

# **Why Labour Didn't Listen: Party Competition and Issue Responsiveness in the Recent British and U.S. Elections**

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## Abstract

Elections have several functions in a democratic society, but importantly they provide the electorate with information on the policy programmes that parties plan to pursue in office and give voters the possibility to hold their leaders accountable. We thus tend to assume that political parties competing in an election will be responsive to the priorities of voters when they frame their campaign messages. In this paper, we examine the level of issue responsiveness in the recent British and American elections and we analyse variations across parties and party systems. A large body of literature suggests that we should expect variation in the level of responsiveness across electoral systems. According to many scholars, we should expect higher levels of elite responsiveness in democracies with proportional representation than in majoritarian systems (Powell 2000; Lijphart 1999). In this paper we examine whether variation in degrees of responsiveness can be found *within* majoritarian systems as well. We suggest that considerable variation can be found as a consequence of features of the party systems, particularly differences in the number of parties and the level of disproportionality in the vote-to-seats ratio.

To evaluate these propositions, we conduct an analysis of the responsiveness of candidates and party leaders' campaign pledges in the campaigns leading up to the 2005 British general election and the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Using content analysis and wordscores techniques to analyse the speeches and manifestos in these election campaigns, we find that the Labour Party was unresponsive to the wishes of the public in the 2005 election campaign in comparison with the main opposition party and the US presidential candidates. We suggest that this lack of responsiveness is influenced by the sizeable third party in the British party system, that creates a large 'bonus' for the party in first place and thus insulates the winning party from the threat of electoral sanction.

**Keywords:** responsiveness, issue salience, Labour Party, general election, party system

## Introduction

We expect parties in democratic systems to respond to the issue preferences of citizens, especially during election campaign where they seek to be re-elected. Yet, the policy stances of the Labour government during the second term - on important issues such as the Iraq war, university top-up fees and the European Constitution - could suggest that the Labour Party is less concerned with pandering to the wishes of the public than we might expect of a party seeking to win its first-ever consecutive third term in office. This paper examines the extent to which the Labour Party listened to the preferences of British citizens during the 2005 election campaign. We compare the issue responsiveness of the Labour Party with that of the two other major British parties, as well as with the candidates in the 2004 US presidential election. Despite accusations of 'spin' and populism, the findings suggest that the Labour Party was less responsive to the public's issue preferences than its major rival, the Conservative Party, and the incumbent in the US presidential election, George Bush. This begs the question: 'why didn't Labour listen?'. We suggest that the responsiveness of parties is greatly influenced by electoral laws and the nature of the party system. More specifically, we argue that since the combination of a plurality system and a sizeable third party in Britain creates a considerable 'seat bonus' for the party in the first place, the incentives for the leading party (in this case, the incumbent) to be responsive to the public are reduced. In comparison, a plurality system with only two parties will tend to create a smaller 'winning bonus' and thus encourage both the opposition and incumbent candidates to be more responsive to public preferences.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we review the literature on party competition and issue responsiveness and thereafter we outline our theoretical expectations concerning the effect of electoral institutions and party system constellation on the degree of issue responsiveness and issue convergence. Then we analyse speeches and policy programmes from the recent British elections and the 2004 US Presidential Election. We examine not only the issue preferences of parties (issue saliency) but also their ideological positioning using computerised content analysis and Wordscores techniques (Laver, Benoit and Garry 2003). Finally, we discuss the broader implications of these results for our understanding of how institutions affect the responsiveness of parties.

## Party competition and issue responsiveness

*A party is a team of individuals seeking to control the governing apparatus by gaining office in an election...Thus all its actions are aimed at maximizing votes, and it treats policies merely as means towards this end.*

- Downs<sup>1</sup>

Several arguments have been proposed to explain the behaviour of political parties in campaigns (Strøm 1990). As a starting point, we assume that parties seek to maximise their electoral support for the purpose of controlling government. The literature proposes different answers to the question of how parties can achieve their objectives of vote-maximisation and office-seeking in election campaigns. One option is that the party adopts a position close to the location of the median voter in a policy space, as suggested in Downs' (1957) classical spatial model. In Downs' proximity model of policy preferences, voters are represented by positions in a policy space and have their own optimum positions. The vote-maximising strategy for either party in a two-party system would be to adopt a position close to the median voter. Another option for a party is to promote a new issue dimension where the party is more competitive, as Riker (1982) has suggested. Petrocik's theory of 'issue ownership' (1996) has advanced the idea that parties compete by emphasising issues where they have a reputation for greater competence (i.e. parties "own" certain issues) rather than shifting their positions on one issue dimension. In a European context, scholars have developed a similar 'saliency theory' of party competition and they have shown that most political parties do not seek direct confrontation on issues, but engage in selective emphasis of certain issues (see Budge and Farlie 1983; Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge 1994; Budge et al. 2001; van der Brug 2004; Clarke et al. 2005). According to the issue ownership and saliency theories, voters identify with the political party that they feel is the most competent proponent of a particular issue. Hence, during campaigns parties will tend to promote issues on which they hold a long-standing reputation of competence. But for issue ownership to have important electoral consequences, these issues need to be salient to the public (Belanger and Meguid 2004). Following this line of reasoning,

