

Three Elections, No Mandates:
France, 2007, the United States, 2008, and
Great Britain, 2010

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October 24, 2010

Paper prepared for the conference: “What Were the Elections About? How Do We Know It?” Tel Aviv University, October 24–26, 2010.

Abstract

This paper revives the theory of electoral mandates as social constructions from (Grossback, Peterson & Stimson 2006). It develops two criteria for predicting a consensus mandate interpretation: (1) that one party sweeps all contests, and (2) that the victory be at least partly unexpected. These criteria are then applied to three recent national elections, France in 2007, the United States in 2008, and Great Britain in 2010. It concludes that none of the three cases meets the mandate criteria. In a final, more speculative analysis, the paper reviews the degree to which election results mirror fundamental and long-term movements in public opinion.

In this paper I update the view of electoral mandates put forward in (Grossback, Peterson & Stimson 2006).¹ The extension is both in time—from and end point of 2004 in that volume—and across nations. I expand the focus of that purely American research program into elections for the Presidency of France and parliamentary elections in Great Britain. My design is to exploit the objective criteria developed in that book for the newer and different cases.

Having a set of criteria for what constitutes an electoral mandate set in print is a major advantage. For what we observe—particularly in popular commentary—is that the criteria employed are endogenous. The ever creative commentators (usually those favoring the winning party) decide what the criteria should be after the contest is over. And, amazingly enough, these criteria always seem to indicate that the winners have achieved a mandate. Here we have a spectacular advantage, criteria dictated by theory and written down before any of the contests I observe began. It can be extremely useful in such cases to have limits on creativity. As I pursue interpretation of elections in 2007, 2008, and 2010 I will be hobbled by what I (and my colleagues) wrote in 2006.

Before I can begin that interpretation I need to lay out the general theory of that book and also the specific criteria (developed in Chapter Two) for predicting whether or not a consensus interpretation of mandate would emerge from the facts that could be known on election night.

¹I would like to thank three sets of collaborators whose work finds its way into this paper. From the mandate project Larry Grossback and David Peterson shaped the key ideas that structure this extension. In France Vincent Tiberj and Cyrille Thiébaud are also responsible for the estimate of policy mood. And in Great Britain the development of the mood concept and measure was shared with John Bartle and Sebastian Dellepiane. This paper was written with the support of National Science Foundation grant SES-1024291, “Developing Policy-Specific Measures of Public Opinion” (Frank Baumgartner co-principle investigator).

1 Two Kinds of Electoral Mandate

As old as democracy itself, the idea of electoral mandates is that voters sometimes call for a change in governance with the idea in mind of getting a different set of policies. And policies are the key element of the idea. Voters often call for change simply because they have grown tired of the governing party or because results are not good under it. But these electoral results carry with them no message (in the first case) or a trivial one (“do better”) in the second.

Behavioral Mandates So “mandate” is a simple idea, a change in party or candidate motivated by a desire for a change in policies. I’ll call this idea a “behavioral mandate” for a distinction to come later. It is easy to state, at least. Observing the relevant evidence has proven anything but easy. For this traditional conception requires getting into the heads of voters and coming to know whether or not their votes were motivated by a desire for policy change. That was effectively impossible before the advent of sample surveys. And then initial results in the early study of voting behavior at very least discouraged the idea of policy-willful voters, if not altogether killing it.

The American Voter (Campbell et al. 1960) famously relegated policy-motivated voting to at most a minor role. It portrayed an electorate that was not well informed, not particularly interested, whose beliefs were tied to the past and funneled through a prior identification with party that was the major determinant of the vote.² Such an electorate seemed clearly incapable of a willful message to government. And with that conclusion the idea of behavioral mandates was largely shelved as a pre-scientific notion inconsistent with (then) modern understandings of the vote.

Subsequently the evidence about policy-conscious voting was re-interpreted in a more favorable light in a stream of revisionist vot-

²It is always necessary to note that the conclusions drawn by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes were much more careful and nuanced than the subsequent caricature of the book by generations of voting behavior analysts. The strongest interpretations of what the authors said often originated in the gloss of commentary much more than in the pages of the book itself.

ing behavior scholarship.³ Curiously, as the idea of policy-conscious voting was revived in the decades after *The American Voter*, the idea of behavioral mandates stayed pretty much on the shelf. Partly that is because policy-conscious voting is not enough to produce mandates. It is also necessary to have policy-conscious voters who will switch their party support between one election and another. The picture that emerged as issue-voting was revived is that issue voters tended to be committed partisans voting always for their preferred ideological side. If leftists always vote for the parties of the left and rightists always vote for parties of the right you do not get behavioral mandates. The *change* in voting must be explicable by policy preferences to produce a mandate. Perhaps the work of Page and Jones (1979) and Markus and Converse (1979) eased the demise of behavioral mandates. The joint message of both sophisticated attempts to untangle the causality of the vote was that doing so required better data than we were ever likely to have. The picture was that all the traditional forces of voting theory mutually caused and reinforced each other and that getting the causal flow right required heroic assumptions that were untenable with the sort of data we have.

Socially Constructed Mandates Voting behavior scholarship came to be at cross purposes with popular response to the mandate idea. While it would not be correct to say that voting scholarship (actively) denied the possibility of mandates, it mainly ceased to inquire into the more or less discredited idea. But meanwhile real politics continued. And despite the state of voting behavior, the people who govern (and those who comment on governance) have decided from time to time that they have witnessed a mandate election in the United States. While it is always possible that elite interpretations of politics are wrong, the fact that real politicians stake their careers on their beliefs demands that their beliefs be taken seriously. So while the idea of behavioral mandates is largely dormant, elections have come and gone and some have been widely believed to carry a message from willful voters. We know this because we can observe the interpretations offered in the public media.

