

CONSENSUAL POLITICS

Partisan preferences and valence voting

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This paper examines the nature of partisan preferences on a range of issue scales. It compares preferences in a period of strong ideological focus, in the late eighties and early nineties, with preferences in 2000 and 2001 – a period of weak ideological focus. Where partisan preferences were formerly polarised, they are now more consensual. I argue that once positional issues now resemble valence issues. This has implications for the positions we can expect parties to rationally adopt: theories of party position based on polarised partisan preferences do not apply in the current time. I offer a mechanism for how changes from positional to valence issues create competence based evaluations, and question the application of ‘core vote’ theories of party behaviour.

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Introduction

“If political parties are primarily concerned with ensuring that their ambitious office seekers obtain power from the electorate, and if the ambitious office seekers depend on the electorate to continue to realize their ambitions, then the place to begin to understand contemporary partisan politics is in that electorate”¹.

A great deal of the academic literature on party incentives arose during the seventies and eighties. This was a period in which parties sought to differentiate themselves clearly using distinctive ideologies (McLean, 1982; Heath et al, 1985). The Conservatives occupied territory to the right and Labour occupied territory to the left. The conventional logic of Downsian (1957) competition, that parties would converge, was therefore challenged.

Competing theories arose to explain these diverging positions. It was argued that incentives exist for rational parties to diverge, because their own supporters, voters, or partisans are located in ideologically divergent territory (May, 1973; Kitschelt, 1994; Fiorina, 1999). A party aiming to maintain the support of its base as well as competing for new voters would place itself between the centre or median and its voters (Key, 1966; Hirschman, 1970; Robertson, 1976; McLean, 1982; Aldrich, 1995; Adams, 2001) or further right or left (Adams and Merrill, 1999). If a party's vote diminished to its base it follows that the centre of gravity of its available vote would shift accordingly. Therefore a party could be expected to find itself in a catch 22 – electorally unpopular and competing on less popular ideological positions (Moon, 2004). The perennial problem for a political party is therefore to strike a balance between its unrepresentative supporters and the centre ground. “[P]arties making no effort to break out of their electoral ‘ghettos’ can suffer serious decline” (Ware, 1987:159).

In the period of competition in which the two main British parties occupied leftist and rightist positions it was thought that each benefited from motivated core voters and being equidistant to centrist ones. “*In Britain, both Margaret Thatcher and Tony Benn are proudly conscious of pulling their parties away from consensus....[in 1980-81] it is true that the Conservative Government is remote from the median voter. But so is the Labour opposition*” (McLean, 1982). The current period presents a notable deviation.

¹ Aldrich (1995:164)

It is broadly accepted that the main British parties have converged in recent elections (Heath et al, 2001; McLean, 2002). Bara and Budge (2001) chart growing consensus between the parties from 1992 and 1997 to 2001. By February 2005 the polling company NOP found that only 21% of their sample recognised a difference between the Conservatives and Labour (The Independent, 16.02.05). This perceived lack of difference may have been one of competence or style, or simply resulting from lower attention, but it was probably also one of ideological difference. In the 2001 wave of the British Election Panel Study, the correlation between the perceived distance between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party on a composite score of the difference between the placement of the two parties with responses to the question, 'Do the Conservatives and Labour differ?' was 262.616, significant at the $p < .001$ level². The period of convergence appears to contradict 'core vote' explanations of party divergence. How, therefore, might this convergence be explained?

One explanation is that fewer restraints upon Downsian convergence exist. It has been argued that the party base has become less influential with the decline of party membership and activism (see Panebianco, 1988). It has also been demonstrated that strongly identifying partisans are in smaller proportion (Aldrich, 1985; Heath et al, 1991; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). Parties may simply be less constrained by their unrepresentative members, activists and identifiers.

However, diminishing numbers may also make these partisans even more pivotal. Converging party positions may in this case indicate that these pivotal members are having a lesser impact upon the party's issue position strategy because they are either not as 'purist' as we might initially predict or that the incentives for parties to converge have simply become stronger³.

In this article I will argue that converging party positions can be explained in part by a previously overlooked factor: converging positions within the electorate at large.

² Pearson Chi², degrees of freedom 186, N = 1795. An average index of distance was computed for all 5 scales (work-prices, tax-spend, nationalization-privatisation, equalize incomes and EU unite) by subtracting the perceived position of the Conservative Party with the perceived position of the Labour Party. This variable was correlated with responses on the 4 level variable of 'difference between the Conservatives and Labour where 1 = great difference, 2 = same difference, 3 = not much difference and 4 = don't know.

³ One further explanation remains. A loyal partisan may either be most likely to bring its own opinions in line with its party position or support the party regardless. After all, the nature of a loyal base is that it is just that. The parties are therefore free from partisan constraints. If partisans have converged in their ideological preferences, it may indeed reflect the former of these explanations, suggesting that the period of 'dissensus' and positional preferences in the 1970s and 1980s was simply indicative of where the parties were, rather than *visa versa*.

Furthermore, a consensual electorate has come to more closely resemble a ‘valence’⁴ electorate. Spatial models of party competition were criticised in the sixties precisely because the dominant modes of political competition were consensual. Competence evaluations predominated on issues on which parties and voters agree. These were termed ‘valence issues’, rather than ‘positional’ issues on which there is ideological disagreement (Stokes, 1963; Butler and Stokes, 1969). As the electorate has become less positional, I argue that we can expect evaluations to be competence based.

Stokes described such periods when valence issues predominate as cases of ‘weak ideological focus’ – when “*political controversy can be diffused over a number of changing issue concerns which rarely present position-dimensions*” (1963:376). This can be contrasted with cases of ‘strong ideological focus’ – when “*Political conflict can be focused on a single, stable issue domain which presents and ordered-dimension*” (ibid). I therefore suggest that the current period represents a period of ‘weak ideological focus’ and that theories of party behaviour should reflect this contextual climate.

Predicting preference change

Here I outline a range of possible reasons for predicting less diverging partisan preferences.

The first reason is the well-noted pattern of partisan dealignment. This has been documented elsewhere (Aldrich, 1985; Heath et al, 1991; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002) although it is useful to replicate here. The following figure demonstrates the weakening strength of identification of Conservative and Labour partisans between 1964 and 2001; a trend robust despite fluctuations in the proportions of Labour and Conservative partisans in relation to each other and overall. For example, in 1992 the proportion of partisans identifying with the Conservative Party overall fell from 40.7% to 28.1% in 1997 and this figure fell again to 23.5% in 2001⁵. Despite this, the proportion of strongly identifying partisans fails to increase as a larger proportion of the Conservative base. We would expect them to become a larger proportion if their strength of partisanship was indicative of equal loyalty ‘come what may’.

- Figure 1 about here -

⁴ Heath et al (1985) prefer to name valence issues ‘dissensus issues’ and positional issues as ‘consensus issues’, whereas Butler and Stokes (1970) make a more explicit point about the nature of valence issues as those on which competence evaluations are paramount.

⁵ Source: 1992, 1997 and 2001 British Election Study Cross Section Surveys

Dealignment may be a cause and/or consequence of consensual politics. Political engagement (The Electoral Commission, 2004; 2005) and party membership are also characterised by widespread decline (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). Nevertheless, with a high correlation between strength of partisanship and ideological position (Heath et al, 2001)⁶, we can expect to witness weakening ideological divergence with weakened partisan strength. This 'social explanation'⁷ is related to wider demographic observations of the British electorate, such as ageing proportions of the politically committed, weakening socialisation effects, social mobility, less class-consciousness and consequent changing habits. Such an explanation may lead to a gradual weakening of preference divergence over time, consistent with the gradual and secular trend in partisan strength demonstrated in Figure 1.

