

THE PROBLEM OF PARTY CONVERGENCE

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This paper highlights the importance of party convergence for theories of spatial competition and reveals asymmetries between the incentives of different parties, and their consequences. The findings are drawn from newly available measures in the 2005 British Election Study, revealing that when major parties converge, vote losses due to abstention can outweigh vote gains due to proximity. Furthermore, when centrist third parties offer voters an alternative to abstention, they gain votes from major converging parties. However, these effects impact the two main parties differently and the consequences of these asymmetric incentives are important for the predictions of spatial theories.

Spatial modellers point to a lack of examples of party convergence to question the expectations of Downs (1957).¹ They instead explain why parties tend to take polarised positions relative to their opponents (See Adams 2001; Adams and Merrill 2001; Adams and Merrill 2003; Adams et al. 2005).² However, voters in Britain voters judged the major parties in the past two general elections as more similar than ever before (Bara 2006; Curtice 2005) and recent British politics presents spatial theorists with a confounding example.

While chasing votes at the center, each of the major parties in Britain claims to be ideologically distinct. One explanation must be the aim of projecting opponents away from optimal positions. Another is to give voters a reason to turnout.³ In the spatial literature, parties should seek to reduce ‘abstention from indifference’, whereby voters’ preferences are met or not met irrespective of their decision to vote (see Brody and Page 1973; Hinich and Munger 1997). Yet in the most well-known spatial theory of party competition parties are also expected to maximize votes by pursuing the same voters, converging towards the position of the median (Downs 1957). This suggests that there is a strategic a tension in this theory between pursuing the median voter for one party and doing so when another party adopts the same strategy, since if parties converge at the median both may lose voters due to abstention.

In models of party competition that incorporate the relevance of indifference, such as those put forward by Hinich and Munger (1997), Erikson and Romero (1990) and Adams and Merrill

¹ The equilibrium position for two parties on a single-peaked dimension will be convergence at the median voter. Also: Hotelling (1929) and Black (1958).

² Originally argued by Smithies (1941); parties vacate the center when they risk losing votes at the periphery. This is the basic assumption underling later theoretical modifications, explained, for example by the role of different party and electoral systems (e.g. Cox 1990; Dow 2001). Another significant explanation is the directional theory of Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989; MacDonald et al. 1991; MacDonald and Rabinowitz 1998): voters choose parties that emphasise positions in their direction, creating incentives for party divergence. Furthermore, some valence and spatial theories link the position taking of political parties to their valence advantages and activist constraints (see Schofield 2005; Schofield and Sened 2005).

³ In an interview with the author on 16th September 2002, William Hague (Conservative party leader between 1997 and 2001) said, “any opposition campaign in an election is usually highlighting the differences between them and the government, otherwise there’s no reason to vote for an opposition”. In a further interview on 6th March 2007, Michael Howard (Conservative leader between 2003 and 2005) said of earlier elections such as 1983, “there was clearly a very big difference between the two parties; they were very big issues that mattered to people, so people were not surprisingly... more prepared to go out and vote”.

(2003: Adams et al. 2005), abstention due to indifference is thought to be outweighed as a strategic consideration for parties by other factors causing parties to diverge, such as the polarising influence of partisan constituencies. This paper responds by urging spatial scholars to reconsider the importance of indifference on the strategic considerations of parties. I seek to show, using commonly cited spatial assumptions, and by introducing to the models the choice of responding to indifference by voting for third parties, that converging parties can lose more votes by being similar to their opponents than they gain by being closer to voters, providing an influential explanation for the vote gains and losses of party strategies.

I present analyses of vote choice in the British general election of 2005, comparing two different measures of perceived party similarity, to show that the British Labour party's vote losses to the third party, the Liberal Democrats, mean it suffers more vote losses than it gains from proximity to voters if it converges with the Conservatives. The British general election of 2005 provides an ideal example of party convergence and a data source, the 2005 British Election Study, that incorporates a new measure uniquely suited to exploring these tensions. I reveal that our choice of measures is highly important for our conclusions about the impact of indifference.

The implications of the analyses based on this case study are, most interestingly, that the incentives between parties within the same country and political system can be in opposite directions. One party should hope to diverge whereas its competitor should converge. This is shown because Labour's losses due to convergence far outweigh its gains due to proximity, due to abstention and vote losses to the third party, but the other major party – the Conservatives – can gain as much, or more, by converging with Labour than they lose due to indifference. If incentives are symmetric, we can predict party divergence or convergence, and this has been the assumption in spatial theories up to this point. However, if incentives are asymmetric, as I highlight here, then many more interesting predictions and questions arise, potentially more faithful to reality. Parties may converge simply because one party will chase another, despite that other party's incentive to be

ideologically distinct. Fiorina's (1977) retrospective punishment voting model dealt with asymmetries between vote choices for incumbents and opposition parties, but this model only considered how voters take competence ratings in government into account. The asymmetry I reveal shows that consequent differences exist in the impact of spatial evaluations for different parties. The findings compel us to consider whether we should generalise from one incentive-based theory to all parties, either claiming that several parties can gain votes by each adopting centrist strategies (see Ezrow 2005) or by adopting divergent strategies (see above).

The analyses confirm the importance of third parties to the strategic logic of major competing parties and to theories of spatial competition, supporting the arguments of Callandar and Wilson (2007). These authors relate the success of third parties to the emergence of new salient issues on which they can differentiate from their major party competitors. The paper presents a further example of this dynamic, similar to that put forward by Greene (2007) in the case of Mexico, but in an advanced industrialised country. The third party in Britain was able to win votes in the 2005 British election due to the salience of the issue of Iraq, on which it had a positional advantage relative to the two major parties. However, my analyses also show that the third party gains on an overarching dimension on which it shares a highly similar position to the two major parties, and so instead of being squeezed at the center by converging parties, I offer an account whereby this party is the beneficiary of party convergence between the major alternatives. I offer a theoretical model whereby voters can choose a third party because it makes little difference if they vote for the Conservatives or for Labour. Many scholars who incorporate the third party into theories of spatial competition predict party divergence not convergence (Palfrey 1984; Nagel 2003; Adams and Merrill 2006) whereas my findings suggest that at least one party, the Labour party, faces stronger incentives to diverge due to the position of the Liberal Democrats.

The analytic approach I adopt builds on the work of Brody and Page (1973), Adams and Merrill (2003) and Adams et al. (2005). I test a revised 'unified turnout model', comparing the

classic proximity model with the indifference model in a case study of political party convergence, examining both abstention due to indifference and alternative party choices due to indifference. To the best of my knowledge, no other study has evaluated these effects.

Voting calculus: moderate and similar parties

In the classic proximity model of Downs (1957) individuals vote for the party holding policy positions most similar to their own (see Davis, Hinich et al. 1970; Enelow and Hinich 1984). Voter i 's overall evaluation of party p 's utility on dimension j (U_{ijp}) depends upon the squared or absolute distance between the party's position (P_{jp}) and the voter i 's own preferred position or ideal point (P_{ji}). The utility declines with distance, and so a negative sign defines the function.

$$U_{ijp} = - (P_{jp} - P_{ji})^2 \quad (1)$$

If the distance between voter i and party 1 is greater than the distance between voter i and party 2, the utilities of supporting party 2 outweigh those for party 1, such that $U_{ijp2} > U_{ijp1}$, where U_{ijp1} or U_{ijp2} are denoted by equation 1. Thus, parties are expected to pursue the preferences of the greatest number of voters and to assume positions that are optimal relative to opponents.

