

OPPOSITION PARTY STRATEGIES: THE MEETING OF THEORY  
AND PRACTICE IN THE BRITISH CONSERVATIVE PARTY

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# Opposition Party Strategy: The British Conservatives, 1997 - 2007

## **Abstract**

David Cameron has stated his intention as leader of the Conservative Party to move the party towards the centre. Using interviews with William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard, and also relevant quantitative data, I show that these leaders attempted to address the same electoral challenges and each pursued a similar vote-maximizing logic. The main difference between those leaders and David Cameron is not that they appealed on core vote issues, as existing interpretations claim, but that they appealed on Conservative 'owned' issues, whereas Cameron has thus far avoided focusing on traditional Conservative issue strengths. Yet I argue that this strategy is as much a consequence of changing ratings on a broader range of issues as it is a cause. The implications are that electorally weakened parties are forced onto losing platforms, hampering their prospects for recovery. The findings have implications for our understanding of campaigns, for incumbency advantage and for party competition theories most broadly.

At first glance British politics appears to confirm the Downsian (1957) logic<sup>1</sup>; parties win elections when they compete at the centre ground and lose elections when they pursue their core interests. Labour moved to the centre in order to regain electoral competitiveness in 1997 and from then the Conservative party remained languishing on its core vote, described as appeasing its right-wing base with hard line appeals on traditional issues. From 1997 until 2005 the Conservative Party polled around 30% in approval ratings (see Cowley and Green 2005: 55), gaining just 32.7% and 33.2% of the vote respectively in the 2001 and 2005 elections (Curtice and Steed 2001; 2005). Under David Cameron the party has seen its poll ratings shift to an average of 38%<sup>2</sup> and Cameron continually emphasises his repositioning of the Conservative Party at the centre ground.<sup>3</sup> 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 centre ground, to get us into a position where people would listen to what we were saying, where we were in touch with Britain as it is today, talking about the things people care about” (David Cameron, interviewed on Sky News, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2007).

An improvement in Conservative popularity under David Cameron appeared to vindicate his strategy. It also implied that previous strategies were misplaced and to thus confirm arguments that the party responded to Labour’s ideological transformation by shifting to the right, damaging Conservative prospects in the 2001 and 2005 elections (Butler and Kavanagh 2001; Norris 2001; Collins and Seldon 2001; Kelly 2001; 2002; Garnett and Lynch 2002; 2003; Norris and Lovenduski 2004; Seldon and Snowdon 2005). These authors describe electoral and organisational crisis and the campaigns of William Hague and Michael Howard as appeals to core Conservative voters on a narrow issue appeal and right-wing policies. A search among all UK broadsheet newspapers 2000 and 2005 produced 216 articles in which the Conservative core vote was cited as an explanation for Conservative strategy.<sup>4</sup> This expectation also has a wide

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<sup>1</sup> See also Hotelling (1929) and Black (1958).

<sup>2</sup> Source: [http://www.yougov.com/archives/pdf/Voting%20trends%2005-%20\(2\).xls.pdf](http://www.yougov.com/archives/pdf/Voting%20trends%2005-%20(2).xls.pdf). Since Gordon Brown became Prime Minister the Conservative’s advantage has been reduced to around 35%, but at this stage this is widely seen to be attributable to a finite honeymoon period for Brown.

<sup>3</sup> In September 2005, he said, “We’ve called for modernisation and a move to the centre-ground” (The Spectator, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2005). In October 2005 he said, “Do we move to the right, or do we fight for the centre ground? Do we stick to our core vote comfort zone, or do we change to win the future” (‘Change to Win’ speech, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2005). In January 2006, in a speech levelled at right-wing critics, he said, “The alternative to fighting for the centre-ground is irrelevance, defeat and failure” (Speech to Demos, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The failure to mobilise the Conservative core vote was one of the explanations, offered by right-wing MP, Edward Leigh, for the 29<sup>th</sup> June 2006 Bromley by-election result which saw the party’s majority cut from 13,000 to 633 (Edward Leigh MP, The House Magazine, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2006).

theoretical following based on the view that party members and supporters hold more extreme views, providing incentives to pull parties away from the centre (see Key 1966; May 1972; Hirschman 1970; Robertson 1976; McLean 1982; Aldrich 1983; Chappell and Keych 1986; Kitschelt 1989; 1994; Adams and Merrill 1999; Adams 2001a; 2001b; Adams et al. 2005; Schofield 2004; 2005). The policy-seeking explanation is most commonly used to explain Conservative difficulties since 1997, consistent with many of these theories. Parties pursue their own policy-seeking goals that lead them to differ more acutely from each other than if they simply appeal for votes.<sup>5</sup> Kitschelt (1994: 116) explains, “A party may desire to subordinate its vote - or office-seeking to the higher goal of policy”. Schofield argues that activist positions – measured by the positions of MPs and candidates - constrain parties away from the median when leaders (such as William Hague and Michael Howard) do not have a valence or competence advantage (Schofield 2005) and candidate theories of party position propose divergent outcomes due to the preferred positions of leaders (Wittman 1983; 1990; Groseclose 2001).<sup>6</sup> Fiorina (1999) cites that the ‘core vote’ commentary is used to explain party positions that confound the expectation of median voter convergence (Downs 1957).

This paper offers a different interpretation of Conservative party strategy since 1997 and a new theoretical interpretation. Using unique interview evidence with three party leaders and drawing on Conservative party leader speeches and quantitative data, I demonstrate that the strategies of William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard exhibit important similarities with that of David Cameron. Their appeals were broader in terms of issue agenda than previously assumed and I show they were more consistent with a characterisation of an ‘owned issues’ strategy than with a ‘core vote issues’ critique. The theoretical implication is that unpopular parties do not necessarily withdraw to an appeal to their base, but they are forced onto a limited number of relative issue strengths, determined by the wider electoral context. Such parties can still be

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<sup>5</sup> This is not necessarily purely policy-seeking. Parties may believe these individuals to be sufficiently pivotal to vote-seeking aims that they provide a genuine pull on the gravitational centre. Activists motivate others and contribute resources and so appealing to these individuals might be particularly rational for a party that does not expect to win (Robertson 1976) since if parties move away from these positions they risk losing their remaining support (Hirschman 1970; McLean 1982). Furthermore, parties may judge that a ‘purist’ (Wildavsky 1965) strategy – one faithful to traditional party beliefs – will win more support. Kitschelt (1994) differentiates between party ideologues, pragmatists and lobbyists. Ideologues and lobbyists believe a purist appeal will convince voters eventually or appeal to swing voters. The need to appear consistent, reliable or responsible has also been argued as central to explaining the limits to party adaptation (Downs 1957).