A further proposition for gradual social change would be what might be termed the implications of the 'end of ideology' thesis (see Bell, 1964; 2000). That is, due to the absence of great debates over left or right in modern day political discourse, perhaps due, for example, to a 'post-Thatcherite consensus' or new issues and economic globalisation (Caul and Gray, 2002). This would also suggest a connection between 'valence politics' and a diminishing influence of ideological differentiation and distinctive self-placement, because if traditional issue divisions are less salient or relevant, the electorate could be expected to adopt more 'compromise' type positions.

However, other 'political explanations' can be imagined, which would be consistent with more sudden patterns of preference change, and patterns found between remaining strongly identifying partisans for whom 'dealignment' explanations would be less relevant.

It has been argued that in order to be electorally successful, party organisations will become electoral-professional (Panbianco, 1988) or catch-all parties (Kirchheimer, 1970). This is consistent with public choice models of electoral competition based on competition for the centre ground. For example, socially democratic parties, in order to be competitive beyond their declining working class base, adapt to achieve centrist modes of competition (Przeworski and Sprague, 1985), witnessed in the transformation of New Labour (Evans and Norris, 1999; Heath et al, 2001; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002; Hindmoor, 2004). Significantly,

⁶ This correlation may be caused by an underlining correlation between partisan strength and information and knowledge. As knowledge increases, so partisan identifications are more likely to be brought in line with ideological preference (Andersen et al, 2005). As knowledge and partisan strength decrease (both evident in a disengaged electorate), so ideological divergence should diminish.

⁷ I hold that long-term patterns should most powerfully be explained by social explanations whereas short-term fluctuations should most powerfully be explained by political explanations – see Evans (1999) for an application of this reasoning.

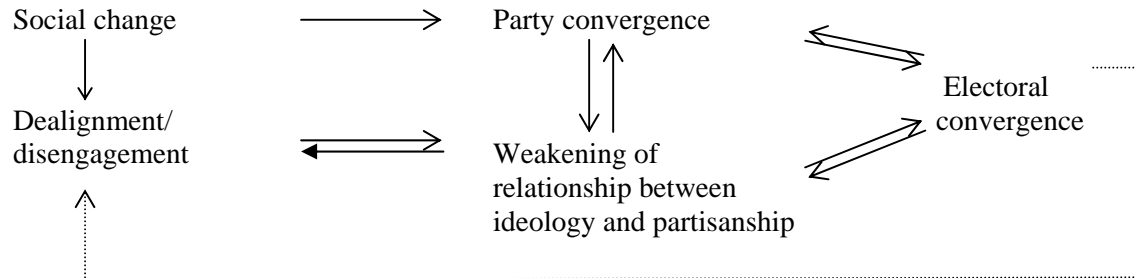
Kirchheimer (1970) describes a process of 'de-ideologization' - a reduction of the party's ideological baggage and, specifically, the concentration instead upon valence issues.

Hindmoor (2004) argues that New Labour reframed political competition towards valence politics. For example, they attempted to make the issues of Europe, tax and spend and ownership valence issues by changing the way in which the issues were viewed. *"Thought of in terms of a zero-sum relationship between tax and spend, Labour's proposals to increase public expenditure divided public opinion. In trying to frame it as an issue about the quality and not the quantity of public expenditure, New Labour was trying to turn this issue into a valence issue. For, it is very difficult to be in favour of expenditure on the costs of social failure or to be against public investment. This was an issue-frame constructed so as to leave New Labour at the moderate political centre"* (Hindmoor, 2004: 153). With such centrist and 'valence' transformations, we might also predict that partisans adapt their preferences in line, particularly if the direction of partisan ideology is endogenous (voters take the lead of their parties, (Belknap and Cambell, 1952)) or if parties are successful in preference shaping (Dunleavy and Ward, 1981). Labour's command of the centre ground and the Conservative's ideological return from its more Thatcherite deviation were particularly apparent when Labour came to power in 1997 (Bara and Budge, 2001). Evans and Norris (1999) cite the claimed intended strategy of Philip Gould, Labour's election strategist in 1997. *"We wanted to remake the political map by establishing new dividing lines, new prisms through which politics was perceived. Not tax and spend but save and invest; not private versus public, but partnership between the two"* (1998:6). Thus, we should expect to witness less polarised dividing lines also mirrored in the electorate.

In summary, there are theoretical and empirical grounds on which to predict a more consensual electorate – due to social and political explanations. These explanations are interlinked. Party convergence may be causal upon dealignment and disengagement⁸, just as dealignment and disengagement may be causal upon partisan convergence, and consequently, party convergence. These relationships suggest a cyclical relationship between party and electoral consensus – which may be an overlooked political explanation for apparent rising levels of voter apathy, low turnout, dealignment and leader oriented election campaigns – that is, creating further incentives for the electoral-professional organisation (Panebianco, 1988)

⁸ Convergence will alter the costs and benefits of participating in a party – so it might alter the costs and benefits of aligning oneself with one party or another. If two parties occupy the same ideological territory and partisans occupy the same location, why be strongly motivated to participate one party rather than another, on ideological grounds?

and for judgement (Denver, 1994) or valence politics (Clarke et al, 2004). A presentation of these hypothesised causal relationships are presented below:



On the basis of these relationships, we can expect both gradual shifts towards valence distributions (thus valence issues remain so, but positional issues become consensual), indicative of social (and political) dynamics, and a particularly marked shift in the 1997 election cohort, indicative of a political transition. Space does not permit a causal test of these relationships in this paper. However, hypotheses are generated as follows:

Hypotheses

- H^1 = Labour and Conservative partisan preferences will become increasingly consensual since the ‘ideologically strong’ period under Margaret Thatcher.
- H^2 = Consensual or valence issues will remain so, but positional issues in early cohorts will resemble valence issues after 1997.
- H^0 = Partisan preference divergence will persist.

Method

I compare the frequency distributions and mean scores of partisans (respondents of the British Election Studies expressing an identification with the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties and those expressing no identification at all) on 11-point ideological scales. I compare the 1987 or 1992 distributions (relatively strong ideological focus) with those in 2000 or 2001 (relatively weak ideological focus).

The issue scales have changed over the years of the British Election Panel Studies (BEPS) and British Election Study (BES) cross sections. The most consistent have been eleven-point scales in the 1987, 1992, 1997 and 2001 cross sections and 87-92, 92-97 and 97-01 panel studies (midpoint = 6)⁹. The redistribution and nationalisation-privatisation scales are available from 1987 to 2001. The tax-spend, inflation-unemployment and EEC/EU integration scales are available from 1992 to 2001. For snap shot comparisons I use the 2000 wave of the BEPS, the year preceding the 2001 election¹⁰, which is particularly interesting in evaluating the potential impact of core voters of the parties in this election. In each case respondents are asked where they would place the parties and themselves. The wordings of the scales are as follows.

Equalisation of Incomes

1 = 'Make much greater efforts to make people's incomes more equal to 11 = 'Be much less concerned about how equal people's incomes are'

Nationalisation or Privatisation

1 = 'Nationalise many more private companies' to 11 = 'Sell off many more nationalised industries'.

