THE PROBLEM OF PARTY CONVERGENCE

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The Problem of Party Convergence

Political parties are expected to pursue moderate policies to gain votes, and so two parties pursuing the same strategy will eventually converge. I argue, however, that two parties cannot pursue an optimal strategy and share similar policy ground. Using a new measure in the 2005 British Election Study, and introducing the choice of third parties and new dimensions, this paper demonstrates that voter abstention and switching due to indifference can strongly outweigh votes gained by spatial proximity. However, parties experience these effects differently. The findings have implications for how we understand the policy positions of political parties in Britain and beyond.

Spatial modellers point to a lack of examples of party convergence to question the expectations of Downs (1957).[1] They explain instead why parties tend to take polarised positions relative to their opponents (See Adams 2001; Adams and Merrill 2001; Adams and Merrill 2003; Adams et al. 2005; Nagel and Wlezien 2008).[2] In contrast to the examples offered in these studies, however, in the past two general elections in Britain voters judged the major parties as more similar than ever before (Curtice 2005; Bara 2006; Green 2007). Recent British elections present spatial theorists with very interesting and important yet confounding examples.

While chasing votes at the center each of the major British parties also claims that other parties are further from the center and that the parties are ideologically distinct. One explanation must be the aim of projecting opponents away from optimal positions. Another is presumably to give voters a reason to turnout.[3] In the spatial literature, parties should seek to reduce 'abstention from indifference', whereby voters' preferences are met or not met irrespective of their decision to vote (see Brody and Page 1973; Hinich and Munger 1997). Parties seek to win votes from other parties and to motivate their voters to the polls. If two parties are similar, this raises the question of whether votes gained due to proximity, as predicted by Downs (1957) are outweighed due to votes lost due to indifference. If so, the vote maximizing logic of pursuing the median voter is only optimal for one party so long as another party does not follow the same logic. This tension in the

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

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

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

spatial model has not been tested before, and yet the theoretical and empirical implications are wide-reaching.

In models of party competition that do incorporate the relevance of indifference, such as those put forward by Hinich and Munger (1997), Erikson and Romero (1990) and Adams and Merrill (2003: Adams et al. 2005), abstention due to indifference is outweighed by other factors causing parties to diverge, such as the polarising influence of partisan constituencies. Recent British party competition allows us to revisit the importance of perceived party convergence to directly test the nature of vote gains and losses when two parties pursue the center and converge with each other.

The 2005 British Election Study (BES) also incorporates a new measure uniquely suited to testing the effects of convergence. When parties are similar, and when voters have low levels of information, questions asking respondents to place political parties on rating scales have high margins of error. The 2005 BES asks respondents specifically whether they perceive policy differences and whether the major parties offer no choices to voters. This study compares the relative vote gains from proximity to the votes lost from perceived convergence for the two major parties in Britain, contrasting the findings using both types of measures of convergence. In both cases there is strong evidence of a trade-off between proximity and convergence but with more robust effects for the newly introduced BES measure.

The study offers a theoretical model to account for the empirical trade-offs. Introducing the relevance of additional issue dimensions and of centrist third parties, responding to other authors who likewise combine these central features of political life (see Palfrey 1984, Adams and Merrill 2006, Callandar and Wilson 2007, Greene 2007, Nagel and Wlezien, *typescript*), the paper makes a new contribution to theory building in the field of political party contests.

Furthermore, the votes gained and lost by the two major parties in Britain show different and competing incentives. When the British parties demonstrated convergence in 2005, Labour's losses due to convergence far outweigh its gains due to proximity, due to abstention and vote losses

to the third party. However, the other major party – the Conservatives – can gain as much, or more, by converging with Labour than they lose due to indifference. If incentives are symmetric, we can predict party divergence or convergence – the assumption in spatial theories up to this point. However, if incentives are asymmetric, many more interesting predictions and questions arise. The paper argues that parties may converge simply because one party will chase another, despite that other party's incentive to be ideologically distinct. The implications of the findings in Britain are considered for wider development of spatial theories in political science. They compel us to consider whether we should generalise from one incentive-based theory to all parties, either claiming that several parties can gain votes by each adopting centrist strategies (see Downs 1957; Ezrow 2005) or by similarly adopting divergent strategies, as argued by Adams and Merrill (1999), Adams (2001a; 2001b), Adams et al. (2005), and many other authors.[4]

Voting calculus: moderate and similar parties

In the classic proximity model of Downs (1957) individuals vote for the party holding policy positions most similar to their own (see Davis, Hinich et al. 1970; Enelow and Hinich 1984). This can be represented where voter *i*'s overall evaluation of party *p*'s utility on dimension *j* (U_{ijp}) depends upon the squared or absolute distance between the party's position (P_{jp}) and the voter *i*'s own preferred position or ideal point (P_{ji}).

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

The utility declines with distance, and so a negative sign defines the function. If the distance between voter *i* and party 1 is greater than the distance between voter *i* and party 2, the utilities of supporting party 2 outweigh those for party 1, such that $U_{ijp1} > U_{ijp1}$, where U_{ijp1} or U_{ijp2} are denoted

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[4] See: Key (1966), McLean (1982), Wittman (1983), Aldrich (1983), Rabinowitz and McDonald (1989), Kitschelt (1989; 1994), Chappell and Keych (1986), Groseclose (2001), Schofield (2004), Schofield and Sened (2005).

by equation 1. Parties are expected to pursue the preferences of the greatest number of voters or the median voter, and to assume positions that are optimal relative to opponents.

Downs (1957) also offers a utility model of the decision to turnout. Surprisingly, however, the two elements of Downs' model are rarely considered together.

According to Downs (1957), a voter calculates the expected utility of turning out if benefits, B, exceed costs, C. The benefits, PB, are comprised of B, the expected utility from the policies of candidates $|U_{ijp1} - U_{ijp2}|$, weighted by P, the probability that one's vote influences the outcome. C represents the costs of voting.[5]

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

However, let us now assume that two parties adopt the same vote maximizing logic and converge towards the position of the median voter in a one-dimensional policy space, as predicted. This suggests $P_{jp1} = P_{jp2}$ and then it is also true that $U_{ijp1} = U_{ijp2}$, according to equation 1. The benefits of voting for one of the two parties should, in Downs' model, be exceeded by the costs.

The costs, *(C)*, of gathering information about parties' policy proposals is greater when differences are not obvious. Matsusaka (1995) argues that the value of *B* is higher when a voter is confident they are voting for the correct candidate or party. If clear ideological cues allow voters to make informed choices, blurring traditional party distinctions should result in higher costs and higher levels of abstention. If two parties are very similar, Enelow and Hinich (1984) argue that 'abstention from indifference' will occur. This phenomenon is widely accepted in studies of voting behaviour where perceived party similarities drive down electoral turnout. Enelow and Hinich (1984) explain that the utility difference between the candidates or parties can be too small, beyond

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

a threshold of indifference, such that the costs of voting outweigh the utility benefits for a given voter. "This voter may then abstain from voting because it simply does not make that much difference to him who wins" (Enelow and Hinich 1984: 90). As converging parties widen the 'indifference region' (Hinich and Munger 1997), the likelihood of abstention increases.

Together these models point to an untested tension in the utility models of voting for the closest party if one party moves towards the median voter, and the utility calculation of comparing two parties that have adopted the same strategy. Accordingly, we can suggest that the utility of voting may be sufficiently low, relative to costs, to render vote losses due to indifference greater than vote gains due to proximity. No study, to the best of our knowledge, has tested the consequences of these models combined.[6] The potential consequences and their expectations can be summarised as follows:

$H^1 =$ *When two major parties are perceived to converge, votes gained by moderation will be outweighed by votes lost due to convergence.*

Hypothesis 1 presents a simple comparison of two parties on the basis of their policy positions, and the choice to abstain. However, voters do not base their utility calculations between party choices on relative spatial proximity alone. Although two parties may offer voters a similar policy choice, they could still differentiate – and so motivate voters to the polls – along additional criteria. We could imagine a voter opting to vote on the basis of other issues that do divide the parties, or on competence, likeability, or leader evaluations, particularly when the difference between the parties on policy position is small (Green 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008). For the sake of simplicity, these

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[6] Adams et al. (2005) explore the impact of party incentives to diverge due to abstention from indifference in relation to alienation. They argue that more important than indifference is the incentive to diverge arising from 'abstention from alienation' – caused by the loss of partisan supporters if parties move away from the party base towards the centre. However, Adams et al. (2005) cannot evaluate the true impact of indifference since their cases do not include parties that have converged. Also, the degree to which abstention from alienation drives parties to diverge has been questioned, particularly in Britain (Green 2007).

additional criteria can be denoted *k,* representing an additional issue or spatial dimension, such as policy considerations that do not line up on the traditional left-right axis, and also component *A* (affect), denoting overall comparisons of leaders, competence, trustworthiness, likeability etc.: [7]

$$U_{ijp1} = | \ P_{jp1} - P_{ji} \ | + |P_{kp1} - P_{ki}| + A_1 \qquad\qquad (3)$$

Accordingly, unless two parties offer voters similar policies on all available policy dimensions, and are liked or disliked by a voter at similar levels, then voters may not be indifferent between two parties. In this case, we would expect abstention to be lower.

