

# **The Powerful Impact of Party Leaders: How Blair Cost Labour Votes (But Not Too Many)**

by

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Since the 2001 election there have been stark changes in the fortunes of the leader of the Labour Party and in the personnel leading the Conservatives. Of the main national parties only the leadership of the Liberal Democrats was relatively stable in terms of public perceptions and occupancy, and even Charles Kennedy had his share of negative publicity relating primarily to his social life and political commitment. Yet has this leadership flux made a difference? Can we say that the electorate's voting preferences in 2005 were affected by the varying fates of the party leaderships over the electoral cycle? The goal of this article is to examine the influence of the electorate's evaluations of the main party leaders on voting in the 2005 election. We start by examining public opinion polls showing some of the main features of the changing appraisals of party leaders. We then examine the impact of leader images on voting intentions in 2005 using the British Election Study. We do this by estimating a model of influences on voting decisions that includes enduring values, election-specific issues and assessments of the government's record, social background variables, various indicators of partisanship and, of course, perceptions of the party leaders. Though cautioning against making strong causal interpretations of estimates of leadership effects using cross-sectional evidence, we conclude that appraisals of Blair, Howard and Kennedy were indeed significantly and strongly related to vote in 2005. Blair's decline in popularity appears to have cost Labour a substantial amount of votes, but Howard's appeal was too lukewarm for the Conservatives to fully benefit.

## 2001 -2005: swings and roundabouts for party leaders

The last electoral cycle saw a period of considerable change in one way or another for the party leaders. In 2001 Mr Blair contributed positively and substantially to his party's repeated massacre of the opposition.<sup>1</sup> The well-known story since is that it has been anything but easy for Blair, with the Iraq war and its cover-ups, David Kelly's suicide, and the PM's tactical evasions, proving to be a geopolitical escapade that was taken too far in the eyes of much of the electorate. By comparison with the position of strength occupied by Labour at the start of the electoral cycle, the attempt by the Conservative Party to renew its prospects under Michael Howard was a matter of some urgency given the parlous state of Iain Duncan Smith's occupancy of the leadership. Whether or not the selection of a figure with such resonant connections to the Conservative Party so roundly beaten in 1997 was the magic bullet a party in their position needed seems unlikely. Even the Liberal Democrats were not immune to leadership *faux pas*: 'chat show Charlie', 'good time Charlie', 'champagne Charlie' – all nicknames given to the Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy. Questions about his commitment to the role of leader surfaced in 2002 along with discussions of his 'health'. His appearances on programmes such as *Have I Got News for You* were at times mocked. On the other hand, the performance of the Liberal Democrats in 2005 was not at all bad, so all these soubriquets could simply indicate that Kennedy is perceived as a rather interesting person with a sense of humour and a life outside of the unhealthy confines of party politics.<sup>2</sup>

-- Figure 1 about here --

In Figure 1 we show evidence of how the public's evaluations of the leaders of the three major parties changed over the period between the 2001 and 2005 elections using polling estimates by Mori, who provide the most extensive over time measures of public opinion on this question (other polls do not differ dramatically). In the figure we can see a clear decline in evaluations of Blair, whose prime ministerial approval rating declined from a peak in the mid-60s in late 2001 to a stable and considerably lower level at about 40 per cent by mid-2003. So Teflon Tony, so long an asset, had perhaps become more of a liability. But not such a liability that his party was seriously challenged in 2005 despite all of the misplaced journalistic enthusiasm for every minor bump and grind of the polls.<sup>3</sup> The inequities in the distribution of votes by seats certainly helped turn a slim popular endorsement into a substantial mandate in Westminster, but even without this, the conditions for a severe negative Blair effect on voting are not as evident as some

commentators might have thought. Moreover, the idea that a change in leadership could be sufficient to restore Conservative fortunes was unfounded: Howard to a large degree found himself facing the same difficulties as his predecessor so that he had, at best, brought a small increment in Prime Ministerial approval over Duncan Smith and his popularity was almost always below that of Blair throughout the cycle.<sup>4</sup> Finally Kennedy does not appear to have suffered unduly from publicity with respect to his perceived job performance. There was a decline from an average satisfaction rating in the mid-40s in 2002 to one in the late 30s from 2004 onwards, but from mid-2003 onwards he was always given higher ratings than Blair.

Each of the above questions asks about the leaders in isolation – there is no direct comparison required by respondents. In Figure 2, however, we present responses to a YouGov question on which of the three ‘would make the best Prime Minister’ thus forcing the issue. Although not directly comparable to the Mori poll time series, because they only commence in 2003, answers to this question raise further doubts about the extent of Blair’s demise, and Kennedy’s apparent rise, in the popularity stakes. Blair goes almost unchallenged as the best Prime Minister, while Howard improves his position to displace Kennedy for the number two slot. We must conclude therefore that the changing fortunes of the party leaders do not point to a clear reversal of fortune for their parties.<sup>5</sup> Whether we take Mori’s separate Prime Ministerial approval question as our benchmark or the forced choice option used by YouGov, Blair is consistently ahead of Howard in 2005.

-- Figure 2 about here --

The radical drop in relative Prime Ministerial approval for Kennedy in the forced choice format might well reflect the more obvious partisan biases that come to the fore when explicit trade-offs have to be made between leaders of the parties. This is a general problem when examining responses to party-laden questions which likely to reflect partisanship – when asked who would be the best PM, a Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat it is not surprising if people who support those parties tend to affirm their own. This raises the question, then, of how much of an effect leadership actually has on voting: Is the leadership factor swamped by party preference? Can we say with confidence that Blair has become a liability in that his attempts to be a player in geopolitics, the mediator between the old Europe and new world, have cost him dearly at home;

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that Howard probably did help shore up the Conservatives when compared to their likely fate under IDS; that the image of champagne Charlie was benign for the relatively successful Liberal Democrat outcome?

### **How to estimate leadership effects**

Political parties market their leaders to mass appeal. Telegenic presentation and carefully planned sound-bites designed to make leaders appear as though they can relate to voters are now common practices of party strategists. The growing worldwide emphasis on leaders rather than parties is also evident in the vast number of countries that now have leaders' debates during election campaigns. Even in a parliamentary system like Britain's where the party is elected, not the Prime Minister, appraisals of leaders have long been argued to matter.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in 2001 it was widely thought that the Conservative Party suffered because of Hague's leadership. Hague was attacked for his apparent uncertainty, lack of clarity, and general lack of personal appeal which allegedly resulted in a lack of support from voters. By comparison Blair was favourably perceived by most voters, which in turn contributed to the success of the Labour Party.<sup>7</sup>

But other scholars have disagreed. Bartle and Crewe argue that leadership effects in the 2001 election were small.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, with respect to Hague's apparent unpopularity, Bartle writes: "To be sure, voters thought that Tony Blair would make a better prime minister than William Hague, but these evaluations are almost entirely predictable on the basis of voter predispositions, policy preferences and evaluations of party competence. William Hague was not the Conservative Party's problem. Quite the reverse: the Conservative Party was William Hague's".<sup>9</sup>

These differences of opinion reflect the problems faced in identifying what should count as leadership 'effects'.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the separation of partisanship from leader appraisal is necessary if one is to identify their distinct impact. Moreover, it is important to control for a range of other influences that can condition voting. Even with such controls, the inference of any causal impact is open to question, as Bartle and Crewe have observed.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, it is still possible to provide evidence that rigorously assesses whether there is an association between perceptions of leaders and voting that *might* indicate a causal connection. For such a task, reliable data, appropriate indicators and careful model specification are of paramount importance.