Inflation-Unemployment

1 = 'Getting people back to work should be the government's top priority' to 11 = 'Keeping prices down should be the government's top priority'.

Tax-Spend

1 = 'Government should cut taxes and spend much less on health and social services' to 11 = 'Government should increase taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services.

EU Integration

Britain should: 1 = 'Do all it can to unite fully with the European Union' to 11 = 'Do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union.

⁹ The 1987-1992 panel study actually only includes responses in 1987 and pre and post the 1992 election. Therefore the 1987 cross section is employed and then the 1992-1997 and 1997-2001 panels.

¹⁰ Note that the 2001 wave of the 1997-2001 BEPS is a post-election sample – used for the nationalization-privatisation scale because this is not available in the 2000 wave.

Although respondents may simply make their own positions consistent with their declared supported party, this should be consistent over time, and it is changes over time with which I am concerned.

Evidence for electoral convergence

Adams (1998: 2001) uses the first issue scale demonstrated here to argue that parties will compete away from the median voter because their partisans adopt polarised positions. The further left or right the mean score of a party's voters, the further from the centre the party's equilibrium position¹¹. Adams displays 1987 BES distributions on the nationalisation scale¹². The distribution is replicated below, and illustrates a typical positional distribution of partisan preferences – with Labour identifiers peaking on the left hand of the scale and Conservative identifiers peaking on the right.

- Figure 2 about here -

In 1987 the difference in Conservative and Labour partisan means was 3.53, the Conservatives were positioned at mean 7.94 and Labour partisans at 4.41. According to Adams (2001) the position of the Liberal Democrats creates some incentive to squeeze votes in the middle, but the parties reach equilibrium between the centre and their own partisans.

However, in 2001¹³ the nationalisation-privatisation scale resembled the preference distribution characteristic of valence issues. There are some partisan differences, but these are much more minimal than in 1987 (and in 1992) and it is noticeable that there are no longer clearly identifiable polarised peaks at the far ends of the scale. In 2001, the difference between the mean value of Conservative and Labour partisans was only 1.62, the Conservative mean was 6.10 and the Labour mean was 4.48.

- Figure 3 about here -

¹¹ The basic voter's utility function is represented: $U_i(K) = P_{ik} + L_{ik}$
Where i 's partisanship is P_{ik} , a dummy variable that equals b if voter i identifies with party K and equals zero otherwise; b is defined as the strength of partisan attachment relative to ideology. The result is party positions that diverge in increments depending on the strength of the relationship between partisanship and ideology.

¹² He observes less diverged preferences in 1992.

¹³ For other scales I use the 2000 wave of the BEPS. However, the privatization-nationalisation scale is only available in the 1997 and 2001 waves, and so I use the latter.

According to existing theory, incentives for centrist party convergence have therefore increased on this issue. This is because with every centrist vote gained fewer will be lost at the far points. Therefore the trade-off between partisans and centrist voters is less acute. McLean (1982:80-81): “*each successive issue position away from the centre contains fewer votes than the last; so a party which moves away from the centre [...] loses more than two votes for every one it gains*”. This was not true in 1987 because for the two main parties more votes could be gained at the far extremes than at the centre, particularly if partisans were more likely to vote. However, in 2001, to attract partisans and centrist voters, the main parties could be expected to maximize their vote in the centre of the scale. In Figure 3 the costs of moving to the extremes is far greater than the costs of moving to the extreme in Figure 2.

However, this convergence may be unique to the issue of privatisation. The question of whether to ‘privatise more companies’ is less meaningful by 2001 than in 1987 – there were simply fewer industries left to privatise (see Heath et al, 1985). On the other hand, the issue of taxation and public spending was central to the 2001 election (Butler and Kavanagh, 2002).

The tax-spend scale depicts a different trend between 1987 and 2000. On this scale, distributions were not apparently strongly correlated with partisanship in 1987 or in 2000. The only degree of polarization in 1987 was found among Liberal Democrat identifiers. Just fewer than 30% of Liberal Democrat partisans peaked at point 1 in 1987. The Labour mean was 3.56, the Conservative mean was 5.25, Liberal Democrat mean was 4.18 and the mean for no party identification was 4.76. This represented a divergence of Labour and Conservative partisans of average 1.69. By 2000 there were no strongly diverging preferences by partisanship, as demonstrated in Figure 4.

- Figure 4 about here -

In 2000 the difference in means between Conservative and Labour partisans is 0.83 and 0.61 between Conservative and Liberal Democrat partisans. This distribution suggests that the tax-spend scale represents a valence issue, and with the exception of Liberal Democrat partisans, also represented a valence issue in 1987. That is to say, on this issue, although some partisan distinctiveness is evident, there are no clear polarized divergences in this issue over time¹⁴. On this scale the Labour partisans have actually moved towards the left of the scale between 1987 and 2000, the Conservative partisans have adopted the same distribution and the Liberal Democrats have modified their position. Taken together, the 1987 and 2000 preferences

¹⁴ This was also the case in 1992 and 1997 distribution patterns.

suggests that for Liberal Democrats, the issue of tax and spend was positional but is now a valence issue, whereas for other voters this issue has been relatively consensual throughout, and particularly in 2000.

A very similar trend is evident on another economic scale, the inflation-unemployment scale. In 1987 and 2000 the preferences are consensual with a very high peak among all partisans at point 1 (reduce inflation) and few partisans of any party on the right-hand side. The majority of each is positioned at the centre point. The pattern can be seen in Figure 8, for 2000.

- Figure 8 about here -

On these two scales, tax-spend and inflation-unemployment, the evidence disputes much that has been written on the nature of campaigns aimed at core voters. For example, in 2001 it was argued that the Conservatives fought a campaign aimed at the ideologically unrepresentative core (Butler and Kavanagh, 2001; Norris and Lovenduski, 2004), but on tax and spend, and on inflation and employment, such an argument fails in these terms. The campaigns may have been aimed at core voters, but it is not correct to argue, particularly on taxation and public spending, that ideologically divergent voters pulled their parties away from the centre ground.

However, the issue of Europe should be particularly interesting because this issue was most clearly a dividing line between the parties themselves in 2001 and it was the issue most labelled as a 'core vote' issue for the Conservatives (Bara and Budge, 2001; Cowley and Quayle, 2002; Bartle, 2002). We might therefore expect this issue to represent a positional division between partisans.

The following figure demonstrates that in 1992¹⁵ the issue was positional, but in this case divided partisans of the same party. We can observe peaks to the far left and the far right of the EU integration scale demonstrating polarized positions among Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat identifiers. Of all the issue scales, this is the only issue on which cross-cutting divisions are evident *within* partisan groups. Thus the issue is a positional one within and between the electorate in 1992.

- Figure 5 about here -

¹⁵ The EU integration question has only been asked consistently between 1992 and 2001.

The means are Labour 5.2231; Conservative 6.3575, Liberal Democrat 5.5104 and none identifiers 6.1623. There is only a difference of 1.13 between Conservative and Labour identifiers. In 2000 the difference in means is similar but the pattern is dramatically different. The identifiers of the Labour and Conservative parties diverge to the greatest extent, with a difference of 1.85 on the scale, a difference large enough in Adams (2001) argument to provide an incentive for divergence. However, there is a strongly mirrored pattern of partisan preference and the majority of voters are found at the furthest point at the right of the scale, as evident in Figure 6.