However, let us now assume that two parties adopt the same vote maximizing logic and converge towards the position of the median voter in a one-dimensional policy space. This suggests that $P_{jp1} = P_{jp2}$, and according to equation 1, it is also true that $U_{ijp1} = U_{ijp2}$. In this case, if two parties are very similar in policy terms 'abstention from indifference' occurs (Enelow and Hinich 1984). The utility difference between the candidates or parties is too small (beyond a threshold of indifference) that the costs of voting outweigh the utility benefits for a given voter. "This voter may then abstain from voting because it simply does not make that much difference to him who wins" (Enelow and Hinich 1984: 90).

Turnout may also decline due to policy uncertainty when parties are similarly placed. In equation 2 above, the costs (C) of gathering information about parties' policy proposals is greater when differences are not obvious or articulated along clearly defined ideologies. Matsusaka (1995) argues that the value of B is higher when a voter is confident they are voting for the correct candidate or party. Thus, if clear ideological cues allow voters to make informed choices, blurring traditional party distinctions will result in higher costs and higher levels of abstention. The expected utility model of voter turnout summarised by Downs (1957) supposes that a voter calculates the expected utility of voting or not if benefits exceed costs, where the benefits, B, can represent the utility calculation in equation 1, if:

$$R = PB - C > 0 \quad (2)$$

The benefits, PB, are therefore comprised of B, the expected utility from the policies of candidates $|U_{ip1} - U_{ip2}|$, weighted by P, the probability that one's vote influences the outcome. C represents the costs of voting.⁴ If converging parties widen the 'indifference region' (Hinich and Munger 1997), the likelihood of abstention increases.

Adams et al. (2005) agree that parties face incentives to diverge due to abstention from indifference, but they argue that more important in explaining party strategies is an incentive to diverge arising from 'abstention from alienation'. The greater the distance a party is from its partisans the greater the risk of losing those supporters due to the perceived distance from those voters and the position of their party. I suggest that partisans also value their party's distance from a disliked opponent, such that the incentives due to party convergence will be significant for these

⁴ Riker and Ordeshook (1968) append 'D' to the expression $(R = PB - C + D)$ to denote the relevance of expressive benefits of voting to the decision to turnout. It can also be argued that the costs of voting are so high and the probability of influencing the outcome so low that the benefits of voting rarely outweigh the costs. However, Hinich and Munger (1997) challenge this argument and empirical evidence demonstrates that these instrumental calculations make a difference at the margin from election to election (Zipp 1985; Adams and Merrill 2003; Plane and Gershtenson 2004).

voters also.⁵ I propose that a party will lose more votes due to abstention than they gain from moderation, resulting in expectation 1.

E¹ = When two parties are perceived to converge, votes gained by moderation are outweighed by votes lost due to convergence

Voters do not simply choose to vote for one of two contending parties, however, or the choice to abstain. They also do not base their utility calculations between party choices on relative spatial proximity alone. This means that although two parties may offer voters a similar policy choice, they can still differentiate themselves – and so motivate voters to the polls – along additional criteria.

For the sake of simplicity, these additional criteria can be denoted *k*, representing an additional issue or spatial dimension, such as policy considerations that do not line up on the traditional left-right axis, and also component *A*, denoting overall comparisons of leaders, competence, trustworthiness, likeability etc. (affect),⁶ where:

$$U_{ijp1} = |P_{jp1} - P_{ji}| + |P_{kp1} - P_{ki}| + A_i \quad (3)$$

In Britain, and in almost all classic ‘two-party’ countries, voters can also choose to support minor parties or third parties. In the case of Britain, the third party is the Liberal Democrats and there is a range of smaller parties at the national and regional level. Let us therefore assume that these options provide additional spatial comparisons and additional criteria in the vote calculation.

⁵ I offer some comparisons of the relative sizes of these effects in the analysis, although this empirical question is additional to the dominant focus of this paper.

⁶ *A* here encompasses term C_{jp} , for example, which captures the competence of a party on a particular issue or dimension, where $U_{ijp} = -(P_{jp} - P_{ji})^2 + C_{jp}$, consistent with the models of Enelow and Hinich (1982; 1984) and Enelow and Munger (1993). Elsewhere I argue that as the distance between $P_{jp1} - P_{jp2}$ becomes smaller, the weight given to $C_{jp1} - C_{jp2}$ in the utility calculation between two parties should be greater, because $P_{jp1} - P_{jp2}$ will tend towards zero and $U_{ijp} = -(P_{jp1} - P_{ji})^2 - (P_{jp2} - P_{ji})^2 + (C_{jp1} - C_{jp2})$ is then determined by $C_{jp1} - C_{jp2}$ (Green 2007; Green and Hobolt, 2006).

Accordingly, the choice of party 1 over parties 2 and 3 would be represented where:⁷

$$U_{jp1-3} = U_{jkAp1} > U_{jkAp2} \geq U_{jkAp3} \quad (4)$$

Lets say that $U_{jkAp1} = U_{jkAp2}$ such that two major parties provide a similar utility benefit to voter i because they adopt a similar position on dimensions j and k , and one is not liked to significant degree more than the other, on overall ‘affect’ derived from competence differentials and so on. In this case, when an additional party choice is available, we can envisage three possible outcomes.⁸

If:	$U_{jkAp1} = U_{jkAp2} \leq U_{jkAp3}$	vote p_3
If:	$U_{jkAp1} = U_{jkAp2} \leq U_{jAp3}$	vote p_3
If:	$U_{jkAp1} = U_{jkAp2} = U_{jkAp3}$	abstain

If neither party offers a utility differential to voter i , either in terms of affect or relative location on dimensions j or k , then voter i 's outcome should be to abstain. But if additional parties offer strategic advantages over the main competitors on other issues or on wider preference, these parties should win more support the greater the perceived similarity between party 1 and party 2.

$E^2 =$ *When two parties are perceived to converge, votes gained by moderation are outweighed by votes lost to additional parties.*

Although voters are expected, *ceteris paribus*, to choose the party closest to their opinion, when two or more parties present the same choice to voters, as predicted by Downs’ theory (1957), and when additional dimensions and parties are relevant to the vote choice, voter incentives are

⁷ The model can be extended where $P = n_j$ through $n-jk_n$, where the number of parties = the number of dimensions – 1.

⁸ We can also expect votes to be gained by p_3 where $U_{jkAp1} \leq U_{jkAp2} < U_{jAp3}$ and for abstention to arise due to alienation rather than indifference, when $U_{jkAp1} = U_{jkAp2} = U_{jkAp3}$ represent negative values for all parties (see Brody and Page 1973).

changed. A voter may be less likely to vote for a party closer to their preferences, either because they have little incentive to vote or they have greater incentives to vote for alternatives.

If voter utilities from proximity outweigh indifference from convergence or attraction from others, then party strategies remain motivated towards convergence. Alternatively, if indifference outweighs proximity, then parties will be expected to diverge. I therefore set out to answer the question of whether the costs of convergence outweigh the gains of moderation by quantifying these different expectations in a recent and relatively striking context of party convergence.

2005: Moderate and similar parties in Britain

On dominant policy dimensions British parties demonstrate significant policy convergence (Green 2007), also observed in manifesto content analysis over time (Bara and Budge 2001; Bara 2006). Labour moved to the center prior to 1997 in order to regain electoral competitiveness (see Heath et al. 2001; Whiteley and Seyd 2002; Hindmoor 2004). The Conservatives subsequently matched Labour's policies in key areas (Green 2005) and party leader David Cameron claims to be repositioning the Conservative Party further towards the center.⁹ There is also the significant third party, the Liberal Democrats, and this party competes for the electoral center on the classic left-right dimension. On the eleven-point left-right scale in the 2005 British Election Study (BES), the average placements of the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties respectively were 4.8 (standard deviation = 2.1), 4.7 (standard deviation = 1.4) and 6.8 (standard deviation = 2.0).¹⁰ A range of only 2 points between the three values on the eleven-point BES scale denotes strong convergence and the Liberal Democrats are perceived to take a position on three policy measures in the BES – tax, crime, and European Integration – in the center and between the two major parties.