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<sup>1</sup> Downs 1957: 34-35

one would expect that in order to maximise votes, parties would not only emphasise issues on which they have a strong reputation (issue ownership), but also emphasise issues that are important to the public (issue saliency). However, the aspects of voter preferences voter issue priorities is rarely fully accommodated by the issue ownership literature. As Damore (2005) points out, the literature on ‘issue ownership’ is largely silent on the political context within which campaigns are fought. This problem is particularly important in so far that voters’ perceptions of issues are important in explaining election outcomes.<sup>2</sup> It seems plausible that political parties have preferred issues on which they want to campaign, but it seems equally likely that parties will seek to emphasise issues that are likely to resonate the most with the public. Hence, this paper seeks to incorporate the issue preferences of voters explicitly into the analysis of party competition in election campaigns. By doing so, the paper also aims to integrate the two approaches to party competition - the proximity and the ownership models – by focusing on the concept of issue responsiveness, since issue saliency is important in both accounts of party competition. Regardless of whether voters base their vote choice of proximity considerations (position) or competence (issue ownership), the position/ownership of a party will matter more if the issue in question is salient to the public. Hence, the degree to which the party’s campaign speeches and policy programmes reflect the issues that are most salient to the public can be seen as an indicator of a party’s responsiveness to the public. In this paper, we therefore focus on issue responsiveness in election campaigns, defined as the extent to which parties’ selective policy emphases in speeches and policy programmes reflect public issue preferences. More specifically, this paper focuses on the impact of institutions on issue responsiveness. This is an issue that is largely overlooked in the literature of issue ownership. To make a preliminary attempt to understand how issue responsiveness in elections may vary across different institutional contexts, we examine whether there are differences in the level of responsiveness between American and British political parties. Our theoretical expectations concerning the effect of institutions on issue responsiveness in these two systems are discussed further below.

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<sup>2</sup> See also Aldrich and Griffin (2003) for a discussion of the lack of incorporation of voters in the issues ownership literature.

## Explaining variation in issue responsiveness in British and U.S. campaigns

The main goal in this paper is to evaluate and explain the extent to which the issues promoted by parties match the issue priorities of the electorate in a given election, that is, *issue responsiveness*. We suggest that issue responsiveness vary across parties and party systems. We propose two structural arguments to account for the variation in issue convergence between parties and voters. The first argument concerns the nature of the party system whereas the second argument relates to the rules governing the election of the executive. A number of studies have discussed the effect of electoral systems on the responsiveness of political elites to voter preferences (Lijphart 1999; Powell 2000; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005). Some studies have argued that the plurality system (“first-past-the-post”) used in the UK and the US is superior to proportional system, because the plurality system creates a direct link between the voter and the elected representative. This link ensures that the constituencies are directly represented and hence that the government can be held accountable (Austen-Smith and Banks 1988). Yet, Mitchell (2000: 346) contends that the ability of voters to monitor the responsiveness of parliamentarians and punish these in case of shirking depends on the choices open to the electorate. In this regard proportional representation (PR) has an advantage in terms of sanctions, because there are more candidates in each constituency with a reasonable chance of gaining representation (Lijphart 1999:162). However, whilst there is an ongoing debate about whether the PR or the plurality systems is more conducive to elite responsiveness, most studies have assumed that parties respond in very similar ways *within* different majoritarian systems. In other words, it is assumed that the parties in systems that share the first-past-the-post system, such as Britain and the United States, would respond in a similar fashion to the preferences of the voters. However, in this paper we suggest that more attention should be paid to within-system variation, since other differences between systems with similar electoral laws may affect levels of responsiveness.

The first relevant difference between campaigns in an American and a British context is the configuration of the party systems. The traditional Downsian model of party competition suggests that when two parties are competing in first-past-the-post electoral system, they will converge towards the median voter (Downs 1957).<sup>3</sup> Cox (1984) investigates the consequences of adding a third party, holding constant the electoral institution. According to Cox we should

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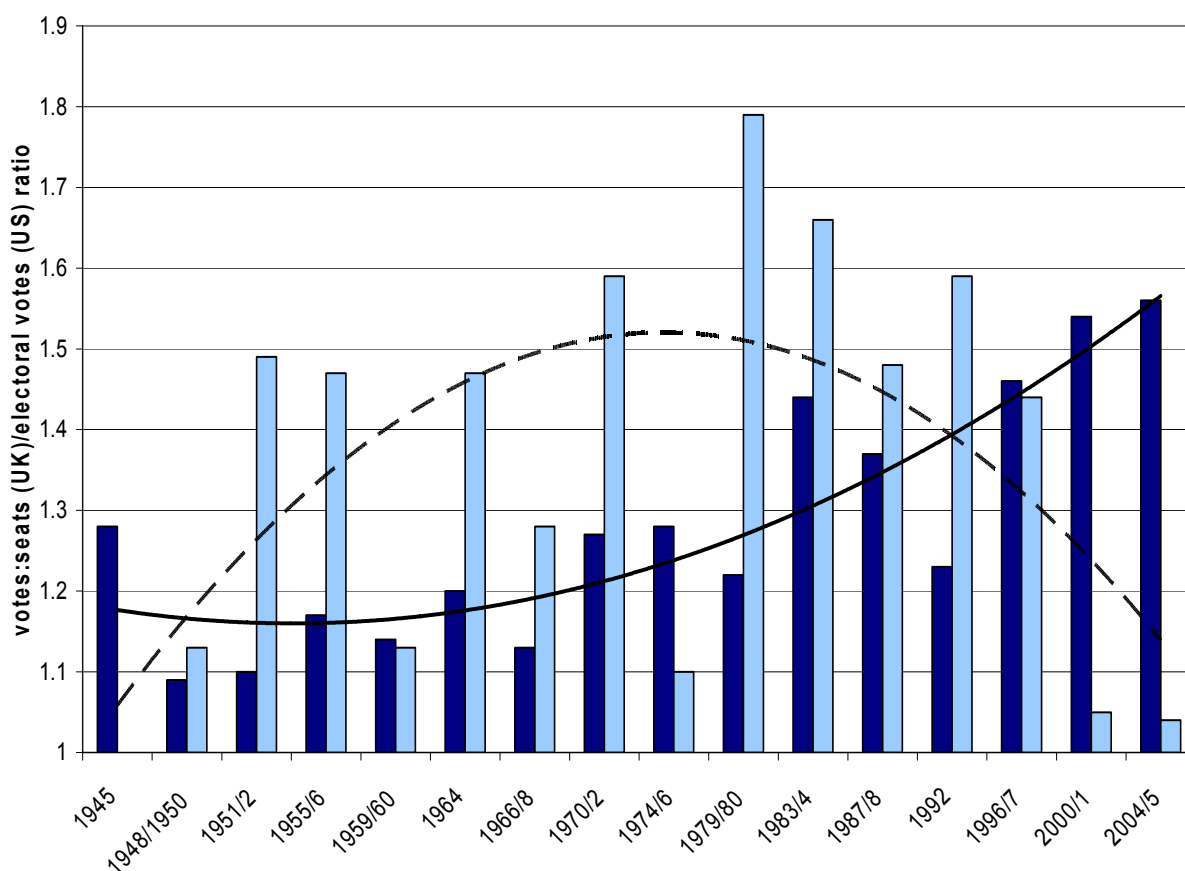
<sup>3</sup> For a recent review of this literature see Grofman (2004).