- Figure 6 about here -

Equally consistent with Adams' analysis is the incentives for convergence resulting from the proportions of Liberal Democrat identifiers and non-identifiers in close proximity to the Conservative partisans. The Conservatives diverge with the Liberal partisans by 1.21 but with the identifiers of no party by 0.15. Where convergence is likely, it can be seen from Figure 6 that this is most likely to be to the right of the scale. It appears that the issue of European integration was once positional between and within partisans but has now become far more consensual, representing a valence issue among the electorate as a whole. Again, this evidence strongly contradicts the arguments that a right-wing position on European Integration was a Conservative 'core vote' issue in 2001. A euro-sceptic position was the preferred position of the majority of voters.

I have omitted one issue scale from the discussion up to this point. This is the redistribution (or equalize incomes) scale, on which an unexpected pattern is witnessed. That is, in 1987 preferences were not simply valence or positional in distribution. In fact this issue appears to be relatively consensual to the far left of the scale (equalise incomes) but divisive among Conservative partisans. Thus, it appears that for Conservatives the issue of redistribution is positional, just as the issue of taxation and public spending was positional for Liberal Democrats. The following figure demonstrates the Conservative partisans who adopt polarized positions to the right of the scale, and the partisans of other parties and none who relatively speaking agree on the goals of redistribution.

- Figure 7 about here -

However, by 2000 the issue of redistribution appears to confuse partisans of all parties, with the slight exception of Conservatives who are more right-wing on this issue, though less prominently than in 1987. The Conservatives still remain relatively polarised as identifiers of

each party and none peak at the far left of the scale. However, Figure 8 demonstrates an unclear pattern of preferences not witnessed on any other scale. Up until this point, each scale throughout time has either reflected consensus or clear division, if only among the partisans of one party. The issue of redistribution has come to be cross-cutting for partisans of all parties. Therefore the mean scores resemble each other except for the Conservative mean, but partisans are relatively evenly spread across all positions on this scale.

- Figure 8 about here -

It is not clear whether the redistribution scale represents a positional issue by 2000, although it clearly represented a valence issue, except for Conservative partisans, in 1987. It is more likely that the issue of redistribution now presents a confused picture for the electorate, possibly because the major parties have failed to present a clear message on redistribution. For Conservatives the issue may still represent a distinctive label, but, as indicated by Whiteley et al (1994), many grass-roots members of the Conservative Party are 'One Nation' or progressive Tories, here positioned on the left. As argued by Whiteley and Seyd (2002) it is not correct to assume all Conservatives are anti-egalitarian, and their moderating influence may have been underestimated due to contrary rhetoric, particularly during the Thatcherite period. Indeed, many assumptions about the nature of core voters require qualification.

Overall, from the evidence presented two main observations emerge.

The first is that it is too simplistic to argue that parties will simply converge at the median voter or diverge towards their partisans. Some parties can be expected to converge and some diverge (according to theoretical assumptions) on some issues and in some periods. Thus it is too simplistic to argue that Labour partisans are left-wing or Conservative partisans right-wing. On different issues in different periods partisans may be left-wing, right-wing, divergent, polarised or consensual. For example, Liberal Democrat partisans may be more likely to diverge on the issue of inflation and unemployment, but otherwise are most likely to be in the centre on most issues, and recently more right wing on the issue of European integration. On the whole, we can expect a rational Liberal Democrat party wishing to maximize votes from its own partisans and other voters to be positioned closest to the median voter, particularly in recent years. Labour partisans are most likely to be polarised at the far left of issue scales, particularly on the nationalisation-privatisation scale and on the issue of European Integration, but are much less likely to be so positioned in recent years. We can therefore expect a rational Labour Party to position itself towards the median voter, and be far less constrained by a trade-off between its own partisans and non-identifiers or Liberal

Democrat voters. It may be the case that Labour partisans have been the most likely to follow their own party to this consensual preference pattern, but it also appears to be the case that the Labour Party has benefited from other partisans moving closer to its own partisans, particularly in the case of the tax-spend scale, where we observe a general trend to more pro-public spending positions overall. A similar situation is present for the Conservative Party, for whom its partisans were most likely to be polarised at the far right of the nationalisation-privatisation and EU integration scales, presenting a trade-off between these voters and others. However, by 2000 the trade-off is largely minimised, with Conservative partisans shifting left-ward on the nationalisation scale, and the electorate moving towards Conservative partisans on the issue of European Integration. Thus, for Labour the electorate has shifted towards its partisans on public spending and taxation, therefore providing an opportunity to appeal to core voters and the median voter. For the Conservatives the electorate has shifted towards its partisans on Europe, therefore providing an opportunity to appeal to core voters and the median voter. Only on the issue of redistribution does the Conservative Party have a significantly more right-wing partisan base, but opinion is also distributed towards the centre and left of this scale. A rational Conservative Party can be expected to lose fewer votes by adopting more centrist positions, or by appealing to the median voter than was the case in the late eighties. The trade-off between a core vote strategy and a centrist or median voter strategy has become minimal on the salient issues of the day.

The second main observation to emerge is a trend towards a greater likelihood of consensus within the electorate as a whole. We can surmise that the issues of tax - spend and unemployment – inflation are most likely to be valence issues, because they appear so in both cohorts. This is consistent with Butler and Stokes's (1969) prediction. These are economic issues on which competence evaluations predominate. However, where issues have been positional in a period of strong ideological focus, namely public ownership and European integration, these have become valence issues in their distribution, thus pointing to a period of relative ideological weakness by 2000, as hypothesised. Therefore on these issues it makes little sense to predict party divergence based on the preferences of respective groups of partisans. Parties may diverge but they may do so for other reasons. Yet, according to utility-based models of vote-maximization, we should predict convergence over time as the electorate becomes consensual, and turn our focus towards competence comparisons as a predominant mode of competition.

Convergence and valence politics

Clarke et al (2004) argued that the British electorate is increasingly a valence electorate. Ideological voting is demonstrated to be in the decline, and Sanders (1999) argued that ideology had a far less influence in the 1997 election than in any election since 1964. This paper offers one causal explanation. In this section I offer a mechanism.

Up until this point no causal argument has been offered for a rise in valence politics. However, given the trend I have demonstrated in this paper a straightforward explanation can be given. This is, due to the diminishing degree of issue distance (between the perceived position of the parties and the voter's own self-placement), the competence part of rational vote calculations has a greater influence. Using the utility model offered by Heath et al (2001) I will demonstrate how this can be so.

Heath et al (2001:160) express their model of rational issue voting through the following four equations:

$$(1) U_{ij} = (U_{ij1} \times P_{ij1}) + (U_{ij2} \times P_{ij2}) + \dots + (U_{ijk} \times P_{ijk}),$$

U represents the utility a voter will derive from a given policy. The authors build into the model variable P , which is the subjective probability that an issue will actually be implemented. That is to say, vote calculations depend both on the voter's preference for the policy and the assessment that the policy will actually be delivered by the party (this may be due to the issue itself or to the party's competence to deliver). The subscript i denotes individual respondents, j denotes parties, and k denotes issues. U_{ijk} thus gives the utility that individual i would gain if party j were able to implement issue k , and P_{ijk} gives the subjective probability that party j will actually implement issue k . It is assumed that an individual votes for whichever party generates the highest utility, U_{ij} .