## Data and measures

We use the 2005 BES pre-campaign data. These data were gathered by in-person CAPI interviews carried out in February and March 2005. Survey fieldwork was conducted by the National Centre for Social Research. We include the boosted samples for Scotland and Wales, with dummy variables to control for their effects. The total sample size is 3589 respondents, though after removing missing data our analytical sample size is 2252. The dependent variable—vote—is divided into three separate variables: (1) Labour versus all others (including non-voters), (2) Conservative versus all others, and (3) Liberal Democrat versus all others).

To measure evaluations of leaders we use four scales for each of the leaders of the three major parties. These are designed to capture like-dislike; competence; responsiveness; and trust. For full wording see Table 1. Responses to the questions are very strongly inter-connected, and when responses to the four questions for each leader are combined to form a summated rating scale they produce exceptionally high Cronbach alphas: Blair (.927), Howard (.904), Kennedy (.900). Given this redundancy it makes no sense to include the scales as separate variables in our models – essentially they are indexing one negative/positive dimension for each leader evaluated. We thus employ the summated scales in our analyses.

-- Table 1 about here --

The BES data also allow for thorough controls of partisan orientations which are typically intertwined with views of leaders.<sup>12</sup> As a result, our models represent demanding tests of the robustness of leadership effects. Not only do they include measures of partisanship that are closely related to vote and are relatively stable, long-term aspects of political belief systems, but they also include variables such as perceptions of the economy, that are arguably more strongly influenced by political support than *vice versa* and which therefore could be quite reasonably not included as independent variables.<sup>13</sup> We do this so that we can claim to have tested the leadership effects hypothesis as rigorously as possible given the data at our disposal. For the analysis presented here we use party identity measured concurrently. In other analyses we have also controlled for the effects of reported 2001 vote, and party like-dislike scales. *The findings are substantively equivalent regardless of how we control for partisan orientations.*

The economy is given attention both through measures of valence issues - economic expectations and retrospective appraisals - and measures of issues where there are social and political divisions in orientations - respondents' positions on the theme of reducing taxation versus increasing public spending. Following the established literature on economic perceptions<sup>14</sup>, we include four measures of economic perceptions: (1) *retrospective egocentric perceptions*; (2) *retrospective sociotropic perceptions*; (3) *prospective egocentric perceptions*; (4) *prospective sociotropic perceptions*. Sociotropic perceptions were measured by a question asking respondents how well they thought the British economy was performing or would perform. The egocentric perception items asked respondents how they felt their own personal household income had been affected in the past year, or would be affected in the coming year. Each of these is coded so that high values indicate positive perceptions, i.e., the perception that the economic situation was/would be better. The taxation-versus-spending issue is central to the established left-right division in British politics and therefore captures this key dimension of non-valence economic issues.<sup>15</sup> We also include in our models attitudes towards politically salient issues which are to some degree distinct from the traditional left-right division, such as the Euro, which was an issue that the Conservatives emphasised in 2001 with some success,<sup>16</sup> immigration, which the Conservatives placed more weight on in this campaign, and, of course, the war in Iraq.

Finally, we also include social structural variables as controls. While social characteristics have been thought to be in decline as influences on political preferences they are certainly not negligible, with class, ethnicity and education in particular continuing to provide significant bases of party support, while the salience of the war in Iraq makes it likely that religion might also influence voters' decisions.<sup>17</sup>

## **Statistical Methods**

The statistical analysis has three main goals: (1) to determine the relative importance of leadership perceptions compared with other important variables in predicting vote for each of the major parties; (2) to assess the importance of the three leaders relative to each other, (3) to determine how leaders affected vote for each of the parties—i.e., to explore the functional form of the relationship between attitudes towards leaders and vote choice.

We began by fitting Generalized Additive Models in order to explore for possible nonlinearities in the effects of leaders on vote choice.<sup>18</sup> Although it was discovered that several of the leadership effects were nonlinear, these nonlinearities were relatively simple and could be adequately modelled using polynomial regression.<sup>19</sup> As a result, the final estimates reported in this article are from three binomial logit models, one for each of the three major parties: Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat. The fact that we could model the trends using parametric regression allowed us to compare the relative importance of sets of predictors. We do so using the measure of relative importance proposed by Silber *et al.*, which is a generalization of standardized variables to non-quantitative regressors or sets of regressors.<sup>20</sup> Finally, since we are interested in understanding the nature of the effects of leaders on vote choice, and the effects are nonlinear, it is important to graph them. We do so using effect displays.<sup>21</sup>

## Findings

Figure 3 displays the density estimates of the distributions (i.e., smoothed histograms), the means, and the standard deviations of the leader evaluation scales for Blair, Howard and Kennedy. We see that on average Blair is rated more positively than Howard, but slightly less so than Kennedy. These patterns are consistent with the decline in Blair's popularity between 2001 and 2005 shown in Figure 1. Importantly, however, we can see from the density curves that perceptions of Blair are more polarised than are the perceptions of other leaders for Labour voting. Not only is the distribution of perceptions of Blair flatter and wider, but there is distinct bulge at the very bottom of the scale – i.e., those with a very negative view of him across all four measures that form the scale. Perceptions of Howard and Kennedy have a closer to normal distribution, possibly reflecting a lesser degree of knowledge of these leaders and lower intensity of feelings towards them. On this basis alone we would expect perceptions of Blair to have more impact on voting than do perceptions of the other two leaders.

-- Figure 3 about here --

Figure 4 below uses boxplots to display how perceptions of the three leaders differ by vote intention. This provides some initial evidence of a leadership effect. In each case, the opinions of the relevant leader are clearly more positive among people who intend to vote for the party in question. Evidence for this is seen both in the higher medians and inter-quartile ranges. All other

groups – other, undecided, abstain and those who intend to vote for other parties – have similarly less positive views. The one instance where this does not appear to hold is with respect to opinions of Blair, where evaluations are lower among non-supporters, but not equally so. Specifically, evaluations are especially low among those who intended to vote Conservative. This again demonstrates the polarised nature of perceptions of Blair and of his potentially stronger effect on vote.

-- Figure 4 about here --

We now turn to the logit analysis. Various models were run initially with different types of predictors or blocks of predictors – social structure, partisanship, issues, and leadership perceptions. Although all of these types of predictors were significantly related to vote intention when examined alone, in this presentation we focus on their effects in the fully-specified models. Table 2 presents an Analysis of Deviance of each of the predictors in the full models. The differences in deviance between the full model (including all predictors) and models excluding particular terms but including all others provides Type II Chi-square tests for the impact of those terms on model fit.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the figures in Table 2 tell us how each of the independent variables in our models improved the fit of the model, controlling for all other predictors.