<sup>6</sup> Calvert (1985) argues that candidates with divergent preferences should still “compete away their differences and offer identical proposals to the voters” (1985: 69). Adams and Merrill (2006) explain party divergence in Britain (preceding 2001) by the presence of the minor third party, the Liberal Democrats.

characterised as ‘vote-maximizers’ rather than ‘policy seekers’ (Strøm 1990), contrary to existing accounts of this period of Conservative competition. I further distinguish how David Cameron has sought to avoid Conservative ‘owned issues’ and focus on newer issues, but I argue that this is as much a consequence of his appeal as a cause. As Labour’s popularity has declined, the available issue agenda is wider for Cameron within a very similar vote-maximizing logic as his predecessors. Thus Cameron’s more distinct strategy is his avoidance of traditional Conservative strengths, (although Duncan Smith attempted this tactic also), but his strategy thus far remains consistent with the issue ownership rationale followed by Hague and Howard. The paper thus departs from the assumption that poor electoral outcomes necessitate strategic failure. Instead, it operates from the assumption that electorally weakened parties face equally strong incentives to vote-maximize unlike authors who claim that when parties cannot increase their votes they will rationally attempt appeal to their existing base (Robertson 1979).

There is a considerable lack of research on the Conservative party and there is also a significant lack of research at the level of elites (see Rohrschneider 2002). This paper examines the motives of elites at the very top of Britain’s main opposition party, reinterpreting assumptions made about a whole decade of Conservative politics. It contributes by providing unique insights into Conservative Party rationale in a significant and under researched period of Conservative Party history, and offers rare documentation of three leader’s own interpretations. In so doing the paper provides a critical empirical case study to challenge existing theories and to generate support for an original theoretical reinterpretation. I compare five areas in which David Cameron has stated his intention to change the Conservative party with reported and stated changes by previous leaders. The first three areas represent changes to the party; in tone, brand and organisation, which I address briefly, and the following two areas represent changes to the policy agenda and position of the Conservative party, using the elite interviews with party leaders and the supporting quantitative data. These last two components are highly relevant to theories of party competition and therefore given greater focus. I conclude by evaluating the degree to which David Cameron’s strategy has contributed to the beginnings of a Conservative party revival.

## **Change to Win**

In his leadership bid speech to Conservative Party conference, David Cameron argued that the Conservative party needed to ‘Change to Win’ (4<sup>th</sup> October 2005). His message was not dissimilar to those used by his fellow contestants,<sup>7</sup> but its tone and delivery gained him the reputation as someone who understood the Conservative dilemma. During the preceding eight years there were many attempts to understand why the Conservatives had suffered such a huge defeat in 1997 and how to respond to New Labour. The difference with Cameron was that he was part of the change – he could embody a more centrist message and he offered a break with the past. It was this past that had been a millstone for the party. The Conservative party suffered a huge loss of support in government because it was seen as caring only for one section of society (Evans 1999). It also lost its perception for competence in the ERM crisis and was tainted by Tory sleaze and deep party divisions over Europe (see Ludlam and Smith 1996; Berrington and Hague 1998; Sowewimo 1996). David Cameron offered a fresh face. Young and charismatic, he articulated a more compassionate response to the Conservative diagnosis of Labour’s failings. As Tony Blair before him, he became leader because his party recognised he was the best chance of electoral success. Also, like Tony Blair, he set out to fundamentally address the party’s prior electoral weaknesses. In the case of Labour it was the relationship with the Unions, the perception of economic (in)competence and a left-wing policy history. For David Cameron it was predominantly the Conservative party’s image. Cameron’s image strategy can be conceived as attempting to change the tone, the brand, the organisation, and then more substantively moving the party to the centre through changing the issue agenda of the party and its policies.

### **Changing the Party: the tone, brand and organisation**

In his first speech as leader Cameron promised ‘hope, optimism and change’ (Conservative party speeches, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2006). He vowed to be more consensual and advocated a new style of politics. The party would refrain from pointing to policy differences that didn’t exist since Labour had now occupied the centre. His diagnosis of the preceding period was that right-wing cheerleaders exerted a gravitational force upon Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard, causing them to emphasise areas of policy difference with Labour, on taxation, immigration and Europe

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<sup>7</sup> These were Alan Duncan, Kenneth Clarke, Liam Fox and David Davis. Alan Duncan pulled out through lack of support, Liam Fox and Kenneth Clarke were eliminated by a ballot of MPs and David Davis and David Cameron were put forward to a ballot of party members. David Cameron won by 68% to 32%.

(Speech to Demos, 30<sup>th</sup> January 2006) but which pulled the party to the right. On being elected leader Cameron said,

I want and I will lead a Conservative Party that when the Government does the right thing, we will work with them, and when they do the wrong thing we will call them to account and criticise them” (Speech to the Conservative Parliamentary Party, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2005).

Thus David Cameron’s leadership was to bring with it a new tone of consensus. Yet it was not David Cameron that first adopted a more consensual tone. Howard declared the same objective. In his leadership speech in 2003, Howard said,

We will offer a new kind of politics, for people today view conventional party politics with contempt. We won’t hesitate to give credit to the Government when it gets things right. We won’t oppose for opposition’s sake. People want better than that (Speech to the Conservative Parliamentary Party, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2005).

By the time of the 2005 election Howard’s message was described as negative (see Wring et al. 2007), but he had identified the same aim to be consensual and to offer a ‘new kind of politics’.

David Cameron also attempted to portray a more ‘in touch’ image, often rejecting a tie, giving interviews in his home and attempting to speak directly to voters via his ‘webcameron’ internet site.<sup>8</sup> Some of these changes are trivial, but Cameron has gained coverage for taking a new approach and their relevance should not perhaps be understated. Cameron himself said the problem the Conservative party faces is its culture rather than its policies:

So the answer to the question, ‘what is it about the Conservative Party that causes us to keep losing elections?’ It’s simple. It is our culture...we need to recognise too that there is no ‘Clause 4 moment’, no single decisive act that will achieve the change we need. It’s about our culture and attitudes right across the board. (David Cameron, *The Spectator*, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2005)

William Hague’s attempts to modify the tone of the Conservative party seem disastrous with hindsight but he attempted a similar goal. His visit to Notting Hill, the pictures at Alton Towers wearing ‘Hague’ baseball caps, his insistence that the Shadow Cabinet away weekend in 1999 be ‘no ties’ and that no member of the Shadow Cabinet should travel to that weekend first class were all decisions aimed at challenging the party’s elite image. Kelly (2001: 197) recalled that at the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.webcameron.org.uk/>

outset of his leadership Hague made a speech calling for “a more ‘pluralistic’ and ‘inclusive’ Conservatism – one that would ‘reach out’ to society’s minorities and destroy forever the notion that Conservatism was ‘stuffy’ or ‘intolerant’”. Peele (1998) also described how Hague attempted to change the whole culture and organisation of the Conservative party through uniting its various levels and introducing a new party structure.<sup>9</sup> These attempts suggest that as early as 1997 there were those who signalled and even exceeded the strategy David Cameron would later pursue.

