Conservative Party Rationality: Learning the Lessons from the Last Election for the Next

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ABSTRACT *The received view of the Conservative Party's 2001 General Election campaign was that the party campaigned on the wrong issues and fought an extreme campaign, trading the goal of vote maximization for an appeal to the core vote. This article challenges existing arguments and evidence that the positions adopted by the party were extreme and sub-optimal. Analysis of British Election Study cross section data reveals that voters placed the Conservative Party closer to their own views than suggested by politicians' self-placement. The perceived placement of the Conservative Party was closest to voters of other parties on Europe and close but not closest to voters of all parties on the taxation–public spending scale. Conservative voters were more euro-sceptic but also more pro-spending than the perceived position of the Conservative Party. The Conservative Party's 2001 General Election campaign may have been sub-optimal but this should necessarily not be attributed to the failure of the party to act rationally according to issue proximity models of vote-maximizing behaviour. The party's issue emphasis was also consistent with theories of rationality. An alternative interpretation of the constraints facing the party is therefore offered.*

This paper re-evaluates the lessons the Conservative Party should learn from its last general election campaign for its next. The last election was notable for several reasons. Firstly, Labour was dominant and its winning a second term in government was inevitable. Second, the fall in turn-out was dramatic, either because voters were disillusioned or they did not think their vote was instrumental. A third feature was the widespread evaluation that the Conservative Party fought a misguided campaign and therefore demonstrated its failure to adapt and learn the lessons of its 1997 defeat. The conclusion would seem to be that the Conservatives should avoid a repeat of the errors in its last campaign at all costs. It will be demonstrated in this article that this conclusion is premature.

In the last general election the Conservatives secured a net gain of just one seat and 31.7% vote share. It was described as “the worst Tory performance since Britain became a democracy” (Kelly, 2002: 38). The expectation was that at least some

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minimal gains would be made – so what explains this failure? Formerly in government for 18 years, mainly unpopular for the last nine of those, with just four years in opposition during which voters gave Labour the benefit of the doubt, the Conservatives faced little prospect of posing a credible threat to a popular government with a healthy economy and a then trusted prime minister. The electoral system was biased against them and so was the “commentariat”. It is far from obvious that the Conservatives would have won more support with a different campaign and it is difficult to know whether the result was the best they could have achieved. Nevertheless, the existing literature presents the view that the Conservatives failed to maximize their vote in 2001, at least in part on the basis of a misjudged and misguided campaign.

Butler and Kavanagh (2002) described the campaign as narrow and extreme, aimed at consolidating the party’s ideologically unrepresentative core vote rather than reaching out to middle England voters and the centre ground. Norris (2001) portrayed the party as fishing for votes beyond where they were located, attempting to create clear blue water between them and Labour. Bara and Budge (2001) reported that the party turned to a series of traditional stances on immigration, law and order, and little England nationalism, and Collings and Seldon (2001) described the leader of the opposition’s (William Hague’s) prospects as a cruel mirage when he turned his back on the moderate agenda. The emerging picture is that the Conservative Party fought a campaign aimed at its core vote rather than maximizing its vote among the wider electorate.

From a rational choice perspective the Conservative Party, in these accounts, failed to act as a vote maximizing party, where rational action would dictate adopting a median, centrist or majority appeal and engaging with the priorities of voters. The party’s behaviour therefore poses an interesting dilemma. The hypothesis could be that competing goals took priority, such as maintaining core supporters: of special interest here would be whether these competing incentives are predictable in periods of electoral weakness and when parties can be expected to maximize their chance of power. However, it will be argued that the Conservative campaign of 2001 was not as “irrational” as first appears. Explanations, such as those detailing barriers to ideological adaptation, miss the point. Specifically, the Conservatives can be viewed as occupying a vote maximizing position according to proximity theories of issue competition. In so far as the campaign has been described as extreme and out of touch, these criticisms should be disentangled from other factors. The Conservatives need not necessarily alter their ideological position substantially in order to maximize their chance of making gains in the forthcoming general election.