Abstention should also be diminished if voters are presented with an alternative electoral choice. This happens frequently, even in two-party systems, where minor parties or candidates enter the electoral contest, providing a potential utility gain where *A* is greater for the entrant candidate, or where an additional issue dimension *k* provides potential vote gains for a third party. The second explanation is consistent with scholars arguing that minor parties or entrant parties gain votes where new issue dimensions become salient within the electorate (see Greene 2002; Rapoport and Stone 2005; Callandar and Wilson 2007). If dominant major parties are similar, or if they are optimally located on traditional voting axes, third parties attempt to raise the salience of new issue dimensions on which they can offer voters a proximity utility gain. In the case of Britain, the third party, the Liberal Democrats, offers indifferent voters an alternative on additional issues, such as Iraq, and on additional criteria such as trust or leader ratings (*A*), and there are also a number of smaller parties at the national and regional level that tend to campaign on issues not captured by the major parties. Accordingly, the choice of party 1 over parties 2 and 3 could be represented where: [8]

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[7] *A* here encompasses term C_{jp}, for example, which captures the competence of a party on a particular issue or dimension, where $U_{ijp} = -(P_{jp} - P_{ji})^2 + C_{jp}$, consistent with the models of Enelow and Hinich (1982; 1984) and Enelow and Munger (1993). Elsewhere I argue that as the distance between $P_{jp1} - P_{jp2}$ becomes smaller, the weight given to $C_{jp1} - C_{jp2}$ in the utility calculation between two parties should be greater, because $P_{jp1} - P_{jp2}$ will tend towards zero and $U_{ijp} = (-(P_{jp1} - P_{ji})^2) - (-(P_{jp2} - P_{ji})^2) + (C_{jp1} - C_{jp2})$ is then determined by $C_{jp1} - C_{jp2}$ (Green 2007; Green and Hobolt, 2008).

[8] The model can be extended where $P = n_1$ through $n-jk_n$, where the number of parties = the number of dimensions – 1.

$$U_{ip1\text{-}3} = U_{jkAp1} > U_{jkAp2} \geq U_{jkAp3} \qquad\qquad (4)$$

Lets say that $U_{jkAp1} = U_{jkAp2}$ such that two major parties provide a similar utility benefit to voter i because they adopt a similar position on dimensions j and k, and one is not liked to significant degree more than the other, on overall 'affect' derived from competence differentials and so on. In this case, when an additional party choice is available, we can envisage three possible outcomes:[9]

If:	$U_{jkAp1} = U_{jkAp2} \leq U_{jkp3}$	vote p_3
If:	$U_{jkAp1} = U_{jkAp2} \leq U_{jAp3}$	vote p_3
If:	$U_{jkAp1} \leq U_{jkAp2} \leq U_{jAp3}$	vote p_3
If:	$U_{jkAp1} = U_{jkAp2} = U_{jkAp3}$	abstain

If neither party offers a utility differential to voter i, either in terms of affect or relative location on dimensions j or k, then voter i's outcome should be to abstain. However, a third party can take a centrist and similar convergent policy position to the two major parties on a dominant issue dimension, j, and still benefit from the fact that the two parties take a very similar position to that party. This is a reasonable assumption considering the first-past-the-post nature of British elections. If voters consider a vote for their preferred party a 'wasted vote' because that party can not win a governing majority, a vote for one of the major parties will maximize their utilities, since one party's policies in government will be preferred to another's. However, if the same outcome occurs from either major party in power, voters naturally sympathetic to a third party can vote with their true preference, since this utility gain now outweighs the $U_{ijp1} = U_{ijp2}$ comparison. This logic differs from the outcomes predicted by other theories incorporating the effects of third parties, arguing that third parties benefit from major party divergence. Nagel and Wlezien (2008) claim the British

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[9] We can also expect votes to be gained by p_3 where $U_{jkAp1} \leq U_{jkAp2} < U_{jAkp3}$ and for abstention to arise due to alienation rather than indifference, when $U_{jkAp1} = U_{jkAp2} = U_{jkAp3}$ represent negative values for all parties (see Brody and Page 1973).

Liberal Democrats gain from Conservative and Labour polarisation, particularly Conservative shifts away from the center, and Adams and Merrill (2006) argue that the presence of small centrist third parties, such as the Liberal Democrats, motivates policy divergence by the two parties, Labour and the Conservatives. Yet these scholars do not consider the instrumental influence of perceived convergence as a motivating factor for supporting other parties.[10] Taking this into account, we can summarise the expectations in the following hypothesis:

$H^2 =$ *When two major parties are perceived to converge, votes will be lost to third parties.*

In summary, although voters are expected, *ceteris paribus*, to choose the party closest to their position, when two or more parties present the same choice to voters, as predicted by Downs (1957), and when additional dimensions and parties are relevant to the vote choice, voter incentives are changed. A voter may be less likely to vote for a party closer to their preferences, either because they have little incentive to vote or they have greater incentives to vote for alternatives. If voter utilities from proximity outweigh indifference from convergence or attraction from others, then party strategies remain motivated towards convergence. Alternatively, if indifference outweighs proximity, then parties should be expected to diverge.

The nature of these incentives is best determined by examining an example where the major parties converge on the dominant issue dimension. The most recent British general election, in 2005, offers the most vivid and appropriate case study.

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[10] Neither Nagel and Wlezien (2008) nor Adams and Merrill (2006) account for the period of Conservative and Labour convergence, post 2001, combined with the strongest Liberal Democrat vote share recorded. Nagel and Wlezien suggest the anomaly may arise due to the salience of Iraq, consistent with Greene (2002), Rapoport and Stone (2005), and Callandar and Wilson (2007), but they do not consider the comparisons of convergent parties on the dominant dimension.

2005: Moderate and similar parties in Britain

On dominant policy dimensions British parties now demonstrate significant policy convergence, observed using election study data of perceived party positions (Green 2007) and also in manifesto content analysis over time (Bara and Budge 2001; Bara 2006). Labour moved to the center prior to 1997 in order to regain electoral competitiveness (see Heath et al. 2001; Whiteley and Seyd 2002; Hindmoor 2004) and the Conservatives subsequently matched Labour's policies in key areas (Green 2005). Party leader David Cameron claims to be repositioning the Conservative Party further towards the center.[11] There is also the significant third party, the Liberal Democrats, and this party competes for the electoral center on the classic left-right dimension. Adams and Merrill (2006: 403) report, for the past half-century, the party "has occupied a position in between the two major British parties: Labour and the Conservatives". By the 2005 general election, using an eleven-point left-right scale in the 2005 British Election Study (BES),[12] the average placements of the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties respectively were 4.8 (standard deviation = 2.1), 4.7 (standard deviation = 1.4) and 6.8 (standard deviation = 2.0). A range of only 2 points between the three values on the eleven-point BES scale denotes convergence and the Liberal Democrats are perceived to take a position on three policy measures in the BES – tax, crime, and European Integration –in the center and between the two major parties. These placements can be seen in Table 1, below.[13]

- Table 1 about here -

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

[12] Left right 0 = left to 10 = right: "In politics, some people sometimes talk about parties and politicians as being on the left or right. Using the 0 to 10 scale on this card, where the end marked 0 means left and the end marked 10 means right, where would you place yourself /the Labour/Conservative/Liberal Democrat Party/…on this scale?" The tax-spend, crime and European Union question wordings can be found on page x, in the description of the independent variables.

[13] It could be the case that greater numbers of 'don't know' responses for the third party, recoded at the mid-point 5, push this party to the centre of the scales, using these data. Therefore, the responses were also compared omitting these 'don't know' responses, and although all the mean values shifted slightly leftwards, the Liberal Democrats are still perceived as occupying a position to the middle of the Labour and Conservative parties across all issue scales.

Relative to previous years and decades, the 2005 British general election presented voters with greater convergence between the three major parties than in any other election recorded. Despite this apparent crowding at the center ground, a phenomenon predicting the squeezing of the Liberal Democrat vote according to existing scholarship (see Downs 1957; and empirical analysis by Adams and Merrill 2006; Nagel and Wlezien 2008), the 2005 British general election also saw the highest Liberal Democrat vote share since the party's formation in 1988, at 22.1%.[14] As Nagel and Wlezien (2008: 16) ask, "with considerable convergence between the major parties in 2001 and 2005, why did the Liberal Democratic vote increase?"