⁹ He recently said, "I made changes to the Conservative party over the last 18 months for a very clear purpose – to get us back into the center ground" (David Cameron, Sky News, 22nd July 2007).

¹⁰ Left right 0 = left to 10 = right: "In politics, some people sometimes talk about parties and politicians as being on the left or right. Using the 0 to 10 scale on this card, where the end marked 0 means left and the end marked 10 means right, where would you place yourself /the Labour/Conservative/Liberal Democrat Party/...on this scale?"

However, the third party in 2005 had a different and optimal policy position relative to the two main parties on the issue of the Iraq war. The party consistently opposed the Iraq war, a position closer to the majority of British voters, and focussed heavily on this in the 2005 campaign and made much of its slogan ‘The Real Alternative’ – claiming it was the only party to offer a real choice to voters (see Wring et al. 2007). The two major parties had supported the Iraq war.

The Liberal Democrats also offered indifferent voters the opportunity to vote on non-policy criteria. Their leader, Charles Kennedy, was preferred to both Tony Blair and Michael Howard.¹¹ The single member plurality electoral system is heavily biased against the Liberal Democrats such that although the party won 22.1% of the popular vote in 2005, a record high for the party, they gained only 9.5% of the total seats. Voters therefore rationally consider, except where pivotal in closely fought elections or where strategic voting can make a difference, that a vote for the Liberal Democrats can be wasted. The BES asks respondents before the election how they will vote if they have decided, and then to select the reason for their vote, whether due to the best policies, leaders, or because ‘I prefer another party but it has no chance of winning in my constituency’ or ‘I voted for tactical reasons’. The large majority of respondents (38.5%) answering in the last two categories stated the Liberal Democrats as their preferred party. In these respects we can expect that as the two major parties converge, voters who would otherwise vote for one of those parties because they offered a distinct policy choice, would vote for the Liberal Democrats as their true preference.

In the 2005 British general election the Green Party, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the British National Party (BNP) gained over 1 million votes between them, representing 3.9% of total votes cast.¹² These parties have never won parliamentary representation in the UK parliament (the Green party recently won a seat in the European Parliament, and the

¹¹ 43.3% of respondents to the 2005 BES rated Tony Blair negatively on a like-dislike scale, 44.0% did so for Michael Howard whereas 34.1% disliked the Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy (N = 2959). These differences are partly attributable to greater proportions of respondents answering ‘don’t know’, but Liberal Democrat support increased in each general election campaign, 97, 01 and 05, as voters made more informed judgements about each of the three parties.

¹² Other significant minor parties in Britain are the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales; respectively the Scottish Nationalist Party and Plaid Cymru, both of which have been bolstered in recent years by the creation of a devolved parliament for Scotland and a devolved Welsh Assembly.

UKIP have also gained representation at the European level) but these parties were successful, relatively speaking, in the 2005 election, possibly due to the perceived similarities by the two major party alternatives. In 2005 the Respect Party also gained one parliamentary seat, formed in opposition to the Iraq War and fronted by a previous Labour MP, George Galloway, and two independent candidates won a majority in two parliamentary constituencies.

One further important and relevant feature of the 2005 British election was the continuation of a recent trend in relatively low levels of turnout. In 1997 the proportion turning out was 71.4%. In 2001 it was 59.4% and in 2005 it was 61.36% (preceded by a record high of 77.7% in 1992). While these outcomes can be traced to several explanatory factors, they have also been attributed in vote models to the inhibiting effects of ideological proximity between the major parties (Pattie and Johnston 2001; Whiteley et al. 2001; Curtice 2005; Clarke et al. 2006), suggesting that as the major parties became more similar, the incentives to turnout corresponding declined.

In addition to these relevant empirical factors, the 2005 British general election was the first in which the British Election Study asked respondents specifically about indifference.

Data and Methods

Two key effects are of interest in evaluating the expectations. The first is the effect of perceived proximity advantages relative to other parties. If a party is the *closest* party to a voter, that voter should be more likely to support this party versus other parties. This is the proximity theory assumption and implies that parties should eventually converge, since they should gain most if they are the party closest to the greatest majority of voters. This conceptualisation is most faithful to the theoretical premises of these models, but I will also discuss the findings using a range of measures. The second effect is the degree to which perceived similarities between the major parties result in fewer voters turning out in the election and which also result in a greater likelihood of voting for alternatives, incurring vote losses to parties that offset the gains they accrue by spatial location. The

key concern here is the relative size of the effects of these losses and gains, and so the analyses first estimates the effects and then compares them across each case.¹³

Dependent variables: I estimate the effects of being closest to a party and of perceived party convergence across each possible vote outcome for the two main parties, the Labour party and the Conservative party, in turn. I estimate each relationship e.g. voted Labour/Conservative/Liberal Democrat/others/abstained, but summarise the effects, which are completely consistent with the bivariate models, by presenting multinomial logistic regression models where the dependent variable is voted Labour/voted for other parties/abstained, and then voted Conservative/voted for other parties/abstained.¹⁴ The base category is the party under consideration (Labour or Conservative) in each model. The group ‘other’ is then formed of the other major party, the Liberal Democrats and the minor parties. The abstention measure relies on self-reported turnout, underestimating abstention, but therefore biasing the results in the direction of underestimation rather than an exaggeration of the findings.¹⁵

Independent variables: I employ a measure of party and voter placement on a composite scale comprised of the three available policy measures in the 2005 BES. These are the tax-spend question, a crime question and a European Union question. I combine these scales to best capture all the available policy space but the results are consistent with alternative specifications relying on different composite or single issue measures. Voter self-placement and perceived party placements are derived by summing the scales and averaging the position across the three questions:

(i) Tax-spend: “Using the 0 to 10 scale on this card, where the end marked 0 means that government should cut taxes and spend much less on health and social services, and the end marked

¹³ In supporting analyses, I also compared the relative effects of perceived party convergence and distance from the closest party, evaluating the importance of the ‘abstention from alienation’ explanation of party divergence relative to the effect of party convergence. These tests are beyond the scope of the present study but I refer to their potential implications in relation to the findings reported in this paper, as appropriate.

¹⁴ Tests for the independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA) were carried out. Hausman tests and Small-Hsiao tests were inconsistent, very common in these IIA procedures (see Long and Freese, 2006), and so I validate the results in the models by confirming their effects in bivariate analyses and reporting both in the discussion of the tables. In each case the model specification does not alter the conclusions arising from the results.

¹⁵ Turnout in Britain in the 2005 general election was 61.36% but self-reported turnout in the post-election BES wave in 2005 was 71.7%.

10 means that government should raise taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services, where would you place yourself/the Labour/Conservative/Liberal Democrat party on this scale?” recoded 0 = increase services, to 10 = cut taxes.

(ii) EU scale: “Now let’s talk about where parties and voters stand on some political issues. The first issue is Britain’s membership in the European Union. You’ll see on this show card that the end of the scale marked 0 means that Britain should definitely get out of the EU, and the end of the scale marked 10 means that Britain should definitely stay in the EU. Where would you place yourself/the Labour/Conservative/Liberal Democrat party on this scale?” recoded 0 definitely stay in, to 10 = definitely get out.