The structure of the argument is as follows. Firstly, the existing case for Conservative irrationality is set out, specifically highlighting the analysis of Norris and Lovenduski (2004). This account is then challenged and an alternative analysis of issue positions is presented, demonstrating far closer proximity between voters and the Conservative Party. There follows an evaluation of the issue emphases of the Conservative Party, namely the attempt to make the election about the Pound and avoiding the subject of health. The article concludes by discussing the implications for party behaviour and rationality in the forthcoming campaign.

Drowning in Clear Blue Water?

It would be easy to think, due to the general level of criticism levelled at the Conservatives' 2001 campaign, that the view that the Conservative Party was "drowning in clear blue water" is unchallenged. Losing campaigns are rarely described as optimal, regardless of the separate reasons for electoral defeat. However, it has been pointed out that the Conservatives were in fact popular in relation to Labour on the issues of law and order, taxation, Europe, and asylum and immigration (Collings & Seldon, 2001; Worcester & Mortimore, 2001; Cowley & Quayle, 2002; Webb, 2002). These issues were the Conservatives' chosen campaign issues and exclude only health, education and pensions among the top ten most salient (Bara & Budge, 2001; Norris, 2001; Webb, 2002), although it should be noted that health was by far the most salient in responses to "most important problem" questions. The rationality of issue emphasis will be dealt with in a later section.

Contrary to these accounts, Bartle (2002: 190) argues that the Conservatives' populism was unpopular, specifically on the subject of Europe, because although some survey questions yielded positive support of the Conservative Party on the issue, other questions revealed more mixed results. He maintains that the Conservatives talked about Europe in the wrong way, and this stylistic error underlined their unpopularity. However, on the issue dimension of European integration, measured by the British Election Studies, Evans (2002) has shown that the Conservatives adopted a more optimal position than the other parties, and consequently benefited relative to their appeal on the issue in 1997.

Crewe (2001) argues that the Conservatives were rated the most unpopular party on all policy issues. This may reflect the fact that party identification drives the rating of policy alternatives, and need not therefore be indicative of sub-optimal issue positions, but of partisan bias in evaluating the Conservatives on "best party" survey questions. Private polling for the Conservative Party by ICM revealed, "75% of Labour supporters nominate Labour as having the best policies on 16 or more out of 19 different policy areas, 65% of Tory supporters do the same for the Conservative Party" (ICM Research, 2001).

Manifesto analysis by Bara and Budge (2001) reveals that the Conservatives adopted their most centrist platform in over two decades across all issues except Europe, yet on Europe the Conservatives were closest to public opinion. It would be possible to dispute the accuracy of this aspect of manifesto analysis, calculating only the sum of right-wing statements minus the sum of left-wing statements in the party manifestos (Budge *et al.* 2001). Bara and Budge (2001) also cite their belief that the Conservative campaign may have been more extreme than their manifesto, and further criticism has focused on the difference between the theoretical and rhetorical campaign (Cooper, 2002). However, on the basis of this conflicting empirical evidence there is reason at least to question claims of Conservative "extremism".

Several descriptive accounts of the Conservatives' 2001 campaign exist, but only one provides analysis of the positions of the Conservative Party in an attempt to

draw a causal account of the outcome. Norris and Lovenduski (2004) compare the self-placement of Conservative candidates (including MPs) in 2001 with voters on the same two scales (tax-spend and European integration). The authors make their argument as follows. Conservative politicians were further from the mean position of voters than the other parties. They perceived voters to be closer to their own positions than voters in fact were, and this “selective perception” explains the extreme positions held by the Conservatives in the election. These positions, and therefore the phenomenon of selective perception, explains the failure of the Conservative Party to maximize its vote in the 2001 election. The implication is that the Conservatives failed to catch up with the “policy mood” (Stimson, 1991), and should remedy their electoral fortunes by becoming ideologically responsive to the views of the electorate.

Adopting the assumptions of issue proximity used by Norris and Lovenduski (“Rational vote-seeking politicians seek to maintain popular support (and hence office) by remaining ... where the public is in accord with policy proposals, rather than moving too far across the ideological spectrum to the left or right”, 2004: 87) and implicit in the criticism of the Conservative campaign made by the authors reviewed above, it will be demonstrated that alternative factors should be considered to explain the rationality and election outcome of the Conservative Party in the 2001 election.