expect less convergence between competing parties when three political parties are competing in an election. The median voter is thus not as attractive to the parties competing, provided that the voters are voting for the party closest to them (Cox 1984: 447). This has consequences for the convergence we should expect between parties competing in elections. Moreover, it may also affect the level of elite responsiveness to the preferences of voters. When three parties compete in a first-past-the-post election and their votes are distributed more or less equally across constituencies, the 'winning party bonus' will be considerably higher than in a system with only two parties. We know from the literature that the level of disproportionality (the degree to which the parties' share of seats lacks correspondence to their share of votes) is significantly greater under plurality than under PR systems (Jackson and Rose 1991; Lijphart 1994; Gallagher, Laver and Mair 2005). Yet, the level of disproportionality also varies *within* majoritarian systems. This variation in proportionality depends not only on the electoral rules but also on features associated with the party system: the number of parties competing, the geographic distribution of party support and the degree of tactical voting (Norris 1997; Curtice and Steed 1997; Dunleavy and Margetts 1997; Norris and Wleizien 2005). In Britain, the combination of these factors have resulted in an unusually high 'winning party bonus' for the party in first place in the most recent elections. The average seat bonus to the Conservatives Party from 1945-2001 was 5.1 per cent and the Labour Party was rewarded with an average seat bonus of 7.1 per cent (Mitchell 2005). These seat bonuses to the 'big two' have been chiefly the result of the existence of a major third party, the Liberal Democrats, that has been the major loser of the system. The Liberals have never received a seat bonus in the post-war period: on average they have won 9.2 per cent fewer seats than their share of the votes, and this has increased to 15.2 percent in the 1974-2001 period (Mitchell 2005). Consequently, the level of disproportionality in the British system has been on the increase in the last decades. Particularly since the 1974 watershed election where the British party system seized to be a classic two-party system. After 1974, the Liberal vote increased from an average of 7 percent before to an average of 19 percent in the period 1974-2001. Figure 1 shows the votes-to-seats ratio for the governing party in the UK and the votes-to-electoral votes<sup>4</sup> ratio of the president in the US in the post-war period.

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<sup>4</sup> Technically, the US president is not directly elected, but elected by an Electoral College. The US Constitution, in Article 2, Section 1, provides: "Each State shall appoint, in such Manner as the Legislature thereof may direct, a Number of Electors, equal to the whole Number of Senators and Representatives to which the State may be entitled in the Congress." To win, a presidential candidate must have a majority in the Electoral College.

Figure 1 ‘Winning bonus’ in British general election and US presidential elections



Source: Norris and Wlezien (2005) and the National Archives (2005)

Figure 1 shows a marked increase in the ‘winning party bonus’ in the last three decades in Britain. The Labour Party, in particular, has benefited from this in the last three elections with a votes-to-seats ratio of over 1.4 (Norris and Wlezien 2005). In comparison, there is no linear trend in the translation of votes to Electoral College votes in the US presidential elections, but the figure shows that Bush did not benefit from a large ‘bonus’ in the translation from votes-to-electoral votes in the last two elections. The ‘third-party’ effect is also visible in the U.S. vote-to-electoral votes ratio. In elections with a strong independent candidate, the ‘bonus’ for the winner tend to be larger. In many of the US presidential elections with a high ‘bias’ in favour of the winning candidate, there was strong independent ‘third’ candidate running: 1980 (John Anderson, 7 percent of the votes), 1992 (Ross Perot, 19 percent of the vote) and 1996 (Ross Perot, 9 percent of the vote). Hence, the ‘third-party’ effect can have an impact in presidential as well as parliamentary systems. However, it may be argued that in the US case the size of the bonus is less significant given that all that matters is a majority in the Electoral College, since the