The Liberal Democrats in 2005 had a different and optimal policy position relative to the two main parties on the issue of Britain's involvement in the Iraq war (Green and Hobolt, 2008). The party consistently opposed the Iraq war, a position closer to the majority of British voters, and focussed heavily on this in the 2005 campaign and made much of its slogan 'The Real Alternative' – claiming it was the only party to offer a real choice to voters (see Wring et al. 2007). The two major parties had supported the Iraq war. There are no data allowing us to evaluate the degree to which voters *perceived* an optimal Liberal Democrat position relative to the other parties on Iraq, since the British Election Studies and commercial polling studies did not include party placement questions on this issue. However, the BES shows that the majority of respondents opposed Britain's involvement in Iraq,[15] and other analyses show that the third party gained votes decisively on this issue in 2005 (Whiteley et al. 2005).

The Liberal Democrats also offered indifferent voters the opportunity to vote on non-policy criteria. Their leader, Charles Kennedy, was less disliked than both Tony Blair and Michael

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[14] The highest vote share was achieved by the Social Democratic Party-Liberal Alliance in the 1983 general election, at 25.4% of the vote, prior to the official formation of the 'Liberal Democrats' in 1988.

[15] Using a four point question asking respondents whether they approved strongly, approved, disapproved or disapproved strongly of Britain's involvement in Iraq, 65% of respondents 'disapproved' or 'disapproved strongly' (N= 3,505).

Howard, although not clearly preferred.[16] On a scale asking respondents how much they trusted the leaders Charles Kennedy, the Liberal Democrat leader, was the most trusted leader of the three.[17] He was also considered by respondents to be the most responsive politician,[18] and the party was more liked overall than the Conservatives, though less liked that Labour.[19]

There is also evidence to suggest that the Liberal Democrats may have gained more votes if they were perceived to be capable of winning. The BES asks respondents before the election how they will vote if they have decided, and then to select the reason for their vote, whether due to the best policies, leaders, or because 'I prefer another party but it has no chance of winning in my constituency' or 'I voted for tactical reasons'. The largest proportion of respondents answering in the last two categories stated the Liberal Democrats as their preferred party (38.5%). In these respects we can expect that voters who would otherwise vote for one of those parties because they offered a distinct policy choice may vote for the Liberal Democrats as their true preference.

Minor parties were particularly successful in the 2005 British election, arguably also due to the perceived similarities by the two major party alternatives. In the 2005 British general election the Green Party, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the British National Party (BNP) gained over 1 million votes between them, representing 3.9% of total votes cast.[20] These parties have never won parliamentary representation in the UK parliament but they performed relatively well in the 2005 election.[21] The Respect Party also gained one parliamentary seat, formed

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[16] 43.3% of respondents to the 2005 BES rated Tony Blair negatively on a like-dislike scale, 44.0% did so for Michael Howard whereas 34.1% disliked the Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy (N = 2959). These differences are partly attributable to greater proportions of respondents answering 'don't know', but Liberal Democrat support increased in each general election campaign, 97, 01 and 05, as voters made more informed judgements about each of the three parties.

[17] Where 0 = no trust and 10 = great deal of trust, the mean values were 4.29 (Tony Blair, Labour), 4.19 (Michael Howard, Conservative) and 4.82 (Charles Kennedy, Liberal Democrat), N = 3304.

[18] The mean values were 4.85 (Tony Blair, Labour), 4.93 (Michael Howard, Conservative) and 5.08 (Charles Kennedy, Liberal Democrat), where 0 = does not respond and where 10 = responds fully, N = 3037.

[19] Using a feeling thermometer question from 0 to 10 in the 2005 pre-election BES where 0 = strongly dislike and 10 = strongly like, the mean values were 5.04 (Labour), 4.75 (Liberal Democrats) and 4.42 (Conservatives), N = 3587.

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

[21] The Green party recently won a seat in the European Parliament. UKIP gained representation at the European level and is represented in the unelected House of Lords.

in opposition to the Iraq War and fronted by a previous Labour MP, George Galloway. Two independent candidates also won a majority in two parliamentary constituencies.

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

The 2005 British general election was also the first in which the BES specifically asked respondents about indifference, thereby providing many empirically and theoretically grounded reasons to use this case study, as well as ones of data suitability.

Data and Methods

Dependent variables: Models of party vote choice are estimated to compare the likelihood of voting for each of the two major parties, in turn, relative to the two other party alternatives (Labour or the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats) and not voting. Therefore the dependent variable is coded, voted Labour/Conservative/Liberal Democrat/abstain, with the reference category being voted Labour or Conservative, for the Labour and Conservative models respectively. The abstention measure relies on self-reported turnout, underestimating abstention,[22] but this biases the results in the direction of underestimation rather than over-estimation.

Voting for the small, minor parties was excluded from the main analysis. Preliminary analyses indicated no significant effects of perceived convergence or ideological proximity upon voting for 'other' parties, where these are the number of regional and single-issue parties in 2005,

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

and when minor parties were included as a category in the dependent variable, the effects upon other vote choice outcomes were not affected. These non-findings may represent the small sample sizes of voting for 'others',[23] but they also support an interpretation whereby voting for these other parties is motivated by dislike of the major parties, irrespective of strategic position. Table A1 in the appendix presents the key variables in the multinomial logistic regression models of voting for 'others' relative to voting Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or not voting at all.

Independent variables: The two key independent variables are the spatial proximity measure for each party and the perceived closeness between the two major parties.

Spatial Proximity: A measure of party and voter placement on a composite scale comprised of the three available policy measures in the 2005 BES is used to evaluate voter and party positions. The measures are a tax-spend question, a crime question and a European Union question. The scales are combined to best capture the available policy space and to provide the strongest measure.[24] The issues are typically orthogonal in studies of voter attitudes in Britain. Combining the scales therefore captures a broad issue space and forces the three issues into a one dimensional measure. Voter self-placement and perceived party placements are derived by summing the scales and then averaging the position across the three following questions:

(i) Tax-spend: "Using the 0 to 10 scale on this card, where the end marked 0 means that government should cut taxes and spend much less on health and social services, and the end marked 10 means that government should raise taxes a lot and spend much more on health and social services, where would you place yourself/the Labour/Conservative/Liberal Democrat party on this scale?" recoded 0 = increase services, to 10 = cut taxes.

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[23] 7.63% of the overall sample of 4,102, and 313 respondents, smaller once missing data for key variables was eliminated from the analyses.

[24] The models were run using another composite left-right measure (the combined positions on the tax-spend and a left-right scale) and with the left-right measure alone (where respondents are simply asked to place themselves and the parties between left and right, where 0 = 'left' and 10 = 'right'). In each case the substantive conclusions are supported but the proximity measures were less powerful, strengthening the argument but providing an easier test of the relative effect of convergence over proximity. Therefore the most robust measure was used, enabling the strictest test of the theory.

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

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

If a party is the *closest* party to a majority of voters, votes should be gained relative to other parties. This is the proximity theory assumption implying that parties should eventually converge. The party closest measure (proximity measure) was constructed whereby 1 = party is closest to voter (e.g. Labour or Conservative), and 0 = other, calculated by first comparing the perceived distance from each party to the respondent and categorising respondents according to whether they were closest to Labour (or else) for the Labour party measure and Conservative (or else) for the Conservative measure.[25]

Party Convergence: The perceived closeness of the two main parties to each other is measured in two ways, the first using a conventional spatial measure, and the second the newly available measure in the 2005 BES. The first measure is the perceived spatial distance between the

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[25] The results were also consistent if relative proximity was calculated for each party as the distance between respondent and party 1 (for the party 1 measure), minus the averaged distance between respondent and the two other parties: $(Respondent - P_1)^2 - ((Respondent - P_2)^2 + (Respondent - P_3)^2) / 2$. In this case the effects were stronger for the Conservative models. This strengthens the conclusions. A measure comprised of the three policy scales plus the left-right scale discussed on p.7 was also calculated, in addition to a simple $P_{j1} - P_{ij}$ difference comparison for the party of interest on the left-right scale. The measure was again more robust using the three policy scales, providing a stricter test.

Labour and Conservative parties, where Con-Lab distance = $(P_1 - P_2)^2$ on the three averaged measures, coded between 0 and 1.[26] This measure, representing a purely spatial comparison, has some measurement error and content validity difficulties in capturing a notion of indifference.