The authors then write equations for the influences on U_{ijk} and on P_{ijk} .

$$(2) U_{ijk} = f(W_{ik} - W_{ijk}),$$

“where W_{ik} represents the position of the individual voter i on issue k and W_{ijk} represents the perceived position of party j on that issue.

$$(3) W_{ik} = f(A_i, B_i, C_i \dots),$$

where A_i , B_i , C_i represent the demographic characteristics such as social class, housing tenure, and union membership of the individual respondent i .

$$(4) P_{ijk} = f(X_{ij}, Y_{ik}),$$

where X_{ij} represents the perceived competence of party j and Y_{ik} represents the extent to which issue k is thought to be influenceable by government action.”

Equation (1) summarizes the basic utility concept, equation (2) expresses the notion that a voters utility from a party’s victory will depend on the ideological distance between the party and the voter, equation (3) summarizes the relationship between the voter’s ideological position and his or her social characteristics, and equation (4) denotes the constant and variable elements of the degree to which voters think any party is capable of delivering on policy outcomes and the evaluation of the particular party on that issue. Equations (2) and (4) therefore provide the variable elements of the utility calculation. However, if $U_{ijk} = f(W_{ik} - W_{ijk})$ is also a constant due to electoral convergence (because the parties have positioned in themselves close to public opinion, which is recently more evenly clustered), then the only variation in the calculation is found in equation (4). Therefore, if distance between the voter and the party = 0, as parties converge upon a consensual electorate, the issue voting calculation relies upon the perceived competence of the party on the issue and the degree to which the individual perceives the issue or problem capable of being resolved by the party. The distance will not = 0 for all voters. However, as each of the issue scales demonstrated becomes more consensual, the likelihood becomes greater. This leaves a utility calculation based upon the valence characteristics of the issue only, and thus, the issue is a valence issue and the electorate a valence electorate. Using this utility based model we can therefore understand why, if voters and parties coalesce around the same ideological positions, the evaluations made by rational voters are far more likely to be competence based in periods of weak ideological focus, than in periods of strong ideological focus when a calculation based upon issue distance can be expected to compete with the competence factors. A valence electorate provides challenges and opportunities for competing parties, and calls into question theoretical predictions based on empirical predictions (of divided partisan electorates) which are no longer a reality. I turn to some possible implications in the concluding section.

Conclusions

In the introductory section I suggested that there were several social and political reasons to predict more consensual preferences among partisans. The social reasons included dealignment and an independent change in the ideological nature of public opinion. The political reasons included political convergence and endogenous party preference shaping. Unfortunately there is not space in this paper to provide evidence of tests for causation. However, the findings provide an impetus for doing so. With this in mind, it is worth highlighting one interesting observation. In addition to the static cohorts, over time comparison of means (using t-tests of groups of varying Conservative partisan strength and the none-identifiers as a comparison group) were conducted on each of the scales presented here. The emerging pattern is of a gradual *and* a sudden change in 1997 towards less significant differences between the very strongly identifying, strongly identifying and weakly identifying Conservative partisans and none-identifiers (of which little of this change was due to alterations in the location of the reference group). On the European integration scale all groups shifted rightwards towards the most strongly identifying partisans at the far right but on other scales the trend was towards the centre or centre left of the scales. In 1997 even the most strongly identifying partisans exhibited only minimal or no differences, having diverged prior to that sample. This suggests a gradual social process of weakening ideological polarisation, perhaps due to dealignment. However, dealignment cannot be wholly attributable, as even strongly identifying groups merge over time and particularly in 1997. Thus, among these voters we can hypothesise that political explanations, such as the rhetoric of consensus, party convergence and/or external realities (such as the end point of privatisation) may be responsible. These potential explanations warrant further study.

However, a number of theoretical questions and implication emerge.

As I noted earlier, Kirchheimer (1970) specifically predicts a process of de-ideologization within political parties manifested in a concentration on valence issues. The question arises whether parties have generated a process of positional to valence transformation within the electorate, or whether this trend is independent. Regardless, we can surmise that not only will parties have an incentive to concentrate on valence issues, at the present time they have little alternative. However, I have only investigated five issue scales available in the British Election Study and further analysis of the three dimensions of British ideological competition

(see Heath et al, 2001) is needed. A private study conducted by the Labour Party in 2005¹⁶ suggests that a dimension of Europe and immigration exists on which the electorate is divided, but on other issues a consensual electorate is observed. This may suggest that the questions asked by the British Election Studies are insufficient to capture the picture of dimensional consensus and dissensus. Nevertheless, on the issues under observation, we can predict that parties in Britain have little incentive to compete in distinctive ideological territory, except insofar as they compete on relative competence, and unless they believe the benefits of being ideologically distinctive to their opponents outweigh the costs of positioning themselves away from the maximum number of votes in spatial terms. This does not mean that theories such as those expounded by Adams (2001) are theoretically incorrect (i.e. that parties will rationally diverge) but that their empirical conditions are not met at the present time. Thus, deviation from a median voter strategy appears to lack rational foundation.

In a quote cited in page 2, McLean (1982) argues that Margaret Thatcher and Michael Foot were proudly pulling their parties away from consensus. This quote, in connection with the evidence presented here, raises questions for the validity of 'core vote' theories of party constraint. As I summarise them, core vote theories postulate that parties can be constrained by purists (Wildavsky, 1965), activists, members and/or voters, from adopting vote-maximizing strategies. The argument of this paper is that such theories do not apply in periods of weak ideological focus. That is, when partisan preferences converge, manifested in valence distributions, core vote theories based on divergent partisan ideological positions are no longer applicable. However, the nature of the change from position to valence issues poses further problems for these theories. For example, if McLean is accurate in arguing that the Conservative and Labour parties of the early eighties were pulling their parties away from consensus, can it be argued that these diverged partisan preferences were a constraint upon them? This is clearly illogical, but it is not necessarily illogical later when it might be more accurately acknowledged that the parties had difficulty adapting (for example, under Neil Kinnock in the late eighties and under John Major in the early nineties). This would suggest the parties themselves had made a rod for their own backs. However, most logical would be the presumption that if the parties could successfully pull their partisans away from consensus they could also pull them towards consensus again. Among party members Webb and Farrell (1999:50) demonstrate a right-ward shift among Labour party members on the issue of nationalisation-privatisation in 1997, and state that this "*plainly points to the widespread degree of acceptance at grassroots level of the leadership's reform of Clause 4 of the party constitution in 1995*". Such a party led transition would be consistent with the picture

¹⁶ Anonymous source

emerging in the issue scales of the British Election Studies and with the political explanations suggested. It then raises questions for the nature of the apparent constraints upon these attempts at adaptation. The idea that it is 'core voters' who are the millstone around a party's neck can be questioned. Webb and Farrell (1999) describe the 'perfectly formulated party of electoral contestation' as one whose membership (or we might also add, partisans) adopts an ideological location as close as possible to the median voter (and whose members are not ideologically different to the non-members voters of the same party). We have reason to believe that for the two main parties such a scenario is far more likely than in recent decades.