election determines the president rather than a share of seats in parliament. Moreover, Bush received a majority of the Electoral College votes in the 2000 election, although he had received less votes than his main opponent, Al Gore. The important point to note, however, is that whereas the Labour Party was fairly certain that they could hold on to power, even if they won no more than 35 percent of the votes in 2005, George Bush and the Republican Party knew that it would be a very close race in the 2004 Presidential election, where they would have to win close to half of all votes in order to retain the presidency. Hence, a small swing towards the Conservatives would not unseat the governing Labour Party, but a similar swing toward the Democrats in the US would have unseated George Bush. These two scenarios are likely to have created different incentives to be responsive to public preferences for the two incumbents, Bush and Blair in the 2004 and 2005 campaigns. We therefore suggest that the increasing ‘seat bonus’ in the British system in recent decades has consequences for the level of responsiveness of the parties, in particular that party expected to be in the first place. Strøm (1990) argues that the behaviour of party leaders is determined by considerations on three dimensions. Party leaders can pursue office, policy or vote goals in some combination. We expect that the most important of these aims is the goal of controlling the government (Downs 1957). The degree to which vote-maximisation equates office-seeking depends on the electoral system and the configuration of the party system. In a plurality system where three parties are competing to gain office, the vote share needed to gain office is less than 50+1 percent. Consequently, if the party leader has a win margin which is sufficiently large, it seems reasonable to expect that other goals, such as policy-seeking, become important. The willingness to compromise on policy issues may depend on the threat of electoral sanction and the share of votes necessary to control the government. Hence the argument proposed here is essentially that party leaders pursue their office goals in a cost-efficient manner, that is they want to secure the benefits of office without sacrificing their policy goals more than necessary.

The second feature which might affect the responsiveness of political elites during campaigns is the relationship between the executive and the legislative branches of government. First, this relationship is partly determining the extent to which elites can be held responsible when they are elected. This is important because it determines how responsive elites will be to the electorate coming into office. Secondly, this relationship determines how constrained the executive is vis-à-vis the legislative branch (Strøm 2000). Powell and Whitten (1993) argue that the clarity of responsibility determines the extent to which the political elites will be held responsible for their actions. Samuel and Hellwig (2004) extend this argument and argue that a somewhat overlooked institutional factor in explaining the responsiveness of political elites is

how responsibility is attributed by the voters. According to this argument, the extent to which voters perceive the executive as capable and sufficiently powerful to solve problems determines whether the executive will be held responsible for the political outcomes. Samuel and Hellwig argue that an important institutional feature determining how responsibility is attributed is whether the executive is directly or indirectly elected and they show that directly elected executives are attributed more responsibility by the electorate than indirectly elected executives when controlling for the complexity of the systems (Samuel and Hellwig 2004:13). Assuming that the executive is aware that it is held responsible, it seems reasonable to expect that political parties (or candidates) fighting an election where the executive is directly elected will pay more attentions to voters' priorities.

Building on these considerations we can formulate some specific expectations concerning the level of issue responsiveness in the recent British and U.S. elections. First, we expect responsiveness levels to be higher in the U.S. election than in the British election, given the 'third party effect' and the indirect election of the executive in the latter case. Second, we expect the responsiveness of the Labour Party in the British election to be particularly low given that that Labour Party could expect to come first and consequently receive a sizeable seat bonus. These propositions are tested in the following sections.

## **Data and methods**

To examine issue responsiveness of parties and candidates to the public, we analyse data from two cases: the British general election in 2005 and the American presidential election in 2004. These cases vary both in terms of the number of parties competing in the election and in terms of the electoral procedures for electing the executive. In order to test the propositions concerning issue responsiveness, we use several sources of data. First, we have analysed the issue priorities in the campaign speeches made by each of the major parties/presidential candidates, using computerised content analysis, and compared these issue preferences with the issue priorities of the voters. Second, we have coded the British party manifestos from the three most recent British general elections using the wordscores technique developed by Laver, Benoit and Garry (2003). This technique allows us to investigate the extent to which the political parties have changed their position over time. The measures of public preferences and government policy promises during the campaign as well as measure 'issue responsiveness' are discussed in further detail below.

### *Measuring public preferences*

The policy priorities of citizens are estimated on the basis of the survey question: ‘what do you consider to be the most important issue’. This ‘most-important-issue’ captures the public’s relative concerns with different policy areas on the ‘popular agenda’ (McDonald, Budge, and Pennings 2004; Pennings 2005). The distinct advantage of this survey question is that it has been asked in several polls and elections surveys in both Britain and the United States. This question item is also preferable to the ‘most-important-problem’ question often used to measure public issue salience, since it does not focus the respondents’ minds on ‘problem status’ of an issue, but on the relative importance of issues more generally (Wlezien N.d). In our analysis we include two versions of the most-important-issue measure. One measure is based on surveys taken during the campaign. Since parties conduct their own polls in the campaign period, we would expect them to be highly responsive to the pre-election public survey preferences. To alleviate problems of noise in the measurement, we base our measure on an average of the surveys conducted in the period that include the ‘most-important-issue’, rather than relying on a single survey. Our second measure is based on post-election surveys, where voters are asked to identify the most important issue. By using post-election data, we can also evaluate how the issue preferences of voters vary across vote choices and examine whether parties/candidates are more or less responsive to their own voters compared with ‘majority opinion’. In both measures, we focus on policy categories that were identified in the answers to the open-ended “most-important-issue” question in the pre-election surveys. The policy categories thus differ slightly between the two campaigns: in Britain we identified 11 policy categories that were identified in all surveys and in the United States, we identified 7 policy categories, using the pre-election polls. Tables 1 shows the distribution of the percentages of respondents choosing the policy categories in the last three British general elections campaigns (re-calculated to percentages that sum up to 100 within each campaign), using an average of the polls conducted during the campaign period.

Table 1 **Public issue preferences in the 1997, 2001 and 2005 British election campaigns**

<i>Policy categories</i>	2005 public issue importance*	2001 Public issue importance**	1997 Public issue importance**
Health	16	25	23
Immigration & Asylum	14	6	1
Welfare/pensions	14	7	7
Law & order	13	17	15
Taxation	11	2	2
Economy	10	5	10
Education	8	19	20
Environment	5	3	4
Europe	4	11	14
Iraq/defence/foreign policy	4	1	1
Transport	3	5	2

\* average of pre-election polls (British Election Study, YouGov, MORI and ICM)

\*\*average of pre-election MORI polls

Table 1 shows that health care and law and order have been among the most salient policy issues to the British public in all of the three most recent general elections. It is also noteworthy that immigration and asylum issues emerged as a new salient issue in the 2005 election and that education and European issues declined in their relative importance to the public. Relying on the post-election British Election Study (BES), we can also examine the distribution of preferences across party voters by dividing respondents into categories according to which party they voted for. Table 2 shows the public's issue preferences in the 2005 general election, using post-election data.