Data and Methods

This study initially replicates Norris and Lovenduski’s (2004) findings of the self-placement of politicians (Norris, 2001) with the mean placement of voters on the two issue scales of tax-spend and European Integration (2001 and 1997 British Election Studies respectively; Clarke *et al.*, 2001a; Heath *et al.*, 1997). The perceived placement of the Conservative Party is then measured using respondent’s mean and median scores and self-placement using the 2001 British General Election Study cross-section (Clarke *et al.* 2001a).

Measuring party placement by voter’s perceptions is more theoretically consistent if connecting party placement with electoral effect. Even if Conservative politicians placed themselves furthest from the mean position of voters it cannot be concluded that the effect was for the party to suffer electorally *unless voters thought this was the case*. Norris and Lovenduski concede, “Voters consistently believed that the Conservatives were more middle-of-the-road than was the case” (Norris & Lovenduski, 2004: 100). It is also possible that voter’s placement of the Conservative Party is actually a more accurate indicator of the actual position held by the party than politician’s self-placement. The BRS is a sample of MPs and Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs), the latter forming the largest proportion. It is highly doubtful that Conservative Party policy was formulated by MPs, let alone the party’s candidates. Political parties are not unitary actors and national campaigns are increasingly directed by a professional caucus. William Hague was criticized for not including his MPs or even a large number of professionals in the development of the campaign (Butler & Kavanagh, 2002).

Furthermore, elected members are argued to be the most radical in the Conservative Party (Norris, 1995), and it might be predicted that they are likely to hold more extreme positions than evident in the national strategy.

This article uses post-election scores on two issue scales for perceptions of the Conservative Party's position and voter's self-placement. These post-election scores should be the most stringent test of whether the party was perceived to hold extreme positions reflecting informed voter preferences as a result of any campaign learning (and pre- and post-election responses are compared). The analysis is confined to the three main political parties for simplicity, and also due to sample size limitations.

Norris and Lovenduski (2004) conflate 1997 and 2001 data¹ due to the omission of the European Union (EU) integration scale in the 2001 British Election Study (BES). The 2001 EU scale is replaced with a scale specifically measuring attitudes towards the single currency (where 0 = definitely replace the pound and 10 = definitely keep the pound) and this scale is used here. The scale is particularly relevant to the 2001 general election. Collings and Seldon (2001) report that William Hague sought to make the election a referendum on the euro and Norris and Sanders (2003) report that the Conservatives staked much of the election on the claim that only they could save the pound. Between 1997 and 2001 the highly politicized question of European Monetary Union (EMU) became more central to the European Integration question itself (Evans, 2002). The tax-spend scale (where 0 = cut taxes and spend much less on public services and 10 = increase taxes and spend much more) captures an important dimension in two respects. Firstly, it was central to the Conservatives' campaign in so far as taxation was one of the party's campaign issues. Secondly, it represents the key issue of spending on public services in the campaign and an important dimension of British ideological competition.

The 2001 BES campaign panel (Clarke *et al.* 2001b) is also briefly analysed here. This survey provides a comparison of salience ratings of the "most important issue", revealing unprompted response ratings using voluntary categories.

Analysis of Results

The graph overleaf (Figure 1) presents Norris and Lovenduski's comparison of party and voter placement on taxation and EU integration, demonstrating that the Conservative Party's candidates are clearly the furthest from the mean position of voters.

Conservative politicians either held views considerably more right wing on Europe and taxation than the other parties, or they wish to represent themselves as such in their survey responses. It may be the case that the Conservative Party recruited more right-wing candidates for the 2001 election, and possibly that its remaining MPs after 1997 were further from majority public opinion. However, it need not be concluded either that these positions reflect the ideological position adopted in the election strategy, or the ideological position perceived to have been adopted by voters.

Figure 1. Politician's self-placement on Europe and taxation in 1997 and 2001.

Source: Norris and Lovenduski (2004: 95) BRS and BES values. BRS 2001 and BES 1997 European integration scale: "Some people feel that Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union. Other people feel that Britain should do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union. Where would you place your own views, the views of the Labour Party etc ..."; BRS and BES 2001 Tax-Spend scale: "On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means government should cut taxes a lot and spend much less on health and social services, and 10 means government should raise taxes a lot and spend much more, where would you put the views of ..."