In the USA a trend of realignment has been observed together with a trend towards polarisation among American voters, as the Republican and Democrat parties have also polarised (Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998). This suggests that quite unlike the British electorate, American voters, and the parties, have undergone a reverse process towards a more positional electorate. Just as I have argued that less divergence leads to more valence characteristics, we can predict that American elections should be characterised by an increase in ideological voting based on issue-distance. Issues on which the largest differences are perceived tend to be those most closely predicting how a floating voter will cast their vote (Heath et al, 1985). Such a prediction would be consistent with observations made in the analysis of the 2004 Presidential elections. Furthermore, the link drawn between polarisation and realignment raises an important question for the nature of dealignment in Britain. Accordingly, we might hypothesise that dealignment in Britain (and also the decline in voting and political participation¹⁷) is closely connected, and possibly also caused by ideological convergence. As I have suggested, we can predict that ideological consensus removes some incentives for membership, activism and participation, but it may also remove the incentives for aligning oneself with a political party. There are undoubtedly a wide range of motives for partisanship and participation - cognitive, solidaristic and affective (Green et al, 2004; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). Nevertheless, there appears to be a strong relationship between the degree of dealignment and realignment, and the degree of ideological consensus and polarisation within the electorate. I suggest that underpinning these relationships is a need to revisit the causal link between party and partisan position, and consequently, revisiting theories of party behaviour based upon the assumed exogenous nature of partisan preferences.

¹⁷ McLean (1982) argues that the voter who is on-median has no incentive to become a party activist. For that voter, the converging tendency will result in his or her preferences being met. However, the voter who is off-median will have incentives to participate and the further off-median he or she is, the greater the likelihood that the gains of activism will off-set the personal costs. Activism is then preferable to free-riding. McLean argues that in a two-party system there is a general tendency for activists to be extreme. Accordingly, a consensual electorate creates a greater tendency to free-ride.

Specifically, we can challenge recent arguments that the Conservative Party core in particular is ideologically unrepresentative (see Butler and Kavanagh, 2002; Norris and Lovenduski, 2004). There may be elements of the Conservative core which prevents change. If so, this may not be a core vote constraint, but a constraint by certain pivotal activists or constraints at the elite level. Furthermore, the nature of ideological divergence may be one of issue emphasis rather than issue position. Nevertheless, assumptions of ideological divergence in spatial terms require qualification. If in 2001, subsequent to the dramatic Conservative defeat in 1997, the party's base became more extreme, forcing the party away from a Downsian position, we would have expected to find a right-ward shift in the preferences of the conservative base, particularly among the strongest identifiers. Sanders (1999) identified ideological voting among Conservative voters in 2001 but not among the voters of the other parties. "*The probable explanation for this apparent anomaly is simple: the Conservatives were so unpopular in 1997 that their support base was reduced to its right-wing ideological core*" (Sanders, 1999:197). However, the reverse is in fact the case. The Conservatives became more moderate before 2001, particularly among the strongest identifiers (who also failed to become a larger part of the core, but declined in line with the proportions in the Labour Party). Not only does this point to a sustained pattern of ideological convergence but it also calls into question the degree to which any so-called 'core vote strategy' in 2001 is accurately described as such (see Green, 2005)¹⁸. Moreover, the decision to focus on relative competence strengths rather than weaknesses can be more fully understood within the rubric of a valence electorate.

Generally, there are strong grounds to reassess stereotypes, commonly used, to describe and explain the nature of political activism. Although this paper only evaluates partisan identifiers, not political activists (the sample sizes of party members in the British Election Studies are far too small), it has been argued, "*parties risk severe electoral penalties if their policies diverge from their sympathizers' policy preferences*" (Adams, 2001:15). Indeed, Fiorina (1999) labelled the link between extremism and political participation as self-evident. Hence May's (1972) law of curvilinear disparity predicts that activists will be more extreme than a party's voters and office-holders – why else accrue the costs of political activism? Hirschman (1970) characterised loyal partisans as those who exercise 'voice' (protestation) to inhibit the party's moderation, particularly powerful when 'exit' is a credible threat. As Whiteley and Seyd (2002:151) summarise, "*supporters at the fringes of the left-right spectrum who oppose a move by their preferred party to the center ground of politics exercise voice, and this serves to inhibit the parties from moving too close to each other*". However, if

¹⁸ Furthermore, Sanders' findings of ideological voting in 1997 may be better explained as a proxy for party identification in 2001. Party identification is not controlled for in his model.

fewer party supporters are located at these fringes, we can expect such inhibitors to be lessened. Furthermore, participation in politics has declined over time (see Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). I am not arguing that there are no ideologically extreme partisans, but it is conceivable that the ideological spectrum has become sufficiently consensual to minimise their effect or at least rendering it 'irrational' to prioritise their loyalty.

Evans and Norris (1999) argue that critical elections are those which produce abrupt, significant and durable realignments in the electorate with major consequences for the long-term party order. If the convergence of the parties, the partisan realignment and resultant consensus around Blair's 'third-way' resulted in a converged electorate, then this might be one example of such an effect in 1997. Catalysts for such a shift are argued by the authors to be institutional, ideological and social, and the authors also point to consequences of party competition. "*In the 1997 British election the closure of the traditional left-right gap was dramatic...This may have led to the rise of Europe as a polarizing and cross-cutting issue on the political agenda*" (*ibid*, p.xxxiii). Far less than a polarizing issue, European integration opinion was also converged but towards a euro-sceptic position.

The consequences of such a critical election, arguably contributing to a transition from a positional to a valence electorate, are not as obvious as one might first imagine. For example, we cannot assume that some issues will become positional just because others are consensual. The parties have incentives to campaign on some issues over others due to relative competence evaluations, perhaps more so than to create cross-cutting divisional issues. However, we can also imagine incentives to attempt to create a more positional electorate. If both parties' partisans are converged, then both parties may lose and gain the other parties' voters with equal ease (in a purely ideological proximal form of competition). For the party with a lower rating in issue competence, it would perhaps be more optimal for partisans to be *less* close to the median voter, thus rendering them less volatile to party switching. Panebianco (1988) argued that electoral change, such as dealignment, encourages organisational change within political parties, combined with the influence of the mass media upon professional organisations running personalised, candidate-centered and issue-oriented (as opposed to ideological) campaigns. Although some of these characteristics have come to be commonly associated with recent political competition, it is too early to predict whether they will remain.

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Figures

Figure 1: Proportions of partisans in the Conservative and Labour Parties, 1964-2001

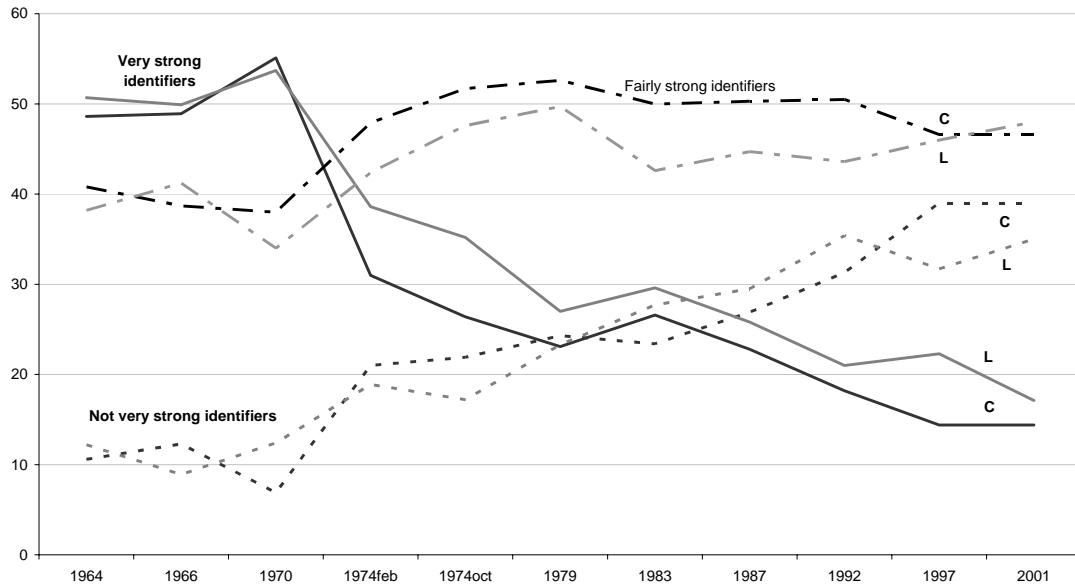


Figure 2: Preference distributions by party identification on the issue of nationalisation 1987 BES cross section, (N = 3214)