Although variables such as class, ethnicity, employment sector and education have significant effects in less heavily specified models of vote intention (these are available from the authors), these indicators of ‘objective’ social characteristics are to a large degree unimportant in determining vote intention when leadership effects, partisanship and issues are included in the model– only education retains any substantial predictive effect. This should not be taken to indicate the irrelevance of social structure, but rather that their direct effects are small. Clearly social structure is likely to influence many of the other predictors in the model, whereas they in turn cannot plausibly be argued to influence social structure. On the other hand, the direction of influence subjective perceptions, attitudes, and orientations of one form or another, to and from partisanship when measured concurrently is always open to question.

-- Table 2 about here --

Moving down the table, we see that party identification is a massively significant predictor of vote intention, despite the large number of controls. This is not a surprise, of course – party

identification and vote intention measured at the same point in time just before an election should be very strongly related to each other. (Similar relations with vote intention are found for reported 2001 vote and the party like/dislike measures). When we examine the issue positions, however, we see almost no such effects. Tax/spend retains a significant impact on labour voting (pro-tax = pro-Labour), and retrospective sociotropic perceptions have a barely significant impact on Conservative voting (negative perceptions = pro-Conservative). Nonetheless, as with social structure, issues generally fail to predict voting once partisanship and leadership perceptions are included in the models.

The main question is: are leadership effects removed when partisanship and issues are included in the analysis? The final rows of the table show, dramatically, that this is not the case. All three leaders have highly significant effects on voting for all three main parties. As we would expect, perceptions of Blair improve the model fit to a much greater extent than perceptions of the other two leaders for Labour voting; Howard has greater predictive strength for Conservative voting; and to a lesser degree Kennedy improves predictions of Liberal Democrat voting. The most important finding, however, is that all of these leadership effects are highly statistically significant despite the inclusion of a vast number of controls, including other partisanship measures not included here – such as reported past vote, the party like/dislike scales - are included (details available from the authors).

#### *Assessing Relative Importance*

As the relative nature and magnitude of the leadership effects cannot easily be observed from the deviance analysis presented in Table 2, we next present comparisons of the relative importance of blocks of variables in terms of the strength of their effects. We do so using the measure of relative importance proposed by Silber, *et al.* referred to above.<sup>23</sup>

The relative importance of leadership perceptions compared with other sets of variables in the final models is displayed in Table 3. Each of the columns in the table displays the ratio for each vote choice. Positive values indicate that leadership perceptions are of more importance; negative numbers indicate that the other variables are of more importance. The main finding is that leader evaluations are *far* more important than either social structure or issues in determining vote intention for all three parties (all of the ratios are positive and statistically significant). When compared with the effects of party identification, however, there is a far more even picture: there is only one significant difference in the relative importance of leadership compared to party

identification, which occurs for Conservative voting, though the effect for Labour voting is also marginally significant. Both of these differences are positive, which indicates leadership perceptions are (slightly) more important for vote intention than even party identification.

-- Table 3 about here --

Table 4 extends the relative importance analysis by comparing the strength of perceptions of perceptions of the three leaders on each voting outcome. Here positive values indicate that the first named leader in the comparison has stronger effects; and conversely, negative values indicate that the second leader has stronger effects.

-- Table 4 about here --

The top half of the table shows that perceptions of Blair have far stronger effects on voting for Labour than perceptions of either of the two other leaders, and particularly Kennedy. Howard has far stronger effects than either of the other two leaders on voting Conservative; and Kennedy has stronger effects – though less so – than the other two on voting for the Liberal Democrats. In the bottom half of the table we summarise the strength of effects for each of the leaders compared with both others. This tells us that perceptions of Blair counted for far more than perceptions of both other leaders in Labour voting; Howard was also more important for Conservative voting, though not by the same degree; but Kennedy had no dominant effect on Liberal Democrat voting, having a similar weight to the combined perceptions of the other leaders.

#### *The shape and magnitude of leadership effects*

Let us now turn to the effect displays for leader evaluations. Figure 5 shows displays for the effects of evaluations of each leader on the probability of voting Labour. Although the effect of appraisals of Blair is strong and linear on the logit scale, the line is curved slightly because it has been plotted on the probability scale. We notice clearly that those with a very negative appraisal of Blair have a probability very close to 0 of voting Labour, while those who gave Blair a very high rating (i.e., near the top of the scale) were almost certain to vote Labour. By contrast, perceptions of Howard and Kennedy have non-linear effect patterns indicating that only the more positive appraisals affect the likelihood of voting Labour. In other words, up to a certain level of approval there is no discernable effect of variations in approval. It is only when appraisals of

these other party leaders are markedly positive that the odds of voting Labour decrease noticeably.

-- Figure 5 about here --

In Figures 6 and 7, we can see a similar though more muted pattern for Conservative and Liberal Democrat voting. In Figure 6, appraisals of Howard clearly have a much stronger effect than appraisals of other leaders on the likelihood of voting Conservative across most of the range of opinion. As was the case with Blair for Labour vote, the effect of appraisals of Howard on Conservative voting are strong and linear on the logit scale and the effects of appraisals of the leaders of other parties matter only at higher levels of approval.

Finally, the results in Figure 7 indicate that appraisals of Kennedy are an important predictor of the Liberal Democrat vote, though they matter to a lesser degree than do appraisals of the other leaders for the popularity of their parties. Appraisals of Kennedy are strong in the mid-range and non-linear at the tails, reflecting the smaller number of cases in the tails (see Figure 3). Much as we saw for Labour and Conservative vote choice, the effects of appraisals of other leaders are only observable towards the high end of the range of opinion.

-- Figures 6 and 7 about here --

In general, then, appraisals of a party leader are very strong predictors of voting for that party. It is clear, too, that appraisals of all leaders matter for all three parties. The effect of the leader of the party in question is, of course, most important and this importance is seen throughout the range of opinion of the leader. On the other hand, though the other leaders matter, it is generally only when levels of approval of these leaders is very high, at which point there is a strong pull factor towards the party of that leader.

Using the fitted curves, we can also assess how voting might have differed if the popularity of the three leaders had differed. Of course, this counterfactual exercise must be interpreted cautiously because the model from which these fitted values were drawn may change significantly if opinions of leaders were radically shifted. Nonetheless, it illustrates the possible impact of leaders in this election.