On three occasions in the U.S. (1964, 1980, and 1994) inter-

³The work is far too voluminous for citation, the work of hundreds of authors working over two decades or so. A notable and prominent example is (Nie, Verba & Petrocik 1979).

pretative consensus has emerged in the Washington community that voters were expressing strong policy preferences in their votes. We call these socially constructed mandates. They are every bit as real as the behavioral kind because the commentators' words are written down for anyone to see. There either is not consensus, the normal case, or there is—and it is an observable fact. If consensus were just a matter of words, then social construction would still be a fact, if not a very important one. But the key finding of (Peterson et al. 2003) and (Grossback, Peterson & Stimson 2006) is that the elite consensus—which we presume is shared with those who practice politics as well as those who write about them—has causal force. We observe in particular that movements in votes in Congress in the direction of the mandate occur in both parties and are on average quite large. We observe also that such movements have had decisive consequences in the Great Society legislation (with voting rights as a key example), in the Reagan Revolution, including the key taxing and spending package of 1981, and (somewhat less so) in the “Contract with America” legislation of 1995.⁴

The point of view of the social construction theory is that what voting behavior analysts believe about (behavioral) mandates is an interesting side-show, but only that. When politicians decide that they have witnessed a mandate election, they act. And that action is very real and easily observable. Because behavioral mandates are so difficult to observe in the complicated endogenous and multivariate world of voter decision-making, it may well be the case that interpretative errors occur. It is possible that mandates may be sent by voters and never received by governing elites. It is even more likely that mandates never “sent” in the minds of voters might nonetheless be “received” by politicians. We are agnostic about the question of whether elite consensus is correct. For us all that matters is that it leads to consequences that matter.⁵

To summarize a simple idea very simply, if politicians perceive

⁴The 1995 case had equally massive effects on legislation passed, but because of divided government at the time little of it became law.

⁵And we have observed for our three cases that the consensus mandate interpretation never survives the long term; it eventually leads to skepticism and then reversal. That loosely suggests that consensus interpretations must have gone beyond what reality would support, which explains why the consensus eventually fades.

a mandate, then one exists.⁶

2 Predicting a Consensus on Message

I could proceed as we did in the U.S. to a content analysis of the relevant media sources for my three cases. I have not done so because the work demands more resources than I have and also because it demands more resources than it is worth because I was a spectator to all three elections. I was in the U.S. for most of the 2008 election cycle and was exposed to media sources daily before in the run-up and the aftermath. I was in France for academic 2006–2007 and equally exposed to the French media as the election played out and was interpreted. I observed Great Britain from across the Channel. But in this case the outcome—a hung parliament leading to a coalition government—was so starkly indecisive so as to quell any serious talk of mandate.

In Chapter Two of *Mandate Politics* we raised the question of whether the consensus which is the defining feature of a socially constructed mandate could be predicted from objective facts, such as those that could be known on election night. We found, with some sighing of relief, that it could be. We found that consensus—as opposed to mere partisan claims which could be hilariously unconnected with evidence—was easily predictable from the facts of the election.

We assume that consensus is a social process within the governing community that begins on election night and continues for months thereafter. To the question “what leads commentators on elections to declare a mandate?” theory suggested two answers. One is that the election had to be a sweep for one party. That meant in particular (and partially limited to the American context of multiple elections at multiple levels) that party gains had to be across the board, with all offices moving in the same direction. Otherwise ad hoc explanations, e.g., the winning presidential candidate was more personally attractive than his or her opponent, could challenge an interpretation of willful voters. Where one party was gaining everywhere—and in particular

⁶But the consensus idea is crucial here. Winning parties always claim a mandate for their policy stances. And so such claims are essentially meaningless. Consensus emerges in the rare cases where the losers concede that voters preferred the winning parties’ programs.

in contests like the House of Representatives where the number of seats in contest is so large—some uniform national factor is required to explain why the election is breaking one way more than the other.⁷

Second, we know that commentators go into election night with a pretty clear understanding of what the night's story will be before any votes are counted. Voters are tired of the incumbents, the economy is in a slump, or whatever, commentators know the conditions and know the horse race polls that convey their election influence. So when things turn out as expected, the stories that are likely to be told are exactly the stories that explained the outcome before it was counted. So if you expect a party to win by say eight points plus or minus a little uncertainty, and the party is actually polling a six, or seven, or eight, or nine or ten point win, there is no need to invent a story about willful voters. So, for example, if the 2010 elections in the U.S. turn out as all expect in a substantial Republican win, the pre-election story—voters dissatisfied with economic progress under Barack Obama and the Democratic Congress—will dominate the night.

That is how election interpretation goes. Expectations are pretty good and usually get confirmed by outcomes. Ho Hum. But rational expectations tells us that surprise is real information—and expected outcomes not. And so electoral surprise prompts those who interpret elections to go searching for a story that explains a result they did not see coming. And willful voters is a natural candidate. Why is one party winning most of the contests and doing so in a more dramatic fashion than anticipated? It is because the voters are sending a message. The need to invent a mandate occurs forcefully, that is, when things do not turn out as expected.

Now we have two objective criteria for asserting a mandate interpretation:

1. the election must show consistent gains all in one direction, and
2. the size of the movement must lie beyond the expectations of informed observers on election night.