Measuring respondent party placements is strongly influenced by the inability of respondents to place the major parties with certainty, a problem we would expect to be particularly acute when parties are similar. The most popular response is the mid-point,[27] but we cannot know whether these placements reflect certainty of moderate locations, guesses, or non-committal answers. Respondents unsure of the party positions will be unlikely to associate their positions to their vote, and uncertainty of each party position or location at random, will result in a measure of distance that is unreliable, therefore underestimating the potential effects of indifference. The measure only tells us about perceived similarities on the included issues. It excludes perceived similarities across the whole policy domain, and on delivery as well as policy position. We may easily underestimate the degree to which parties offer similar and indifferent options because they adopt similar issue priorities in government, or show similar concerns or intensity in their communications, leading to perceived similarities and indifference not picked up using traditional spatial measures on issue scales. In these respects we underestimate the effects of convergence and indifference when parties are perceived to offer no real choice. These difficulties may account for other studies estimating weaker effects for indifference than for alienation (see Adams et al. 2005).

The BES follow-up questionnaire includes a measure specifically related to the concept of indifference. This was worded "The main political parties in Britain don't offer voters real choices because their policies are pretty much the same". The majority of respondents, 53.1%, agreed or agreed strongly that the main parties offered no real choices and 22.8% disagreed or disagreed strongly (24.1% neither agreed nor disagreed). This variable is used in the second set of analyses,

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[26] The perceived difference between the two main parties on the left-right scale was also used, but the results were most robust using the three policy scales and then exactly comparable with the proximity measure.

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

coded 0 = agree strongly to 1 = disagree strongly. Respondents answering 'don't know' were recoded at point 0.5, representing just 1.3% of respondents.

The question requires some further exploration and so a number of comparisons were made between this variable and with pre-election measures of perceived distance between the two main parties, a pair-wise comparison measure between the three parties, and predictors of the variable as a dependent variable (see appendix). We need to be sure that the measure reflects a sense of the spatial difference between the two main parties as well as additional indifference evaluations. The comparisons supported the interpretation that respondents viewed the question compatibly with their evaluations of the *two* main parties on the left-right and composite scale measures in the pre-election sample, suggesting that responses were not simply post-hoc rationalisations of the vote decision and that the variable is consistent with, but not solely reflecting, the perceived spatial differences between these main parties. The measure may also reflect general disaffection with the major parties and/or the political system, and relevant controls are added into the second stage of the analyses using this measure (see below).

Additional Dimension: A policy measure of attitudes to the Iraq War is included in the models given the strategic focus on this issue by the Liberal Democrats. The question is worded, 'Please tell me if you strongly approve, approve, disapprove, or strongly disapprove of Britain's involvement in Iraq", coded 1 = strongly approve to 4 = strongly disapprove'. This question is used as a proxy for the anticipated effect of voting on the issue of Iraq. There is no measure of where the parties stood on Iraq and so no proximity comparisons.

Control variables: alienation: I control for the likelihood that parties lose votes to others or to abstention simply because neither the Conservative or Labour party in 2005 was liked. In the theoretical discussion, it was argued that the third party would gain votes when the two major parties provided utility losses to a voter on a general affect, *A*, evaluation. If a voter likes neither the Labour nor Conservative party, or is indifferent between them, they should vote for alternatives rather than abstain. I use an overall alienation measure akin to that of Brody and Page (1973) by

coding a variable 1 = dislike both Conservative and Labour party and 0 = like Labour and/or Conservative party, where dislike represents points 0 to 4 on the 0 – 10 dislike-like scales of each of the two parties, worded, "On a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how do you feel about the Labour/Conservative party?" This variable also serves as an overarching measure of party preference, or lack thereof, correlated with lack of support for the two party leaders.[28]

Control variables: vote choice and turnout: A number of control variables were selected, for application to abstention and to party choice. The models use the demographic predictors most commonly used in vote choice models in Britain.[29] Age and age squared were included as a control variable for party choice, volatility and turnout. The quadratic term was entered due to the curvilinear relationship between age and turnout (Lijphart 1997). Gender was entered, coded 0 = male and 1 = female. Clarke et al. (2006) use a 'deprivation index' to encapsulate the relationship between social status and turnout. Since I model both turnout and vote choice the deprivation index is substituted with social class categories. This was coded 1 = routine non-manual (reference category), 2 = petty bourgeoisie, 3 = foremen and technicians, 4 = working class, and 5 = salariat.[30] Educational attainment is also used, coded 1 = GCSE or equivalent, 2 = vocational post 16, 3 = A level, 4 = degree level, 5 = postgraduate education, 6 = no formal qualifications and 7 = other (reference category). I further control for party identification, coded 1 = Labour (the reference category), 2 = Conservative, 3 = Liberal Democrat and 4 = other and no party identification, creating three dummy variables. Controlling for party identification is crucial if we are to ensure against the potential bias arising from endogenous relationships between party choice and the independent effects. These controls all represent standard variables in British election studies.[31]

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[28] The effects of leader evaluations were estimated in addition, and while significant in the models, they reduce the effects of the proximity variables for Labour but not the Conservatives – biasing my results in support of the expectations (because proximity effects are reduced but perceived proximity variables are not) and conflating the results.

[29] All variables were selected on the basis that their statistical associations ≤ 0.3.

[30] This is the most commonly used classification in models of British vote choice.

[31] I also controlled for other measures of turnout in preliminary analysis, replicated from Clarke et al.'s (2006) study, but their contribution did not influence the independent effects. The measures reflected the competitive nature of the election

Control variable: general disaffection: I control for the possibility that the 'main parties offer no real choices' measure represents disaffection with politics as a whole (for example, see Citrin et al. 1975). The measure asks respondents, "Please tell me how far you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, … Firstly, how much do you trust British politicians generally?" coded from 0 to 10 where 0 means no trust and 10 means a great deal of trust.[32] The analyses using this control variable in both sets of analyses are provided in the appendix.

Control variable: leader rating scales: Lastly, in confirmatory analyses, I control for the possibility that evaluations of the parties offering no real choices arise from dislike of the two main party leaders. I control for evaluations of Tony Blair (Labour leader and Prime Minister) and Michael Howard (Conservative leader) using to separate variables coded on scales where 0 = strongly like, to 10 = strongly like.

Process of analysis: Multinomial logistic regression models are estimated to compare the effects of proximity and perceived Conservative-Labour distance on the vote choice outcomes. Tests for the independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA) were carried out and summarised in table footnotes.[33] The relative effects of the key independent variables are compared by reporting the predicted probabilities of voting Labour or Conservative from minimum to maximum value for each of the key independent measures in each model. The models are then re-estimated the models using the general convergence measure, 'the main parties in Britain don't offer real choices', again comparing the marginal effects.

(marginality) and party mobilisation. Party mobilisation was measured using four dichotomous items (scored 0-1) asking whether: (a) someone tried to convince the respondent to vote for a party; (b) a party canvasser visited the respondent's home and talked to him/her; (c) someone from a party contacted the respondent on election day to see if they had voted or intended to vote. The party mobilisation variable is the sum of (a)-(d). Competitiveness was measured as the perceived likelihood that each party will win in the respondent's constituency, worded: "On a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means very unlikely and 10 means very likely, how likely is it that the [Labour/Conservative/ Liberal Democrat] party will win the election in this constituency?" Further measures, such as whether respondents were 'satisfied with democracy' were highly associated with and endogenous to the convergence measures, and therefore omitted.

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

[33] Hausman and Small-Hsiao tests are commonly inconsistent (see Long and Freese, 2006), and so the choice of models and the reliability of the findings were also confirmed using bivariate analyses for each comparison group. In all cases the model specifications do not alter the conclusions.

Results

The first set of analyses presents the comparison of proximity and convergence effects for voting Labour relative to the other categories, and then for voting Conservative. These use the spatial convergence measure of perceived spatial differences between the two major parties based on the combined eleven-point issue scales.

Using a spatial measure of convergence

According to the theoretical model, the expectations are that as we move from 0 to 1 on the proximity variable 'party closest', we should find a positive effect on the likelihood of voting for the party in question relative to the other choices. We should also find a negative effect, the greater the perceived distance between the Conservative and Labour parties, between 0 and 1, on the likelihood of voting for the Liberal Democrats and for abstaining. Table 2 presents the model for Labour vote relative to voting Conservative, Liberal Democrat, and abstaining from voting.

- Table 2 about here -

Table 2 confirms the importance of both spatial proximity and perceived convergence for voting Labour relative to other choices in the 2005 general election. Consistent with the median voter theory (Downs 1957), a party gains a proximity benefit if it is the closest to voters. If Labour is the closest party to voters, Labour gains votes relative to the Conservative party. This suggests, at first glance, that the battle for the center ground is rational for both major parties. The models also confirm the importance of perceived Labour and Conservative convergence to abstention. The greater the perceived distance between the two parties, the less likely respondents were to abstain relative to voting Labour. Convergence leads to a commensurate vote loss, as predicted above. These results therefore provide some support for the predicted tension – parties may face incentives to pursue the median voter *and* face incentives to be ideologically distinct.