David Cameron also changed the visual identity of the Conservative party. The new logo, an oak tree, is an effort to soften and modernise the Conservative brand and emphasise a commitment to the environment. Yet Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard all pursued branding changes.

In 1999 the Conservative torch and the union jack colours were dropped from the visual identity, replaced with a yellow ‘swoosh’ under the word ‘Conservative’ or ‘www.conservatives.com’. These were recognitions of the need to appear modern and in touch and to demonstrate change. The old website [www.tory.org.uk](http://www.tory.org.uk) was dropped to try and limit use of the word ‘Tory’ due to its negative connotations. Hague set out to modernise the party’s image on all campaign literature. Under Iain Duncan Smith the identity was changed again; the traditional Conservative blue was changed to a light blue, and the theme ‘A Fair Deal for Everyone’ was used, again dropping the Conservative torch and addressing the problem that the Conservatives were thought to care only for the better off. (Duncan Smith’s ‘Helping the Vulnerable’ slogan was a significant departure in message, and is perhaps a more far reaching change than Cameron’s messages to date.) Under Michael Howard the Conservative torch symbol was reintroduced but it was now a blue torch held by a strong arm with the word ‘Conservatives’ in bold impression. This presented an opportunity to recast the party’s image but with some doubt over what this new image conveyed. Thus several attempts were made to change the Conservative brand before David Cameron with the intention of modernising the image and demonstrating a new Conservative party.

Cameron’s most significant organisational intervention has been the A-list of parliamentary candidates, a list of people given special priority by CCHQ<sup>10</sup> from which target seats can select.

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<sup>9</sup> Peele (1998: 143) wrote of the document ‘Our Blueprint for Change’, published in 1997, “The document itself put the argument for change in the party’s structure against the background of a stark analysis of the decaying state of the Conservative Party. Apart from its willingness to contemplate a complete overhaul of some of the party’s most established organisational features, the document is noteworthy for its efforts to change the culture of the Conservative party.”

<sup>10</sup> Conservative Campaign Headquarters. This name was changed from Conservative Central Office by Michael Howard, who also moved the party from its historic Smith Square location.

The list is composed roughly of half women and half other priority candidates (people from ethnic minorities and under-represented groups). Male candidates with large amounts of political experience were excluded and constituencies could not select local candidates. The system resulted in one third of candidates for target seats being women (to date), whereas women MPs make up only 9% of the Conservative parliamentary party. Hence Cameron can claim to have made the party look more representative. However, he was not the first Conservative leader to try to build a more representative party. William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith also tried to broaden the representation of women, ethnic minorities and people from different backgrounds. For example, from 2002 the selection process of candidates for the Approved List was changed. The selection weekend of public speaking and social events was changed to a one-day Parliamentary Assessment Board. Psychometric testing, in-tray and negotiation exercises were intended to place empathy and negotiation skills in higher priority and assessors gave greater importance to service to the voluntary sector than service to the Conservative Party. A unit was also established under William Hague to proactively build links with people from different ethnic minority groups. True, David Cameron was willing to take more invasive steps, reducing the autonomy of associations for the first time (see Kelly 2004), but this built on earlier attempts.

Further organisational changes under David Cameron have seen groupings of target and safe seats to enable mutual aid and shared financial management, regional campaign centres and the appointment of the Northern Party Board – aimed at reviving the party in Northern cities. Earlier innovations in campaigning were also introduced, some of the most far-reaching of which were William Hague's. Under Hague a series of far-reaching constitutional reforms were brought in, changing the selection process for leader, introducing democratising measures to the party and attempting to rebuild the mass membership of the party (Peele 1998). Under Howard the campaigning efficiency of the Conservative operation was further improved (see Canzini 2007; Green 2007), with a central campaign centre for target seats based in Coleshill. This was in the heart of central England the party was trying to reach. The attempt at reaching out beyond the South East thus preceded David Cameron. David Cameron's Party Chairman, Francis Maude, was a lead moderniser and previous member of Michael Portillo's leadership campaign (in 2001), a clear signal of a desire to modernise,<sup>11</sup> but it was Michael Howard who first appointed him.

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<sup>11</sup> Maude, with Archie Norman, had been the advocate of the 'Change to Win' argument, jointly setting up an organisation called C-Change aimed at encouraging different types of candidates into the party, and also a think tank, Policy Exchange, aiming to broaden the Conservative message into new policy arenas. In his role as Chairman he introduced the A-list and tried to make resources more efficient and oriented to target seats and massively under-resourced seats in the North. A franchising relationship between the party and

David Cameron also subcontracted out his policy making process to a series of trusted experts in the form of six policy groups.<sup>12</sup> These groups were each given a remit to consult and propose policies in an eighteen-month period to form the basis of the Conservative manifesto, allowing Cameron the time to make changes first to the party's image. A similar strategy was used by William Hague. Hague launched the 'Listening to Britain' consultation exercise comprising public meetings and the soliciting of opinions from pressure groups and interested organisations, eventually involved around 40,00 participants (Garnett and Lynch 2002). Seven years prior to David Cameron's leadership the Conservative Party had therefore attempted the most extensive policy consultation in its history, preceding David Cameron's efforts to reconnect the party's message and aiming to legitimise the party's policy making process.

These comparisons are not exhaustive but they demonstrate how David Cameron has made changes to the tone, brand and organisation of the Conservative Party and in each case his predecessors began, attempted or went further than those processes. Cameron has, however, made unique claims to position the Conservative party onto the centre ground (see above). These claims can be evaluated in the context of the rationales given by William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard.<sup>13</sup>

### **Changing the Strategy: the agenda**

The most significant strategic change made by David Cameron has been to move the Conservative party onto a new issue agenda. In March 2007 David Cameron listed the policy priorities of the Conservative party as the public services, environment, and improving everyone's quality of life (speech to the Spring Forum, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2007). David Cameron has campaigned to stop cuts in the NHS, claiming to neutralise the image of Labour as the party of the NHS and to position the Conservative party as a party that can be trusted on the Health Service. This focus is a departure from previous strategies. He has also made much of his focus

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Associations was proposed but the extent of David Cameron's ability to shape the grassroots organisation was heavily curtailed when many of these proposals were shelved.

<sup>12</sup> These were the Globalisation and Global Poverty, Social Justice, Economic Competitiveness, NHS, Quality of Life and National and International Security Policy Groups.