⁷This quickly discounted most presidential landslides, for example, where it happened to be the case where the party winning the White House usually was losing congressional strength on the same day.

Both are necessary. A big victory that could be seen coming weeks or months in advance produces no consensus on mandates. Nor does a surprise win for one office, e.g., the presidency, that is not joined with gains elsewhere.

Although we shall infer, rather than observe, policy conscious voting, the idea is essential. Mandates carry a message about the changed policy preferences of the electorate or they are not mandates. And that matters because belief in a popular will often provides the extra push needed to turn proposals into law. Politicians who believe that they have witnessed a mandate, whether they approve it or not, are wary of standing in the way.

I now turn to apply the theory and criteria to three recent elections, that of Nicolas Sarkozy in France, that of Barack Obama in the United States, and that of David Cameron in Great Britain. I proceed in chronological order, France 2007, then the United States 2008, and the Great Britain 2010.

3 France, 2007

When Nicholas Sarkozy obtained the backing of the Neo-Gaullist UMP, it was widely believed that he would become the next president of France. The UMP (and its predecessors), after all, produced most of the presidents of France under the Fifth Republic. France is a social democracy governed most of the time by the political right. It is a workers' state where the parties of the workers only rarely command a majority. Its workers have time after time won generous concessions from private industry and from the French State. But only in the person of François Mitterrand did the workers ever have the upper hand in ruling France. So Nicholas Sarkozy was the latest in a line of center-right figures dating back to Charles De Gaulle himself who would become presidents of France.

Sarkozy was undoubtedly an ambitious man. But more than some of his predecessors, he also had an ambition to change France. The essence of the program he put forth, designed to make France more competitive in the world and more like its German and Anglo

allies, was to roll back some of the rights French workers had succeeded in enacting. Chief among these were the 35 hour work week, a system of early retirement that had a typical retirement age of about 60, and the right of public workers to gain their goals by striking and shutting down necessary services such as public transport. For Sarkozy the 35 hour workweek was uncompetitive and the retirement system, particularly with an aging population, was unsustainable. And the ability of workers to shut down France gave them a power they could not win at the ballot box. The slogan that combined changes in all these areas was “travailler plus pour gagner plus” (work more to earn more).

That brings us to the central question, “Did French voters choose Sarkozy over his socialist rival Ségolène Royal simply because they liked Sarkozy and the UMP more than Royal and the Parti Socialiste, or were they endorsing Sarkozy’s program? In the former case there was no mandate. In the latter case there was. Were French voters voting simply for the traditionally winning party or for a France that worked harder?”

To get beyond mere interpretation, with an ever-present danger of ideological bias, we turn to the two criteria already discussed. If the Sarkozy victory is to be said to carry a mandate for policy change, then the UMP victory must be for more than the Presidency, big prize that it is, and it must have been in part unexpected. We can observe the former criterion in the results of the legislative elections, coming shortly after the two rounds of presidential balloting. We can observe probable expectations in the pre-election polling for the presidency.

A Sweeping Victory? The French case provides four occasions to judge whether a party victory is sweeping. The presidency is decided in two rounds, first a multi-party (12 parties in 2007) plurality contest to decide who will contest the second round and then the second round majoritarian election to pick the winner. The legislative contests, held later, are the same two rounds in each legislative district.

From the first three of these four elections one could make a case for a decisive win of Sarkozy and his UMP party. Not overwhelming, to be sure, but Sarkozy and the UMP did triumph by about five

points over Ségolène Royal and the Parti Socialiste in the first round (31-26). And then that margin held up as Sarkozy won the second round (53-47). Probably the best showing of the three was the first round of the legislative elections where the UMP scored an impressive 40% in multi-party competition, setting up an expected easy win in the second round.

And then in the second round of the legislative contest French voters had second thoughts about the three straight UMP wins and gave the left opposition a net gain of seats over what it had held going into 2007—at the cost to the UMP. So this second round legislative election is a pretty clear answer to whether the party result was sweeping—and the answer is no. Nicolas Sarkozy assumed the presidency with reduced UMP strength in the *Assemblée Nationale*.

And so the first criterion is settled in the negative. From the theory a failure of either criterion is sufficient to deny a mandate. Nonetheless I turn to the second criterion anyhow and pose the question: “Was the Sarkozy/UMP win a surprise, or did we see it coming?”

An Unexpected Win? This second criterion is easier to gauge. Although we cannot observe people’s expectations, we have a very good second best from knowing the pre-election polls which were driving those expectations. So we can ask the subsidiary question, “Did the polls predict the outcome or would it have come as a surprise?”

We can see from Figure 1 that the answer is easy. This election outcome was well predicted, almost from the outset. Anyone who had paid attention to the polls would have expected the winner to be Nicolas Sarkozy—and by about the margin by which he did in fact win.⁸

The figure shows some uncertainty early, mainly in 2006, which then resolves itself into a clear picture of a dominant Sarkozy in the final months before the April 22 election. The second round (on May 6 in metropolitan France) was equally uneventful. One can predict the second round from first round results for the winners and the

⁸For what little personal testimony is worth, I clearly remember watching TV on election night knowing whose face I was going to see on the screen.