Furthermore, Labour lost votes to the Liberal Democrat party if respondents opposed Britain's war in Iraq. Although this is not a party placement measure, it supports the interpretation that the Liberal Democrat's optimal position on this issue indeed provided an issue dimension on which the third party could leverage votes from other parties. However, there is no evidence in support of the second hypothesis – that centrist third parties gain votes when major parties converge, since the convergence measure is not associated with gains to the Liberal Democrats. We also find no significant effect of Liberal Democrat party identifiers switching support away from the Labour or Conservative parties when those two parties are perceived to be similar.

Table 3 presents the same model, with voting Conservative as the reference group.

- Table 3 about here -

The Labour and Conservative models are, of course, mirror images. The Conservatives win votes from Labour if it is perceived to be the closest party to voters. However, the Conservatives gain votes across more outcome groups than Labour. If voters place the Conservative party as the closest party to their position, they are less likely to vote Liberal Democrat or to abstain. This finding may reflect the nature of the proximity measure because it is formed of placements on Europe and on crime, as well as an economic policy question, and it may be the case that Conservative voters are more likely to support the party on Europe and crime.

Corresponding to the model for Labour, perceived similarities and differences between Labour and the Conservatives also predict the decision to abstain rather than vote for the Conservative party. This is consistent with the indifference argument offered above.

In evaluating the first hypothesis, the key consideration is the magnitude of the relative proximity and separation (convergence) effects. The following table compares the marginal effects of both measures taken across the component choices in each model, for both Labour and Conservative vote. These marginal effects represent the change in predicted probability of voting

Labour (Conservative) from the minimum to the maximum value of each measure, setting all other variables to their mean.

- Table 4 about here -

The probability of voting Labour according to proximity (3%) increases by a smaller margin that the likelihood of voting Labour if it is perceived to differentiate from the Conservatives (6%). These findings give some support to expectation 1. However, the effects overall are small and taking all the outcomes into account, the overall net gains and losses associated with each measure are not statistically significant. In the Conservative model, the marginal effect is also greater for the convergence effect (15%) than for proximity (10%), again apparently supporting the first hypothesis. However, the overall net effect of being the closest party for the Conservative party in 2005 is significantly significant whereas the convergence measure is not. These findings give cause to reject both hypotheses. Yet in both models the coefficient size for the convergence measures is bigger than the coefficient for the effect of proximity. These results should give us caution in rejecting the first hypothesis. As discussed above, given the high rate of error in placing the parties, this convergence measure may be an insufficiently robust measure to capture indifference. In order to explore the findings further, the following models replace the spatial convergence measure with the variable, 'the main parties in Britain offer voters no real choices because their policies are pretty much the same'.

Using an alternative measure of convergence

Recall that the 'parties offer no choices' measure was tested for its relationship to the spatial proximity measures in relation to two and three parties. These tests indicated that respondents answered this question in light of their perceptions of Labour and the Conservatives ideological differences rather than all three parties. According to the theoretical argument, we

should therefore expect to see vote gains to the Liberal Democrats the more respondents agreed with the statement, if the third party gains votes from Labour and Conservative convergence. Table 5 presents the results for the Labour vote choice model.

- Table 5 about here -

Similarly to the model using the spatial convergence measure, we find that Labour gained votes from the Conservatives if respondents place the Labour party closest to their own position. Also Labour lost votes due to abstention if the Conservative and Labour parties were perceived to 'offer no real choices' due to their policy similarities. However, in contrast to the earlier model in Table 2, using the 2005 BES measure of indifference, the Labour party loses votes in 2005 to the third party, the Liberal Democrats, due to agreement with the statement' 'the main parties offer no choices because their policies are pretty much the same'. This finding now indicates support for the theoretical model – third parties gain when major parties converge.

Let us consider this finding more closely. It could perhaps be assumed that this finding arises due to the Liberal Democrat's optimal position on Iraq – it was the Conservative and Labour policy similarities of supporting Britain's involvement in Iraq that led voters to support the third party. However, the result is significant controlling for attitudes towards the Iraq war. The model also controls for overall 'alienation' with the major parties – where respondents rated both the Labour and Conservative parties negatively on like-dislike scales. Even with these controls, and with the controls for party identification, an exhaustive set of measures, we find a significant effect of perceived convergence on voting Labour. Another interpretation we could offer is that the 'parties offer no choices' measure is picking up an overall measure of alienation with the main political parties. We can control for this possibility by examining the robustness of the effect when we include a measure of alienation in the model. One such measure is the variable asking whether respondents trust in politicians, a measure associated with alienation with mainstream politics as a

whole (see Citrin et al. 1975). A second interpretation is that agreement with the statement 'the main parties offer no real choices' reflects a lack of preference or a dislike for either of the Conservative or Labour party leaders, above and beyond policy observed policy similarities observed. It would be very easy to imagine a voter taking their perceptions of the ideological similarities between high profile parties from the images of those parties' leaders. Therefore, we can also control for the degree to which respondents liked or disliked in the 2005 election. Table A3 in the appendix shows that even controlling for these effects, which are significant in all three cases, the Labour party still loses votes to the Liberal Democrats when it is perceived to be similar to the Conservative party, and therefore offering 'no real choices'. In contrast to those scholars who explain third party vote losses when major parties are similar, the reverse pattern is shown in an example of significant major party policy convergence in Britain in 2005. These data therefore provide support for the hypothesis that additional parties can gain votes from major parties that converge on the same policy positions. Table 6 compares the results for the Conservative model.

- Table 6 about here -

In the first set of analyses, the Conservatives lost fewer votes to perceived convergence than the party won due to proximity, and in Table 6 very similar findings seem to be the case. The Conservatives gained votes from Labour, the Liberal Democrats and from abstention if it was the closest party to respondents, and only lost votes to abstention if the party was perceived to offer no real choices, along with Labour. Measuring significance at the 95% level, the Conservatives did not lose to the third party if it was judged similar to Labour, but this finding is bordering statistical significance, and suggests that the theoretical expectation may also be supported here. Outweighing these effects, however, appears to be strong associations for the Conservatives between spatial proximity and vote choice, relative to other parties. These statistical effects also remain significant when the same additional controls (trust, leader ratings) are added to the model (see Table A4).

Using the 2005 BES measure of indifference an apparent asymmetry appears to be present in the two models shown in Tables 5 and 6. There appear to be strongly significant effects of convergence on Labour vote and weaker effects of proximity, whereas on Conservative vote there appear to be stronger effects of proximity and weaker effects of convergence. Just as in Table 4, we can compare the marginal effects on Labour and Conservative vote in 2005 overall.

- Table 7 about here -

In Table 3, neither the overall net effect on Labour's vote of proximity or convergence was significant. For the Conservatives there was a statistically significant effect of proximity but not convergence. Table 7 demonstrates that convergence with the Conservatives did matter to the Labour party – it was strongly significant, representing a 27% change in Labour vote relative to voting Conservative, Liberal Democrat, and abstaining, if respondents changed their position from disagreeing strongly that the main parties offered no real choices, to agreeing strongly. This is a dramatic difference to the results using the spatial measure of party similarity, showing it is easy to vastly underestimate the effects of indifference using other measures. Comparing the marginal effects when the series of controls were added (trust in politicians and dislike of the party leaders) showed that these effects remain strong, statistically significant, and they strongly outweigh the non-significant effects of proximity.[34] The Labour vote model demonstrates strong evidence in support of the first hypothesis. Considering votes lost to the Liberal Democrats, and votes lost to abstention, this party's vote losses due to indifference strongly outweigh any vote gains (i.e. non statistically significant) due to proximity.

In the case of the Conservative model, the effects of proximity and convergence are in the opposite direction. The Conservatives gained far more votes due to proximity, and did not lose votes significantly in 2005 from the perception that the main parties offered no real choices because

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[34] See Table A5 of the reviewer appendix.

their policies are pretty much the same. Thus, the results show that hypothesis 1 is true for one party but not for another: there is an asymmetric effect between the main political parties in Britain. The implications of these findings are highly consequential for our understanding of party incentives.

Discussion

There are two implications of note in the analysis of the 2005 British general election. The first is that when major parties converge, as predicted by Downs (1957) and as witnessed very clearly in the most recent British election, it is possible for a party to lose more votes due to its similarity to another party, due to indifference, than a party gains from being the closest party to the median voter. This is clearly in tension with Downs' median voter theorem that argued that it should be in the interests of two major parties to eventually converge upon the median. However, the second is that while one party may lose significantly to this perceived convergence, both to a third party and to abstention, another party can gain votes due to proximity but lose no votes overall due to indifference. How does this translate into party competition incentives, as they are evaluated in spatial models of party competition, where parties are expected to take positions in order to achieve overall net gains?