(iii) Crime scale: “Some people think that reducing crime is more important than protecting the rights of people accused of committing crimes. Other people think that protecting the rights of accused people is more important than reducing crime. On the 0-10 scale, where would you place yourself/the Labour/Conservative/ Liberal Democrat party on this scale?” coded 0 = protect rights, to 10 = cut crime. In 2005 the Labour party was perceived, on average, to be on the left of each scale, the Liberal Democrats further towards the middle and the Conservatives more to the right.

I have run the models with each issue in turn, with a composite left-right measure (the combined positions on the tax-spend and a left-right scale) and with a left-right measure (where respondents are simply asked to place themselves and the parties between left and right, where 0 = ‘left’ and 10 = ‘right’). In each case the substantive conclusions are supported but the proximity measures are less powerful, strengthening my argument but provide an easier test.

The party closest measure (proximity measure) was constructed whereby 1 = party is closest to voter (e.g. Labour or Conservative) and 0 = other, calculated by first comparing the perceived distance from each party to the respondent and categorising respondents according to whether they were closest to each of the two major parties.¹⁶ The variable was recoded from 0 to 1,

¹⁶ The results were also consistent if relative proximity were calculated for each party as the distance between respondent and party 1 (for the party 1 measure), minus the averaged distance between respondent and the two other parties:

such that 0 = closest to other parties and 1 = closest to the party in question. The mean positions of the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties on the party-placement scale was 3.88 (standard deviation 1.34), 4.47 (1.35) and 5.16 (1.35) respectively, showing face validity and consistency with the component measures and suggesting that the Liberal Democrats were on average perceived to occupy the center of the scale, between the Conservative and Labour parties.¹⁷

I then use two different measures of perceived party policy convergence in two separate analyses. The first is the perceived spatial distance between the Labour and Conservative parties, where Con-Lab distance = $(P_1 - P_2)^2$ on the three averaged measures, coded between 0 and 1.¹⁸ This measure, representing a purely spatial comparison, has some measurement error and content validity difficulties in capturing a notion of indifference.

Measuring respondent party placements is strongly affected by the inability of respondents to place the major parties with certainty, a problem we would expect to be particularly acute when parties are similar. The most popular response is the mid-point, but we cannot be sure whether these placements reflect certainty of moderate locations, guesses, or non-committal answers. Significant proportions of respondents answer 'don't know' to these party placement questions.¹⁹ Also, the measure only tells us about perceived similarities on the composite issues and excludes perceived similarities across whole policy domain, for example, on the salient issue of Iraq. Furthermore, when we think of policy or ideological convergence we may easily underestimate the degree to which parties offer similar and indifferent options because they adopt similar issue priorities, or show similar concerns or intensity, leading to perceived similarities and indifference not picked up

$(\text{Respondent} - P_1)^2 - ((\text{Respondent} - P_2)^2 + (\text{Respondent} - P_3)^2) / 2$. In this case the effects were stronger for the Conservative models, strengthening my conclusions. I also calculated a measure comprised of the three policy scales plus the left-right scale discussed on p.7, in addition to a simple $P_{j1} - P_{ij}$ difference comparison for the party of interest on the left-right measure. However, the measure was more robust using the three policy scales, providing a stricter test of the expectations.

¹⁷ The mean respondent position was 4.84 (standard deviation 1.66), N = 2567.

¹⁸ I also used the perceived difference between the two main parties on the left-right scale but the results were most robust using the three policy scales and then exactly comparable with the proximity measure.

¹⁹ On the tax-spend scale 5.6% of respondents chose 'don't know' for Conservative placement and 3.6% for Labour placement. On the crime scale the respective figures were 9.6% and 7.3% and on the EU scale they were 9.1% and 6.2%. I recode 'don't know' responses to the mid-point, but the results are consistent if they are dropped from the analysis.

using the traditional spatial measures on issue scales. In these respects we will underestimate the effects of convergence and indifference when parties are perceived to offer no real choice.

The BES follow-up questionnaire includes a measure specifically related to the concept of indifference. This is worded “The main political parties in Britain don’t offer voters real choices because their policies are pretty much the same”. The majority of respondents, 53.1%, agreed or agreed strongly that the main parties offered no real choices and 22.8% disagreed or disagreed strongly (24.1% neither agreed nor disagreed). This variable is used in separate analyses and coded 0 = agree strongly to 1 = disagree strongly. Respondents answering ‘don’t know’ were recoded at point 0.5, representing 1.3%. The question wording requires some further exploration and a number of comparisons were therefore made between this variable and pre-election measures of perceived distance between the two main parties, a pair-wise comparison measure between the three parties, and predictors of the variable as a dependent variable (please see the appendix). The comparisons supported the interpretation that respondents viewed the question compatibly with their evaluations of the *two* main parties on the left-right policy measures in the pre-election sample, suggesting that responses were also not simply post-hoc rationalisations of the vote decision and that the variable is consistent with the perceived spatial differences between the two main parties. The measure may also reflect general disaffection with the major parties and/or the political system, and relevant controls are added into the second stage of the analyses using this measure (please see below).

Lastly, I include a policy measure of attitudes to the Iraq War, given the strategic focus on this issue by the third party. The 2005 BES did not ask respondents where they thought the parties stood on this issue, so there are no proximity comparisons. The question is simply worded, ‘Please tell me if you strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of Britain’s involvement in Iraq’, coded 1 = strongly approve to 4 = strongly disapprove’.

Control variables: vote choice and turnout: A number of control variables were selected, for application to abstention and to party choice. I model abstention and party choice in the same models because I am specifically interested in comparing the relative effects of proximity and

convergence across both outcomes, relative to each other. The model specifications comprise a revised ‘unified turnout model’ to include the demographic predictors most commonly used in vote choice models in Britain.²⁰

Age and age² were included as a control variable for party choice, volatility and turnout. The quadratic term was entered due to the curvilinear relationship between age and turnout (Lijphart 1997). Gender was entered, coded 0 = male and 1 = female. Clarke et al. (2006) use a ‘deprivation index’ to encapsulate the relationship between social status and turnout. Since I model both turnout and vote choice the deprivation index is substituted with social class categories. This was coded 1 = routine non-manual (reference category), 2 = petty bourgeoisie, 3 = foremen and technicians, 4 = working class, and 5 = salariat. Educational attainment is also added, serving as a proxy for political knowledge, coded 1 = GCSE or equivalent, 2 = vocational post 16, 3 = A level, 4 = degree level, 5 = postgraduate education, 6 = no formal qualifications and 7 = other (reference category). I further control for party identification, coded 1 = Labour (the reference category), 2 = Conservative, 3 = Liberal Democrat and 4 = other and no party identification, creating three dummy variables. Controlling for party identification is crucial if we are to ensure against the potential bias arising from endogenous relationships between party choice and the independent effects, and these controls represent standard variables in British election studies.²¹

Control variables: alienation: I control for the likelihood that parties lose votes to others or to abstention simply because neither the Conservative or Labour party in 2005 was liked. I use an overall alienation measure akin to that of Brody and Page (1973) by coding a variable 1 = dislike

²⁰ All variables were selected on the basis that their statistical associations ≤ 0.3 .