<sup>13</sup> Each leader was interviewed within a year of the end of their leadership period to minimise post-hoc rationalisation and the interviews followed the same schedule of questions, lasting an average of one hour. All quotations are taken from verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, except where derived from printed articles or speeches, which are specified in the text. Interview scripts can be provided upon request.

on the environment. From his first day as leader, cycling to work,<sup>14</sup> he made the environment a focus. This was particularly clear in the 2007 local elections which were fought under the theme, ‘Vote Blue, Go Green’, putting the environment at the centre of that campaign. However, the ‘Vote Blue, Go Green’ message of the 2006 local council elections and of the Conservative’s re-branding exercise was first conceived under William Hague, called the ‘blue-green’ agenda. In an interview with Danny Finkelstein (former Head of Policy under William Hague) Finkelstein recalled that when Hague gave a key-note speech on this issue, its failure to gain coverage led to the dismissal of his Head of Press, Gregor Mackay.

I’ll give you three examples of speeches. (i) Speech called the blue-green agenda on the environment that William Hague gave. I think in Oxford. (ii) His intervention in the Tony Martin affair (iii) His radical speech on public service reform made ... three months I think before the general election. Of those three events you’ll have only heard of the middle of them. The other two were considered, intelligent, fairly wide reaching, influential things that made no impact whatsoever... In the case of the blue-green agenda it was because people are not interested in taping serious addresses and because probably we didn’t sell it well in terms of press.

However, Cameron’s issue agenda has clearly moved beyond the issues labelled the Conservative core vote issues of taxation, Europe, crime, and immigration. David Cameron’s stated intention is confirmed by an examination of all leader speeches in the eighteen-month period between 6<sup>th</sup> December 2005 and 6<sup>th</sup> August 2007.<sup>15</sup> Those issues were said to have been mainly focused on by William Hague and also by Michael Howard. Hague was most criticised for his emphasis of Europe in 2001 and Howard for immigration in 2005. In the latter case the immigration campaign was thought to be a ‘dog-whistle’ strategy of attempting to appeal to the sentiments of anti-immigrant Conservative voters (see Wring et al. 2007).

Yet it is incorrect to assume that the election campaigns of William Hague and Michael Howard focused only on these issues and it is also a misperception that Conservative core voters cared disproportionately about the traditional Conservative issues of taxation, Europe, crime and immigration.

William Hague’s 2001 campaign and preceding focus were, according to his interview, focused on the issues of taxation, crime, Europe, asylum/immigration and education.

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<sup>14</sup> Later criticised because his papers were delivered behind him by car. He also had a wind turbine fitted to his London home.

<sup>15</sup> See: <http://www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.speeches.page&spokesman=Cameron%2C+David>

It was meant to be crime, Europe, tax, and then education as a kind of loss leader. There was no way of winning an election on health and education, on those. But to show that we weren't just on about Europe, crime and tax. And one day, one in the whole campaign on asylum.

Hague explained the rationale of campaigning on Europe, crime, tax and asylum – issues on which the Conservatives had positive ratings.

You have to find the issues that you have a relative advantage. On tax, crime and Europe, and asylum, we had a relative advantage.

He also explained the strategy of trying to present a balanced platform. He recalled how he had undertaken a great deal of activity on education in the previous two years, believing it possible to reduce Labour's advantage on the issue, although with little effect, whereas he argued that Labour's lead on health in particular was so great that to campaign on the issue would have only given Labour a considerable strategic advantage. He remarked,

I think there is no doubt that any party that fights an election on issues where the opponents are far ahead in the lead is asking for it.

This rationale is wholly consistent with the 'saliency theory' of Budge and Farlie (1977; Budge and Farlie 1983; Budge et al. 1987)<sup>16</sup> and the 'issue ownership' theory of Petrocik (1996; Petrocik et al. 2003). In both theories parties are expected to maximize their votes by emphasising issues on which they have the best ratings and by downplaying issues that benefit their opponents. Raising the salience of an issue on which a party is negatively rated only hands the agenda to the party with the best rating. These theories are particularly relevant in a context of 'valence politics', whereby parties are primarily judged on their ability to deliver (Stokes 1963; Clarke et al. 2004; Green 2007). This suggests that Hague sought to maximize the vote beyond the Conservative core vote by aiming to shift the agenda onto the party's owned issues or relative issue strengths. He also tried to reduce Labour's advantage on a highly salient issue, education, similar to Cameron's stated aim on the issue of the Health Service.

Michael Howard pursued a very similar logic to William Hague although in his eighteen months as leader he believed he could not reverse the party's ratings on issues. He set out to organise an efficient and targeted campaign on five issues. The 'ten words' at the centre of the 2005

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<sup>16</sup> This argument is also made by Webb (2002) in relation to the Conservative's 2001 election campaign.

campaign were 'school discipline, clean hospitals, lower taxes, more police and controlled immigration'. These therefore covered public service issues as well as the more traditional Conservative issues of crime, taxation and immigration, but with a narrow focus. Although Michael Howard was accused of pandering to the Conservative right in his focus on immigration (Seldon and Snowdon 2005), the issue was salient beyond the Conservative vote and the party was judged by far the 'best party' on the issue (Cowley and Green 2005). Howard remarked,

Of course it's perfectly true that in talking about immigration you run the risk, and we did run the risk, of being accused of pandering to the right and all that sort of thing. Um, and that's the spin Labour put on it ... but actually it undoubtedly was and is a real problem that people far beyond the confines of core Tory votes cared quite passionately about.

Furthermore, just as in 2001 Hague avoided health, Labour's strongest issue, so in 2005 Howard avoided the issue of the economy.

We didn't talk about the economy very much...the judgement was, whatever might be the truth, most people think Gordon Brown's doing a reasonable job in managing the economy, so if you talk about that you will sort of be spitting in the wind.

Interestingly, Howard avoided talking about Iraq, a Liberal Democrat positional strength (see Green and Hobolt 2006). He regretted this decision. He believed in retrospect he could have gained a positional advantage by explaining his position.

People said to me, "lay off Iraq because whenever you say anything on Iraq it sort of goes pear-shaped" which it had on a number of occasions. I sort of listened to that which I shouldn't have done. That's my biggest regret...I think there were a lot of people who were turned off the government because of the Iraq war...they either abstained or they voted Liberal Democrat. If I had set out my position more convincingly it's possible that more of them would have voted for us.

In both elections, the Conservatives avoided Labour's therefore avoided their opponent's main strength issues; health and the economy in 2001 and the economy (and Iraq) in 2005. They tried to present a balanced platform while aiming to focus voters' attention onto issues thought to be most beneficial to the Conservatives. Hague and Duncan Smith tried to change the image of the party, first by moving onto new issues and later (under Duncan Smith) by avoiding traditional Conservative strengths. It was certainly believed that the party had suffered in 2001 due to the

perception of a narrow issue agenda, long before David Cameron became leader of the Conservative party. On being elected leader in September 2001, Iain Duncan Smith said,

It [the party] will campaign on the issues that really matter to people, the things that affect them most in their daily lives, obsess them, these are the things that must obsess us. (Conservative Party speech, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2001).