Labour's overwhelming advantage would be to distance itself from the Conservatives. However, because the Conservatives gain more votes by being the closest party than they lose by being similar to Labour, the two parties have contrasting incentives. A fascinating asymmetry arises and the current dynamics of British political competition present important and interesting implications. We should expect Labour to attempt to distance itself from the Conservatives to maximize votes if the Conservatives maintain their existing location. In recent elections the two main parties have held similar policies, but Labour has attempted to label the Conservatives as extreme. This is an optimal strategy for Labour, allowing it to occupy the center ground and be perceived as different to the Conservatives. However, in 2005 the Conservatives were perceived by voters as highly similar in terms of spatial locations, and if the Conservatives can achieve the goal

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

Conclusions

What is rational for one party depends on the strategy of the other. British politics demonstrates this tension particularly acutely. The three main parties are perceived by voters to share similar policies on the main policy dimension, and voter abstention due to these similarities is an important predictor of the decision to turnout. This study shows that votes lost due to convergence, whereby the costs of voting outweigh the benefits of voting because the main parties are insufficiently different, and where voters indifferent between the major parties can vote for third parties, can outweigh the benefits to be gained from ideological moderation and proximity.

Anthony Downs' (1957) famous model has been critiqued from many angles. In accounting for major periods of British Labour and Conservative party policy divergence, Adams and Merrill (2006) argue that the Liberals push Labour and the Conservatives away from the center. It is certainly the case, in their analysis and in others' (Nagel and Wlezien 2008), that in much of post-

war British history the Labour and Conservatives have diverged when the Liberal party has gained in vote shares. However, the party's highest vote share since 1983 was gained in 2005, when the three main parties were more convergent in policy terms than ever before. The theory and analyses presented in this paper suggest that third parties gain votes from similar converging parties.

One interpretation with which to make sense of these apparently challenging findings is that in no period before the last two elections have all three parties converged around the same location. As Labour and the Conservatives adopted similar policies in period between 1955 and 1964, the Liberals were distinctly to the left of them (see Adams and Merrill 2006: 411).[35] The other explanation is that, likewise, in no other period have the two major parties taken such similar convergent positions. Having more data points, certainly including 2005, Adams and Merrill's (2006) theory requires qualification, whereby substantial major party polarisation prospers the centrist third party.

However, this study also shows that the effects of proximity and convergence were strongly asymmetric for the two major parties in 2005. Where Labour lost significant number of votes to the third party and to abstention, the Conservatives gained more votes from being closer to voters on a composite measure of the policy domain than it lost to perceived convergence. This points to an interesting outcome: one party, the Labour party, would gain from being different to its opponent, but that opponent, the Conservative party, will gain if it is similar, since it can punish Labour if it converges, without harming its overall vote share, creating an asymmetric incentive structure and a contest between the parties for strategic success. Therefore two major parties may converge because it is in the interests of one party to do so – the Conservatives, and parties may diverge because it is in the interests of another party to do so – Labour. However, so long as the other party gains votes from the opposite configuration, there will be a constant disequilibrium in the battle for the center.

These findings may similarly relate to other countries. There are several examples of countries where two main candidates often compete with centrist third party candidates also. In

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[35] These authors use manifesto data to derive these party placements on a left-right scale.

Germany, the Free Democrats have held a similar centrist position between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, and in the 1980 U.S. Presidential election, and the 1992 and 1996 general elections, candidates John Anderson and Ross Perot, respectively, held similarly centrist entrant positions in those races. Were those major parties to converge in significant terms, it may well be that emerging contenders would benefit from voters indifferent between or alienated by the two main contenders. It may well be also that it is not in the interests of both major party candidates to converge upon the same position, risking votes lost to abstention that outweigh vote gains.

The interpretations may be contingent on further factors uncovered in this paper, however, and these should be pursued in future research. We may ask whether parties with valence, incumbency, or popularity advantages are able to maximise utility differentials in competence to offset those lost in convergence. We may also consider the role of tactical voting, and its prediction, and particularly whether convergence, or divergence, should make these outcomes more or less likely. Let's imagine that party 2's (the Conservatives') policies are highly unattractive to a voter but party 1's policies (Labour's) are much more attractive. Where a vote for party 3 (the Liberal Democrats) could increase the likelihood of a Labour win, this will result in the worst outcome for the voter, an interpretation widely offered for Labour and Liberal Democrat voting in the British elections of 1997 and 2001. But when party 1 and party 2 offer similar positions, the incentives to vote for party 3 could be significantly reduced. In this case, convergence may result in complex vote changes interpretable in the context of tactical voting. These questions are beyond the scope of the present study but they offer fascinating areas of future research. The findings may also relate to the difference in proximity evaluations for opposition parties relative to incumbents. As incumbents are evaluated with weighting on their delivery in Fiorina's (1977) retrospective voting model, the lack of weighting for opposition parties of performance may correspond to greater vote gains for moderation. To date, no theory of party incentives currently allows two or more parties within the same political system to differ in their optimal strategy. The analyses in this paper will usefully provoke theories to reconsider the tendency of generalising across all parties.

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Tables

Table 1: Perceived party issue positions and respondent self-placement, 2005 BES

	Labour	Liberal Democrats	Conservative	Respondent
Tax-spend scale	3.69 (1.89)	4.16 (1.78)	4.71 (1.78)	3.74 (2.12)
Crime scale	4.90 (1.97)	5.02 (1.59)	5.79 (1.87)	6.30 (2.43)
Europe scale	3.14 (2.27)	4.38 (2.14)	5.03 (2.16)	4.57 (3.17)
Left-right scale	4.87 (1.98)	4.77 (1.24)	6.49 (1.99)	5.27 (1.80)
Tax, Crime and Europe composite scale	3.88 (1.34)	4.47 (1.35)	5.16 (1.35)	4.84 (1.66)

Table 2: Multinomial logit model of Labour voting relative to abstaining and supporting other parties in the 2005 general election (N = 2481)

	Conservative/ Labour		Liberal Dem/ Labour		Abstain/ Labour	
	Coeff.	s.e.	Coeff.	s.e.	Coeff.	s.e.
Constant	-4.50 ***	0.83	-3.48 ***	0.74	1.51 *	0.59
Party closest	**-0.40 ***	**0.18**	-0.17	0.15	-0.03	0.13
Lab-Con convergence	- 0.58	0.40	0.11	0.37	**0.77 ***	**0.33**
Dislike Lab and Con	0.00	0.19	0.86 ***	0.17	0.88 ***	0.14
Iraq war	0.05	0.09	0.20 *	0.08	0.11	0.07
Age	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.02	-0.09 ***	0.02
Age^2	-0.00	0.36	-0.00	0.00	0.00 **	0.00
Gender	-0.40 *	0.17	-0.24	0.16	-0.32 *	0.13
Educational level						
GCSE	-0.47	0.32	-0.29	0.30	0.02	0.28
Vocational	-0.29	0.31	-0.11	0.27	0.21	0.25
A Level	-0.50	0.39	0.03	0.35	-0.30	0.33
Degree	0.09	0.33	0.70 *	0.29	-0.08	0.30
Postgraduate	-0.30	0.52	0.40	0.37	0.05	0.37
None (formal)	-0.39	0.29	-0.37	0.28	0.81 **	0.26
Other	.		.		.	
Social Class						
Petty bourgeois	0.16	0.24	0.27	0.22	0.19	0.20
Foremen/technician	-0.10	0.26	0.19	0.24	0.22	0.21
Working class	-0.55	0.30	-0.12	0.27	-0.09	0.23
Salariat	-0.42	0.29	-0.09	0.25	0.22	0.21
Routine non-manual	.		.		.	
Party identification						
CON party id	5.79 ***	0.27	2.35 ***	0.24	2.24 ***	0.21
LIB party id	2.72 ***	0.33	3.04 ***	0.21	1.11 *	0.22
Other/no party id	3.21 ***	0.30	1.37 ***	0.23	1.46 ***	0.19
LAB party id	.		.		.	
Chi ^{2}	2219.78 ***					
Pseudo R ^{2}	0.33					
2LL	-2273.85					

* p ≤ 0.05; ** p ≤ 0.01; *** p ≤ 0.005

Tests for the Independence of Irrelevant Assumptions produced fully confirmatory results (for the hypothesis that errors are independent) using the Small-Hsiao test and the suest-based Hausman test.

