.85*** (0.10)	-0.46
Leader	0.07 (0.08)	0.05	0.28** (0.14)	0.09
Party Image	0.48*** (0.05)	0.41	0.43*** (0.04)	0.35
General Economy	0.52** (0.23)	0.13	-0.52** (0.24)	-0.09
Household finances	0.46** (0.22)	0.11	-0.37* (0.23)	-0.06
South	0.08 (0.14)	0.01	-0.11 (0.15)	-0.01
Degree	0.11 (0.16)	0.03	-0.08 (0.17)	-0.01
Working Class	-0.20 (0.19)	-0.04	0.10 (0.18)	0.01
McFadden R2	0.23		0.26	
% predicted correctly	61.6		64.0	
% reduction in error	20.9		17.2	
N	955		955	

Note: Marginal effects (Δ) indicate the increase in the predicted probability of having positive expectations about the economy arising from a change in the value of explanatory variable from the minimum to the maximum

*** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.1

Table 5: Factors Affecting Economic Expectations 1997 (ordered logit regression)

	Incumbent		Opposition	
	B (S.E)	Δ	B (S.E)	Δ
Party ID	0.78*** (0.17)	0.10	0.63*** (0.15)	0.10
Ideology	0.43*** (0.12)	0.28	-0.50*** (0.11)	-0.32
Leader	0.52*** (0.08)	0.36	0.69*** (0.10)	0.41
Party Image	0.22*** (0.04)	0.24	0.30*** (0.04)	0.30
General Economy	1.09*** (0.09)	0.62	-0.49*** (0.08)	-0.34
Household finances	0.20*** (0.07)	0.13	-0.01 (0.07)	0.00
Knowledge	0.02 (0.04)	0.02	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.08
Interest	0.06 (0.08)	0.04	0.08 (0.08)	0.06
South	0.02 (0.13)	0.00	0.16 (0.12)	0.03
Degree	0.27 (0.19)	0.04	-0.13 (0.18)	-0.03
Working Class	0.16 (0.14)	0.02	0.38*** (0.14)	0.07
McFadden R2	0.28		0.21	
% predicted correctly	61.7		52.3	
% reduction in error	11.7		9.1	
N	1351		1351	

Note: Marginal effects (Δ) indicate the increase in the predicted probability of having positive expectations about the economy arising from a change in value of explanatory variable from minimum to maximum.

*** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.1

Table 6: Factors Affecting Economic Expectations 2001 (ordered logit regression)

	Incumbent		Opposition	
	B (S.E)	Δ	B (S.E)	Δ
Party ID	0.55*** (0.13)	0.10	0.35*** (0.14)	0.05
Ideology	-0.44*** (0.10)	-0.29	0.33*** (0.10)	0.19
Leader	0.52*** (0.06)	0.53	0.59*** (0.06)	0.60
Party Image	0.26*** (0.04)	0.26	0.31*** (0.03)	0.31
General Economy	0.91*** (0.07)	0.54	0.01 (0.07)	0.00
Household finances	0.25*** (0.06)	0.19	0.00 (0.06)	0.00
Knowledge	-0.13*** (0.04)	-0.16	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.02
Interest	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.02	-0.16*** (0.06)	-0.09
+South	-0.10 (0.11)	-0.02	0.01 (0.10)	0.00
Degree	-0.15 (0.16)	-0.03	0.06 (0.16)	0.01
Working Class	-0.02 (0.12)	-0.00	0.18 (0.13)	0.03
McFadden R2	0.23		0.17	
% predicted correctly	56.0		47.8	
% reduction in error	14.6		12.2	
N	1943		1943	

Note: Marginal effects (Δ) indicate the increase in the predicted probability of having positive expectations about the economy arising from a change in the values of the explanatory variable from minimum to maximum.

*** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.1

Turning to consider the pattern of significant coefficients, it is clear that both incumbent and opposition evaluations appear to be influenced by the wide range of long and short term factors. Across all three elections, partisanship and left right position are significantly related to voters' prospective evaluations of both parties. Identifying with a party unsurprisingly has a positive effect on evaluations whilst being to the right of the ideological spectrum has a positive effective on Conservative evaluations (whether the party is in government or opposition) and a negative effect on Labour evaluations. This is what we would expect under the issue priority model of economic voting where voters' prefer the parties they

see as being most likely to tackle the particular economic problems they are concerned with. Traditionally, Labour has been identified as the party sympathetic to left wing economic goals of full employment and redistribution whilst the Conservatives are seen as committed to the right wing economic concerns of inflation and big business. Interestingly, the significant effects of ideology persist in 1997 and 2001 despite Labour's well publicised move to the centre and evidence of lessening ideological distance between the parties. Short run factors also have an important influence on evaluations of both parties; favourable perceptions of a party's overall image and their leader's capacity to be a good prime minister exert a positive effect on voters' expectations for the economy under that party. The only instance when one of these variables fails to reach significance is in 1992 when evaluations of John Major did not have a significant effect on perceptions of the incumbent Conservatives' economic capabilities. This may be because, at the time of the 1992 election, John Major had only been party leader for a short time and had yet to become fully associated with the party and its fortunes.

The main difference between the results for incumbent evaluations and those for the opposition relates, unsurprisingly, to the role of retrospective evaluations of the economy in predicting prospects for the future. In the case of the incumbent we consistently observe the anticipated significant relationship between retrospective evaluations of economic performance over the last 12 months and prospective evaluations for the economy if the party were to be re-elected. Relying on past experience as a reliable guide to future performance, voters who hold positive evaluations of the recent performance of the economy are more likely to hold positive evaluations for the future. This relationship holds both with regard to evaluations of the general economy and the voter's own personal financial situation. However, the role of retrospective economic evaluations in predicting prospective evaluations of the opposition is less clear. There is some evidence from both 1992 and 1997 that opposition evaluations are negatively related to retrospective evaluations of the general economy; if voters hold positive opinions about how the economy has performed under the current incumbent then they are less likely to think that a change in government would be an improvement. However, in 2001, retrospective evaluations of the economy exerted no influence on opposition evaluations whilst in 1997 retrospective evaluations of the voter's personal financial situation had no significant effect on opposition evaluations. Furthermore, again in 1997, it is noticeable that the general economy coefficient in the

opposition model is less than half the size of the same coefficient in the incumbent model, suggesting that current economic performance is less important in predicting evaluations of the former. The lack of consistent evidence in favour of a strong negative relationship between retrospective evaluations of the economy and opposition evaluations supports the idea that voters form independent evaluations of the prospects for the opposition and that these evaluations are not a simple mirror image of their feelings for the incumbent or an automatic reaction for or against the status quo.

We can compare the effects of the different explanatory variables on incumbent and opposition evaluations more fully by looking not just at significance levels but also at the size of the marginal effects. As was mentioned above, identifying marginal effects is complicated when using ordered logit models as the coefficients are not readily interpretable in terms of probabilities. However, we can calculate and compare the effect of the different explanatory variables on the probability of a certain outcome occurring. Here, we calculate the change in the probability that a typical voter will hold a positive expectation about the future prospects of the economy resulting from a change in the value of a particular explanatory variable from its minimum value to its maximum.¹⁰ This information is presented in the tables alongside the logit coefficients and summarised graphically in figures 1 – 3. Comparing these probabilities clearly demonstrates the greater importance of retrospective economic evaluations in determining expectations about the incumbent compared to the opposition. In 2001, for example, believing that the national economy had got a lot better over the last 12 months (as compared to having got a lot worse) is associated with an increase of 0.54 in the probability of a positive evaluation of the incumbent but no change in the probability of evaluating the opposition positively. In 1997 we observe a change of only 0.34 in the probability of evaluating the opposition positively compared with a much larger change of 0.62 in the probability of evaluating the incumbent positively.