Figure 2 presents the position of the three main parties measured by the location voters perceived the parties to occupy compared to the position of the mean value of voters. Here the scales used are the same tax-spend scale as in Figure 1 but the 2001 BES scale on attitudes towards EMU.

Firstly, and not very surprisingly, voter's views on Europe were more right-wing than in 1997 on the measure of attitudes towards EMU. Secondly, the Conservative Party was far closer to voters on this measure than the other two parties. The Conservatives appear to have occupied a vote maximizing position on this issue and as Evans (2002) has shown, preferences on Europe were positively correlated with Conservative vote.

The Conservative Party was also closer than in Figure 1 to the views of voters on the tax-spend scale. It is argued that tax-spend scales in person-to-person surveys such as the BES tend to be influenced by social acceptability factors (Bartle, 2002, 2003) and so respondents may say they are more pro-taxation than in anonymous Internet polling (Kellner, 2004). It should therefore be noted that the mean voter score on this scale (and throughout this paper) could in fact be even closer to the position adopted by the Conservatives.

Two explanations may account for the proximity of the Conservative Party towards voters on the tax-spend scale. Either uncertainty of the party's positions

Figure 2. Voter's perceived party placement on taxation and the euro in 2001.

Source: BES 2001, Tax-Spend Scale as above. Keep-Replace Pound scale: "Some people think that Britain should definitely replace the Pound with the Euro. Other people think that Britain should definitely keep the Pound. On the 0–10 scale below, where would you place your own views, the Labour Party's views, etc ..."

leads voters to locate parties nearer the centre, or the Conservative Party was perceived accurately as holding more pro-spending views on taxation. Both interpretations are plausible – the first due to the relatively low level of political interest in the 2001 campaign, and the second when the Conservative Party's policies are recalled. Although the Conservatives talked about reducing taxes by £8bn, Labour also promised tax cuts for families and pensioners. On education, the Conservative Party committed itself to spend £450 extra per pupil per school in England; both parties pledged to boost pensions; and the Conservatives pledged to match Labour's spending on health. These precise policies may not have been observed by the majority of voters, but the differences between the parties in 2001 were certainly not of the magnitude of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and demonstrate significant convergence in relative terms. Indeed, McLean (2002) cites the 2001 election as an example of Downsian convergence, purportedly responsible for the dramatic fall in turn-out. The findings here reflect Bara and Budge's (2001) manifesto data analysis of a convergence towards the centre of the political spectrum. If the latter explanation is plausible, it suggests that the strategy succeeded in placing the party against its less ideologically representative Parliamentary Party, an interpretation finding consistency with May's law of curvilinearity of disparity (May, 1972).

Regardless, these findings challenge the argument that the Conservatives suffered electorally because they were "fishing for votes where they weren't located" (Norris & Lovenduski, 2004: 96) or because they held extreme positions on these two scales. As Cowley and Quayle (2002) observed, on Europe the Conservative Party

Figure 3. Frequency distributions for the perceived placement of the Conservatives and self-placement on the Keep-Replace Pound Scale (definitely keep = 10; definitely replace = 0).

Source: 2001 BES Cross Section.

was extreme only in so far as the electorate were extreme. Although measuring “extremeness” in relation to an arbitrary centre is spurious, when measured against the position of the electorate, the Conservatives were not extreme. If their emphasis on this issue was in some qualitative sense extreme, these findings demonstrate that this should not be confused with issue position.

Mean values of central tendency can be problematic in assessing the positions of both parties and voters if the average simply cancels out more interesting dispersions of opinion. The distribution of the electorate can be understood better on the two issue scales by examining the distribution of frequencies, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Figure 4. Frequency distributions for the perceived placement of the conservatives and self-placement on the Tax-Spend Scale (cut taxes, spend less = 0; increase taxes, spend more = 10).

Source: 2001 BES Cross Section.