²¹ I also controlled for other measures of turnout in preliminary analysis, replicated from Clarke et al.’s (2006) study, but their contribution did not influence the independent effects. The measures reflected the competitive nature of the election (marginality) and party mobilisation. Party mobilisation was measured using four dichotomous items (scored 0-1) asking whether: (a) someone tried to convince the respondent to vote for a party; (b) a party canvasser visited the respondent’s home and talked to him/her; (c) someone from a party contacted the respondent on election day to see if they had voted or intended to vote. The party mobilisation variable is the sum of (a)-(d). Competitiveness was measured as the perceived likelihood that each party will win in the respondent’s constituency, worded: “On a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, how likely is it that the [Labour/Conservative/ Liberal Democrat] party will win the election in this constituency?” Further measures, such as whether respondents were ‘satisfied with democracy’ were highly associated with and endogenous to the convergence measures, and therefore omitted.

both Conservative and Labour party and 0 = like Labour and/or Conservative party, where dislike represents points 0 to 4 on the 0 – 10 dislike-like scales of each of the two parties, worded, “On a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how do you feel about the Labour/Conservative party?” This variable also serves as an overarching measure of party preference, or lack thereof, correlated with lack of support for the two party leaders.²²

Control variable: general disaffection: Lastly, in the analyses using the ‘main parties in Britain offer no real choices’ variable, I control for the likelihood that this measure represents disaffection with politics as a whole (See Citrin et al. 1975), rather than with convergence. The measure asks respondents, “Please tell me how far you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, ... Firstly, how much do you trust British politicians generally?” coded from 0 to 10 where 0 means no trust and 10 means a great deal of trust.²³

Process of analysis: I estimate the regression models to compare the effects of proximity and perceived Conservative-Labour distance on the outcomes of voting for the party in question compared to abstaining or voting for alternatives. I then re-estimate the models using the general convergence measure, ‘the main parties in Britain don’t offer real choices’. In each case, I compare the coefficient sizes by reporting the predicted probabilities of voting Labour or Conservative from minimum to maximum value for each of the key independent measures in each model.

²² I have modelled the effect of leader evaluations in addition, and while significant in the models, they reduce the effects of the proximity variables for Labour but not the Conservatives – biasing my results in support of the expectations (because proximity effects are reduced but perceived proximity variables are not) and conflating the results.

²³ I initially also controlled for how much trust respondents had in Parliament, on the same scale, but this measure had no bearing on the results.

Results

In the first set of analyses I present the effects of the proximity variable and the perceived distance between the Conservative and Labour parties in models of Conservative and Labour vote choice. To recap, the expectations are that as we move from 0 to 1 on the proximity variable ‘party closest’, we should find a positive effect on the likelihood of voting for the party in question, and a negative effect of voting for other parties or for abstaining relative to that party (since voting Labour is the base category in the Labour model and voting Conservative is the base category in the Conservative model). We should also find a negative effect, the greater the perceived distance between the Conservative and Labour parties, between 0 and 1, on the likelihood of voting for other parties and for abstaining.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 confirms the importance of both spatial proximity and perceived convergence for voting either Conservative or Labour relative to other choices in the 2005 general election. If respondents perceived the Labour party to be closest to them, they were less likely to vote for other parties, and the same effect is found in the Conservative model. Respondents placing the Conservative party closest to their own position were less likely to vote for ‘others’. Respondents placing Labour closest to their own position were not more likely to vote Labour rather than abstain, whereas the same effect is strongly significant in the model of Conservative vote choice. Correspondingly, the predicted probability of voting Labour was 0.32 (confidence intervals 0.24 - 0.41) if Labour was the closest party and 0.28 (0.21 – 0.37) otherwise, representing a marginal effect for the measure of only 4%.²⁴ In the Conservative model the effect of proximity is greater, representing a marginal

²⁴ In predicted probabilities based on a multinomial logistic regression model the effect may be significant for the probabilities of voting ‘other’ but not the probabilities of voting ‘Labour’ (the confidence intervals overlap) because the predicted probability of voting Labour is also contingent on the effect for abstention. However, the marginal effect comparisons are meaningful and should simply be related to the presence or absence of significant effects in the model.

effect from 0 to 1 of 10%, ranging from a 0.24 (0.16 – 0.34) probability of voting Conservative if the Conservatives were perceived to be the closest party, compared to 0.14 (0.09 – 0.21) if they were not. This is consistent with the additional influence of proximity on voting Conservative relative to abstention and with the additional exploration of these effects in binomial logistic regression models comparing each party outcome in turn. In those models, which are not reported here in the interest of space, Labour's gains over other parties were in the direction of the Conservatives only. That is, if Labour was the closest party it won votes from the Conservatives but not to other parties. In the Conservative models, proximity was associated with vote gains from Labour and the Liberal Democrats, as well as abstention.

The models also confirm the importance of perceived Labour and Conservative convergence to abstention. In both models, the greater the perceived distance between the two parties, the less likely respondents were to abstain relative to voting Labour or Conservative. These results provide some support for the tension predicted above – parties may face incentives to pursue the median voter *and* face incentives to be ideologically distinct. However, this depends on whether there is a genuine trade-off or whether one incentive outweighs another. We can explore this by comparing the marginal effects for spatial proximity with those for party convergence.

The measure of perceived Labour and Conservative convergence resulted in a change of 6% in the probability of voting Labour, ranging from 0.23 (0.19 - 0.27) to 0.29 (0.22 – 0.38) if the parties were thought to be far apart. This effect is the same for the Conservative model, between 0.10 (0.08 – 0.14) and 0.16 (0.10 – 0.23). Convergence impacts the vote shares of both the major parties equally. However, we can see that the probability of voting Labour according to proximity increases by a smaller margin than the likelihood of voting Labour if it is perceived to differentiate from the Conservatives. These findings support expectation 1, and show that the costs of converging with other parties outweigh the benefits of pursuing the position closest to the greatest number of voters.

Conversely, the Conservatives benefit more from being located closest to voters than they lose if they are perceived to be located in a similar location to Labour, in contradiction of the first expectation. Instead, we appear to find evidence of asymmetry in the incentives of the two parties; it is in the interests of the Conservatives to pursue the median voter irrespective of whether it converges with Labour, since it can win more votes than it loses if it does so. If Labour pursues the median position while a similar strategy is also pursued by the Conservatives, it loses more votes than it gains, and hence it should logically diverge.

However, the results in Table 1 fail to offer support for expectation 2. Votes gained by moderation are not outweighed by votes lost to additional parties when major parties converge. Neither the Conservatives nor the Labour party lost votes significantly to other parties when they were perceived to converge and these results were confirmed in the supporting binomial analyses. Yet, Labour does lose votes to other parties if respondents were opposed to the war in Iraq, and we know this was an issue that divided the electorate but did not divide the positions of the Labour and Conservative parties. The cost to Labour across attitudes towards the Iraq war ranged from a predicted probability of voting Labour of 0.31 (0.25 – 0.37) if respondents strongly approved of the war, in contrast with 0.23 (0.19 – 0.26) if respondents strongly disapproved, representing a marginal effect of 8%. This variable was highly significant in predicting Liberal Democrat vote choice relative to voting Labour but it was not in any of the other comparisons.

Three questions remain following the analyses presented in Table 1. First, the differences in effect between the measures and in both models are relatively small, and so we cannot be confident in the support for the first expectation – that parties lose more votes than they gain when they pursue the position closest to voters and they converge. We also cannot therefore deduce whether the effects of ‘indifference’ outweigh those due to ‘alienation’, since convergence considerations seem comparable with proximity considerations.²⁵ Second, there is an apparent asymmetry in the

²⁵ In separate analysis of the same vote choice model only among respondents closest to the Labour party, the effect of perceived distance from Labour outweighs the effect of convergence. However, in the equivalent Conservative model, the

effect between the two major parties but we cannot be sure of the relevance of these differences, given the lack of discriminatory power between the measures. Second, although we can deduce that Labour lost votes to the third party on Iraq, we are unable to conclude whether this was due to the party's convergence with the Conservatives. That is, did the third party win votes on this issue because the major parties failed to offer voters an alternative, thereby handing this party a strategic advantage on an additional salient dimension?