Figure 1: Effect on Competence Evaluations 1992

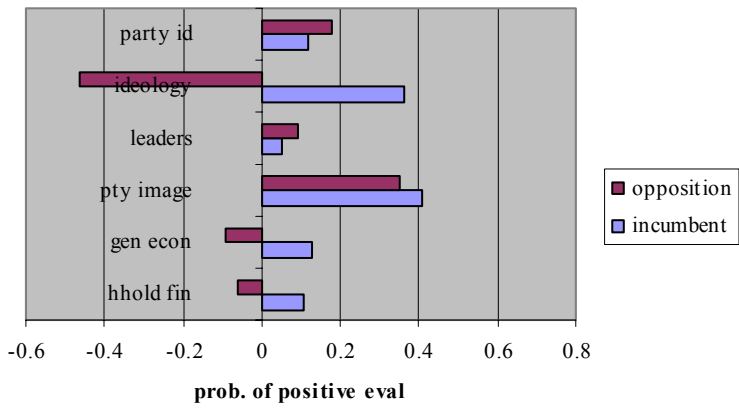


Figure 2: Effect on Competence Evaluations 1997

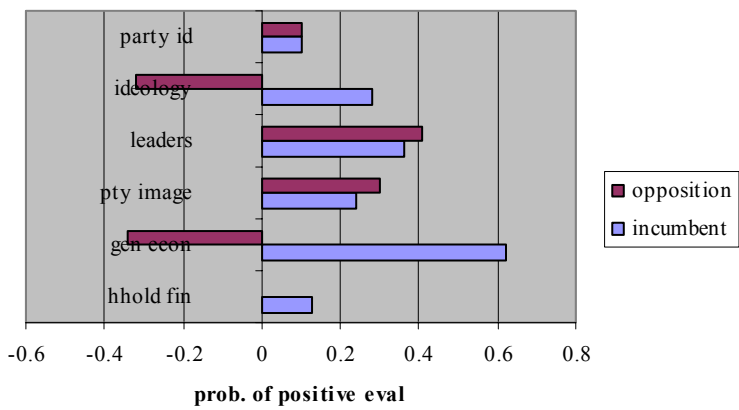
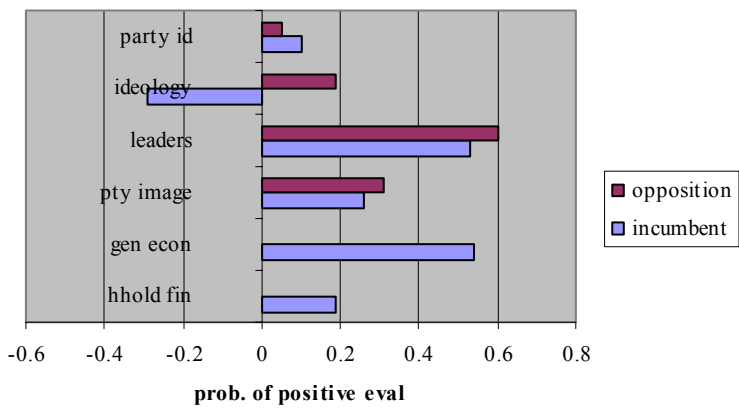


Figure 3: Effect on Competence Evaluations 2001



A comparison of probabilities also allows us to test the hypothesis that, in the absence of a current performance record on which to base their judgements, voters rely more heavily on long term factors such as party identification and short run proxies for competence such as leadership when judging the opposition. There is in fact no consistent evidence that this is the case. Looking first at the evidence pertaining to the long run influences of party identification and left right ideology, there is some evidence from 1992 that these factors mattered more in evaluating the (Labour) opposition than the (Conservative) incumbent. For example, being at one extreme of the left right scale as compared to the other alters the probability of a positive opposition evaluation by 0.46 compared to 0.36 for the incumbent whilst identifying with the party increases the probability of a positive opposition evaluation by 0.18 compared with an increase of 0.12 for the incumbent. However, in 1997 the difference between parties in the size of the effects of these variables is negligible whilst in 2001 these variables actually have a slightly larger effect on incumbent (Labour) evaluations than opposition (Conservative) evaluations.

As regards the effect of the other short run factors i.e. leadership and general party image there again appears to be little difference between the parties.¹¹ Across all three elections the effect of both leadership and party image on the probability of evaluating the party positively is bigger for the opposition than the incumbent. However, any differences are very small especially when compared with the overall size of the effect of these variables on party evaluations. For example, believing that the party leader would be very good as prime minister (as compared to not at all good) increases the probability of a positive opposition evaluation by 0.41 whilst similarly increasing the probability of a positive incumbent evaluation by 0.36. On the basis of the available evidence therefore, we cannot reliably conclude that voters make more use of the informational shortcuts provided by party identification, ideology or leadership when evaluating prospects for the future under the opposition. Rather voters appear to make good use of these heuristics whenever they are called on to make prospective evaluations.