The views of voters were more uniform on the issue of EMU than their perceived placement of the Conservative Party. This suggests that despite the argument that the Conservative Party made “saving the pound” a central campaign theme (Lansley, 2002), voters still demonstrated uncertainty in placing the party on the issue. A significant number placed the Conservatives towards the “replace the pound” end of the scale. These responses may reflect the perception that the party’s position was insufficiently Euro-sceptic given that its policy was not to rule out joining the euro indefinitely. The mean value for voter’s opinions (6.8) underestimates the fact that the majority of respondents were against membership of EMU (point 10) and the median voter was located at point 8.0. The salience of views on the euro will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

On the tax-spend scale there was a wider distribution of respondent’s opinions and their placement of the Conservative Party. The difference between voter and perceived Conservative Party mean scores is 1.9 whereas the difference in Figure 1 (between voters and Conservative politicians) is 3.4. If the position of the Conservative Party (measured by the mean) is compared with the median voter, the distance is greater on taxation but closer on Europe.

Mean values may also obscure important differences in issue position by the types of voters the parties would have hoped to attract. Therefore, it is central to calculate the positions of voters by the party they voted for. This allows an evaluation of the strength of the argument that the Conservative campaign, if extreme, was aimed only at the ideological positions of the core vote rather than other or all voters. It might be expected that Conservative voters (the core forming the largest proportion of the party’s 31.7% vote share) would be closer to the positions of the Conservative Party than any potential new voters from the other two parties. It might also be expected that the perceived placement of the Conservative Party would be affected by voter’s party preferences. Party identification may lead voters to place themselves further from a party they did not support. Considering the low popularity of the Conservative Party in 2001, any such effects of “cognitive dissonance” should be particularly pronounced and so exaggerate differences between party placement and voter’s self-placement. Figure 5 presents these comparisons on the two scales.

The voters of each party did place themselves closer to their own party, but not to the degree that Labour and the Liberal Democrats were significantly closer to voters on the keep/replace the pound scale. These parties appear to have been “fishing for votes where they weren’t located” on the European issue. There was a slight variation in the perceived location of the Conservative Party, with Liberal Democrat and Labour voters thinking the Conservatives were more in favour of cutting taxes than the party’s own supporters. However, there was a general consensus among the voters of each party regarding the Conservative position on the single currency and this lends support to the use of voter’s perceptions as a measure of party placement, particularly on this scale. On taxation the Conservative Party was almost equally distant from the voters of all three parties though closer to its own voters, particularly as Conservative voters perceived the Conservative Party to be more left of the scale.

Figure 5. A comparison of voters and parties on taxation and the euro in 2001
Source: BES 2001 cross section.

Significantly, the Conservative Party's own voters, or for these purposes, its core vote as far as it can be measured here, were more centrist on taxation and more right wing than the Conservative Party on Europe. If the Conservative Party was appealing only to its core, it either incorrectly perceived the ideological location of its core voters, or was in fact appealing to Labour and Liberal Democrat voters and Conservative voters equally. These findings indicate that the party may have risked its Euro-sceptic votes for a position closer to the voters it needed to attract from the Liberal Democrats and Labour. The findings also reveal the degree to which the extreme nature of any core vote appeal has been overestimated, particularly on taxation and public spending. On this issue Conservative voters appear to be more pro-spending than their party.

However, is it possible to be sure that the parties were in fact nearer to voters than their politicians perceived themselves to be? If voters acquire knowledge of the positions in the campaign, as argued by Norris and Sanders (2003), and the Conservative campaign was in fact in extreme, it would be expected that campaign learning would result in more extreme perceived positions after the campaign, and consequently some change in the mean scores would be seen. However, a comparison of pre- and post-responses demonstrates no such change. On the tax-spend scale the means were 4.73 and 4.72 respectively ($N = 2025$). Either the campaign had literally no effect on voters' perceptions of the party, or the mean scores reflect

an accurate assessment of the Conservative Party's position. Taken overall, there is evidence to suggest that the Conservative Party can be argued to have adopted a more moderate position than the collective views of its MPs and candidates measured by the BRS.