We start by considering how Blair's decline in popularity might have hurt his party in the 2005 election. In the middle of the probability scale, an increase in one point on the leadership scale for Blair with opinions of the other leaders remaining unchanged is associated with an increase in support for the Labour Party of about four percentage points. If we consider that the actual popular support for the Labour Party was 36.2 percent, this suggests that Labour would have obtained around 40 percent of the popular vote if Blair were only moderately more popular (one point is not a massive change given that the difference in the mean scores of Howard and Kennedy was around two points). In other words, the decline in Blair's popularity appears to have cost the party many potential votes. The impact isn't quite as strong for Howard, but it is still substantial. If Howard's popularity had been only one point higher and Blair and Kennedy's popularity did not change, it would translate into a gain of about three percentage points for the Conservatives, meaning that they would have gone from 33.2 to around 36.2 in popular support. In other words, they would have equalled Labour. By marked comparison, an increase in one point in Kennedy's popularity would have translated into an increase of about only 0.7 percentage points, suggesting that the party's vote would have only risen minimally from 22.6 to 23.3. This suggests that Kennedy's leadership performance is simply far less important to the Liberal Democrat's fortunes in terms of vote share.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

This paper has set out to test the importance of leader appraisals on voting in the 2005 British election. Having first established that the Prime Minister's standing with the electorate had declined over the 2001-2005 electoral cycle we estimate whether such changes in perceptions influence vote intentions. To ensure that we did not mistakenly interpret spurious relationships our analysis controls for other factors commonly used to predict vote. We find that appraisals of Blair, Howard and Kennedy are significantly and strongly related to vote in 2005. These results persist even after controlling for many other predictors of vote: party identification, past vote, party like/dislike issues, social structure. We also show that these leader effects are far more important than a wide range of issues, social background and even, though to a far lesser degree, party identification.

Simply put, these findings suggest that Blair's decline in popularity lost the Labour Party votes and seats. It probably cost them more votes than anything else at this election. Yet as we know, this was not enough to endanger the Party's control of Westminster. Howard's modest popularity

contributed only slightly to the fortunes of the Conservatives, while the more positive evaluations of Charles Kennedy had somewhat weaker effects than the other two leaders on voting. Although approval of Kennedy was relatively high, not many people voted for the Liberal Democrats, which suggests that differences in public support between the Liberal Democrats and the other main parties are perhaps largely related to long-term party attachments. While our findings do not address this directly, it is also likely that the Liberal Democrats receive less support simply because they are not seen as likely winners of the election. One could speculate that this is why so many people took a relatively benign view of Kennedy – he was not serious contender.

There are some qualifications that are worth considering, briefly. For example, it is possible that some voters might simply be more ‘leader centred’ than others – ‘the effect of leadership traits may well vary between, say, those with high and low levels of political awareness or between those with “extreme” and “moderate” ideological positions’.<sup>24</sup> In analyses of these data, however, we find no evidence of such heterogeneity: leadership impacts equivalently across all levels of attention to politics, as we also found in the 2001 election.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly there are unanswered questions concerning both model specification and the endogeneity of leader effects.<sup>26</sup> With respect to model specification, there are clearly more issues that could be included in our analyses. More thorough examination of the government’s record, for example, might chip away at the effect of leaders, but the granite-like resoluteness of the leader effects in the face of contemporaneously measured partisan controls that are so similar to vote—almost raising questions of tautology—suggests that they will not be removed by dredging up a few more sets of responses to questions about performance for inclusion in the models.

But what of the endogeneity problem - the effect of opinions on the issues themselves on leadership perceptions, for example? Questions of endogeneity bedevil all of these sorts of political measures and more than likely issues affect perceptions of leaders and thus account for voting indirectly. For example, other analyses not presented here indicated that attitudes towards the Iraq war were indeed strongly and positively correlated to appraisals of Blair, both when controlling for party identity and when not, i.e., respondents who thought that the war was successful were more likely to approve of Blair. Nevertheless, even if issues influenced perceptions of Blair and other party leaders, a wide range of issues are included in the model as controls (including Iraq) and even then the partial effects of leaders are very strong. In other words, the indirect effects of these issues are likely to be very small compared to the sheer size of

the direct net effects of leadership perceptions on voting. And of course, perceptions of party leaders are not the only variables typically employed in models of voting behaviour that might be ‘contaminated’ by prior influences—economic perceptions, party images, and even positions on election issues could also be strongly influenced by, among other things, previous partisanship.<sup>27</sup>

To conclude, even in a model that contains indicators of party identification, political issues, economic perceptions and social structure we find robust leadership effects. Taken at face value these results confirm commonsense rather than some of the more sceptical interpretations taken by survey analysts. All of the main party leaders would appear to have played their role, for good or ill, in the relative electoral fates of their parties and unlike in 1997 and 2001, the Prime Minister was clearly a source of weakness for Labour. Though the immediacy of this analysis, undertaken with very first wave of election data from the 2005 BES suggests some caution is advisable when making such claims, our other more demanding tests of the endogeneity of leader effects and of many other favoured explanatory candidates of political popularity and voting indicate that leadership is exogenous, far more so than many political issues, ideological orientations and perceptions of the economy. We therefore feel some confidence that these conclusions will withstand further more leisurely analysis by ourselves and others.

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## 1. Summary of indicators used in the analysis

### Leadership perceptions

(1) **Like/dislike** “Using a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how do you feel about... Tony Blair... Michael Howard.... Charles Kennedy?”

(2) **Competence**. Using a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means a very incompetent leader and 10 means a very competent leader, how would you describe Tony Blair... Michael Howard.. Charles Kennedy?”

(3) **Responsiveness** “Use the 0 to 10 scale to indicate the extent to which the different leaders respond to voters' concerns” (0=Does not respond at all to voters' concerns; 10 = Responds fully to voters' concerns).

(4) **Trust** “Use the 0 to 10 scale to indicate how much trust you have for each of the party leaders, where 0 means no trust and 10 means a great deal of trust.”

### Control variables:

#### (1) Social Background:

- a. Gender
- b. Age—continuous variable (tested for nonlinearity but not significant)
- c. Education—Degree, other qualification, no qualifications
- d. Religion--Anglican, other, none
- e. Minority – all minorities, white
- f. Social Class-- (1) professional & managerial, (2) self-employed, (3) routine non-manual, (4) skilled working class, (5) unskilled working class, (6) other (no job, housewives etc.).
- g. Public sector versus other

(2) Party identification-- (1) Labour, (2) Conservative, (3) Libral Democrat, (4) other, (5) none.