Controlling for Incumbent Evaluations

The results discussed above strongly suggest that voters are capable of forming meaningful evaluations of the likely prospects for the economy if the opposition were to be elected and that these evaluations are more than a simple mirror image of their evaluations of the incumbent. As a further safeguard against the possibility that voters' evaluations of the opposition are merely a reaction for or against the status quo or a reflection of their attitudes towards the incumbent we can rerun the model above including voters' prospective evaluations for the economy if the incumbent were to be re-elected (as well as their evaluations of current economic performance) as an additional control variable. This enables us to determine the genuine effect of the various explanatory variables on opposition evaluations independent of voters' attitudes towards the incumbent and to assess the potential value of including opposition evaluations as a separate explanatory variable alongside incumbent evaluations in models of vote choice. If it is the case that voters' evaluations of the opposition are more than a simple reflection of their feelings towards the incumbent then we would expect to observe that the various explanatory variables which emerged as significant predictors of opposition evaluations above remain significant even after controlling for incumbent projections in the model.

Below are the results from rerunning the multivariate model of opposition party evaluations with prospective incumbent evaluations as a control variable. For the purposes of comparison, the model of incumbent party evaluations was also rerun including opposition evaluations. Unsurprisingly, in 1992 and 1997 at least, voters' expectations for one party (be it incumbent or opposition) were negatively related to their expectations for the other; opinions are clearly divided along party lines with voters who are optimistic about the future under one party tending to be pessimistic about the future under the other. To some extent this may be because economic evaluations are endogenous and hence a rationalisation of vote choice. It may also be because voters do genuinely tend to think of the opposition in terms of being an alternative (good or bad) to the status quo. It is noticeable that in 2001 there was no evidence of a relationship between prospective evaluations of the two parties. This may be explained by the fact that, in 2001, voters still had strong, largely negative, memories of what the current opposition, the Conservative party, had been like as a party of government. These memories made it particularly easy for voters to form independent evaluations of the opposition in this instance and not simply to see the opposition as an automatic alternative to the incumbent.

It is clear that overall voters' evaluations of the opposition are more than a mirror image of incumbent evaluations and that voter attitudes towards the opposition cannot be completely determined from their attitudes towards the incumbent. Even after controlling for prospective evaluations of the incumbent a number of other key variables remain as significant predictors of opposition evaluations. Voters' prospective evaluations of the likely performance of the economy under the opposition are affected by long term predispositions towards the party i.e. party identification and position on the left right ideological scale. Furthermore, voters' short run opinions regarding the party's leader and overall image continue to exert a significant influence on evaluations even after controlling for attitudes towards the incumbent. This suggests that what the opposition party does and how it presents itself to the voters whilst in opposition can significantly affect voters' opinions and, potentially, their final party choice.

Including other party evaluations as an additional control in the model also helps to clarify the relationship between prospective evaluations of the economy under the different parties and retrospective evaluations of recent economic performance. The original results discussed above pointed to the fact that though the relationship between retrospective evaluations and prospective evaluations was weaker for the opposition than the incumbent there was some evidence of a negative relationship between retrospective evaluations of recent economic performance and prospective evaluations for the economy under the opposition. Once we control for voters' evaluations of the incumbent this negative relationship is weakened to the extent that there ceases to be a significant relationship between retrospective evaluations of the economy and opposition evaluations in 1992 as well as 2001. In 1997, retrospective evaluations of the general economy remain a significant predictor of opposition evaluations but only at the 10% level. In contrast, the strong positive relationship observed between retrospective economic evaluations and incumbent prospects persists even after including the additional control variable. It appears that voters recognise that whilst past performance provides voters' with valuable information about the incumbent party's capabilities and serves as a reliable guide to the future under the continuation of the status quo; it cannot provide any information about the particular capabilities of or prospects for an alternative government. Evaluations of current performance have little, if any, independent influence on evaluations of the opposition; any inverse

relationship between the two sets of evaluations is explained by the fact that retrospective economic evaluations influence voters' opinions of the incumbent and that voters opinions of the opposition are, albeit partially, inversely related to their evaluations of the incumbent.