Rationality and Vote-Maximization

In light of the findings discussed here, is it possible to answer the question of whether the Conservative Party acted rationally in issue based terms, and that it could have been expected to maximize its vote accordingly? On first appraisal of the evidence presented here, the Conservative Party adopted a more rational ideological location than previously stated, unless its position on taxation was "too far" from target voters. There is no measure of evaluating what is "too far" in Norris and Lovenduski's theoretical framework, based on Stimson's (1991) model of policy moods and cycles.² In Figure 5 the position of the median voter is included, allowing the positions to be evaluated within the assumptions of Downs' (1957) median voter theorem. Concurrently, it would be expected that the party would maximize its vote, and so be considered a rational actor, if its position is *closest* to the median voter on a single dimension. From these findings it might be argued that the Conservatives occupied a vote maximizing position on Europe but not on taxation, where the Liberal Democrats were closest. However, the full assumptions of Downs' model (particularly relating to multidimensionality) are not tested here, and alternative theories of vote-maximization and rationality would also need to be considered. For example, it might be possible to control for the type of issue, whether valence or otherwise (Heath *et al.* 2001) or test the directional model of voting (Rabinowitz & MacDonald, 1989). This article has, however, challenged existing analysis that the party adopted extreme issue positions. If the Conservative Party failed to behave as a rational actor in the 2001 General Election, it could be possible to miss the point by referring primarily to vote-maximizing assumption of issue proximity.

A more accurate criticism of the vote-maximizing nature of the Conservative campaign might be addressed to the issues the Conservatives chose to focus upon rather than issue proximity. The findings discussed above necessarily relate to the question of rationality and ideological competition *ceteris paribus*. However, in so far as the campaign was described as out of touch and extreme, an evaluation of the rationality of the Conservative Party should also question whether the issues the party chose to focus upon had the effect of damaging their electoral chances.

The planned Conservative campaign themes were tax, crime, Europe and education, with one day planned on asylum and immigration.³ These were the issues on which the Conservatives were more popular (except education). On Labour's strengths, health and education, the aim was to neutralize them by matching Labour's spending commitments and pointing to the Government's failure to deliver (Butler & Kavanagh, 2002). There are innumerable comments that could be made about the campaign and to what degree the actual campaign reflected its intended strategy, and some of these points have been made elsewhere (Butler and Kavanagh,

2002; Cooper, 2002; Lansley, 2002). However, it is possible to ask whether the Conservative campaign themes were misjudged and in some sense 'irrational'.

Three points can be made regarding the rationality of attempting to make the campaign about the Conservatives' issues and raising their salience. Firstly, although 61% of BES respondents overall considered the Conservatives to be "out of touch", a comparison between 1997 and 2001 of the perception that the Conservative Party was extreme indicates that the Conservatives were perceived to be less extreme in 2001, falling from 36.8% to 32.5% over the two elections. Therefore, if the issue emphases led to the evaluation that the Conservatives were "out of touch" the criticism that this made the party appear extreme (for example, Norris, 2001; Butler and Kavanagh, 2002; Norris and Lovenduski, 2004), does not receive convincing support. Furthermore, this 32.5% were primarily comprised of Labour and Liberal Democrat identifiers before the campaign.

Secondly, the Conservatives had some success in raising the salience of their issues, and consequently, it is necessary to consider that their campaign was rational in a respect that has thus far been overlooked. As Webb (2002: 364) rightly noted of the aim of the Conservative Party's strategy: "while it may be very difficult for parties to change voters' minds on any issue, they can sometimes succeed in changing what issues are on voters' minds through the force of their campaigning efforts". Collings and Seldon (2001) have pointed to some Conservative success in raising the salience of tax and striking a chord with the electorate in this way. There is also evidence to indicate that the salience of Europe and the euro was raised during the campaign. Prior to the election, an ICM/Guardian poll (see www.icmresearch.co.uk) found that Europe was the 11th most salient issue for voters. However, a MORI/Sunday Telegraph poll (see www.mori.com) on 4 June 2001 (three days prior to voting) found that Europe was the fourth most salient issue, after health, education and pensions. In Table 1, the BES Campaign Panel (Clarke *et al.*, 2001b) reveals Europe or the euro to be the third highest unprompted issue, with a small increase from beginning to end of the campaign (although this question relates to the most important issue in the election).