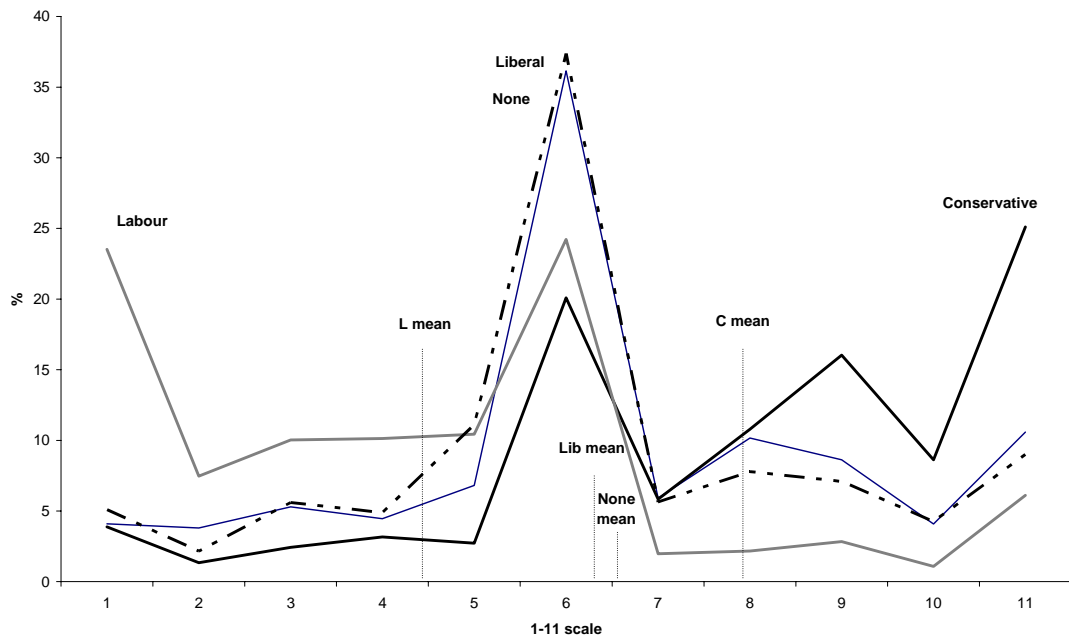


Figure 3: Distribution of preferences for Labour, Lib Dem, Conservative partisans and none on the BEPS nationalisation scale, 2001 wave (N= 1751)

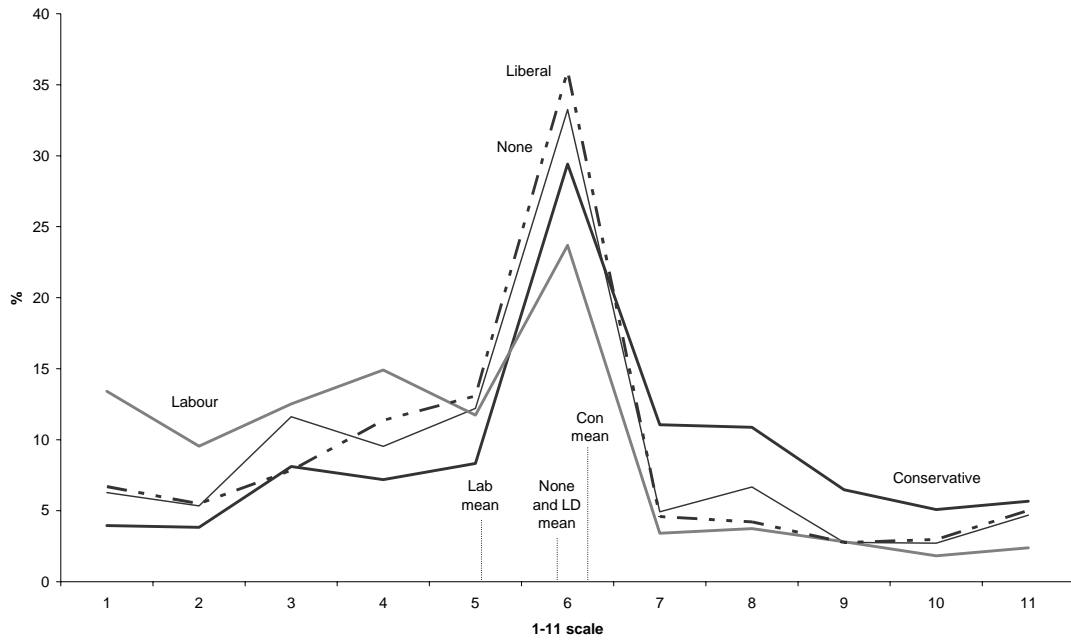


Figure 4: Distribution of preferences for Labour, Lib Dem, Conservative partisans and none on the BEPS tax-spend scale, 2000 (N= 1803)

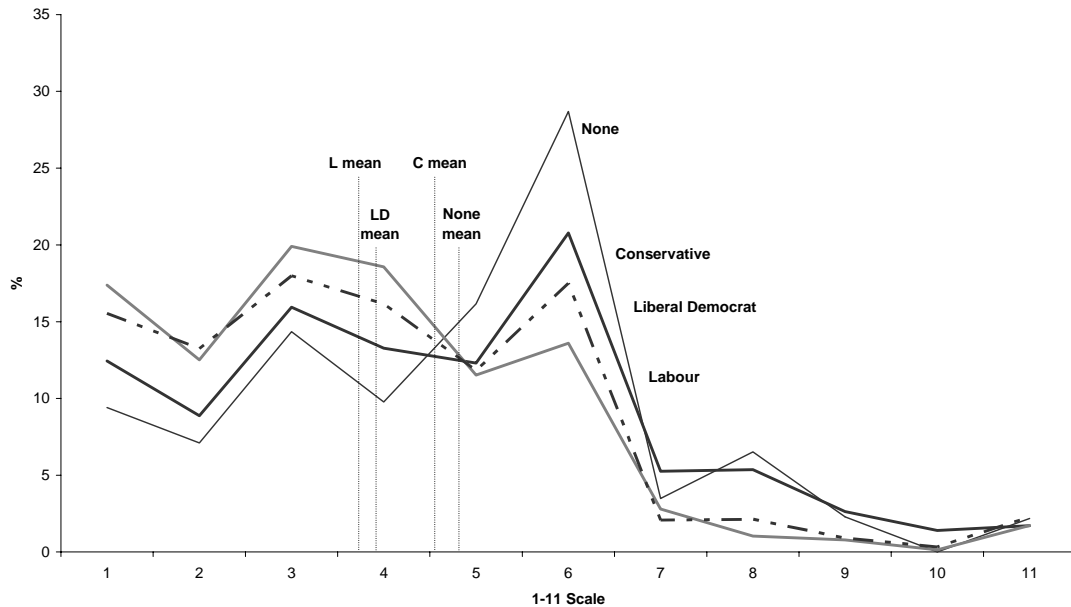


Figure 5: EU integration preference distribution in 1992 (BEPS, N = 1549)