In order to re-evaluate the findings, we can compare the effects against the measure of indifference in the 2005 BES, the perception that the 'main parties in Britain offer voters no real choices because their policies are pretty much the same'. Recall that the measure of party convergence in these models shows validity when compared with perceived differences between the parties on the BES issue scales (see appendix), and therefore we expect the measure of convergence to represent the degree of perceived spatial distance between the two parties and also the general evaluation that, to the degree to which the parties' policies are 'so similar', they effectively 'offer voters no real choices'. To recap, we should expect to find the same effects in Table 2 as in the models in Table 1; if a party is closest to respondents, we should see a significant reduction in the likelihood of voting for others moving from 0 to 1 in the proximity measures, and as the main parties are perceived to offer no real choices (coded from disagree strongly (0) to agree strongly (1)), we should observe an increase in the likelihood of abstaining according to expectation 1, and if expectation 2 is supported, of voting for other parties.

[Table 2 about here]

As in Table 1, the importance of spatial proximity is supported in Table 2, but the effects for spatial proximity are only significant in the Conservative model. If respondents placed the

effect of convergence outweighs the effect of distance from the closest party, again showing conflicting and asymmetric incentives from each party's natural base, relative to the impact of converging.

Conservative party closest to them, they were significantly more likely to vote Conservative than other parties and significantly less likely to abstain from voting. The same proximity variable is no longer significant in the Labour model, confirming the weak effect in the earlier model and supporting the interpretation that proximity on the policy dimensions captured by the measure mattered very little, or not at all, to Labour's vote share in 2005. In contrast, the proximity measure appears to be strongly significant to the Conservative vote share, both in the direction of voting for the Conservatives relative to others and the decision to vote Conservative rather than abstain. Bivariate analyses confirmed the same relationship of Conservative proximity to a reduction in the likelihood of voting Labour and voting Liberal Democrat. The Conservatives gain votes by pursuing the position closer to those two parties, that is, towards the center of the voter distribution. The effect for proximity, remaining robust in the model, is almost as strong as the effect found in Table 1. In the first analyses the marginal effect of perceiving the Conservative party to be closest was 10% and in the model shown in Table 2, the effect is 7%, reflecting a change in the probability of voting Conservative from 0.11 (0.08 – 0.14) to 0.18 (0.13 – 0.24).

In the first set of analyses, the Conservatives lost fewer votes to perceived convergence than the party won due to proximity, and in Table 2 very similar findings are observed. The same effect of party convergence is observed between the two models using the two different measures of convergence, resulting in a marginal effect of a change of 6% in the likelihood of voting Conservative using both measures – from a predicted probability of voting Conservative from 0.18 (0.13 – 0.26) to 0.12 (0.09 – 0.16). Therefore, the incentives for this party of converging or diverging versus moving closer to the majority of voters are essentially the same, and show no statistically significant differences between them. These findings therefore contradict the first and second hypotheses in the case of Conservative vote choice – the costs of converging to abstention or other parties do not outweigh the benefits of moderation. In fact, the benefits of moderation may be greater but more persuasive is a neutral utility gain or loss in either strategic direction.

In the Labour model, however, the effects of convergence, or the evaluation that the main parties offer voters no real choices due to policy similarity, is strongly significant, explaining both the decision to abstain from voting in 2005 and the choice to vote for ‘others’ which contradicted the second expectation, that converging parties would lose more votes to other parties when they converged than they gained from moderation. In Table 1, there was no observed statistical effect for perceived Conservative-Labour distance on the likelihood of voting for other parties, but using the new measure in the 2005 BES, we find a strong statistically significant effect of convergence on the likelihood of voting for other parties, providing support using a different and perhaps preferable measure of indifference for the second expectation. The supporting bivariate analyses for this multinomial logistic regression model confirmed that the votes lost to others from Labour were to the Liberal Democrat party only. These data therefore provide greater support for the prediction that additional parties can gain votes from major parties that converge on the same policy positions, consistent with the theoretical models outlined earlier. The marginal of effect on the probability of voting Labour for the ‘parties offer no real choices’ variable was 20%, reflecting a change in probability of voting Labour of 0.36 (0.12 – 0.20) if respondents disagreed strongly that the parties offered no real choices due to their policy similarities, to 0.16 (0.12 – 0.20) if they strongly agreed. Electoral costs associated with convergence to third parties and to abstention outweigh gains from moderation and in the case of Labour’s vote share in 2005, both expectations are supported: the party loses more votes when it is perceived to converge, both due to abstention and due to votes lost to the Liberal Democrats.

In the Labour models in Table 2 we also find the effect for attitudes towards the Iraq war to no longer be significant. This change in significance, however, occurs due to the inclusion of the control variable, trust in politicians.²⁶ We can assume that attitudes towards the war resulted in

²⁶ The trust in politicians variable was strongly significant in the binomial regression Labour/others and also Conservative/others, whereas the positional and convergence measures were not significant in either case. This suggests that minor parties gain votes from people disillusioned with the political system overall, whereas this evaluation does not explain support for the more institutionalised third party alternative, the Liberal Democrats.

responses to the question regarding lack of trust in politicians, as well as visa versa, and reasonably explain part of the Liberal Democrat's relative success in 2005 to the salience of an additional dimension on which it had an advantage relative to the major parties. However, the significance of the relationship between party convergence and voting for others suggests that Labour's vote losses to the Liberal Democrat party resulting from its convergence with the Conservatives resulted in a significant gain to the third party beyond those votes lost on the additional dimension of the war in Iraq. Recall that using the composite measure of party policy positions, and consistent with the component policy questions, the Labour party was perceived as slightly left of centre (mean position of 3.88 on an eleven-point scale), the Liberal Democrats were perceived as being at mean 4.47 on the same scale, and the Conservatives were placed at 5.16. Where the two major parties fail to differ greatly or significantly and where the third party shares very similar policy positions with those converging parties, the results show that the third party *gains* votes rather than having its votes squeezed at the center by the two other major parties. Such a counter-intuitive finding points to a more significant effect of indifference between two converging parties than has previously been observed or recorded, due both to abstention due to indifference *and* voting due to indifference. Consistent with the theoretical model outlined above, if voters are presented with two main choices between which they are indifferent, they will either abstain from voting or may vote for their preferences in the form of the third party that is similarly placed, but which in other cases, where parties diverge, would normally represent a wasted vote.²⁷

In the Labour model, especially in Table 2 and consistent with the findings in Table 1, it is clear that Labour's overwhelming advantage would be to distance itself from the Conservatives. Labour's vote losses due to indifference are strongly robust in both models, also to the addition of further controls and emphasised more greatly with the second choice of measure in Table 2. It is

²⁷ Analyses of alienation in supporting models, conceptualised as distance from Labour among respondents placing themselves closest to the Labour party, also showed that the 'parties offered no real choices' was much more important in explaining vote outcomes than the distance or alienation measure, suggesting that convergence, here measured, is a more important explanation of party incentives than any polarising influence from the party's traditional constituency.

less obvious which incentive dominates for the Conservatives. According to Tables 1 and 2, it appears to be equally advantageous to be different to Labour as it is to be closest to the majority of voters and possibly marginally more advantageous to pursue the median voter.²⁸ The proximity variable is by far more robust in models of Conservative vote share than in the Labour models. This suggests that while the costs of convergence outweigh the benefits of moderation for Labour, supporting the first and second expectations, the expectations are not supported in either Conservative model, despite using a new measure of party convergence that appears to be a powerful vote predictor for Labour. In the case of the Conservatives the expectations are not supported but they are strongly supported for Labour. Thus, an interesting asymmetry arises.