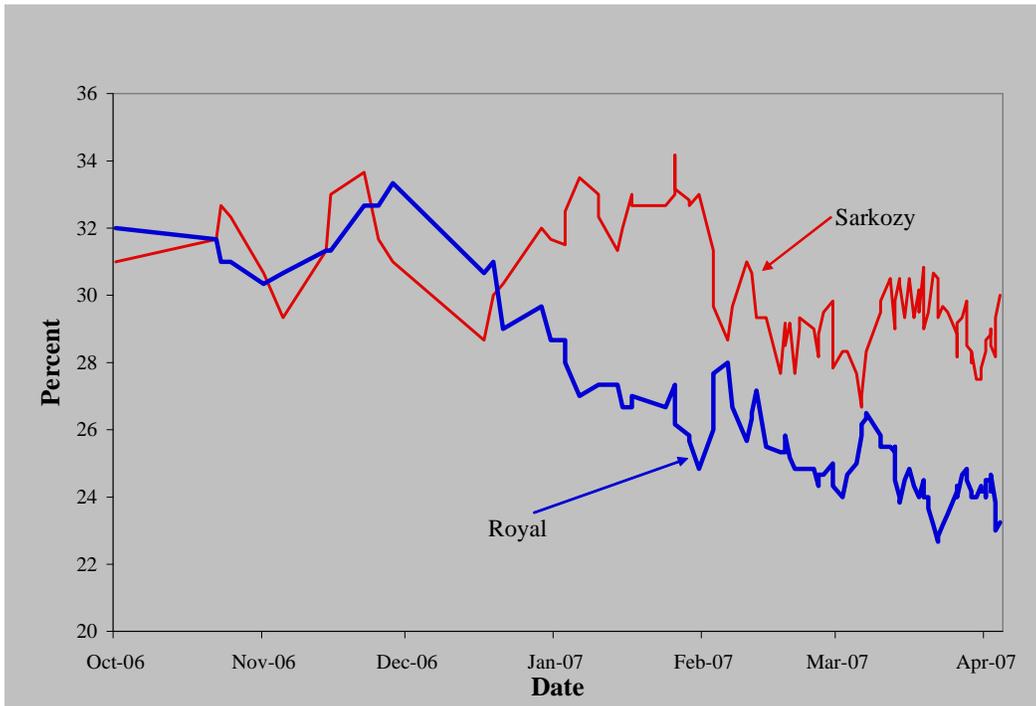


Figure 1: The Standing of Sarkozy and Royal in Pre-election Polls: (Three Period Moving Average) 2006–2007

assumption that other parties of the left and right will choose the spatially most proximate candidate, the UMP for the right parties and the PS for the left. That left François Bayrou's MoDem in the middle. Bayrou might have played the king-maker with his 18% of the first round vote, but chose to endorse neither second round candidate (one suspects because he would have been embarrassed by inability to deliver his own vote to one side or the other had he made the attempt). Analysts quickly declared that Sarkozy's first round win should be enough to sustain him in the second round. Because the non-UMP vote on the right was larger than the non-PS vote on the left in the first round, it was hard to tell a story of Royal making up a substantial deficit.

France, 2007, thus meets neither criterion of a proposed mandate consensus. There was no consensus and thus no mandate. A belief in mandate would have immensely aided Sarkozy's attempts to enact his policies. Instead, he had to function, as political leaders normally do, without the belief that the people had clearly spoken. From that we would have expected the sustained and bitter struggle he has in fact faced.

4 The United States, 2008

George W. Bush, after September 11, 2001, briefly attained the highest presidential approval ever recorded.⁹ By the end of his eight years in office he was the least approved president of all time. Although he did not record the very lowest approval numbers ever on record, he did sink to the doldrums of disapproval and stay there for much of his second term. No other president had been so unpopular so long.

While Bush was becoming deeply disapproved, Democratic partisanship was on the rebound—and not coincidentally.¹⁰ The Demo-

⁹It is useful to note here that my interpretation of the American case dates from a public talk at the Brookings Institution one week after election day 2008. It does not therefore reflect the ensuing two years of Congressional gridlock and Tea Party revolt against the Obama Administration. It is instead fully driven by facts that were known the night Barack Obama was elected.

¹⁰For the connection between approval and macropartisanship see (MacKuen, Erikson

cratic gain from Bush's relatively close re-election in 2004 was on the order of eight points (see Figure 2), easily enough to assure a win in 2008 for whoever would become the Democratic nominee. Presidential nominations are always an eagerly sought prize, even in years when the prospects are not good. In 2008 there was optimism in the Democratic Party that the next nominee would become the next president of the United States.

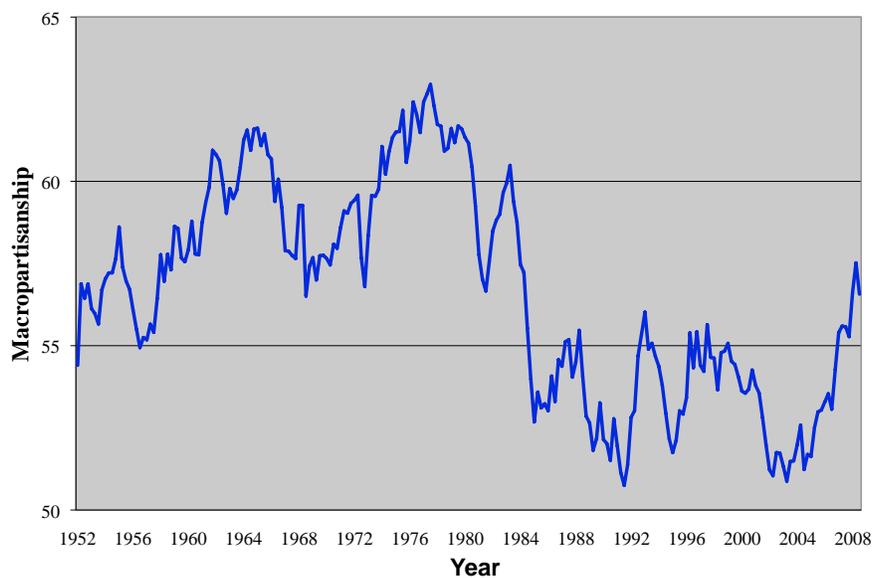


Figure 2: Democratic Macropartisanship: 1952–2008. The series is the percent of self-identified Democrats divided by the summed percents of Democrats and Republicans