Table 2 **Public preferences by party in the 2005 British general election**

<i>Policy categories</i>	Public issue importance (All)	Preferences of Labour voters	Preferences of Conservative voters	Preferences of Liberal voters
Health	23	22	19	23
Immigration & Asylum	23	18	29	17
Welfare/pensions	4	5	1	3
Law & order	15	16	20	12
Taxation	2	1	2	2
Economy	9	14	9	11
Education	7	8	6	9
Environment	2	2	1	2
Europe	6	4	7	10
Iraq/defence/foreign policy	9	10	6	10
Transport	0	0	0	0

Source: Post-election British Election Study 2005

Issue preferences are fairly stable across respondents voting for different parties, according to the results shown in Table 2. In this survey conducted after the election, health, immigration and law and order were identified by voters as the most important issue. As expected, issues of immigration and law and order are more important to Conservative voters than to the public at large, but otherwise we find few significant differences between voters supporting different parties. In contrast, when we examine similar post-election results from the US 2004 presidential election, we find that Republican and Democrat voters are significantly more polarised in terms of their issue preferences. It is also interesting to note that whereas Iraq appears to be an issue of low salience to most voters in the 2005 British election campaign, it was the leading theme in the US presidential election. Table 3 shows the pre- and post-election issue preferences of the American public in the last presidential election and breaks it down by candidate choice.

**Table 3 Public issue preferences in the 2004 US presidential election**

<i>Policy categories</i>	2004 Public pre-election issue importance*	2004 Public post-election issue importance**	Preferences of Bush voters**	Preferences of Kerry voters**
Iraq	23	24	14	44
Economy	23	20	8	32
Terrorism	20	16	20	4
Morale issues	14	27	48	7
Health	11	6	3	7
Education	3	4	2	5
Taxation	4	4	4	1

\* Average of pre-election polls (Newsweek polls, National Election Studies)

\*\* PEW post-election survey, 2004

It is clear from Table 3 that there are significant differences in issue saliency between Bush and Kerry voters. Morale issues and terrorism are the most poignant concerns to Bush voters whereas Iraq and the economy top the list among Kerry supporters. This is perhaps not surprising given that the presidential campaign was to a large extent a battle about defining whether the election issues were the “war on terror” and moral issues (Bush) or about the Iraq war and poor economic performance (Kerry). But it is nevertheless noteworthy that American voters are more split along party lines in their views on issue saliency than the British voters. To measure the responsiveness of political elites to these public issue preferences, we also need a measure of the policy priorities of parties and candidates during these campaigns.

### *Measuring party and candidate policy priorities*

The policy priorities of the parties/candidates are estimated by conducting content analysis of the speeches made by the party leader/presidential candidate during the election campaign. In Britain, we have analysed the speeches given by Tony Blair (Labour), Michael Howard (Conservative) and Charles Kennedy (Liberal Democrat) during the three weeks leading up to the election in May 2005. In the United States, we have analysed the speeches given by George W. Bush (Republican) and the challenger John F. Kerry (Democrats) in the period from the day they were chosen as a presidential candidate by their party to the election day in November 2004. Party documents, particularly manifestos, are the most common source for identifying the policy priorities of the executive in the literature on parliamentary democracies and campaigns (Laver 2001; Budge 1993; Pennings 2005). Yet, for our purposes there are several advantages of using campaign speeches. Party election manifestos tend to deal with all of the major policy areas. This complicates the precise measurement of issue priorities. By analysing the speeches given by party leaders during the campaign, we get a much better measure of the particular issues that the party is seeking to emphasise during the campaign. As an example, the Conservative Party Leader, Michael Howard, made immigration the second most important issue in his campaign speeches (17 percent), whereas it was given a much less prominent role in the 2005 Conservative Party Manifesto relative to other policy issues (5 percent). Yet, most observers would agree that issues relating to immigration and asylum were important in the Conservative Party campaign (see Clarke et al. 2005; Norris and Wlezien 2005), and this is more clearly reflected in the estimates of the speeches.

In each of the cases examined, we have analysed a pooled text file with over 20 speeches of each candidate/party leader, and this provides us with extensive and reliable data on the policy issue that each party tried to promote during the campaign. In the first step of the analyses, we have employed computer-aided content analysis<sup>5</sup> of the speeches to get reliable estimates of each candidates policy preferences. This quantitative method of content analysis is often used when large amounts of textual data are processed and when the interest lies primarily in manifest rather than latent content (see for example Laver 2001). Studies have shown that this technique is suitable for generating both valid and reliable estimates of policy positions (Garry 2001; Laver and Garry 2000; Bara 2001). In our analysis, the policy preference time-series was obtained by calculating the relative frequency of all coded words and quasi-sentences,

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<sup>5</sup> The software program TEXTPACK 7.5 was used in our content analysis of the speeches.

corresponding to the policy categories in a ‘dictionary’ file. Computer-aided coding has been chosen, because it is far more reliable than expert coding in that it ensures perfect stability and reproducibility of the coding procedure (Krippendorff, 1980).<sup>6</sup> The design of a good dictionary is a vital part of computer-aided content analysis. Our dictionary consists of words, word sequences and character strings that describe the policy categories in each campaign. The dictionary is validated by means of the keyword-in-context (KWIC) procedure, which highlights keywords within the context in which they are used. By locating keywords in the text file the most appropriate category is determined and ambiguous words are excluded or disambiguated. Moreover, to enhance the validity of the analysis, the dictionary has been cross-validated with the public opinion dictionary used for the analysis reported in Bara (2001).<sup>7</sup> The coding categories were created so they were mutually exclusive and exhaustive and no word or word string was allocated to more than one coding category. By coding all the manifest policy terms used in the speeches (e.g. Iraq, police, hospitals, schools, immigrants), this analysis captures the relative weighting given to each category as a percentage of the overall frequency of policy terms. Table 4 shows the policy emphases of the leaders of the three major parties in Britain.