#### (3) Issues:

- a. Economic perceptions (Four 5-point scales for retrospective and prospective, egocentric and sociotropic perceptions)
- b. Euro—respondent feels should join Euro (coded 1) else=0.
- c. Tax/spend (10-point scale)
- d. Iraq (10 –point scale)
- e. Immigrants take jobs (5-point scale)

### Dependent variables:

- (1) Labour Vote intention versus all others (including nonvoters);
- (2) Conservative Vote intention versus all others (including nonvoters);
- (3) Liberal Vote intention versus all others (including nonvoters)

2. Analysis of Deviance Table for Terms in the final model--Type II chi-square tests

	<b>Vote intention</b>		
	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Liberal Dem.</b>
<i>Demographics</i>			
Gender (male)	.04 (1)	.15 (1)	.33 (1)
Age	2.10 (1)	1.14 (1)	.96 (1)
Religion	.38 (2)	7.85 (2)*	1.46 (2)
Minority	3.56 (1)	2.04 (1)	.00 (1)
Education	12.38 (2)**	4.30 (2)	7.12 (2)*
Social Class	8.22 (5)	6.73 (5)	7.38 (5)
Public Sector	2.15 (1)	1.54 (1)	0.31 (1)
<i>Partisanship</i>			
Party identity	483.54 (4)***	402.08 (4)***	343.19 (4)***
<i>Issues &amp; economic perceptions</i>			
Euro	2.20 (1)	.33 (1)	.07 (1)
Tax/Spend	7.77 (1)**	.08 (1)	.53 (1)
Iraq	.30 (1)	.28 (1)	1.87 (1)
Immigration	2.46 (1)	.04 (1)	.02 (1)
Retro. egocentric	.79 (1)	1.15 (1)	3.51 (1)
Prosp. egocentric	.42 (1)	.02 (1)	.43 (1)
Retro. sociotropic	.98 (1)	4.82 (1)*	.65 (1)
Prosp. sociotropic	.03 (1)	.34 (1)	.11 (1)
<i>Leaders</i>			
Evaluation of Blair	258.99 (1)***	54.09 (2)***	38.47 (2)***
Evaluation of Howard	61.91 (2)***	275.18 (1)***	33.47 (2)***
Evaluation of Kennedy	17.85 (1)***	59.27 (2)***	133.25 (3)***

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Note: Degrees of freedom are in parentheses.

3. Relative importance (measured by the log of the standard deviation ratio) of leaders compared with other sets of influences on vote (standard errors in parentheses).

	<b>Vote intention</b>		
	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Liberal Dem.</b>
Leaders/Demographics	1.76 (.23)***	1.71 (.22)***	1.25 (.28)***
Leaders/Party id.	.19 (.10)	.38 (.10)**	.06 (.11)
Leaders/Issues	1.74 (.25)***	2.42 (.42)***	1.77 (.42)**
Leaders/All others	.11 (.10)	.26 (.09)*	-.02 (.12)

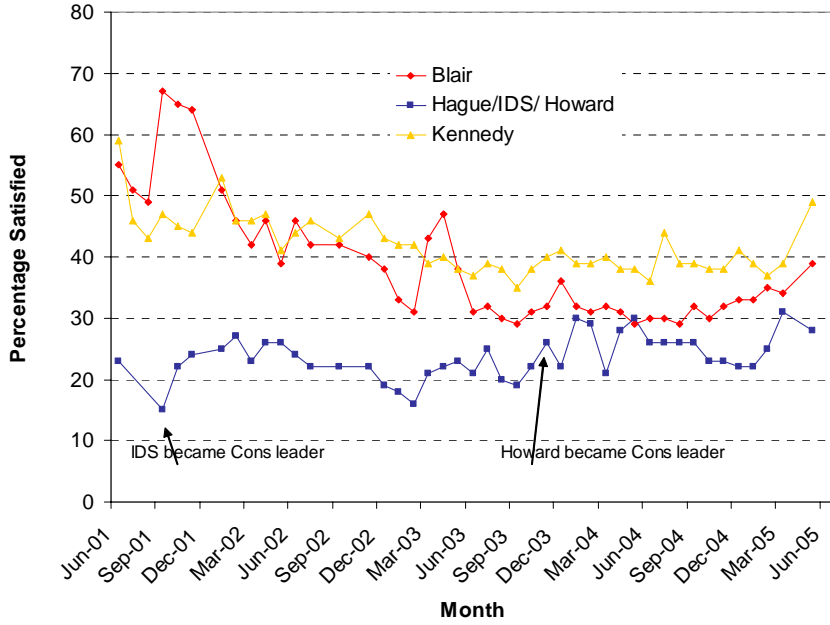
\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

4. Relative importance of leaders (standard errors in parentheses).

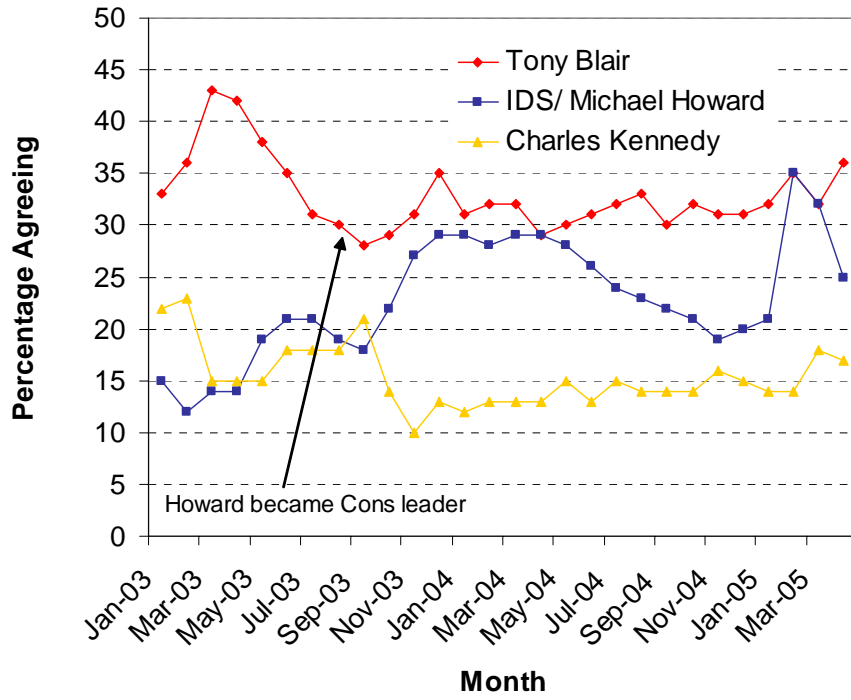
	<b>Vote intention</b>		
	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Liberal Dem.</b>
Blair/Howard	.72 (.14)***	-.69 (.14)***	.10 (.25)
Blair/Kennedy	1.60 (.23)***	.18 (.20)	-.37 (.18)*
Howard/Kennedy	.88 (.29)***	.87 (.12)***	-.46 (.18)*
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Blair/Others	.61 (.12)***	-.70 (.14)***	-.46 (.19)***
Howard/Others	-.72 (.14)***	.34 (.09)***	-.58 (.19)***
Kennedy/Others	-1.74 (.24)***	-1.00 (.13)***	.10 (.14)

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Figure 1**  
Satisfaction with how party leaders are doing their jobs, 2001-2005