Discussion

The results in this paper suggest that the conceptualisation of Britain as a two-party system in which Labour and the Conservatives have incentives to pursue the median voter overlooks the important influence of the third party, the Liberal Democrats. With the possibility that indifferent voters can be won by the similarly located third party, the analyses show that the electoral costs to major parties associated with convergence can outweigh the benefits of taking a position closest to the greatest majority of voters. Since the Liberal Democrat party gains votes when the main parties converge, encompassing its gains against Labour net of the issue of Iraq in 2005, the costs for Labour of pursuing the Downsian strategy due to convergence outweigh the gains accrued by being closer to voters on the policy spectrum. However, because the Conservatives gain more votes by being the closest party than they lose by being similar to Labour, the two parties have competing incentives. The implications of the findings are two-fold.

First, the major parties should be expected to neutralise the advantage of the Liberal Democrats on the issue of Iraq, as far as they are able to whilst appearing credible. Both parties

²⁸ The party closest variable reported in both tables provides the most conservative estimate of spatial proximity. Using the perceived distance from the Conservatives or a relative distance measure suggests more strongly that the Conservatives should converge rather than differentiate. The choice of measure make no difference to the Labour models.

should move towards a more sceptical position about the war but differentiate their positions. This has since been illustrated by Gordon Brown's attempts to distance himself from Blair's foreign policy and to make key announcements of troop withdrawals in order to bolster support. Michael Howard (Leader of the Conservative Party in 2005) also confirmed this rationale (interview for this research project, 6th March 2007). He said:

The thing I regret most is that I don't think I ever properly and convincingly explained where I stood on the war...I think there were a lot of people who were turned off the government because of the Iraq war, but probably not many of the people who were turned off the government for that reason voted for us. They either abstained or they voted Liberal Democrat. And if I had set out that position more convincingly its possible that more of them would have voted for us.

Although the Conservatives did not lose votes across attitudes to the Iraq war in 2005, they believed they lost the potential for gaining votes. If one of the major parties succeed in convincing voters they are closer than the other to voter preferences on Iraq, then voters may again return their support, in this case, from the Liberal Democrats to the Labour party. While third parties can try and gain leverage by adopting relatively beneficial policies on new dimensions when the major parties are similar, those main parties have strong incentives to neutralize new issues by incorporating them within two party competition. This conclusion supports the work of Rapoport and Stone (2005) on third parties in the U.S. context.

Second, we should expect Labour to attempt to distance itself from the Conservatives to maximize votes if the Conservatives maintain their existing location. In recent elections the two main parties have held similar policies, but Labour has attempted to label the Conservatives as extreme. This is an optimal strategy for Labour, allowing it to occupy the center ground and be perceived as different to the Conservatives. However, in 2005 the Conservatives were perceived by voters as highly similar, and if the Conservatives can achieve the goal of being perceived as the closest party to the majority of voters then Labour cannot pursue an optimal strategy. Let us imagine that Labour shifts leftward. It aims to differentiate, but it allows the Conservatives to shift

further onto its territory, handing an advantage to that party. Not only would the Conservatives gain new voters at the center, the party could also neutralise the goal of Labour to be ideologically distinct, since the Conservatives can move closer to Labour without losing more votes. We can see that a shift left-ward would harm Labour party further, precisely because the Conservative's incentives are different, and the party would therefore need to retain its current location, to the detriment of its optimal strategy. Asymmetry in the incentives of two parties within the same system, arising in part due to the existence of a viable third party alternative, causes Labour to be significantly weakened when the Conservatives have the opposite incentives to pursue the same territory. The recent convergence of the main British parties can therefore be explained in a counter-intuitive but empirically supported manner. These findings urge scholars to re-evaluate their theories from a one-size-fits-all approach to a more refined case by case application.

Conclusions

In this paper I have explored a tension in spatial models of party competition between gaining votes by being positioned close to voter preferences and losing votes when two or more parties are located in a similar ideological location. British politics demonstrates this tension particularly acutely at the present time. The three main parties are perceived by voters to share similar policies on the main policy dimension, and voter abstention due to these similarities is an important predictor of the decision to turnout. Thus, 'abstention from indifference', whereby the costs of voting outweigh the benefits of voting because the main parties are insufficiently different, can outweigh the benefits to be gained from ideological moderation.

These expectations were confirmed in models of Labour party vote in the 2005 British general election. Using two measures of perceived party convergence, the party incurred more losses due to its perceived proximity with the Conservatives than it gained in 2005 by having an optimal relative spatial location. However, the party lost even more votes when a different measure of policy convergence is used asking respondents whether they thought the main parties offered no

real policy choices, and then the party lost votes to the third party also, the Liberal Democrats. Using another measure shows substantively different empirical and theoretical conclusions and a theoretical model was proposed, incorporating the presence of third parties for the electoral costs of major party convergence. When the major parties differ, voters more likely to gravitate towards the Liberal Democrats will support Labour, since voting for that party will be decisive upon their utility. When the major parties are similar, and voters are indifferent between them, those voters will be significantly more likely to support the third party alternative. These consequences, combined with losses to abstention, are significantly damaging to Labour when the Conservatives succeed in positioning themselves towards them. Although these effects damaged Labour's vote share, the Conservatives continued to gain as many votes from being closer to voters on a composite measure of the policy domain as it lost to perceived convergence, pointing to an interesting outcome: one party, the Labour party, would gain from being different to its opponent, but that opponent, the Conservative party, will gain if it is similar, since it can punish Labour if it converges without harming its overall vote share, creating an asymmetric incentive structure and a contest between the parties for strategic success.

The interpretations may also, of course, be contingent on further factors, and this paper therefore leads to new research questions. We may ask whether parties with valence, incumbency, or popularity advantages are able to maximise utility differentials in competence to offset those lost in spatial convergence. The findings may also relate to the difference in proximity evaluations for opposition parties relative to incumbents. As incumbents are evaluated with weighting on their delivery in Fiorina's (1977) retrospective voting model, the lack of weighting for opposition parties of performance may correspond to greater vote gains for moderation, and these causal mechanisms would certainly provide interesting questions when evaluating the different strategies of opposition parties and parties in government. To date, no theory of party incentives currently allows two or more parties within the same political system to differ in their optimal strategy. The analyses in this paper may usefully provoke a questioning of theories of competition that generalise across parties.

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Tables

Table 1: Multinomial logit models of Labour and Conservative voting relative to abstaining and supporting other parties in the 2005 general election, by spatial proximity and perceived distance between the Labour and Conservative parties