Table 1. Top 5 most important issue summary

	Pre election % (N)	Post election % (N)
NHS	25.9 (1237)	35.2 (1314)
Education	11.7 (562)	13.3 (496)
Euro, Europe	9.6 (460)	12.3 (458)
Taxation	8.1 (389)	4.5 (169)
Pensions	6.2 (295)	—
Economy general	—	3.8 (141)

N = 3734

Source: 2001 BES Campaign Panel "Most Important Issue" question: "In your opinion, what is/was the single most important issue in the general election?"

Table 2. Conservative party press releases, 2001 general election campaign

Issue	Proactive	Reactive	Total
Tax	21	19	40
Health	3	31	34
Pound/Euro and Europe	8	20	28
Foot and Mouth/countryside	7	16	23
Transport	11	4	15
Crime	8	7	15
Education	7	4	11
Business	3	8	11
Pensions/pensioners	8	2	10
Defence	2	8	10
Sleaze	3	2	5
Asylum	2	1	3
Total	83	122	205

Source: Conservative Party Archive, held at The Bodleian Library, Oxford. Proactive press releases were classified as those announcing events or policies, and reactive press releases were those responding to events or other parties' campaigns.

However, these issue ratings also unequivocally demonstrate that the electorate thought the 2001 general election was about health. Either Labour reflected voter's priorities on this issue or was able to shape the agenda of what the election was about – the issue on which their opponents had one of their most marked weaknesses (Webb, 2002).

Thirdly, and despite this, the degree to which the Conservatives actually maintained a strategy of raising the salience of their own strengths and not campaigning on Labour's strengths should not be overestimated. There is evidence to suggest that it was impossible not to campaign on the issues Labour chose to make the election about. Table 2 reveals the subjects on which the Conservatives distributed press releases during the campaign, showing that health was the second issue. Furthermore, of all keynote speeches made by William Hague during the campaign, four were specifically on health, three were on education, two were on pensions, six were on tax, three were on the countryside, and one speech respectively was made on Europe/pound, crime, and asylum. Six speeches also covered all topics and were given as keynote speeches throughout the campaign.

Although these written communications tell one a limited amount about the campaign content and its appearance, they reveal that decisions were made to reflect a more broad issue platform. The Conservative Party in opposition could only decide so far what they wanted the election to be about and could not avoid responding to the priorities of the electorate or the campaign agenda established by Labour.

An alternative interpretation of Conservative Party behaviour and rationality emerges. Although the Conservatives had mixed success in making the election

about their issue strengths, a campaign aimed at raising the importance of an issue dimension to their advantage can be viewed in rational vote-maximizing terms (Budge & Farlie, 1977), particularly where it can be shown to have had some impact. As Budge (1987: 25) states, "If party leaders feel that they and their rivals 'own' various issues in this way, differential emphases in their treatment of them are entirely logical". This strategy would have cut across the wider electorate as well perhaps as serving the purpose of motivating the Conservative Party's core vote, the latter being an essential and rational part of any campaign, including Labour's in 2001. Evans (1998) has argued that the European issue would have benefited the Conservatives in 1997 but for them appearing divided. By building a clear and consensual image on Europe in 2001, the issue position had a greater chance of serving as an important relative strength. Furthermore, it was Labour's performance on asylum seekers, crime, Europe and taxation that discriminated between Tory and Labour voters in the 2001 election (Bartle, 2003), the very issues on which the Conservatives sought to emphasize their strengths and Labour's weaknesses.

Whether aimed at motivating the core or not, William Hague believed that the party was faced with little choice in this respect. The relative issue strengths had remained unchanged throughout Hague's period as Leader and they could either focus on them or draw more focus to the strengths of their opponents. In an interview with the author, William Hague said,

If the Labour Party at this stage are 30 points ahead then there is no point fighting an election on that issue. You can change the salience of an issue but you can't change the perceptions of the parties on it ... You have to find the issues that you have a relative advantage. On tax, crime and Europe, and asylum, we had a relative advantage.³

Conclusions

A number of explanations have been offered to account for the Conservative Party's failure in the 2001 election, each with implications for an understanding of party behaviour and rationality. The evidence presented here suggests that these accounts require qualification.