Iain Duncan Smith also set out to try to improve the popularity of the Conservative Party by presenting the message of the Conservative Party through the agenda of 'Helping the Vulnerable'. Duncan Smith explained,

We needed the sense of us to be... 'well, actually these people are OK'. That gives us the license to be on other wider political issues as well. You need to earn the right, basically....You sell your story through the eyes of the worst off, which allows people to feel as though what they are voting subsequently will benefit everybody.

We may not have won the health service argument directly as a 'tick-the-box of who's above and below on the line on the health service', but what we would have done is to have decreased the gap in public opinion, so that bit by bit the public came to believe that actually we weren't threatening what they worried about.

Duncan Smith's approach was to focus on a broad range of issues but to communicate them through the eyes of the most disadvantaged, as George Bush had done using the Compassionate Conservatism agenda in 2000. In this respect, Duncan Smith's strategy was arguably more radical than David Cameron's.

Hague and Duncan Smith were taken off course in their attempts to move onto new agendas by the demand for immediate impact and David Cameron has experienced a similar challenge, seen in the minor revolt in the face of two threats to his success; the surge of opinion poll support for Gordon Brown on becoming Prime Minister and the third place result for the Conservative Party in two by-elections.<sup>17</sup> When the party fails to improve its position, Iain Duncan Smith explained,

That worry acts as a massive compressor to drive you off anything that doesn't almost immediately appear to be successful. And so the demand from the parliamentary party of any leader is daily success.

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<sup>17</sup> Sedgefield and Ealing South.

Hague's eventual campaign was perceived as focusing on Europe very greatly (Butler and Kavanagh 2001; Bartle 2002) and Howard sought to differentiate his campaign from the 2001 campaign in this respect.

That was an example of my giving an important subject less emphasis than I might have done.

However, the problem faced by Hague was that he had no owned or positive issues that were also salient. Campaigning on any highly salient issues would, he believed, increase Labour's lead to an even greater degree. Furthermore, Europe was the only issue on which the Conservatives had any positional advantage. Iain Duncan Smith recalled,

Europe was the only thing where they could perceive us to be clearly in line with their thinking. Joe Public.

The perceived position of the party on this issue was closer to Labour and Liberal Democrat voters than it was to the self-placement of Conservative voters (Green 2005) and Evans (2002) argued that the issue won the party votes in 2001, although Hague also acknowledged that he believed the issue would energise core voters. Therefore, both leaders tried to win votes by campaigning on their best issues (limited for Hague) and by appearing as balanced as possible, though for Hague the degree to which Labour's advantages dominated the Conservatives made this difficult. Thus these leaders denied their strategies were consistent with the Conservative core vote interpretation. Their claims can be investigated empirically.

We can explore the degree to which Conservative voters differ from other voters in their issue priorities. A comparison of the five most salient issues for people intending to vote Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat and for undecided voters prior to the 2001 election reveals that Europe was no more salient for Conservative voters than for other voters, and health was a salient issue for more Conservative voters than others. (Using MORI individual level data a very similar pattern of homogenous salience responses across vote intention is found in the intervening periods between 1998 and the 2001 and 2005 general elections).

[Figure 1 about here]

The degree of similarity across partisanship is the most obvious feature of the data in Figure 1. Where differences exist they contradict core vote expectations. Respondents intending to vote Conservative thought that health, Labour's issue in 2001, was more important than the voters of the other parties, including the Labour Party, and individuals with no specified vote intention. Liberal Democrat voters were notable for ranking education and then Europe as the most important problems. Thus, Europe was a salient issue for relatively few voters in 2001, and it was not a 'core vote issue' in terms of salience (nor in terms of position, see above), and had the Conservative party wished to appeal to its core voters, its strategy should have been to place the issue of health in centre stage. This evidence supports the arguments made consistently by William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard. Iain Duncan Smith explained,

The issue of the core vote; ... more often than not, you know, bad health service, transport, the normal domestic issues, are high on their minds. It's that those issues [tax, Europe etc.] are associated with us...the core vote is not an issue based group.

Furthermore, Green and Hobolt (2006) test the issue ownership theory and measure the issue emphases of all three parties, primarily in 2005 and with evidence from 2001.<sup>18</sup> They find the issue agendas of the Conservatives to be consistent with a vote-maximizing logic of focusing on the highly salient issues and on issues on which the party was best rated. In both elections the party had its most positive ratings on its traditional or 'owned' issues, crime, taxation, Europe and immigration. In the 2001 election they find that the five most emphasised issues were crime (20%), education (17%), Europe (15%), taxation (15%) and health (13%) and in 2005 they were crime (25%), health (17%), taxation (14%), education (14%) and immigration (14%). They also find that parties are rewarded electorally when their relative owned issues are also salient. Thus the evidence supports the argument that the issue appeals of the Conservative party were not motivated by an appeal to core Conservative voters but by the vote-maximising logic of the issue ownership or saliency theory.

However, if talking about health in 2001 would have been 'asking for it', why could Howard focus his campaign on health in 2005? The first response would be to argue that Howard limited the discussion of health narrowly to the area in which voters' views coincided with the Conservatives. And yet talking about health should have handed the agenda to Labour's strength. Highly relevant is the change in party ratings across the salient issues between 2001 and 2005.

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<sup>18</sup> The authors conduct a content analysis of all campaign leader speeches, press releases and party election broadcasts. See also Green (2005) for a discussion of issue salience and issue focus in the 2001 campaign.

The following figure demonstrates the net approval rating of the Conservative Party over Labour on a range of salient issues between 1992 and 2006.<sup>19</sup>

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 demonstrates the impact of the period between 1992 and 1997 on Conservative ratings across all issues. Following 1993 the Conservative party was rated negatively on almost all issues relative to Labour. Where it gained any advantage these were the traditional Conservative issues of Europe, taxation, crime and asylum/immigration.<sup>20</sup> The ratings for the economy plummeted from 1997, after which point voters judged the Labour party best. Health and education were clearly in Labour's favour, more positively rated than Labour's overall rating, suggesting a greater proportion of votes than only Labour supporters rated the party positively on the health service in particular. Figure 2 also shows how the issue agenda available to Howard and later to David Cameron is considerably wider than for William Hague, according to the issue ownership or saliency theory. Prior to 2001 the only issues on which the Conservative party had any advantage were the traditional issues, but by 2004, prior to Michael Howard's election campaign, Labour's command was much reduced on the issues of the economy, health, and education. The gap between Labour and the Conservatives was narrower, enabling Howard to cover areas in which Labour would not wholly benefit. Labour still had a commanding lead on the economy which the Conservatives avoided for this reason but health was no longer a Conservative liability.

We can also suggest how these issue ratings may track the overall ratings of the parties. These data are cross-sectional and so changes in vote intention may reflect changes in party ratings on issues, but the stability of relative strengths for the Conservative party and their movement with changes in vote intention suggests an endogenous relationship also (where a party's issue ratings follow overall popularity and vote intention). Therefore, improving a party's overall ratings is crucial to broadening the issue agenda, and this may be more influential than the reverse effect.