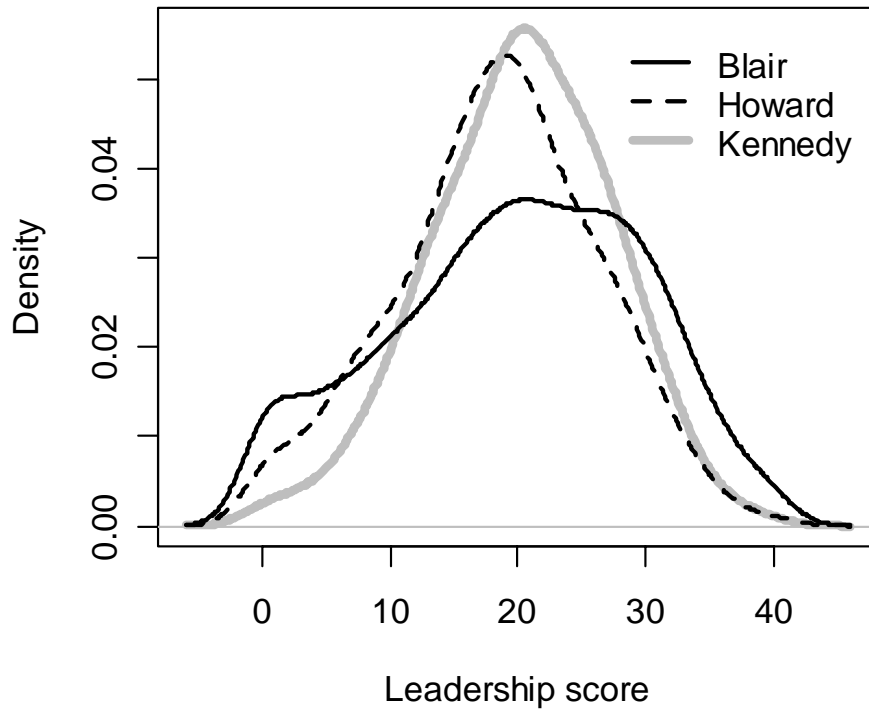


**Figure 2**  
 Who would make the best Prime Minister? 2003-2005



**Figure 3**

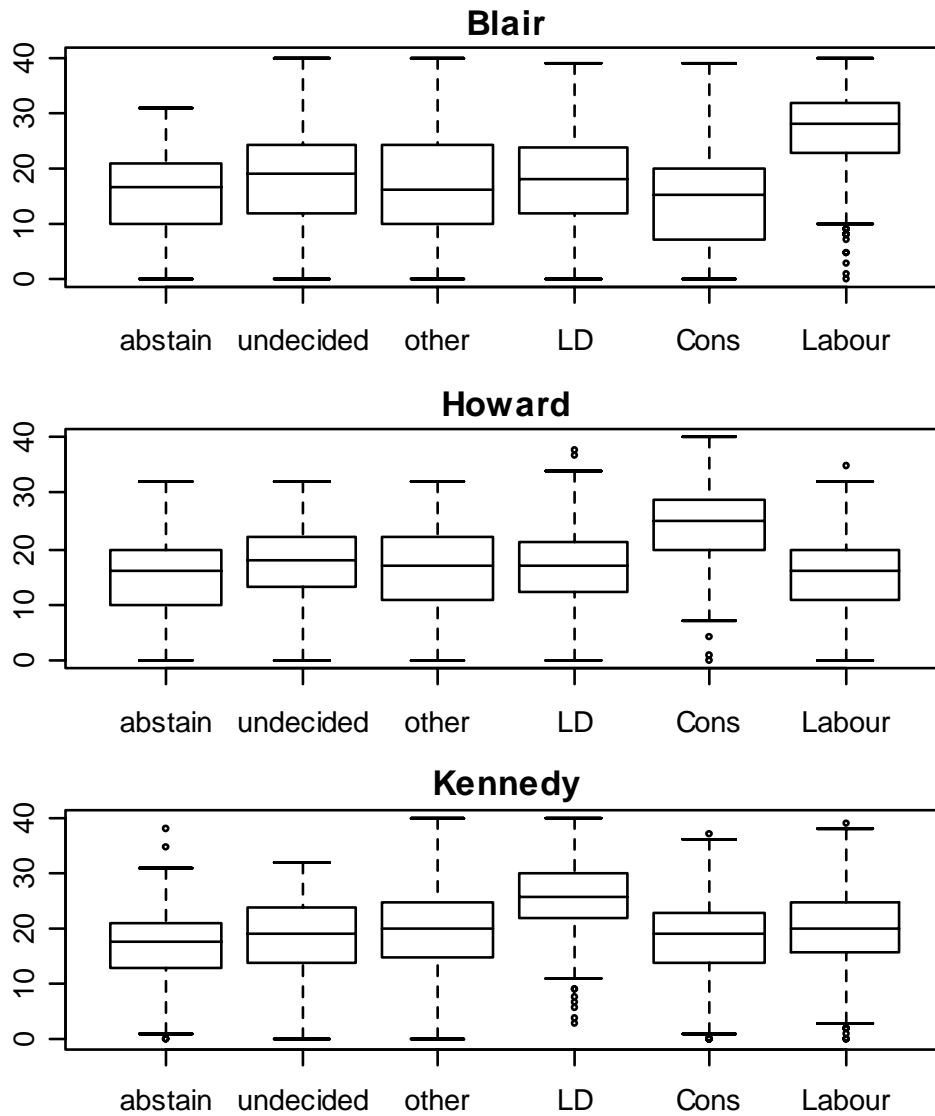
Density estimates of the distributions of the leadership scale for each of the leaders, all respondents



	<b>Descriptive Statistics:</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>
Blair		19.8	9.8
Howard		18.4	7.9
Kennedy		20.3	7.1

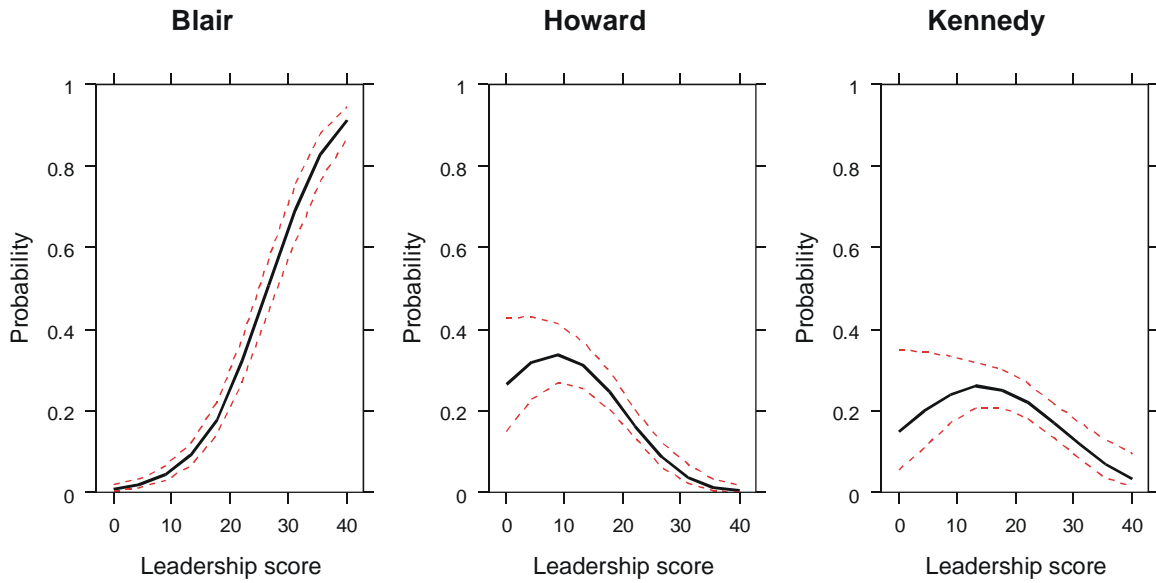
**Figure 4**

Boxplots showing the distribution of the leadership scale for each leader, by vote intention.