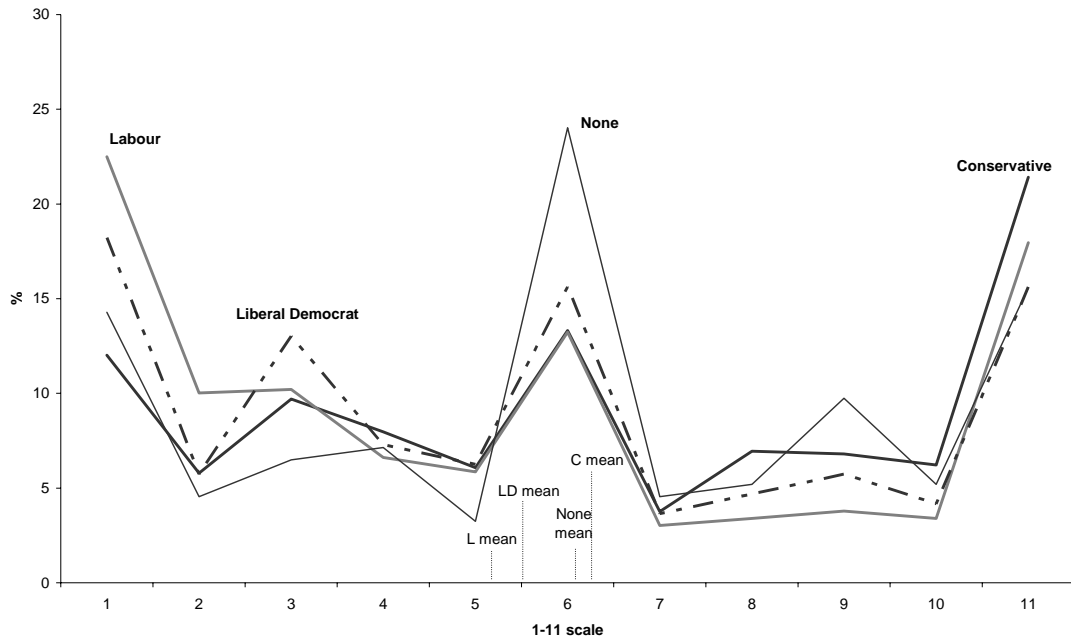


Figure 6: Distribution of preferences for Labour, Lib Dem, Conservative partisans and none on the BEPS EU Integration scale, 2000 (N= 1799)

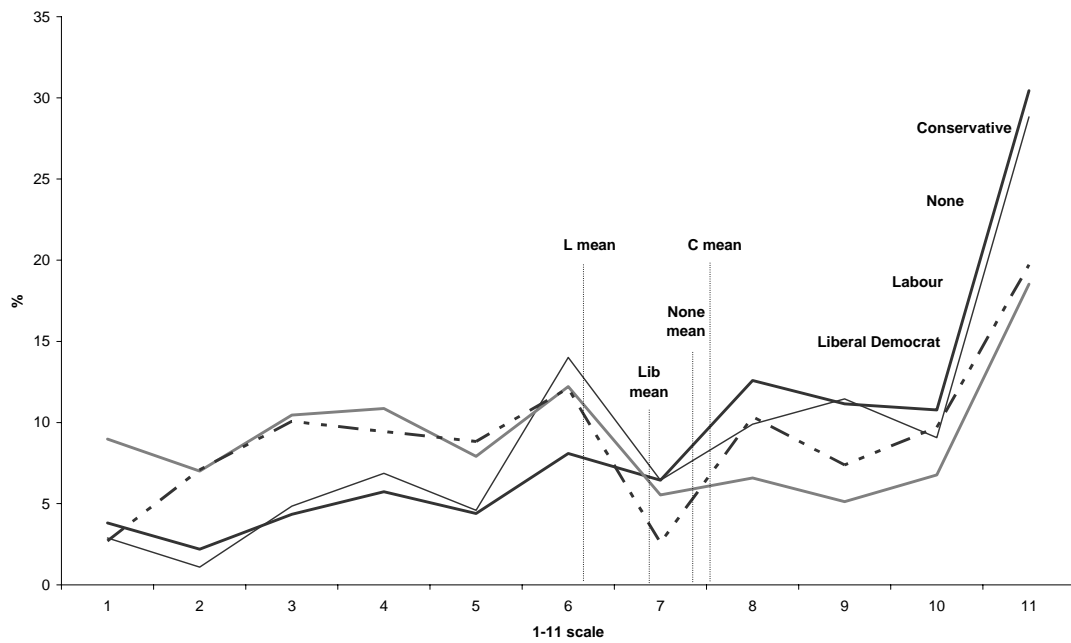


Figure 7: Redistribution preference distributions in 1987 (N= 3285)

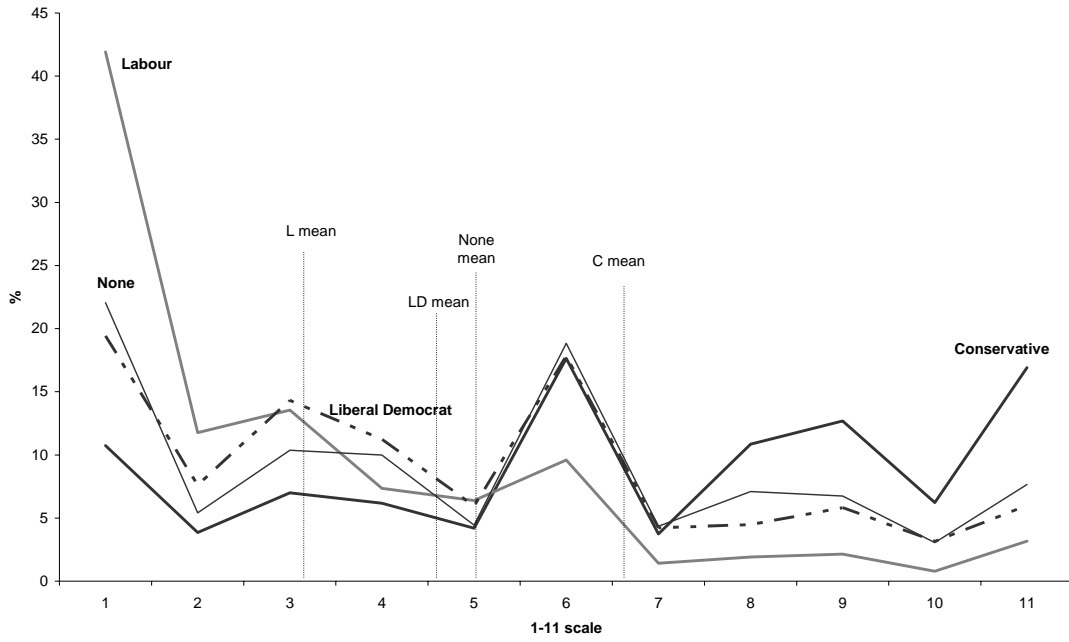


Figure 8: equalisation of incomes distributions in 2000 (N = 1808)