Table 7: Factors Affecting Economic Expectations 1992: Revised Model

	Incumbent		Opposition	
	B (S.E)	Δ	B (S.E)	Δ
Party ID	0.70*** (0.18)	0.11	1.01*** (0.19)	0.15
Ideology	0.60*** (0.11)	0.36	-0.70*** (0.11)	-0.40
Leader	0.07 (0.08)	0.06	0.23* (0.14)	0.08
Party Image	0.44*** (0.05)	0.37	0.41*** (0.04)	0.36
General Economy	0.52** (0.22)	0.13	-0.37 (0.24)	-0.04
Household finances	0.43** (0.21)	0.11	-0.31 (0.23)	-0.03
South	0.06 (0.14)	0.01	-0.12 (0.15)	-0.01
Degree	0.10 (0.16)	0.03	-0.04 (0.17)	0.00
Working Class	-0.21 (0.19)	-0.05	0.06 (0.18)	0.01
Incumbent Expectations	-	-	-0.89*** (0.17)	-0.14
Opposition Expectations	-0.55*** (0.18)	-0.13	-	-
McFadden R2	0.23		0.27	
% predicted correctly	59.1		63.0	
% reduction in error	18.4		16.2	
N	955		955	

Note: Marginal effects (Δ) indicate the increase in the predicted probability of having positive expectations about the economy arising from a change in the value of explanatory variable from the minimum to the maximum

*** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.1

Table 8: Factors Affecting Economic Expectations 1997: Revised Model

	Incumbent		Opposition	
	B (S.E)	Δ	B (S.E)	Δ
Party ID	0.69*** (0.16)	0.08	0.58*** (0.15)	0.10
Ideology	0.36*** (0.12)	0.21	-0.37*** (0.11)	-0.24
Leader	0.48*** (0.08)	0.31	0.66*** (0.10)	0.39
Party Image	0.20*** (0.04)	0.21	0.28*** (0.04)	0.28
General Economy	1.05*** (0.09)	0.60	-0.15* (0.09)	-0.11
Household finances	0.20*** (0.07)	0.13	0.03 (0.07)	0.02
Knowledge	0.01 (0.04)	0.01	-0.07 (0.04)	-0.08
Interest	0.08 (0.08)	0.05	0.07 (0.08)	0.01
South	0.02 (0.13)	0.00	0.16 (0.12)	0.05
Degree	0.23 (0.19)	0.03	-0.14 (0.18)	-0.03
Working Class	0.21 (0.14)	0.03	0.40*** (0.14)	0.07
Incumbent Expectations	-	-	-0.55*** (0.11)	-0.38
Opposition Expectations	-0.40*** (0.10)	-0.24	-	-
McFadden R2	0.29		0.22	
% predicted correctly	61.4		54.3	
% reduction in error	11.4		11.1	
N	1351		1351	

Note: Marginal effects (Δ) indicate the increase in the predicted probability of having positive expectations about the economy arising from a change in value of explanatory variable from minimum to maximum.

*** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.1

Table 9: Factors Affecting Economic Expectations 2001: Revised Model

	Incumbent		Opposition	
	B (S.E)	Δ	B (S.E)	Δ
Party ID	0.55*** (0.13)	0.10	0.35*** (0.14)	0.05
Ideology	-0.44*** (0.10)	-0.29	0.33*** (0.10)	0.19
Leader	0.51*** (0.06)	0.53	0.59*** (0.06)	0.60
Party Image	0.26*** (0.04)	0.26	0.31*** (0.03)	0.31
General Economy	0.91*** (0.07)	0.54	0.01 (0.07)	0.00
Household finances	0.25*** (0.06)	0.19	0.00 (0.06)	0.00
Knowledge	-0.13*** (0.04)	-0.16	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.02
Interest	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.02	-0.16*** (0.06)	-0.09
South	-0.10 (0.11)	-0.02	0.01 (0.10)	0.00
Degree	-0.15 (0.16)	-0.03	0.06 (0.16)	0.01
Working Class	-0.02 (0.12)	-0.00	0.18 (0.13)	0.03
Incumbent Expectations	-	-	0.00 (0.11)	0.00
Opposition Expectations	-0.03 (0.07)	-0.02	-	-
McFadden R2	0.23		0.17	
% predicted correctly	55.9		47.8	
% reduction in error	14.5		12.2	
N	1943		1943	

Note: Marginal effects (Δ) indicate the increase in the predicted probability of having positive expectations about the economy arising from a change in the values of the explanatory variable from minimum to maximum.