After a spirited battle with Hillary Clinton that covered the entire nation and took many weeks and many primaries to settle,

& Stimson 1989, Green, Palmquist & Schickler 1998, Erikson, MacKuen & Stimson 2002).

Barack Obama became that nominee. From the time of clinching the nomination and after it became clear that Clinton and most of her supporters would support the party's nominee, Obama was the odds-on favorite to become president.

The road to election would not be quite as smooth as the Democratic numbers suggested. John McCain, Obama's Republican opponent who trailed nearly all the way, made a risky bet in his choice of vice-presidential running-mate. Sarah Palin, his choice, was a person of limited talent and experience who nonetheless had a magnetic appeal to the Republican right, dispirited after eight years of the Bush presidency. That magnetic appeal produced a brief surge of support for the Republican ticket, moving it ever so slightly ahead of the Democrats coming out of the Republican nominating convention in September. But after about two weeks and a number of embarrassing moments where the issue of Governor Palin's limited talents came to the fore, the surge was over and Obama moved back in front where he would stay through election day.

The September, 2008, meltdown of the world financial system threatened to be an event of such catastrophic proportions that all bets were off. In the end, its affect on the presidential election was almost null. The Bush presidency had already lost the support of everyone but its hard core right wing base. So this event, that could have been disastrous for a politician of higher standing and one not departing from office, appeared to have had almost no effect at all.

But would Obama's victory carry a message that willful voters supported policy change? Or would Obama's victory be ascribed to Bush fatigue and carry no message at all?

A Sweeping Victory? Barack Obama won the presidency with 53.3% of the popular vote and 364 electoral votes—74 more than the 290 needed for victory. These are impressive numbers, but not extraordinary. On the same day Democrats gained eight seats in the U.S. Senate and 21 seats in the House of representatives. They picked up one governorship. So clearly in partisan terms one party was winning at all levels in 2008.

The size of the wins was not unprecedented, but clearly the direction was uniform. Since presidential winners always declare that they have achieved a mandate—a declaration made even by George W. Bush in 2000 after losing the popular vote to Al Gore by almost a half million votes—this would be a good enough case for a mandate claim. But of course making the claim and having it be believed are quite different things.

This win wasn't quite big enough to blast its way into the books. But perhaps it could have snuck in if it also met the second criterion, being in part unexpected.

An Unexpected Win? Thus we need to ask whether we saw the Obama win coming in advance or whether it was a shock on election night. The answer is utterly clear: we saw it coming months in advance.

This is certainly easy testimony for me because the tone of what I have written above was the substance of numerous public talks during the run-up to the election, all with a confident forecast of an Obama win. For those American political scientists and economists in the formal business of election forecasting all but one had forecast an Obama win. The political stock markets agreed. Obama shares quickly traded ahead of the neutral point and stayed there for most of the year.¹¹

And of course American presidential elections produce pre-election polls, immense numbers of them. Those polls are a good indication of what informed observers should have expected when the votes began to be counted on election night.

In Figure 3 I summarize 892 such pre-election horse race polls taken over the period from January 1, 2008 through November 4. The summary, the jagged line in Figure 3, is an estimate obtained from my dyad ratios algorithm of the underlying line which best explains the

¹¹The Intrade market had Obama shares at 88.5 cents (out of a possible 100) on the day before the election, which moved to 91.3 on election day itself (before any results were known). Those who were betting on the outcome, that is, believed that the probability of an Obama win was about .913.

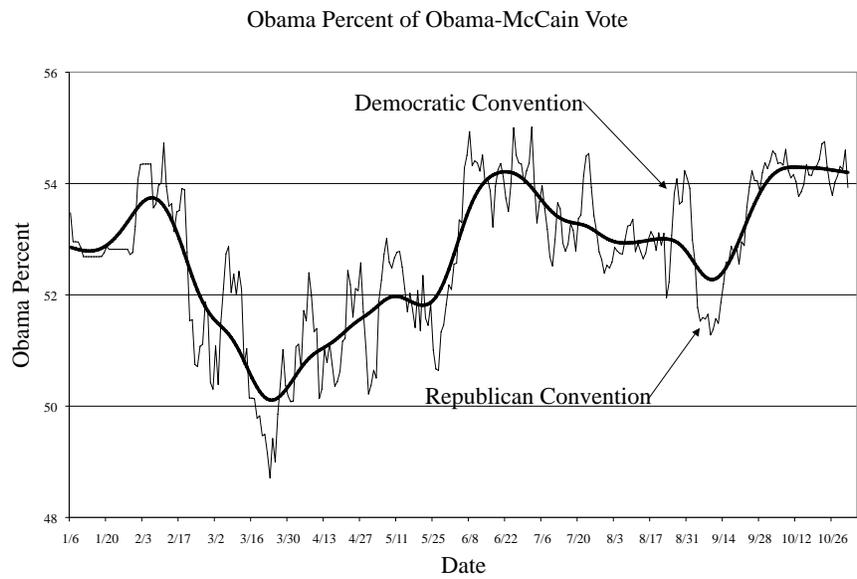


Figure 3: The 2008 American Presidential Contest: The jagged Line is a daily estimate of candidate standing from available polls. The solid line is a smoothed estimate of the same.