Table 3: Multinomial logit model of Conservative voting relative to abstaining and supporting other parties in the 2005 general election (N = 2481)

	Labour/ Conservative		Liberal Dem/ Conservative		Abstain/ Conservative	
	Coeff.	s.e.	Coeff.	s.e.	Coeff.	s.e.
Constant	4.68 ***	0.83	1.12	0.86	6.19 ***	0.76
Party closest	**-0.76 *****	**0.19**	**-0.80 *****	**0.19**	**-0.55 ****	**0.17**
Lab-Con convergence	0.40	0.41	- 0.52	0.42	**1.19 ****	**0.40**
Dislike Lab and Con	-0.01	0.19	0.86 ***	0.18	0.86 ***	0.17
Iraq war	-0.06	0.09	0.15	0.10	0.06	0.09
Age	-0.04	0.03	0.00	0.03	-0.13 ***	0.02
Age^2	0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.00 **	0.00
Gender	0.38 *	0.18	0.12	0.18	0.06	0.16
Educational level						
GCSE	0.45	0.32	0.17	0.32	0.46	0.30
Vocational	0.23	0.29	0.11	0.29	0.44	0.27
A Level	0.50	0.39	0.52	0.38	0.19	0.38
Degree	-0.12	0.33	0.56	0.31	-0.20	0.33
Postgraduate	0.30	0.47	0.71	0.45	0.36	0.46
None (formal)	0.37	0.29	-0.01	0.29	1.18 ***	0.28
Other	.		.		.	
Social Class						
Petty bourgeois	-0.14	0.24	0.14	0.24	0.04	0.22
Foremen/technician	0.15	0.26	0.34	0.26	0.36	0.24
Working class	0.58 *	0.30	0.47	0.30	0.48	0.28
Salariat	0.42	0.29	0.34	0.30	0.64 *	0.27
Routine non-manual						
Party identification						
CON party id	-5.71 ***	0.27	-3.32 ***	0.26	-3.50 ***	0.24
LIB party id	-2.73 ***	0.59	0.33	0.31	-1.62 **	0.32
Other/no party id	-3.19 ***	0.30	-1.80 ***	0.31	-1.72 ***	0.29
LAB party id	.		.		.	
Chi^2	2237.21 ***					
Pseudo R^2	0.33					
2LL	-2265.13					

* p ≤ 0.05; ** p ≤ 0.01; *** p ≤ 0.005

Tests for the Independence of Irrelevant Assumptions produced fully confirmatory results (for the hypothesis that errors are independent) using the Small-Hsiao test. The Hausman tests indicated that the errors may be correlated in the Labour-Conservative models.

Table 4: Change in probability of voting Labour/Conservative by proximity and by distance

	Spatial Proximity benefit		Con-Lab Separation benefit	
	Others closest	Closest party	Convergence	Divergence
Labour	0.30 (0.27 – 0.34)	0.33 (0.29 – 0.38)	0.31 (0.25 – 0.37)	0.37 (0.28 – 0.46)
Marginal effect	3 %		6 %	
Conservatives	0.13 (0.10 – 0.15)	0.23 (0.18 – 0.28)	0.18 (0.13 – 0.24)	0.32 (0.21 – 0.43)
Marginal effect	**10 %**		14 %	

Table 5: Multinomial logit model of Labour voting relative to abstaining and supporting other parties in the 2005 general election (N = 1942)

	Conservative/ Labour		Liberal Dem/ Labour		Abstain/ Labour	
	Coeff.	s.e.	Coeff.	s.e.	Coeff.	s.e.
Constant	-4.39 ***	1.00	-3.94 ***	0.91	0.33	0.77
Party closest	**-0.39 ***	**0.19**	-0.25	0.17	-0.11	0.15
Lab-Con offer no choices	0.54	0.40	**1.32 ***	**0.36**	**1.57 ***	**0.33**
Dislike Lab and Con	-0.04	0.11	0.68 ***	0.19	0.75 ***	0.18
Iraq war	0.06	0.11	0.19 *	0.09	0.16 †	0.08
Age	0.04	0.33	0.04	0.03	-0.09 ***	0.03
Age^2	-0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.00 *	0.00
Gender	-0.30	0.20	-0.25	0.18	-0.23	0.16
Educational level						
GCSE	-0.25	0.36	-0.26	0.33	0.18	0.33
Vocational	-0.35	0.33	-0.39	0.30	0.26	0.30
A Level	-0.10	0.46	0.03	0.41	0.01	0.40
Degree	0.06	0.37	0.56	0.32	-0.27	0.36
Postgraduate	-0.42	0.52	0.29	0.41	0.05	0.43
None (formal)	-0.09	0.33	-0.27	0.31	1.05 **	0.31
Other	.		.		.	
Social Class						
Petty bourgeois	0.08	0.27	0.33	0.25	0.10	0.24
Foremen/technician	-0.14	0.30	0.22	0.28	0.01	0.26
Working class	-0.57	0.34	0.08	0.31	-0.11	0.28
Salariat	-0.66 *	0.33	0.01	0.29	0.09	0.25
Routine non-manual	.		.		.	
Party identification						
CON party id	6.05 ***	0.31	2.63 ***	0.29	2.39 ***	0.27
LIB party id	2.74 ***	0.36	3.09 ***	0.24	1.21 ***	0.27
Other/no party id	3.27 ***	0.33	1.34 ***	0.27	1.25 ***	0.23
LAB party id	.		.		.	
Chi ^{2}	1812.71 ***					
Pseudo R ^{2}	0.34					
2LL	-1742.03					

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

Tests for the Independence of Irrelevant Assumptions produced fully confirmatory results (for the hypothesis that errors are independent) using the suest-based Hausman test and the Small-Hsiao test.

Table 6: Multinomial logit model of Conservative voting relative to abstaining and supporting other parties in the 2005 general election (N = 1942)

	Labour/ Conservative		Liberal Dem/ Conservative		Abstain/ Conservative	
	Coeff.	s.e.	Coeff.	s.e.	Coeff.	s.e.
Constant	4.62 ***	1.01	0.60	1.01	4.88 ***	0.92
Party closest	**-0.70 ****	**0.21**	**-0.82 ****	**0.21**	**-0.46 ***	**0.19**
Lab-Con offer no choices	-0.54	0.40	**0.77** [†]	**0.41**	**1.03 ****	**0.40**
Dislike Lab and Con	0.03	0.22	0.74 ***	0.20	0.77 ***	0.20
Iraq war	-0.07	0.11	0.13	0.11	0.09	0.10
Age	-0.03	0.03	0.01	0.03	-0.13 ***	0.03
Age^2	0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00	0.00 **	0.00
Gender	0.27	0.20	-0.01	0.20	0.04	0.19
Educational level						
GCSE	0.21	0.37	-0.03	0.34	0.41	0.35
Vocational	0.28	0.33	-0.13	0.31	0.54	0.32
A Level	0.07	0.46	0.08	0.43	0.07	0.45
Degree	-0.09	0.37	0.45	0.34	-0.36	0.39
Postgraduate	0.41	0.53	0.73	0.50	0.47	0.53
None (formal)	0.03	0.33	-0.24	0.31	1.09 **	0.32
Other	.		.		.	
Social Class						
Petty bourgeois	-0.06	0.27	0.28	0.26	0.04	0.26
Foremen/technician	0.21	0.30	0.43	0.29	0.20	0.27
Working class	0.60	0.34	0.69 *	0.33	0.47	0.32
Salariat	0.70 *	0.33	0.73 *	0.33	0.78 **	0.31
Routine non-manual	.		.		.	
Party identification						
CON party id	-5.97 ***	0.31	-3.28 ***	0.28	-3.60 ***	0.27
LIB party id	-2.76 ***	1.03	0.37	0.34	1.54 ***	0.36
Other/no party id	-3.26 ***	0.33	-1.88 ***	0.34	-1.99 ***	0.32
LAB party id	.		.		.	
Chi^2	1826.85 ***					
Pseudo R^2	0.34					
2LL	-1734.96					

* $p \le 0.05$; ** $p \le 0.01$; *** $p \le 0.005$; [†]$p = 0.057$

Tests for the Independence of Irrelevant Assumptions produced fully confirmatory results (for the hypothesis that errors are independent) using the suest-based Hausman test. There was some evidence using the Small-Hsiao test that the errors may be correlated in the Labour and Liberal Democrat models.