**Table 4 Issue priorities of party leaders in the 2005 British general election**

<i>Policy categories</i>	Blair's issue emphases	Howard's issue emphases	Kennedy's issue emphases
Health	4	11	10
Immigration & Asylum	11	17	0
Welfare/pensions	9	18	18
Law & order	2	17	3
Taxation	4	11	10
Economy	26	8	6
Education	37	16	24
Environment	0	1	8
Europe	3	1	1
Iraq/defence/foreign policy	1	2	19
Transport	1	0	1

<sup>6</sup> Computer-aided techniques may also have certain advantages with regard to validity, since the coding process is mechanical and thus unbiased by any prior knowledge or opinions of an expert coder (Laver and Garry, 2000; Garry, 2001). However, there are also potential problems associated with this technique, such as *homography* (individual words may have multiple literal meanings) and *context* (the theoretical meaning of a word may be altered by the presence or absence of other words). To alleviate these problems, keywords in the dictionary have been ‘disambiguated’ by using word strings and alternative signifiers to aid in contextualisation.

<sup>7</sup> We are thankful to Judith Bara for sharing this dictionary with us as a basis for our codebook

It is clear from Table 4 that the level of *issue divergence* among parties was very high in the 2005 British general election campaign. In other words, party leaders promoted different issues during the campaign. Tony Blair emphasised the issue of education and the economy, while the Conservative party leader spoke more about immigration, welfare policies and law and order. In contrast, the Liberal Democrat leader put more emphasis on the war in Iraq than the two other party leaders. Charles Kennedy also spoke more about the environment than either Blair or Howard. If we compare with the US election, we see a somewhat higher degree of issue convergence among parties, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 **Issue priorities of Presidential Candidates in the 2004 US election**

<i>Policy categories</i>	Bush's issue emphases	Kerry's issue emphases
Iraq	25	37
Economy	13	8
Terrorism	20	18
Morale issues	11	12
Health	15	9
Education	8	6
Taxation	9	9

Both Bush and Kerry spoke more about Iraq than any other issue, and terrorism was their shared second choice of policy issues. Hence this implies, as expected, a greater degree of issue convergence in the two-party US system compared the three-party system<sup>8</sup> in the UK.

These calculations of issue emphases in the speeches provide us with a good proxy of the issue priorities of parties and candidates during the campaign. As discussed above, the ‘saliency theory’ of political competition suggests that parties respond to public preferences by selective issue emphasis, rather than by shifting ideological positions on a specific dimension. Several studies have shown that quantitative content analysis is an appropriate method of capturing policy priorities, since politicians tend to express their policy priorities in speeches and manifestoes by emphasising certain policies over others, rather than endorsing particular policy stands and commitments (see Budge 1993; Hofferbert and Budge 1992). The campaign

<sup>8</sup> It is still contested issue how to describe the British Party system. Up to 1974, there was a general consensus that Britain had a classic two-party system. In the period 1945-1970 the Conservative and Labour Party combined attracted an average of 91 per cent of all votes cast, and won almost all the seats (98 per cent on average). But after 1974 the Liberal vote has averaged 19 per cent (Mitichell 2004) and it therefore no longer seems accurate to describe Britain as a two-party system, but nor is the term ‘three-party system’ strictly accurate given that a number of other parties are elected to the British Parliament. The reason for the use of this term in this paper is that we focus on the effect of the large ‘third party’ on the bias in the vote-to-seats ratio.

speeches thus provide valuable data to test our hypotheses by comparing the policy-weighting (selective policy priorities) of the speeches with the policy-ranking in the public opinion survey data. This measure of the relative emphasis given to different policy categories in a speech is, however, not identical to the measure of public preferences. Whereas the former measures the relative weight given to different policies, the latter explicitly measures a ranking of policy areas. Yet, although these measures are not identical, they still enable us to measure the extent to which the parties respond to public concerns at least rhetorically. If the public is very concerned with public health at a particular time, this would be reflected in the survey data, and - assuming issue responsiveness - the party leader would emphasise health relatively more than other policy areas in his or her speeches. In the following section, we discuss and develop a measure of issue responsiveness that allows us to compare between parties and across elections.

*Measuring issue convergence responsiveness*

To calculate the issue responsiveness of each party and preference in a given election, we can compare the issue emphases of the candidate on every single issue in the speeches with the percentages of the public that choose each of the issues as the most important issue. Following Sigelman and Buell's (2004) measure of issue convergence, we can therefore derive a measure of issue responsiveness from the sum of absolute differences between the issue emphases of the candidates and the issue priorities of the public. As an example we can assume that there were just three potentially relevant issues. If candidate A distributed 60 percent of his attention to issue 1, 40 percent to issue 2 and no attention to issue 3, while the distribution in the public was as follows: no one chose issue 1 as the most important issue, 40 percent chose issue 2 and 60 percent chose issue 3, then the absolute differences would sum to 120:  $|60 - 0| + |40 - 40| + |0 - 60| = 120$ .<sup>9</sup> We can thus measure issue responsiveness  $R$  of Party A (a) as:

$$R_a = 100 - \left( \sum_{i=1}^n |P_a - P_o| \right) / 2$$

where  $P_a$  is the percentage of their total attention that Party A devotes to a particular issue and  $P_o$  is the percentage of the public that mention this issue as the Most Important Issues. The absolute differences between them are summed over all  $n$  of potential issues in the campaign.