892 polls. (See (Stimson 1991) for details about the algorithm.) The Figure shows a race dominated most of the time by the Obama-Biden ticket. The lines, that is, are nearly always above the 50% neutral point of the graph.¹²

The election eve forecast from these estimates is 53.4% for Obama, which is almost exactly what he received. Thus those who commented on election eve were explaining a victory of almost exactly the magnitude as had been expected from this—and many other similar projections. There was not an iota of surprise in the Obama win.

By these criteria, therefore, Barack Obama achieved office without the benefit of public perception of a mandate for his policy promises. The two first years of the Obama presidency thus should have been about what they were, an administration that could pass its most important policies into law simply because it sometimes had exactly the needed votes from its own party. With no mandate it could not expect and did not get any support—essentially on anything—from the opposition Republicans.¹³

5 Great Britain, 2010

The general election of 2005 signaled the probable end of Labour control of Great Britain. In that contest Tony Blair’s party retained its majority, but lost seats in doing so. It was interpreted as a personal rebuff of the charismatic Blair, who took it as a signal to step down from the leadership of a party he had largely created in his own image. His replacement, the “dour Scot” Gordon Brown was no match for Blair and was never expected to be.

¹²The estimate understates the Republican surge following the convention because that short period is a small influence on patterns averaged over the full year. One doesn’t see in the summary graph that some polls in early September had the Republican ticket leading.

¹³Compare this to Ronald Reagan, operating with a perceived mandate in 1981. Without a filibuster-proof U.S. Senate and lacking even control by his own party in the House of Representatives, Reagan was able to enact his entire package of tax and spending cuts with support from the opposition Democrats who had earlier run against the Reagan program.

Labour probably had hung on past its time. It had done so by the aid of its conservative opposition, which had chosen time and again to bring forward leaders in the mold of humorless, colorless hard-line conservatives, which kept Labour in government by denying a credible choice. It was predicted that if ever the Tories wised up and selected a moderate, accommodating, and attractive leader, the game would soon be over. David Cameron was that leader. A reasonable and likable man, it became quickly clear that Labour's easy path was over once he took control of the Conservative Party. From that time forward Brown's Labour government was living on borrowed time.

By 2009 the Conservative lead over Labour had grown very large and steady. The clock was running out and a general election finally had to be called. But it was called finally on terms unfavorable to the Brown government. Conservatives were expected to win. And had the election been held earlier, they might have won big.

How Big the Win? British parliamentary democracy, unlike the other cases, focuses its elections on a single office, seats in Parliament. Thus the American mandate criterion of a party sweep across offices is not applicable. There is one office that matters. The best we can do as an alternate criterion for the British case is to ask how sweeping is the parliamentary win itself.

Here the call is an easy one. Cameron and his Tories staged the smallest, most indecisive, win of modern times. Although the Tories picked up 97 seats (91 gained from Labour opponents), that was not enough for majority control, producing a "hung parliament." A win not big enough to produce a majority is surely no mandate. Thus we need not pursue the second criterion, but will do so for parallelism.

Was the Tory Win Expected? We can say simply enough that the Tory win had been expected since 2005. The polls during the election year (see Figure 4 for YouGov polling results) showed a steady Conservative lead through 2010 (and if we had looked back to 2009 would have shown an even larger lead then).

Indeed the only action in the British polling was the very sub-

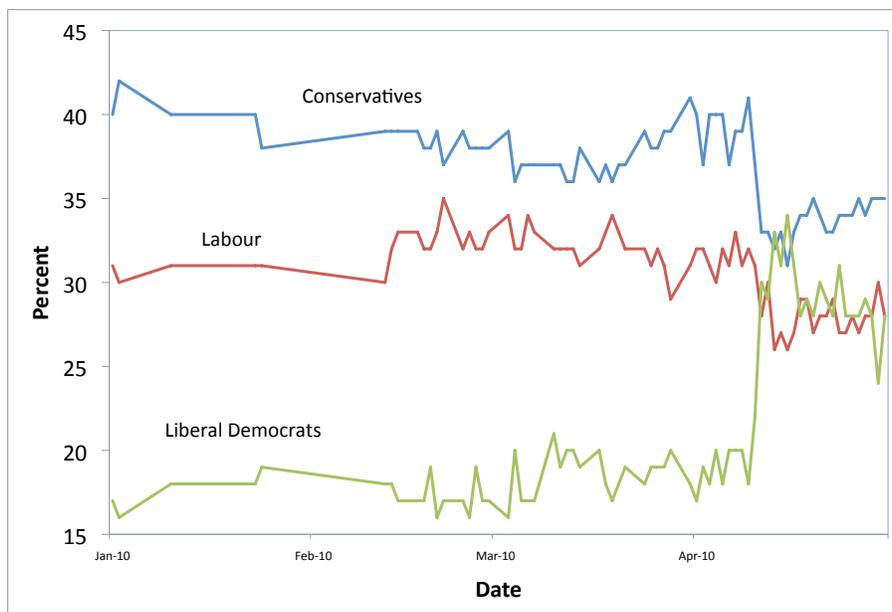


Figure 4: The British General Election of 2010: YouGov Polls Showing Intended Vote by Party

stantial gain by the third place Liberal Democrats following a very strong debate performance by its leader Nick Clegg. Alas, as is often the case for third parties in plurality voting systems, its support dried up on election day causing an actual loss of seats to follow the surge in the polls.