Table 7: Change in probability of voting Labour/Conservative by proximity and by choices

| | Spatial | | Con-Lab | |
| | Proximity benefit | | Parties offer choices benefit | |
	Others closest	Closest party	Convergence	Divergence
Labour	0.28	0.33	0.22	0.49
	(0.24 – 0.32)	(0.27 – 0.38)	(0.17 – 0.28)	(0.39 – 0.59)
Marginal effect	5 %		**27 %**	
Conservatives	0.16	0.27	0.23	0.30
	(0.13 – 0.20)	(0.21 – 0.33)	(0.16 – 0.31)	(0.20 – 0.42)
Marginal effect	**11 %**		7 %	

Appendix

Validation of the measure "The main political parties in Britain don't offer voters real choices because their policies are pretty much the same".

I explore whether this question serves as a measure of policy similarity between the two or three major parties in the pre-election wave of the 2005 BES.

Responses to the $(P_{LAB} - P_{CON})^2$ left-right measure (pre-election) are significantly different between respondents agreeing strongly or agreeing with the statement, "The main political parties in Britain don't offer voters real choices because their policies are pretty much the same" and respondents disagreeing or disagreeing strongly with the statement. The t statistic was 5.22 *** (significant at the 0.000 level). There were no significant differences between respondents agreeing or disagreeing with the statement and their perceived summed distances between the three parties, $((P_{LAB} - P_{CON}) + (P_{LAB} - P_{LIB}) + (P_{CON} - P_{LIB}))^2$. Associations of the measure and perceived distance between Labour and the Conservatives are stronger and more statistically significant than are associations between the measure and perceived summed distances between Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats across all four policy scales (tax-spend, crime, EU and left-right), suggesting the measure taps the judgements between the two major parties rather than all three competitive parties. Observed differences confirm the expected direction of both measures, that is, respondents agreeing with the statement were more likely to perceive larger distances between the parties on the left-right measure than were respondents disagreeing. The mean distance among respondents disagreeing that the parties don't offer policy choices was 17.5 (N = 516, SD = 22.4) on a scale ranging from 0 to 100.[36] The mean perceived distance between the two main parties was 11.9 (N = 1245, SD = 18.9) for respondents agreeing/agreeing strongly that the parties are similar. The most significant differences are found at the lower levels of the perceived Labour-Conservative difference measure of left-right (pre-election). Among respondents agreeing or agreeing strongly that the parties offered no real choices, 25.22% placed the Labour and Conservative parties at exactly the same location in the pre-election measure of perceived left-right party placement, whereas 15.11% of respondent disagreeing or disagreeing strongly with the question placed the parties at the same location. That 15.11% did so does not imply they did not believe the parties were significantly different on other issues and similar on left-right. Also, a linear model of the summed policy differences between the Conservative and Labour parties (the measure used in Tables 1 through 4) regressed on 'the main parties offer no real policy choices' reveals a statistically significant contribution of this variable, robust to other additional variables, such as educational attainment level, feelings towards the party leaders, and party identification.

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

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

Appendix

Table A1: Multinomial logit model of voting for 'other parties' relative to abstaining and supporting the mainstream parties in the 2005 general election (N = 2577)

	Labour/ Other	Conservative/ Other	Liberal Democrat/ Other	Abstain/ Other
Constant	4.00 ***	-0.54	0.58	5.46 ***
	(1.18)	(1.26)	(1.22)	(1.16)
Labour party closest	0.12	-0.29	-0.06	0.07
	(0.24)	(0.26)	(0.25)	(0.24)
Lab-Con distance	0.12	0.53	-0.00	-0.65
	(0.24)	(0.61)	(0.60)	(0.59)
Dislike Lab and Con	-1.05 ***	-1.03 ***	-0.17	-0.15
	(0.25)	(0.27)	(0.26)	(0.25)
Iraq war	-0.16	-0.11	0.05	-0.05
	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.13)
Chi ^{2}	2250.43 ***			
Pseudo R ^{2}	0.30			
2LL	-2668.56			

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

Controlling for age, age squared, gender, educational attainment, social class, and party identification. The two key variables remain insignificant if 'dislike Labour and Conservatives' is not included in the model.

Table A2: Multinomial logit model of voting for 'other parties' relative to abstaining and supporting the mainstream parties in the 2005 general election (N = 2016)

	Labour/ Other	Conservative/ Other	Liberal Democrat/ Other	Abstain/ Other
Constant	3.09 *	-1.54	-0.90	3.26 *
	(1.37)	(1.45)	(1.41)	(1.35)
Conservatives closest	-0.41	0.25	-0.53	-0.19
	(0.31)	(0.30)	(0.31)	(0.30)
Main parties don't offer choices	-0.94	-0.37	0.48	0.64
	(0.59)	(0.62)	(0.61)	(0.60)
Dislike Lab and Con	-0.94 **	0.98 **	-0.25	-0.20
	(0.30)	(0.31)	(0.30)	(0.30)
Iraq war	-0.17	-0.09	0.04	-0.01
	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.15)
Chi ^{2}	1858.38 ***			
Pseudo R ^{2}	0.31			
2LL	-2036.37			

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

Controlling for age, age squared, gender, educational attainment, social class, and party identification. The two key variables remain insignificant if 'dislike Labour and Conservatives' is not included in the model.

Table A3: Multinomial logit model of voting Labour relative to abstaining and supporting other parties in the 2005 general election (N = 1942)

	Conservative/ Labour	Liberal Democrat/ Labour	Abstain/ Labour
Constant	-2.58 (1.14) *	-2.87 (1.01) *	1.63 (0.86) [†]
Labour closest	-0.16 (0.21)	-0.08 (0.17)	0.04 (0.16)
Main parties don't offer choices	0.21 (0.43)	**0.98 (0.28) ***	**1.27 (0.34) ***
Dislike Lab and Con	-0.28 (0.24)	0.26 (0.21)	0.36 (0.19)
Iraq war	-0.20 (0.12)	0.03 (0.10)	0.03 (0.09)
Trust politicians	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.04)	-0.09 (0.04) *
Dislike Tony Blair	0.37 (0.04) ***	0.25 (0.04) ***	0.16 (0.04) ***
Dislike Michael Howard	-0.31 (0.05) ***	-0.10 (0.04) *	0.11 (0.04) **
Chi ^{2}	1940.81 ***		
Pseudo R ^{2}	0.37		
2LL	-1677.98		

* $p \le 0.05$; ** $p \le 0.01$; *** $p \le 0.005$; [†] = 0.059

Controlling for age, age squared, gender, educational attainment, social class, and party identification

Table A4: Multinomial logit model of voting Conservative relative to abstaining and supporting other parties in the 2005 general election (N = 1902)

	Labour/ Conservative	Liberal Democrat/ Conservative	Abstain/ Conservative
Constant	2.75 (1.14) *	0.41 (1.12)	4.36 (1.03) ***
Conservatives closest	**-0.44 (0.22) ***	**-0.74 (0.21) ***	-0.36 (0.19)
Main parties don't offer choices	-0.23 (0.43)	0.73 (0.42)	**1.05 (0.41) ***
Dislike Lab and Con	0.27 (0.24)	0.54 (0.22) *	0.62 (0.21) **
Iraq war	0.19 (0.12)	0.21 (0.11)	0.22 (0.11) *
Trust politicians	0.02 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)
Like Tony Blair	-0.36 (0.04) ***	-0.11 (0.04) **	-0.20 (0.04) ***
Like Michael Howard	0.30 (0.05) ***	0.20 (0.05) ***	0.20 (0.05) ***
Chi ^{2}	1952.62 ***		
Pseudo R ^{2}	0.37		
2LL	-1672.07		

* $p \le 0.05$; ** $p \le 0.01$; *** $p \le 0.005$

Controlling for age, age squared, gender, educational attainment, social class, and party identification

Reviewer Appendix*

Table A5: Marginal effects of proximity and separation upon Labour vote in 2005, with controls*

	Spatial Proximity benefit		Con-Lab Separation benefit	
	Others closest	Closest party	Convergence	Divergence
Controls				
Dislike Lab and Con	5%		**27%**	
Dislike Lab and Con, trust politicians	4%		**24%**	
Dislike Lab and Con, trust politicians, dislike TB	2%		**19%**	
Dislike Lab and Con, trust politicians, dislike TB, MH	1%		**17%**	

Table A6: Marginal effects of proximity and separation upon Conservative vote in 2005, with controls*

	Spatial Proximity benefit		Con-Lab Separation benefit	
	Others closest	Closest party	Convergence	Divergence
Controls				
Dislike Lab and Con	**11%**		7%	
Dislike Lab and Con, trust politicians	**11%**		9%	
Dislike Lab and Con, trust politicians, dislike MH	**9%**		7%	
Dislike Lab and Con, trust politicians, dislike MH, TB	8%[†]		9%	

* Significant effects in bold where confidence intervals do not overlap.
[†] Confidence intervals overlap at just 0.1 percentage point.

TB (Labour leader and Prime Minister Tony Blair) and MH (Conservative leader Michael Howard)