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<sup>9</sup> This example is adopted from Sigelman and Buell's (2004:653) discussion of measure issue convergence among parties or candidates.

Dividing the sum by 2 calibrates the measure to range between 0 and 100, and subtracting from 100 converts the measure to one of similarity rather than dissimilarity. Hence, an issue responsiveness score of 80 would indicate a 80 percent overlap between the issue priorities of the candidate and the issue priorities of the public. In the following section, we apply this measure to an analysis of issue responsiveness<sup>10</sup> in recent British and US election campaigns.

## Issue responsiveness in the recent British and US elections

Using the data and measure of issue responsiveness described above, we can now test our hypotheses concerning the responsiveness of British parties in the 2005 general election campaign. Recall that we expected the responsiveness of British parties to be lower than that of American presidential candidates. In particular, we expected the responsiveness of the British Labour Party to be low, because of the lack of uncertainty about the outcome and the low proportion of votes needed to win an absolute majority of seats. The results are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6 Issue responsiveness in the 2005 British general election and the 2004 US presidential election**

	Responsiveness to pre-election public preferences	Responsiveness to post-election public preferences	Responsiveness to own voters (post-election preferences)
<i>2005 UK campaign speeches</i>			
Blair	55	45	46
Howard	82	68	75
Kennedy	62	44	57
<i>2004 US campaign speeches</i>			
Bush	86	78	62
Kerry	78	74	70
<i>Responsiveness average</i>	<b>73</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>62</b>

*Note:* Issue responsiveness is a scale from 0 to 100 where 100 signifies that the issue priorities in the speeches and those of the public overlaps completely, and 0 signifies no convergence of issue preferences

<sup>10</sup> In this analysis weight the measures according to the number of issues included in analysis in each of the two campaigns to allow for cross-campaign comparisons.

As Table 6 shows, the issue responsiveness of Tony Blair is considerably lower than that of Michael Howard, the Conservative Party leader, and of the two American presidential candidates, both when measured against pre-election and post-election public issue priorities. This suggests that the combination of a plurality system with a sizeable third party may reduce the incentives for the party that expects to “win” the contest to be very responsive to the wishes of the electorate. Tony Blair could be fairly certain that his party would be re-elected even without pandering to the public. And while the Labour Party suffered a considerable electoral defeat in the 2005 election, this did not cost the party the control of government. In contrast, Howard knew that a very large swing<sup>11</sup> was needed in order for the Conservative Party to win office. As expected, the figures show that Howard was very responsive to the concerns of the public. The Liberal Democrat leader, in contrast, knew that any prospects of government was out of sight (except in the case of a ‘Hung Parliament’, see Clarke et al. 2005), hence one may speculate that policy consistency and opposition politics (e.g. by emphasising Iraq) were more important to the Liberals than offering a government alternative. In contrast, both candidates in the US presidential election knew that this was going to be a very close race and the issue responsiveness of both candidates is also high, as shown in Table 6. Moreover as we hypothesised, the American presidents speak directly to the ‘American voter’. Party specific interests are less important in the American campaign rhetoric, and this is supported by the evidence. American presidential candidates tend to speak *less* to their own voters than to the median voter (recall the high level of polarisation among American voters shown in Table 3). In contrast we find the British parties tend to speak *more* to their own voters. This is especially the case for the leaders of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats. Hence, these findings on issue responsiveness generally support our expectations. As mentioned, party manifestos do not provide good data for examining variation in issue preferences, yet, they may provide us with information on the *positioning of parties*. In the next section, we examine how the British parties have positioned themselves on the left-right ideological scale in the most recent general elections. We apply worcscores techniques to the party manifestos to examine this issue of the party’s ideological positioning.

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<sup>11</sup> The Labour Party could withstand a swing of up to 6.5 per cent to the Conservative Party and still retain power.

## Ideological positioning in recent British elections

Whereas the previous section focused on the *issue* positioning of parties and voters, this section examines the *ideological* (or spatial) positioning of the parties in British general elections. In order to investigate whether the positions of the parties changed, we use the wordscore technique developed by Laver, Benoit and Garry (2003). This technique allows us to extract policy positions from campaign speeches and manifestos by comparing these texts with a set of reference texts with known scores on the dimensions we wish to analyse (Laver, Benoit and Garry 2003:313). As we are interested in locating the parties on the main dimension of contestation in British politics – namely the left-right dimension - we have chosen reference text that represents “extreme” points on this dimension. The wordscore approach assumes that once we know the frequencies with which different words are used in the reference text we can calculate the position of the virgin text by calculating the frequencies with which words are used in these texts. Following Laver, Benoit and Garry, the position of the virgin is calculated as the mean dimension score of all the scored words in virgin text weighted by the frequency of the scored words in the reference text (2003: 316). The validity of the position scores obtained through the wordscore technique is therefore very sensitive to the selection of reference texts, since these provide the word frequencies which are used to calculate the position of the virgin texts. In this analysis, we have used the Labour manifesto from 1983, representing a left-wing position on the dimension, and the Conservative manifesto from 1987, representing a right-wing location on the left-right dimension. The first manifesto was assigned a score of 1 and the second a score of 10.