The story thus is that the Conservatives were expected to win—and at least initially, to win bigger than they did—and thus there was no surprise and no mandate.

6 A Longer Term Perspective

Citizens tire of personalities and they grow weary over time with less than hoped for results. These predictably influence government approval and translate ultimately into electoral defeat. But they convey no mandate to the successful opposition. All that is needed to cure these discontents is new personalities and better results.

True mandates require something more, a translation of those discontents into support for an alternative set of policies. Given the inattentiveness of mass electorates to politics, this is not something we expect to happen easily or view often. But changing support and opposition to public policies, on the rare occasions that it occurs, is the stuff that can produce profound rather than superficial political change.

Here I step back from attention to elections and the days and weeks that precede them and shift focus to the very long term. Without a solid base of theory to guide me, I want to address the issue of whether or not particular elections might serve as translation mechanisms for long-term shifts in public opinion and therefore carry a macro sort of message, bringing government into alignment with a changed public opinion.

The question to be pursued is this, “Does a party electoral victory coincide with a substantial movement of public opinion in the direction of the party’s stance?” If yes then the party’s victory is more than tired personalities and unsatisfactory results. It might mean that

the party is coming to office because the public has moved to support for its policies.

This too is a mandate of sorts, but it is neither the behavioral variety (because that is a micro concept) nor a social construction. But in this concluding discussion I wish to address whether each of our three cases shows victory coinciding with or conflicting with the movement of public opinion.

My device for doing so is my concept public policy mood, the net position of aggregate opinion interpreted along the standard socioeconomic left-right dimension that dominates the politics of all three cases. The obtained measures are the product of multiple research projects in the United States, of one in Great Britain (Bartle, Dellepiani & Stimson 2010), and of one in France (Stimson, Tiberj & Thibaut 2010, Stimson, Tiberj & Thiébaud N.d.).

The estimated moods are derived from surveyed policy preferences on diverse domestic policy controversies. One may think of the concept in factor analytic terms as the latent dimension (factor score) underlying the observed specifics of public policy preferences. The measures are conveniently available here because they were developed from other research projects.

6.1 France

Observe first the estimated first dimension of policy preferences in France. Unlike the cyclical and thermostatic pattern (Wlezien 1995) seen in other countries, France in recent years has been governed since 1995 (at least at the presidential level) only by the right. Consequently French public opinion has been trending (as the thermostatic hypothesis holds) in the opposite direction. (See Figure 5.)

That settles the mandate question decisively for the Sarkozy election. These estimates show a public moving to the left while the center-right UMP was achieving victory in France. Thus Sarkozy was elected in spite of, not because of, public opinion trends. The opinion effect is consonant with the second round legislative outcome, that is, and not with the three clear victories for the right which preceeded it.

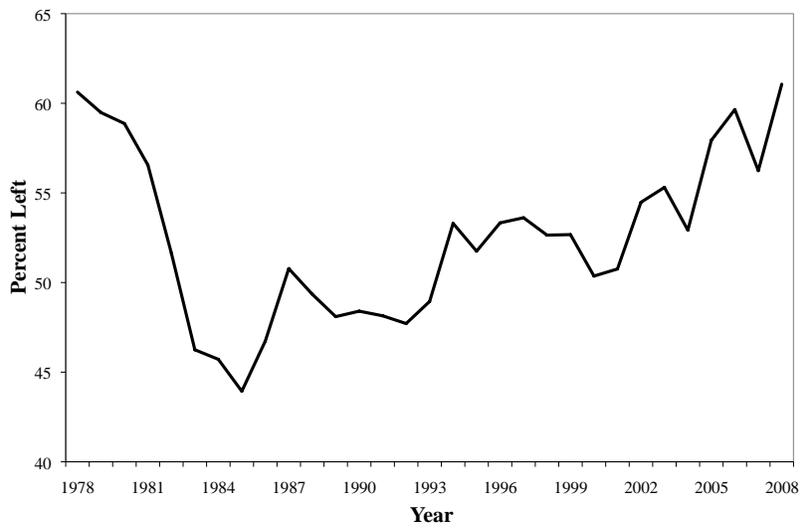


Figure 5: The Socioeconomic Dimension of Policy Preferences in France: 1978–2008

As we will see in the British case to come, parties can remain in power even when public opinion turns against them. That is what Labour did in 2005. But like the British case, winning against the flow portends problems in future elections. This analysis suggests that Nicolas Sarkozy could face great difficulty when he seeks re-election in 2012.

6.2 The United States

The thermostatic theory of public opinion response was developed in and for the United States in the first instance. Its fundamental prediction, that opinion runs counter to policy enactment—and therefore to control of government—fits the American opinion data well, perhaps even better than when first proposed. The simple pattern in mood in the U.S. is that it moves to the right when liberals control Washington and to the left when conservatives are in charge.

The eight years of the Bush government are no exception (see Figure 6). Between 2000, the first Bush election (55.6) and 2008, the Obama election (60.2) the American public became more liberal across the board on domestic issues by about a standard deviation. These numbers suggest that the public of 2008 would not have elected Bush over Gore (if the slate had been blank) nor would it have re-elected Bush, as it did in 2004.