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<sup>19</sup> MORI's 'best party' surveys are conducted yearly and are not yet available for 2007 (source: <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/political/trends.shtml>). The net approval rating is calculated as the percentage rating the Conservative Party the best party on each issue (and vote intention percentage) minus the percentage rating the Labour the best party. The sample is all MORI respondents in each annual survey and the survey collection dates were: 11 – 12 March 1992, 08 April 1997, 21 – 26 Feb 2002, 15 – 20 Sept 1993, 21 – 24 May 1998, 11 – 16 Sept 2003, 19 – 23 May 1994, 23 – 26 July 1999, 10 – 14 Sept 2004, 21 – 24 July 1995, 20 – 24 July 2000, 17 – 21 Feb 2005 (not all issues recorded), 22 – 25 July 1996, 15 – 20 Feb 2001, and Aug 31 – 06 Sept 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Asylum/immigration was only included in Ipsos-MORI 'best party' surveys from 2001.

It also suggests that unpopular parties are forced to campaign on a narrow set of issues, (labelled the core vote issues in the case of the Conservative party), but we should not interpret party behaviour as retracting back to the party base. Contrary to party competition theories arguing that parties are constrained by their core voters, supporters or activists, a significant constraint for the Conservative party in opposition has been the electoral context. Thus David Cameron must hope to widen the number of issues on which the Conservatives are rated positively in time for the next election, but according to the saliency or issue ownership theory, he may well attempt to shift an election agenda off Gordon Brown's best issues and onto his own, particularly if Labour's ownership of the economy remains unfailing and if Labour's issues are highly salient. Hague recalled how the Conservatives lost their ownership of the economy in when Britain was forced out of the Exchange Rate Mechanism (on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1992, known as 'Black Wednesday'), suggesting that significant events are necessary to change a party's reputation on some issues.

The Conservatives were the most economically competent party in the polls for all but one month in 28 years until 1992. And since then we've only been the most economic competent party in one month for the ten years that followed.

In the course of the parliament Cameron's objective is to gain a positive rating on as many new and non-traditional issues as possible by changing the rating of the Conservative party across the board, but this will be determined as much by Gordon Brown's perceived management of the economy and other issues as by him. Cameron appears to be avoiding Conservative issues to avoid the accusation at all costs that he is under the influence of the right in his party. Given the high salience of crime and immigration, Cameron has in some respects pursued a narrower issue agenda than his predecessors. It is this strategic direction to which his opponents, believing that Conservative ownership of those issues could be jeopardised. The same argument was made to Iain Duncan Smith when he tried to move the Conservative Party onto his message of 'One Nation' Conservatism. He recalled a conversation with Norman Fowler MP,

"We've got to go onto tax! This stuff doesn't mean anything. Why aren't we saying anything on Europe?!...Europe is a critical issue. We're going to lose this issue if we don't get back onto Europe now." I said, "Nobody's more passionate than me on Europe, Norman, but I don't think that's true". (Interview)

By changing the issue agenda of the Conservative party thus far Cameron appears to be demonstrating that the Conservative party is new and different, aiming to change the ownership of a wider number of issues prior to an election campaign. But it is arguable whether this

represents a shift towards the centre of British politics, as he claims. After all, as Howard argued, the issue immigration was a concern to a majority of voters in 2005, crime and taxation are also a concern to voters beyond the Conservative core vote, and other leaders took a broader issue agenda than has been supposed. Cameron's strategy of avoiding traditional Conservative issues and emphasising new issues (and that of Iain Duncan Smith), while consistent with the saliency or issue ownership theory appears to be targeted at moving the Conservative party towards the 'political centre' than the 'electoral centre' (Hindmoor 2004). The electoral centre is occupied when parties are located close to majority of public opinion, but the political centre is occupied when parties are believed to be moderate, in touch, and mainstream. Thus, although Cameron appears to have made the Conservative party more acceptable, we need to also ask whether Cameron has thus far shifted the Conservative party appreciably to the electoral centre.

### **Changing the strategy: the policies**

It is a distinctive feature of Cameron's leadership thus far that he has not made many policy announcements or changes. Those he has present a mixed picture of ideological repositioning in policy terms.

The most high profile policy announcement by David Cameron thus far was the speech by David Willetts arguing that educational opportunity would not be advanced by academic selection alone. David Cameron's policy was to commit to existing grammar schools but not to open new ones, and hardly a clause four moment, but the internal row it created marked the beginning of the most challenging period of Cameron's leadership. It was widely seen as a presentational mistake but indicated that some opposed what they saw as a move away from traditional Conservatism. Yet David Cameron's first policy announcement was an immediate move to reassure the euro-sceptic right in the Parliamentary party – proposing the withdrawal of Conservative MEPs from the European People's Party grouping in the European Parliament and the formation of a new centre-right grouping of MEPs. He also pledged to revive the 'Right to Buy' policy of Margaret Thatcher of selling homes to council tenants, suggesting not all his policy proposals were to represent a break with the past. In these respects it is far too simple to argue that Cameron has simply moved away from the right-wing commitments of the party.

More controversial were the policies of support for nuclear energy and the announcement that a Conservative government would increase taxes on aviation to curb environmental pollution. On the second policy, the party defended the policy saying that the taxation raised would fund spending on environmental measures, but both announcements were seen by some to contradict Conservative thinking.<sup>21</sup> George Osborne (Shadow Chancellor) also gave the appearance of changing the focus of economic policy by arguing for economic stability before tax cuts, and the Conservatives launched a campaign when Gordon Brown became Prime Minister promising more spending on the NHS. Debates over taxation policy had dominated the last two years of shadow cabinet discussions under William Hague, and the issue has been symbolic (Walters 2002). The call for more spending on the NHS than Labour can be viewed as something of a sea change (although Hague had previously committed the party to matching Labour's spending on health and education, see Green 2005). In these respects Cameron appears to be moving away from the simple association of Conservative policy with lower taxation and lower public spending, but each had precedence in the policies of previous opposition leaders between 1997 and 2005 (see also Garnett 2003).

Lastly, we can look to David Cameron's 'statement of values' in the 'Built to Last' document.<sup>22</sup> This statement, published in August 2006, is almost entirely a reaffirmation of previous Conservative policy. The commitment to meet the United Nations GDP spending target on international development and aid (0.7%) was agreed between 1997 and 2001.<sup>23</sup> The commitment to public health workers from bureaucracy and government targets was part of the 'free schools' policy of William Hague.<sup>24</sup> The policies of the Howard leadership and the conscious statement of disconnect from Margaret Thatcher's 'there is no such thing as society' (instead it reads: 'there is such a thing as society. It is just not the same as the state') is identical to the words of Iain Duncan Smith between 2001 and 2003.<sup>25</sup> As with the organisational comparisons above, the evidence points to the mistakes we would make if we assumed that policy repositioning by David Cameron is a wholly distinct break from the policy positions of previous leaders.