*** p<0.01 ** p<0.05 * p<0.1

Conclusions

This examination of voters' prospective economic evaluations provides a number of insights into how voters form opinions regarding the economic competence of incumbent and opposition parties. There are both important differences and similarities in the way that voters form evaluations of the two parties. As hypothesised, there is a difference between parties in terms of the relationship between

retrospective evaluations of recent economic performance and prospective evaluations of the future under the two parties. Whilst retrospective evaluations of economic performance exert a significant influence over incumbent evaluations they are not significant in determining expectations regarding the opposition. As the reward punishment model suggests, past performance serves as a reliable guide to the capabilities of the current government but provides no such signal for the opposition. However, both opposition and incumbent evaluations are influenced by a number of other factors, notably voters' long term partisan and ideological pre-dispositions. Also important are their attitudes concerning the party's overall image and its leaders; these last serving as proxies for management competence and allowing voters to make up to date assessments of the party's likely capabilities at the time of the election. Contrary to what was hypothesised there is little evidence that these other factors are more important for voters when evaluating the opposition; they are similarly significant in predicting expectations regarding the incumbent. Voters appear to rely on a range of heuristics besides past performance whenever they are asked for predictions about the future.

These conclusions are based on a detailed study of data from three different elections between 1992 and 2001 giving us confidence in the reliability of our results. That our findings are corroborated across three elections allows us to make generalisable claims about the roles of incumbent and opposition parties which go beyond the experiences of particular parties at a specific point in time. Ideally, we would want to be able to study an even longer series of elections. This would provide us with the opportunity to test hypotheses regarding how circumstances such as the length of time a party has been out of office may affect the extent of any differences between incumbent and opposition parties. For example, the results discussed above suggest that voters' evaluations of the opposition in 2001 less closely mirrored evaluations of the incumbent than in 1992 and 1997, perhaps as a result of the fact that voters' had strong memories of the Conservative opposition's time in government. It might also be interesting to supplement the cross-sectional approach adopted here with an analysis of voter evaluations over time to compare in more detail how voters revise and update their opinions of parties in and out of power. Unfortunately suitable data are not available to allow us to do this.

Nevertheless, as they stand the above findings have important consequences for our understanding of the respective roles played by incumbent and opposition parties in electoral politics. On the one hand

they demonstrate the need to take account of the difference between being in and out of government and the effect that this can have on how voters form judgements about the parties. Informational asymmetries lead to heterogeneity between parties as well as between individual voters. At the same time however, it is clear that the process by which voters evaluate parties in opposition is not entirely different from how they evaluate parties in government. Opposition evaluations are systematically related to a range of variables and voters are capable of making meaningful judgements concerning the future prospects for the economy under the opposition which are independent of their attitude towards the incumbent. This provides support for studies which emphasise the comparative nature of voter decision making and promote the importance of relative economic competence. Considering voter attitudes towards the incumbent can provide us with valuable information over and above that provided by considering attitudes towards the incumbent. This suggests that future election studies should take the opportunity to ask questions designed specifically to elicit responses about the opposition's perceived capabilities and that voters' opinions of the opposition should be included in models of vote choice along side their evaluations of incumbent performance.

Notes:

¹ The complete question wording is: "Suppose the Conservative (Labour) Party were to win the election. How do you think Britain's economy would do under the Conservatives (Labour)? Would it get stronger, get weaker or stay about the same as now?"

² In 1992 there were only 3 response categories – get stronger, stay the same, get weaker.

³ Further details of the precise variables used are given in the following section

⁴ When the models for 1997 and 2001 were rerun using OLS, a similar pattern of results was obtained. However, the choice of technique matters in 1992 when the dependent variable only has 3 categories.

⁵ For information on the use of Clarify see King, G., M. Tomz, et al. (2000).

⁶ For further details on the construction of the Likert scale used see Heath, A., G. Evans, et al. (1994). The 1992 scale was comprised of slightly different items than the 1997/2001 scales but in each case the scales demonstrated high reliability with alpha coefficients > 0.7

⁷ Only 3 different response categories are available for 1992. Retrospective economic evaluations are included in the form of dummy variables equal to 1 if the current state of the economy was evaluated positively and 0 otherwise.

⁸ The models were also run including more detailed demographic controls but this made little difference and so, for the sake of parsimony, only dummy variables are included in the final models.

⁹ Reduction in error is compared to the success rate of prediction if all respondents were simply assigned to the modal category.

¹⁰ A typical voter is defined as a working class party identifier with average knowledge about and interest in politics, holding the mean position on the left right scale and having mean evaluations of the party's general image, its leaders and the recent performance of the economy.

¹¹ In order to determine whether the differences in the size of effects between parties were statistically significant, confidence intervals for the various estimates were compared. Evidence of considerable overlap in the 95% confidence intervals for incumbent and opposition estimates suggests that differences are not statistically significant.

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