First, it has been argued that the party was acting "under the influence" of its less representative members and voters, appealing to its core rather than maximizing its vote (Kelly, 2001; Butler & Kavanagh, 2002; Cowley & Quayle, 2002; Garnett & Lynch, 2002). The implication is to turn to competing conceptions of rationality to explain the party's behaviour, perhaps the desire to reduce exit (Hirschman, 1970) by creating policy related incentives for members in light of diminishing party membership (Lees-Marshment & Quayle, 2001). This may have been part of the story in terms of issue priority, but does not receive support whereby the Conservative Party's position was close to the wider electorate and positions were in accord with the voters of the other parties from which the Conservatives needed to attract support.

Secondly, some explanations describe the Conservative Party as unable to adapt due to ideological tensions, and ideological commitment to unrepresentative

ideological positions, exacerbated by a lack of strategic clarity, leadership ability and organizational structure (Collings & Seldon, 2001; Butler & Kavanagh, 2002; Cowley & Quayle, 2002; Kelly, 2002; Norton, 2002). Although the campaign strategy may have been imperfect, the party should not be criticized for failing to adapt to more moderate issue positions, despite the views of its MPs and candidates. The period was marked by indecision regarding the optimal way to compete with Labour, but the question of adaptation was in the degree to which the Conservative Party would break with its past image, rather than in policy content.

Thirdly, explanations advanced by Norris (2001) and Norris and Lovenduski (2004) contend that the Conservative Party thought it was more in touch with public opinion than it was, and so failed to vote-maximize due to selective perception. This account does not receive support, most notably in the lack of effect of any such selective perception upon the campaign and on the perceptions and voting behaviour of the electorate.

Rational party behaviour should be seen within the context of whether a party is maximizing its available vote or attempting to win an election, the former particularly in a low turn-out election. For the Conservatives in 2001, remaining in opposition was inevitable, and so a campaign aimed at maximizing the available vote on dimensions where it occupied an optimal ideological location and raising their salience can be viewed as entirely rational. The irony is that such a strategy can be rational and yet fail to maximize the party's vote beyond a limited base. Rational behaviour to vote-maximize in the short term may conflict with rational behaviour to vote-maximize in the long term, failing to challenge perceptions of relative weakness on the most important issues and exacerbating a perception of being out of touch.

The question of what lessons the Conservative Party should learn from the 2001 campaign for the next election has to address these conflicting goals and incentives if party behaviour and rationality are to be understood better. The first step to doing this is to avoid the spurious assumption that an election defeat necessarily means the campaign failed to maximize the available vote or that the party acted irrationally. Furthermore, by re-evaluating descriptions of party behaviour on the basis of issue position, it is possible to begin to assess when theories of issue proximity relate to electoral outcomes, and when a more sophisticated theorization is required. After all, in 2001, party leadership and competence were the most significant factors (Andersen & Evans, 2003; Clarke *et al.*, 2004). There are undoubtedly many lessons for the Conservative Party to learn from its defeat in the 2001 general election, but remedying the problem of selective perception and repositioning the party in purely issue based terms are not among them.

Notes

1. Norris and Lovenduski (2004) compare the self-placement of politicians in 2001 with a 1997 measure of voter's issue positions on European integration and a 2001 measure on the tax-spend scale. The electorate became more Euro-sceptic between 1997 and 2001 (Evans, 2002), and so

- comparing 1997 voters with 2001 Conservative politicians will exaggerate any differences between them.
2. The theory states that public opinion moves in cycles, and that at any one time the policy mood contains a zone in which policies are acceptable to the public, the “zone of acquiescence”. Norris and Lovenduski (2004) argue that the Conservatives failed to catch up with the policy mood and pitched its issue positions outside this zone. Two problems arise. Firstly, the zone is not operationalized or measured, and so Norris and Lovenduski (2004) do not actually tell us whether the positions the Conservatives occupied fell within it. Secondly, it is implied that because the Conservatives’ policies were rejected, they must have been outside this zone. Here the theoretical argument is tautologous – are the boundaries of the zone of acquiescence defined by the policies, or the policies by the zone? This theory does not help one understand whether the policies of the Conservative Party were vote maximizing.
 3. Interview with the Rt. Hon. William Hague MP, 16 September 2002.

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