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<sup>21</sup> Information on members' objections and the reporting of MPs' disquiet was obtained from the Conservative grassroots website, [www.conservativehome.com](http://www.conservativehome.com)

<sup>22</sup> In the introduction, "Our values: Our party seeks to cherish freedom, advance opportunity and nurture responsibility. By trusting people, we help individuals grow stronger; by sharing responsibility, we help society grow stronger. We believe there is such a thing as society, but it is not the same thing as the state. Our party stands for a free society and a strong nation state; an opportunity society, not an overpowering state; a responsible society in which each person and every family, regardless of position or power or wealth, is able to fulfil their potential, to make their own choices, and to find true and lasting happiness".

<sup>23</sup> Source: conversation with Gary Streeter MP, Shadow International Development Secretary 1999-2001.

<sup>24</sup> Source: 2001 Conservative Party Manifesto, 'Time for Common Sense'.

<sup>25</sup> Source: Foreword by Iain Duncan Smith in the book 'There is Such a Thing as Society' (2003).

If David Cameron has pulled the Conservative party to the electoral centre, the policies must therefore have been previously to the right, as claimed Butler and Kavanagh (2001), Bartle (2002), Norris and Lovenduski (2004) and Seldon and Snowdon (2005). However, in addition to the above policy comparisons, Green (2005) shows the perceived policy position of the Conservative party in 2001 to be far closer to voters, particularly on its 'owned' issues, and Green (2007) also tracks the perceived policy similarities between the Labour and Conservatives parties in both 2001 and 2005, demonstrating that voters perceive only small differences between the major parties on the tax-spend or left and right dimension. Using manifesto analysis Bara and Budge (2001) and Bara (2006) further demonstrates the relative proximity of the Conservative Party to the other parties in relation to previous elections. With regard to the 2005 general election, Quinn (2006: 173) said, "Changing policies was not the answer because their policies were not overly different from Labour's and not regarded as extreme". David Cameron has therefore sought to move the impression of the Conservative party to the political centre and achieved more than previous leaders did with similarly intentioned attempts. However, he has not moved the party clearly towards the electoral centre, except for few significant changes to date, partly because an ideological shift has not been seriously attempted but mainly because the Conservative party's problem was not ideological extremism in the first place. We should therefore not be too quick to attribute Cameron's apparent impact on the fortunes of the Conservative party to a wholly new strategy for the party or to an ideological shift back to the electoral centre of British politics.

## **Discussion**

The notion of parties as responsive to their core voters is one consistent with a traditional view of party formation and democracy: parties represent the concerns of different groups of voters and offer alternative competing worldviews between which different types of voters tend to align. It has become common wisdom that when the Conservative party lost the 1997 election its response was to appeal to internal policy interests, labelled the 'core vote' strategy in 2001 and 2005. The implication is that the party confirms theories explaining party shifts (to more polarised positions) by the distribution of opinion within the party base (see Key 1966; May 1972; Hirschman 1970; Robertson 1976; McLean 1982; Aldrich 1983; Kitschelt 1989; 1994; Adams and Merrill 1999; Adams 2001; Adams et al. 2005; Schofield 2005). Alternatively, parties primarily seek office and pursue policies and priorities to maximize their electoral support among the greatest number of

voters. This latter aim should be particularly common among more weakly partisan aligned electorates and in a majoritarian election system such as Britain's (see Cox 1990 and Lijphart 1999). In this paper I have not argued that some Conservative activists, members or MPs do not prioritise the traditional core vote issues of taxation, crime, immigration and Europe. I have, however, argued that these are not 'core vote issues' but traditional Conservative issues on which the Conservative party tends to be more trusted and positively rated than its opponents. Emphasising these issues in election campaigns, and aiming to broaden the number of potential positive issues between elections, is consistent with the 'saliency theory' of Budge and Farlie (1977; Budge and Farlie 1983; Budge et al. 1987)<sup>26</sup> and the 'issue ownership' theory of Petrocik (1996; Petrocik et al. 2003). The implications are that when parties are unpopular, they fight campaigns that appear to confound vote maximising assumptions while being motivated by vote-seeking incentives, contradicting the explanation that they are constrained by the party base. Electoral constraints define the strategies of weakened parties but within a vote-seeking rationale. Thus, we need not look to policy-seeking or core vote explanations for party strategies on narrow issue agendas, but to the rational vote seeking logic within the electoral context of issue ownership and salience.

This interpretation prompts a further question regarding the degree to which political parties can change the ownership (and salience) of issues. I have argued that a broader issue agenda was available to Michael Howard than William Hague because Labour's popularity and perceived performance on salient issues waned between 2001 and 2005, and therefore, as Labour's popularity subsequently plummeted, David Cameron has a much wider available issue agenda. However, David Cameron has sought to capture the issue of the environment by heavily emphasising that issue, attempting to demonstrate his commitment and therefore his trustworthiness on the issue, implying a belief that emphasising an issue will also impact a party's relative advantage. Yet Labour were trusted on the economy only after the Conservatives were perceived to fail (and then only when demonstrating their competence in government), pointing to the possibility that governments must first 'lose' their issues before another party can 'own' them.<sup>27</sup> The replacement of Tony Blair by Gordon Brown appears to have alleviated Labour's potential disadvantage for the short-term and it remains to be seen if Cameron can turn sufficient issues to his favour to adopt a winning platform. These changes in British politics point to the

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<sup>26</sup> This argument is also made by Webb (2002) in relation to the Conservative's 2001 election campaign.

<sup>27</sup> Note that I refer to ownership in a relative sense more akin to Budge and Farlie's saliency theory (1977) than Petrocik's (1993) ownership theory which argues that parties own issues more consistently.

need for further research to investigate the impact of leadership evaluations on the issue advantages and therefore the issue agendas of parties.