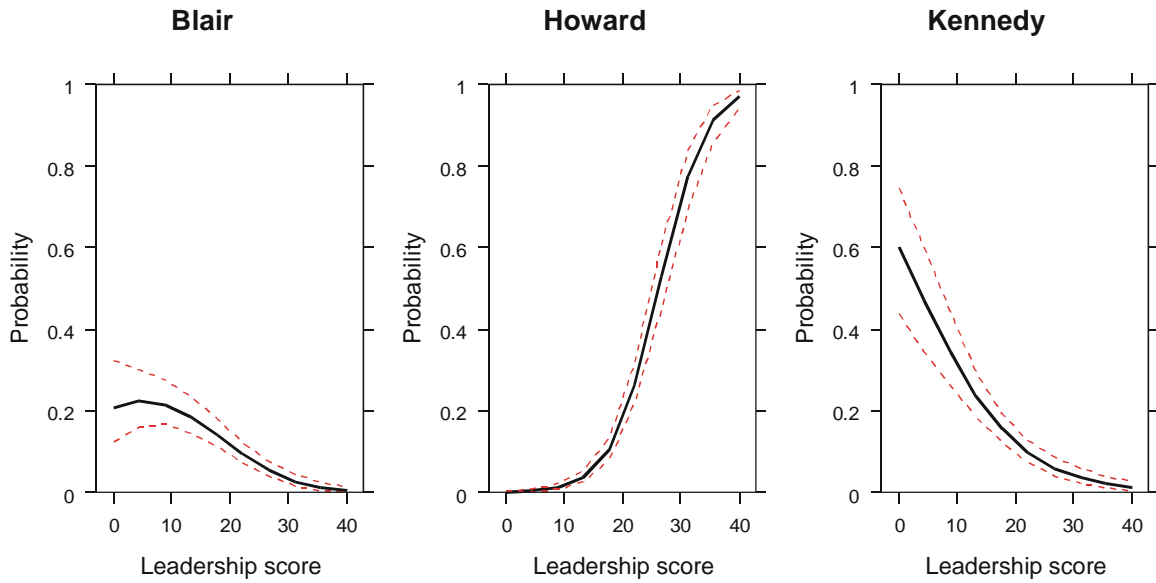
**Figure 5**

Effect displays for the effect of leaders evaluations on the probability of voting for the Labour Party, controlling for social background, party identification, and issue positions. All control variables are set to their means (quantitative variables) or proportions (categorical variables) when calculating the effects.



**Figure 6**

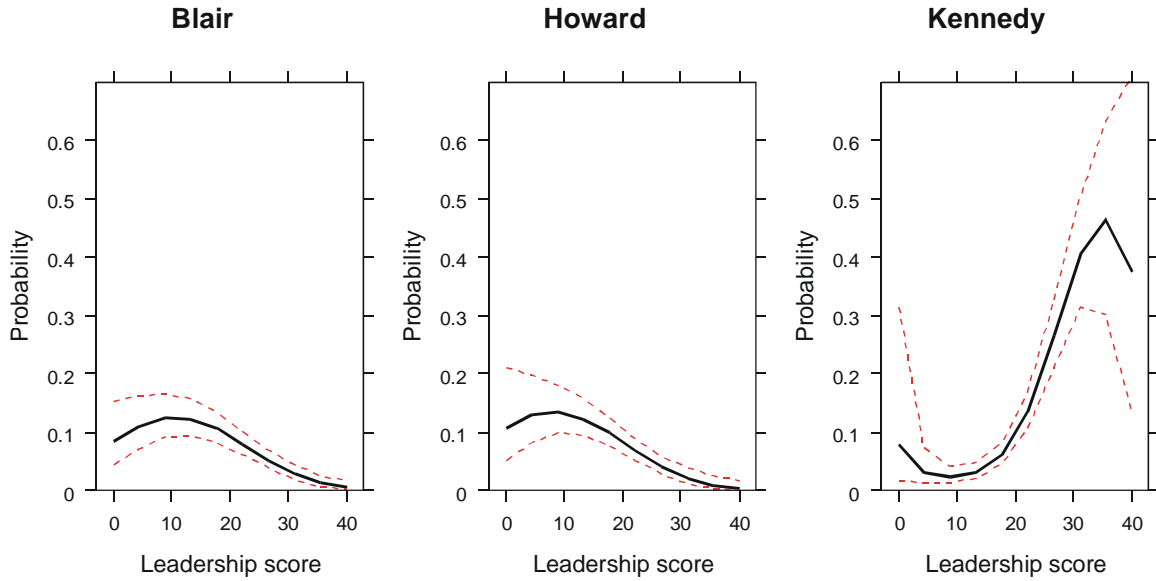
Effect displays for the effect of leaders evaluations on the probability of voting for the Conservative Party, controlling for social background, party identification, and issue positions.



Note: All control variables are set to their means (quantitative variables) or proportions (categorical variables) when calculating the effects.

**Figure 7**

Effect displays for the effect of leaders evaluations on the probability of voting for the Liberal Democrats, controlling for social background, party identification, and issue positions.



Note: All control variables are set to their means (quantitative variables) or proportions (categorical variables) when calculating the effects.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> R. Andersen and G. Evans, 'Who Blairs Wins? Leadership and Voting in the 2001 Election', *British Elections & Parties Review*, 2003, 13, 229-47; H.D. Clarke, D. Sanders, M. Stewart and P.F. Whiteley, *Political Choice in Britain*. (Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> N. Assinder, BBC News Online, 17<sup>th</sup> September, 2003:  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/3096172.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3096172.stm)

<sup>3</sup> See A. Cooper's question-and-answer session in *The Times Online* 06<sup>th</sup> May 2005, for a more balanced view: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,616-1600904,00.html>

<sup>4</sup> See P. Cowley and J. Green, 'New leaders, same problems The Conservatives' in .....  
... 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Note also that Mori polls (on Bob Worcester's Weblog) indicate that although Mr Blair's perceived trustworthiness declined over time, so did that of the Conservative leadership. Moreover, despite much chest-beating about the recent demise of political trust, levels of public trust in 'politicians generally' (18%) and in 'government ministers' (20%) to 'tell the truth' were no lower in 2005 than they were in the early-1980s (18% and 16% in 1983) and higher than in the early-1990s (14% and 11% in 1993).