	Labour Models		Conservative Models	
	Other/Lab	Abstain/Lab	Other/Con	Abstain/Con
Constant	-2.89 (0.63) ***	1.29 (0.60)	4.01 (0.74) ***	5.91 (0.76) ***
Party closest	-0.25 (0.12) *	-0.03 (0.13)	-0.71 (0.15) ***	-0.52 (0.16) ***
Lab-Con distance	0.02 (0.30)	-0.88 (0.33) **	-0.26 (0.35)	-1.04 (0.39) **
Dislike Lab and Con	0.64 (0.15) ***	0.95 (0.14) ***	0.53 (0.16) ***	0.98 (0.17) ***
Iraq war	0.15 (0.07) ***	0.12 (0.07)	0.04 (0.08)	0.08 (0.09)
Age	0.04 * (0.02)	-0.08 (0.02) ***	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.13 (0.02) ***
Age ²	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) ***	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Gender	-0.34 * (0.13)	-0.30 (0.13) *	0.15 (0.15)	0.00 (0.16)
Educational level				
GCSE	-0.29 (0.25)	0.04 (0.27)	0.38 (0.27)	0.45 (0.30)
Vocational	-0.13 (0.23)	0.23 (0.25)	0.22 (0.25)	0.43 (0.27)
A Level	-0.24 (0.31)	-0.27 (0.32)	0.42 (0.34)	0.16 (0.37)
Degree	0.51 (0.25) *	-0.04 (0.29)	0.30 (0.28)	-0.13 (0.32)
Postgraduate	0.03 (0.33)	0.06 (0.37)	0.48 (0.41)	0.37 (0.45)
None (formal)	-0.30 (.30)	0.80 (0.25) **	0.24 (0.24)	1.14 (0.27) ***
Other	.	.	.	.
Social Class				
Petty bourgeois	0.24 (0.19)	0.19 (0.20)	0.01 (0.21)	0.07 (0.22)
Foremen/technician	0.05 (0.20)	0.27 (0.21)	0.12 (0.22)	0.32 (0.23)
Working class	-0.22 (0.23)	-0.05 (0.23)	0.48 (0.26)	0.43 (0.28)
Salariat	-0.18 (0.21)	0.23 (0.21)	0.40 (0.26)	0.60 (0.26) *
Routine non-manual	.	.	.	.
Party identification				
CON party id	4.12 (0.20) ***	0.23 (0.21) ***	-4.72 (0.23) ***	-3.48 (0.24) ***
LIB party id	2.84 (0.20) ***	1.06 (0.22) ***	-1.30 (0.29) ***	-1.63 (0.32) ***
Other/no party id	1.89 (0.20) ***	1.45 (0.19) ***	-2.74 (0.28) **	-1.74 (0.28) ***
LAB party id	.	.	.	.
Chi ²	1539.31 ***		1691.08 ***	
Pseudo R ²	0.28		0.32	
2LL	-1987.74		-1812.36	
N = 2577				

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.005$

Table 2: Multinomial logit models of Labour and Conservative voting relative to abstaining and supporting other parties in the 2005 general election, by spatial proximity and perceived lack of real choices between the main parties

	Labour Models		Conservative Models	
	Other/Lab	Abstain/Lab	Other/Con	Abstain/Con
Constant	-2.12 (0.82) *	0.83 (0.82)	3.43 (0.93) ***	4.67 (0.98) ***
Party closest	-0.23 (0.15)	-0.06 (0.15)	-0.65 (0.17) ***	-0.45 (0.18) *
Parties offer no choices	0.93 (0.31) ***	1.49 (0.33) ***	0.23 (0.35)	1.18 (0.39) ***
Dislike Lab and Con	0.32 (0.18)	0.63 (0.18) ***	0.56 (0.18) ***	0.85 (0.20) ***
Trust politicians	0.13 (0.08) ***	-0.13 (0.04) ***	0.05 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Iraq war	0.12 (0.08)	0.12 (0.08)	0.05 (0.09)	0.10 (0.10)
Age	0.02 (0.03)	-0.09 (0.03) ***	-0.02 (0.3)	-0.12 (0.03) ***
Age ²	-0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) *	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00) *
Gender	-0.32 (0.15) *	-0.21 (0.16)	0.02 (0.17)	-0.01 (0.18)
Educational level				
GCSE	-0.11 (0.29)	0.23 (0.33)	0.25 (0.30)	0.43 (0.35)
Vocational	-0.29 (0.26)	0.25 (0.30)	0.19 (0.27)	0.51 (0.32)
A Level	-0.08 (0.37)	0.03 (0.40)	0.07 (0.39)	0.08 (0.44)
Degree	0.47 (0.29)	-0.20 (0.36)	0.35 (0.31)	-0.27 (0.38)
Postgraduate	0.08 (0.38)	0.17 (0.43)	0.62 (0.45)	0.51 (0.52)
None (formal)	-0.10 (0.26)	1.04 (0.30) ***	0.00 (0.27)	1.07 (0.31) ***
Other	.	.	.	.
Social Class				
Petty bourgeois	0.21 (0.22)	0.10 (0.23)	0.15 (0.23)	0.07 (0.25)
Foremen/technician	0.06 (0.24)	0.07 (0.25)	0.23 (0.25)	0.17 (0.27)
Working class	-0.14 (0.27)	-0.03 (0.28)	0.59 (0.29) *	0.44 (0.32)
Salariat	-0.24 (0.25)	0.11 (0.25)	0.71 (0.29) *	0.75 (0.30) *
Routine non-manual	.	.	.	.
Party identification				
CON party id	4.38 (0.25) ***	2.46 (0.27) ***	-4.72 (0.25) ***	-3.66 (0.27) ***
LIB party id	2.92 (0.23) ***	1.15 (0.27) ***	-1.25 (0.32) ***	-1.65 (0.36) ***
Other/no party id	1.90 (0.23) ***	1.20 (0.23) ***	-2.79 (0.30) ***	-2.09 (0.32) ***
LAB party id	.	.	.	.
Chi ²	1259.16 ***		1344.84 ***	
Pseudo R ²	0.30		0.33	
2LL	-1465.45		-1369.49	
N = 2016				

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.005

Appendix

Validation of the measure “The main political parties in Britain don’t offer voters real choices because their policies are pretty much the same”. I explore whether this question serves as a measure of policy similarity between the two or three major parties in the pre-election wave of the 2005 BES.

Responses to the $(P_{LAB} - P_{CON})^2$ left-right measure (pre-election) are significantly different between respondents agreeing strongly or agreeing with the statement, “The main political parties in Britain don’t offer voters real choices because their policies are pretty much the same” and respondents disagreeing or disagreeing strongly with the statement. The t statistic was 5.22 *** (significant at the 0.000 level). There were no significant differences between respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement and their perceived summed distances between the three parties, $((P_{LAB} - P_{CON}) + (P_{LAB} - P_{LIB}) + (P_{CON} - P_{LIB}))^2$. Associations of the measure and perceived distance between Labour and the Conservatives are stronger and more statistically significant than are associations between the measure and perceived summed distances between Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats across all four policy scales (tax-spend, crime, EU and left-right), suggesting the measure taps the judgements between the two major parties rather than all three competitive parties. Observed differences confirm the expected direction of both measures, that is, respondents agreeing with the statement were more likely to perceive larger distances between the parties on the left-right measure than were respondents disagreeing. The mean distance among respondents disagreeing that the parties don’t offer policy choices was 17.5 (N = 516, SD = 22.4) on a scale ranging from 0 to 100.²⁹ The mean perceived distance between the two main parties was 11.9 (N = 1245, SD = 18.9) for respondents agreeing/agreeing strongly that the parties are similar. The most significant differences are found at the lower levels of the perceived Labour-

²⁹ Note that this is based here on a squared distance scale such that 17.5 does not represent a mean perceived distance of 17 in a linear range between 0 and 100.

Conservative difference measure of left-right (pre-election). Among respondents agreeing or agreeing strongly that the parties offered no real choices, 25.22% placed the Labour and Conservative parties at exactly the same location in the pre-election measure of perceived left-right party placement, whereas 15.11% of respondent disagreeing or disagreeing strongly with the question placed the parties at the same location. That 15.11% did so does not imply they did not believe the parties were significantly different on other issues and similar on left-right. Also, a linear model of the summed policy differences between the Conservative and Labour parties (the measure used in Tables 1 through 4) regressed on ‘the main parties offer no real policy choices’ reveals a statistically significant contribution of this variable, robust to other additional variables, such as educational attainment level, feelings towards the party leaders, and party identification.

These explorations lend support to the substantive interpretation of the question as a measure of policy convergence and difference and also to the correspondence between post election measures of the parties as ‘not offering real choices due to policy similarities’ and pre election evaluations of actual perceived differences between the parties on the left-right scale.