The argument in this paper suggests we should not be too quick to attribute improvements in the ratings of parties to particular strategies. An additional reason is a challenge to Cameron's early apparent successes. Gordon Brown's premiership has undermined Conservative poll ratings to considerable effect in recent months, and we can also question why the Conservative Party did not benefit more from the significant decline in Labour popularity prior to Brown. Cameron's claims of strategic success were bolstered when he achieved 40% equivalent national share of the vote in the 2007 local elections in May, but Conservative leaders have been 'winning' local elections since 1997.<sup>28</sup> Cameron improved on previous results but the gains also reflect the huge loss the Conservatives had incurred prior to 1997 (in 1979 the Conservatives had over 12,000 councillors but by 1997 it was 4,550). The party's performance in the Ealing South by-election in July 2007 was highly problematic for Cameron. They came in third place despite raising expectations of a success. In the Bromley and Chislehurst by-election in 2006, when a Conservative majority was cut from 13,342 to 633, the party could make the case for accelerating the programme for change, but this was far harder by 2007. The Conservative party has not gained a seat in a by-election since 1982, and when Cameron failed to improve the party's position, the perceived success of his strategy was significantly undermined. Thus there are four reasons to challenge the claim that David Cameron has improved the Conservative's electoral position because he has begun to reposition the party at the centre. The first is that his predecessors had not 'lurched to the right' as described, pursuing more balanced platforms than assumed and campaigning on issues on which the party had a positional and relative ownership advantage. Cameron has pursued Hindmoor's (2004) 'political centre' more than he has need to reposition the party at the 'electoral centre'. The second is that Cameron's strategy is very similar to his predecessors – one of attempting to change the party's reputation on other issues and broadening the available issue agenda for the forthcoming election. The third is that this strategy appears to be a function of changing ratings (prior to Gordon Brown becoming Prime Minister) as much as it is a cause, and therefore any advances in poll ratings cannot be credited to Cameron's strategy, and the fourth is that these ratings have returned to pre-Cameron levels in recent months.

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<sup>28</sup> In the 1999 local elections Hague achieved a 34% share of the vote equivalent, Iain Duncan Smith achieved 35% in 2003 and Michael Howard achieved 37% in 2004 (Source: House of Commons Research Papers, 'Local Election Results' 1999, 2003, 2004, 2007). William Hague achieved the greatest number of gains at 1,344, although these figures cannot be directly compared because each election contains a different number of electing councils.

Although David Cameron has offered a fresh face, a new image, and a new tactical approach of avoiding the Conservatives' traditional strengths to gain new ground, his approach builds on those of his predecessors. Whether he has more long lasting success than them, and whether this is attributable to him or to the government's ratings, is yet to be seen.

## **Conclusions**

Using elite interviews with three recent Conservative Party leaders, William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard, this paper has challenged existing explanations of Conservative party strategy in opposition between 1997 and 2007. Whereas many interpretations of the two election campaigns in this period (2001 and 2005) relate the strategies to appeals to core Conservative voters, this article challenges the core vote account and its theoretical implications. I argue that theories of vote-maximisation are consistent with this example, rather than those arguing predicting party divergence to the less representative party electoral base. Conservative leaders claim their strategies to be appeals on issues on which voters agreed with the Conservative party and issues on which voters thought the party was the best party to deliver, and this claim is explored using interview data and also quantitative description. An 'owned issues' explanation is more persuasive than the core vote explanation for the two campaigns.

However, when the Conservative party was first defeated its popularity was so low and the Labour party's so high that barely any owned issues were available to the Conservatives. Hence the 2001 election campaign of William Hague was fought on a relatively narrow agenda, albeit with attempts to broaden the focus. A similar strategy was attempted by Iain Duncan Smith, who made several attempts to present the Conservative party as more caring. By 2005, when Michael Howard fought the general election as leader, voter sentiment against the Labour party allowed Howard to expose Labour's weaknesses on salient issues, focusing also on Conservative strengths. This means that David Cameron's strategy is highly consistent with these objectives, and many of his actions as leader are traced in the article to previous leader's strategies. Cameron is also the first to benefit from a significantly greater number of issues on which Labour has been perceived by voters to fail and hence his broader issue agenda is, I suggest, as much a cause of Cameron's relative success as it is a consequence. The implications of this narrative for party

theory are significant. Parties have only limited options to vote maximise when their opponents are popular.

Where Cameron's strategy is more distinct (although not from Iain Duncan Smith's) is in primarily avoiding traditional Conservative strengths. This strategy has come under recent fire, particularly in light of failed electoral tests and a significant 'Brown bounce' for Labour, from which Conservative poll ratings have suffered. David Cameron has claimed he is the first to move the party to the centre, and seems to be challenged for this approach, and yet the continuities suggest that previous leaders were not as far to the right as we may think. I have argued that under each previous leader since 1997 the Conservative party was not appreciably to the right in policy terms nor positioned only towards the Conservative core vote. Therefore, Cameron has aimed to position the Conservative party to the 'political centre' (Hindmoor 2004), an image shift, but not significantly to the 'electoral centre', a positional shift. If Cameron succeeds in modifying the perception of the Conservative party by further positioning the party in the political centre and in gaining ownership of Labour issues and new issues he will be distinguished from his predecessors as being more successful, but he should not be distinguished for being the first to adopt such an electorally motivated strategy.

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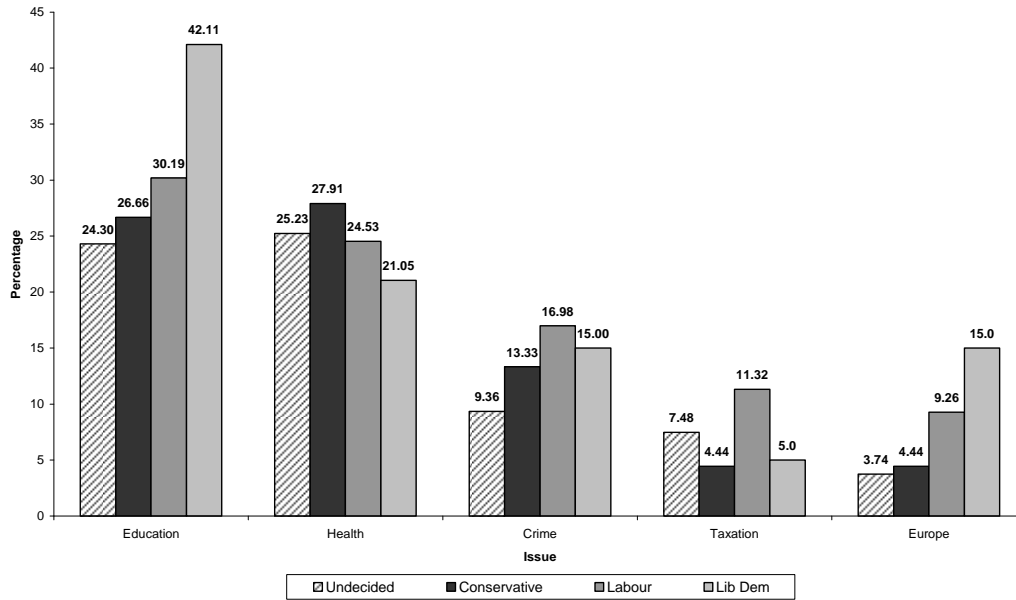
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## Figures

**Figure 1: Most Important Issue by party vote intention (Source: MORI individual level data, February 2001 N = 1018)**



Ipsos-MORI question, 'what is the most important problem facing the country today?'

Figure 2: Net Conservative Advantage across Issues and Vote Intention between 1992 and 2006 (Source: Ipsos-MORI 'best party' data)