Table 7 shows the results from the wordscore analysis. As can be seen from the table the parties have in general moved to the right in the period 1997 to 2005. Looking at the standardised wordscores, we can see that the Liberal Democrats manifestos are to the left on the dimension, whereas Labour moves right of centre after 1997. The Conservative 1997 manifestos scores to the right of centre, but the party moves just to the left of centre with its 2001 manifesto and back to a right-wing position in the 2005 manifesto and particularly in Howard’s 2005 speeches. It is also noticeable that the incumbent Labour Party barely changed its ideological position from 2001 to 2005. In fact Labour it is the party that displays the lowest degree of variation in its positions compared to the other parties. This could be an indication that the winning margin has consequences for the ideological responsiveness of the political parties in British party systems. The “rigidity” in the Labour Party’s position could imply that they stand firm on certain policy issues and positions rather than shifting positions and issue

emphases according to the opinion polls. These small number of cases do not provide us with any conclusive evidence, and further research would be needed to examine the conditions under which British parties change their ideological position in speeches and policy programmes, but the findings nevertheless provides some interesting insights into the ideological positioning of British parties based on their election manifestos.

We have also included the campaign speeches given by the candidates in the same analysis, using the same reference text. As can be seen from the table there is some variation in the position of the party position in manifestos and in speeches (assuming that the reference texts are appropriately chosen for the purpose of analysing speeches). A rather interesting finding is that the speeches of the party leaders are located to the right of their party manifesto position. This could indicate that campaign speeches and party manifestos serve different purposes. One possible explanation for this difference in position is that the party manifestos are influenced by party activists who might be more ideological in their approach to politics, whereas campaign speeches are targeted at a broader audience.

Table 7: **Wordscore results for British political parties**

	Raw scores	Raw SE	Standardised scores	Unique scored words	Total # words
<b>1997 Manifestos</b>					
Labour	5.485	0.015	-0.980	2020	16155
Liberal	5.399	0.018	-1.613	1591	10797
Conservative	5.818	0.016	1.467	1881	14314
<b>2001 Manifestos</b>					
Labour	5.660	0.011	0.304	2296	28185
Liberal	5.400	0.014	-1.603	2138	19315
Conservative	5.660	0.017	0.304	1698	11849
<b>2005 Manifestos</b>					
Labour	5.620	0.013	0.011	2118	21456
Liberal	5.590	0.017	-0.209	1834	14404
Conservative	5.600	0.024	-0.136	1308	6430
<b>2005 Campaign speeches</b>					
Tony Blair	5.670	0.014	0.378	1723	17889
Kennedy	5.720	0.021	0.745	1213	8985
Howard	5.800	0.014	1.332	1563	21504

*Note:* Reference texts are Labour Manifesto 1983 (scored 0) and Conservative Manifesto 1987 (scored 10). The standardised scores are z-scores based on the raw scores.

## Conclusion

Parties are expected to be responsive to the wishes of the public, because they fear electoral sanction if they ignore the voters. The apparent lack of responsiveness of the British Labour Party to the voters in the 2005 election campaign is therefore an interesting puzzle. Not only did the Labour Cabinet take many momentous policy decisions that were unpopular with the majority of the public and a large proportion of its own MPs during its second term in office, the party's campaign leading up to the general election in 2005 also displayed a low level of responsiveness to the issues that were salient to the public at the time. This paper has proposed a preliminary answer to this puzzle that focuses on the combination of the electoral laws, the party system and the indirect election of the executive. By comparing the level of issue responsiveness across parties and election campaigns, we have found that the Labour Party was significantly less responsive than the main opposition party, the Conservative Party, and the candidates in the most recent US presidential election. Moreover, Labour has shown less ideological flexibility during the course of its period in office than the opposition parties. While the Labour Party was expected to lose a considerable number of seats in the 2005 elections, there was also a general expectation that they would win a third term (Norris and Wlezien 2005). This is mainly an artefact of the British electoral system combined with a sizeable third party that creates a very large winning bias for the party in first place. In the end, the Labour Party won 35.2 percent of the votes in the election, compared with 32.3 percent won by the Conservative Party. In most other systems, this would have resulted in post-election negotiations over the formation of a coalition government, but Labour won a comfortable absolute majority of 356 seats, or 55 percent of the seats. Thus, even though Labour experienced a substantial decrease in its share of votes between 2001 and 2005, the party still won a large majority of the seats in the House of Commons. While most theories of party competition implicitly assume that office-seeking implies a vote-maximising strategy that generates more than half of the votes, the British case shows that just over a third of the seats may be sufficient, as long as the party is in first place. This extraordinarily large 'winning party bonus' generated by a combination of factors – but most importantly the existence of a large third party in a majoritarian system – is likely to affect the responsiveness of the party 'in first place' to the wishes of the voters. The lower the likelihood of being ousted from office and the fewer the votes needed to retain that office, the lower the incentives to 'pander to the public'. When uncertainty concerning re-election is low, parties may feel more inclined to pursue policy-

seeking objectives even if these are at odds with the median voter. Following this line of reasoning, it seems less surprising that the Labour Party was less responsive to the voters' issue preferences than the Conservative Party. It is also understandable that Bush was more responsive than Blair, given that the U.S. election was very close and the bonus for being in first place was significantly smaller (Bush won 51 percent of the votes and 53 percent of the electoral votes in the 2004 election). Moreover, when voters are asked to choose directly between two candidates, the competition between these candidates tends to converge towards the median voters.

The findings presented in this paper thus provide suggestive support for the explanation that parties who have the prospect of an "easy" victory, due to a high level of disproportionality in the vote-to-seat ratio, tend to be less responsive to the voters' preferences. But more comparative work on changes in responsiveness over time and between countries is needed to evaluate whether these institutional differences have the proposed effect on responsiveness. If our proposition holds, it suggests that majoritarian systems are all not created equal and we need a better theory of the institutional factors (broadly defined) that influence the nature of party competition and the level of responsiveness of parties to public opinion.

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