So yes, there is a movement in policy preferences in line with the winner. Obama became president with the nation in a liberal mood. But the thermostat hypothesis tells us that there nearly always is movement in the direction of the winner, which robs the idea of some significance. Since mere movement in the direction of the winner is too common to signal a mandate, perhaps we need a higher bar, perhaps extraordinary movement. The 1980 election, which was declared a policy mandate, does show that extraordinary movement.

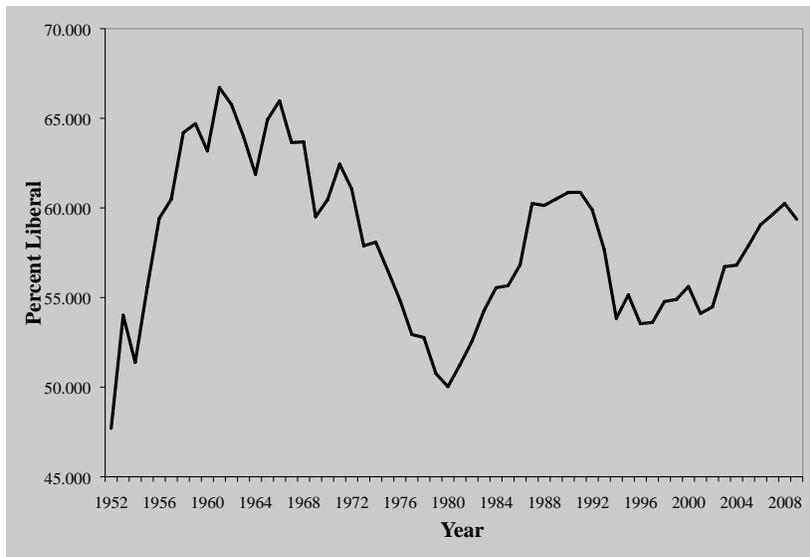


Figure 6: The Socioeconomic Dimension of Policy Preferences in the United States: 1952–2009

6.3 Great Britain

In the British case we (Bartle, Dellepiani & Stimson 2010) had observed the three most recent general elections in 2005 and noted a powerful explanatory effect of public mood. That led us to conclude from the vantage point of 2005 that the Labour majority in Parliament had little chance of surviving another general election. It had seen the public mood shift from a pro-Labour 56.5 when it achieved its breakthrough success in 1997 down to a still decent 52.9 when it held on in 2001, and down further to 49.9 in 2005 when its majority was cut still further. The thermostat hypothesis projected mood to continue to move to the right under a Labour government and there was no saving Labour if it did. The 2010 result (see Table 1) now confirms that expectation, and powerfully.

Table 1: Left-right Mood in Britain and Labour Party Electoral Success

Year	Labour Vote	Percent	Seats Won	Public Mood (Left)
1997	13,518,167	43.2	419	56.5
2001	10,724,953	40.7	413	52.9
2005	9,562,122	35.3	356	49.9
2010	8,601,441	29.1	258	43.5

We are blessed with excellent public opinion data quality in Great Britain, which gives the public mood estimate a corresponding reliability and measurement precision. That is seen in astounding fit for the four elections of .921 between mood and vote (which is significant at $p < .05$ even with $N=4$).

A glance at Figure 7 would seem to indicate that the Conservative Party victory might mean something considerably more than that voters had tired of Labour after a thirteen year run on Downing Street. Because the Tories won their compromised victory from a public that had moved strongly to the right over those thirteen years. In fact it had moved further to the right than it had been when Mrs. Thatcher came to power on an earlier wave of conservatism.

If only the Tories had won a respectable victory, rather than a hung Parliament and a forced coalition with the Liberal Democrats, the evidence for a long-term shift providing a policy mandate is otherwise as good as it gets. But just as the French robbed the UMP of a second round legislative victory and the Americans are preparing to shorten Barack Obama's leash as I write, the British voters wanted the Conservatives over Labour, but not enough to give them a mandate to govern.

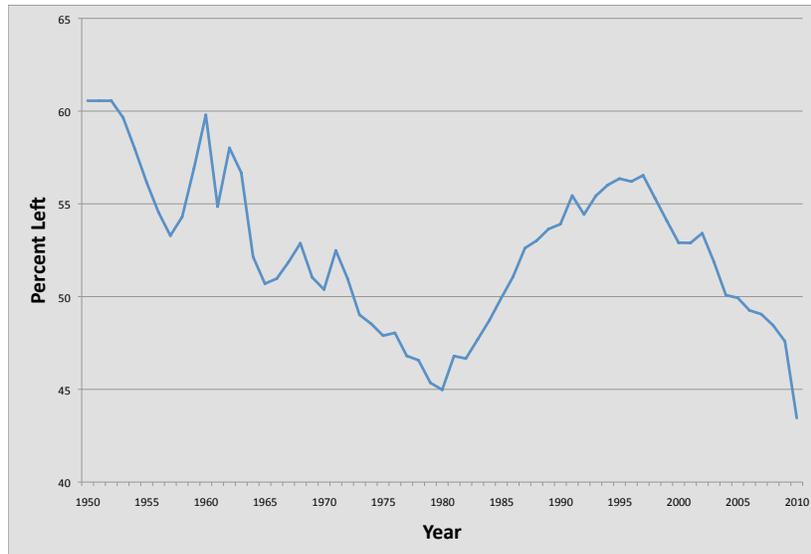


Figure 7: The Socioeconomic Dimension of Policy Preferences in the Great Britain: 1950–2009

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