<sup>6</sup> A. Mughan, Anthony, *Media and the Presidentialization of Parliamentary Elections* (Palgrave, 2000); C. Bean and A. Mughan, 'Leadership Effects in Parliamentary Elections in Australia and Britain', *American Political Science Review*, 1989, 83, pp. 1165-79; I. Crewe and A. King, 'Did Major win? Did Kinnock lose? Leadership effects in the 1992 election', in A. Heath, R. Jowell and J. Curtice with B. Taylor (eds.), *Labour's Last Chance? The 1992 Election and Beyond* (Dartmouth, 1984); J. Curtice and S. Holmberg, 'Leaders' in Jacques Thomassen (ed.), *The European Voter* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Andersen and Evans, 'Who Blairs Wins?', *op cit.*; Clarke, et al., *Political Choice in Britain, op cit.*; J. Bartle, 'Partisanship, Performance and Personality: Competing and Complementary Characterisations of the 2001 British General Election', *Party Politics*, 2003, 9, 317-45. A. King (ed.), *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections* (Oxford University Press, 2002); D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2001* (Palgrave, 2001); P. Norton, 'The Conservative Party: Is There Anyone Out There?', in A. King (ed.), *Britain at the Polls, 2001* (Chatham House Publishers, 2002); C. Seymour-Ure, 'New Labour and the Media,' in Anthony King (ed.), *Britain at the Polls, 2001* (Chatham House Publishers, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> J. Bartle and I. Crewe, 'The impact of party leaders in Britain: Strong assumptions, weak evidence', in Anthony King (ed.), *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections* (Oxford University Press, 2002)

<sup>9</sup> J. Bartle 'Why Labour Won – Again', in Anthony King (ed.), *Britain at the Polls 2001* (Chatham House, 2002), p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> King, *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Election, op cit.*; Curtice and Holmberg, 'Leaders', *op cit.*

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<sup>11</sup> ‘The Impact of Party Leaders in Britain,’ *op cit.*; see also King and Crewe, ‘Did Major Win?’, *op cit.*; R.M. Worcester and R. Mortimore, *Explaining Labour’s Landslide* (Politico’s Publishing, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Andersen and Evans, ‘Who Blairs Wins?’, *op cit.*; Bartle, ‘Why Labour Won?’, *op cit.*

<sup>13</sup> G. Evans and R. Andersen, ‘Endogenizing the Economy: Political Preferences and Economic Perceptions across the Electoral Cycle’, *Revue de la Maison Francaise d’Oxford*, 2003. 1, 117-144; G. Evans and R. Anderson, ‘The Political Conditioning of Economic Perceptions’, *Journal of Politics*, forthcoming; C. Wlezien, M.N. Franklin, and D. Twiggs, ‘Economic Perceptions and Vote Choice: Disentangling the Endogeneity’, *Political Behavior*, 1997, 19, pp. 7-17.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., M. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (Yale University Press, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> G. Evans, A. Heath and M. Lalljee, ‘Measuring left-right and libertarian-authoritarian values in the British electorate’, *British Journal of Sociology*, 1996, 47, pp. 93-112.

<sup>16</sup> G. Evans, ‘European integration, party politics and voting in the 2001 election.’ *British Elections & Parties Review*, 2002, 12, pp. 95-110.

<sup>17</sup> We also included ‘attention to politics’ in preliminary models, and tested for interactions with leadership perceptions on vote choice, but none of these effects were significant so we exclude them from the models reported here.

<sup>18</sup> T. Hastie and R. Tibshirani, R., *Generalized Additive Models* (Chapman and Hall, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> For the Labour vote, it was determined that the influences of appraisals of Blair were linear, but for Howard and Kennedy quadratic polynomials were necessary to capture the nonlinear trend. For the Conservative Party, the effect of Howard and Kennedy was adequately modelled with a linear trend, but a quadratic polynomial was necessary for Blair. The effects of leaders on vote for the Liberal Democrats were slightly more complicated, requiring quadratic polynomials for Blair and Howard, and a cubic polynomial for Kennedy.

<sup>20</sup> J.H. Silber, P.R. Rosenbaum, and R.N. Ross, ‘Comparing the Contributions of Groups of Predictors: Which Outcomes Vary with Hospital Rather than Patient Characteristics?’ *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 1995, 90, 7–18. The measure compares the ratio of the overall contribution to the dependent variable of two sets of variables through the log of the standard deviation ratio between the two sets. In other words, the ratio of the overall contribution of a particular set of variables, X, compared with that of another set of variables, Z, should equal 0 (i.e.,  $X/Z=1$ ) if the two variables have equal importance in terms of their effects on Y. If the ratio is less than 0 (i.e., it is a negative number) then Z is more important than X. On the other hand, if the ratio is larger than 0 (i.e., a positive number), X is more important than Z. We use the David Firth’s `relimp` package for R to implement the relative importance measure: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/relimp>

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<sup>21</sup> J. Fox, 'Effect displays for generalized linear models', *Sociological Methodology*, 1987, 17, pp. 347-361; J. Fox, John, 'Effect displays in R for generalised linear models', *Journal of Statistical Software*, 2003, 15, pp. 1-27. Effects are calculated by finding fitted values for a set of contrived observations for all values through the range of the leadership variable in question with all control variables (including the leadership variables not being examined) set to typical values (means for quantitative variables and proportions for categories of categorical variables). We then transform the fitted values from the logit scale to the scale of the response, i.e., to the probability scale, and plot them against the leadership variable under examination.

<sup>22</sup> See J. Fox, *Applied Regression Analysis* (Sage Publications, 1997), Chapter 15.

<sup>23</sup> Silber, Rosenbaum, and Ross, 'Comparing the Contributions of Groups of Predictors', *op cit.* This measure compares the overall contribution to the dependent variable of two *sets* of variables through the log of the standard deviation ratio between the two sets.

<sup>24</sup> Bartle and Crewe, 'The Impact of Party Leaders in Britain', *op cit.*, p 82; see also J. Bartle, 'Homogenous Models and Heterogeneous Voters', *Political Studies*, forthcoming.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson and Evans, 'Who Blairs Wins?', *op cit.*

<sup>26</sup> For previous disputes on such matters, see G. Evans, 'Economics and Politics Revisited: Exploring the Decline in Conservative Support, 1992-95', *Political Studies* 1999, 47, pp. 139-151; G. Evans, 'Economics, politics and the pursuit of exogeneity: Why Pattie, Johnston and Sanders are wrong', *Political Studies*, 1999, 47, pp. 933-38; and C. Pattie, R. Johnston, and D. Sanders, 'On Babies and Bathwater: A Comment on Evans' "Economics and Politics Revisited"', *Political Studies* 1999, 47, pp. 918-932.

<sup>27</sup> For an elaboration of this argument with respect to economic perceptions, see Evans and Andersen, 'Endogenizing the Economy', *op cit.* Evans and Andersen, 'The Political Conditioning of Economic Perceptions', *op cit.*; Wlezien, Franklin, and Twiggs, 'Economic Perceptions and Vote Choice', *op cit.* On issues, see G. Evans and R. Andersen, 'Do Issues Decide? Partisan Conditioning and Perceptions of Party Issue Positions across the Electoral Cycle', *British Elections and Parties Review*, 2004, 14, pp. 18-39.