

# *What took you so long? Why the Conservative Party needed nearly a decade to come to its senses.*

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Both the political science and the historical literature on Britain's Conservative Party contain works of the highest quality. Yet missing from most of them is a sustained attempt to view the party in comparative terms or through the prism of putatively transportable and self-consciously scientific schema, frameworks and models. This paper illustrates how we might correct this by taking as its starting point the Conservative Party's delayed adaptation to its defeat at the hands of New Labour, and then looking for clues in the comparative, and often quantitative and formal theoretical, literature on party competition and party change. Thus prompted, it suggests four potential explanations for the lack of change: (i) that the leadership was convinced it was doing the right thing to win; (ii) that not changing, even if it meant not winning, was rational given both Labour's acceptance of the Thatcherite settlement and the effort involved in moving back toward public opinion; (iii) that the cost of changing in terms of party unity and support was too high given the fact that the party could not win anyway; and (iv) that the leadership wanted to change but was simply too weak to persuade the party to do so. It then touches on the innovations pursued by David Cameron since his election as Tory leader, asking what these might tell us about what went on - or what didn't go on - under his immediate predecessors. Finally, it reminds us that employing the theories developed by others not only illuminates a particular case, it also allows us to feed back into and to flesh out those theories, thus improving our understanding of party competition and change in Britain and elsewhere.

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The existing literature on the Conservative Party - especially if we leave out 'Thatcherism' as a constituting a cottage industry all its own - is neither so voluminous, nor so conceptually-driven as (some of) the literature on its Labour counterpart. Much of it comes out of a historical rather than a political science tradition (though see the works collected and referred to in both Ludlam and Smith, 1995 and, more recently, Heppell and Hill, 2005; see also Bale, 2006). As with the literature on Labour, of course, there is some crossover between the two disciplines. This crossover is personified not just by established and highly-regarded authors like Stuart Ball and Anthony Seldon (see, among others, 2005), Andrew Gamble (see, for example, 1994 and 2003) and Philip Norton (see, for instance, 1996), but also by a younger generation of scholars like Mark Garnett and Philip Lynch (see 2003). This is no bad thing: political scientists have much to learn from the past (Bale, 1997) and a creative application of its lessons is, indeed, thought-provoking (see, for example, Ball's contribution to Garnett and Lynch, 2003)

However, what is missing most from most of this work is an attempt to view the party in comparative terms or through the prism of putatively transportable, and self-consciously scientific schema, frameworks and models. There are no equivalents, for instance, of Favretto's recent comparative work on social democracy in Italy and the UK (Favretto, 2003) or Andrew Hindmoor's book (2004), which (not for the first time, see Heffernan, 2000) attempts to bring the insights of a rational choice approach to bear on our understanding of the contemporary Labour Party. It is not that there is 'no theory' - as anyone reading Andrew Gamble's or Philip Norton's masterly studies, for example, would attest. And to echo Kipling by asking rhetorically 'what should they know of England who only England know?' would surely be overstating things. But even the most expert analysts, many of them with sound knowledge of overseas systems, rarely employ the sort of conceptualised explanations derived from comparative politics and formal theory that might allow us not just to understand the Conservative Party but also to explore (and even improve upon) the potential applicability of such explanations to other parties in other places.

This paper tries to do just that by taking as its starting point the Conservative Party's delayed adaptation to its defeat at the hands of New Labour. It begins by looking for clues in the comparative, and often quantitative and formal theoretical, literature on party competition and party change. Thus prompted, it suggests four potential explanations for the lack of the latter: (i) that the Tory leadership was convinced it was doing the right thing to win; (ii) that not changing, even if it meant not winning, was rational given both Labour's acceptance of the Thatcherite settlement and the effort involved in moving back toward public opinion; (iii) that the cost of changing in terms of party unity and support was too high given the fact that the party could not win anyway; and (iv) that the leadership wanted to change but was simply too weak to persuade the party to do so. It then touches on the innovations pursued by David Cameron since his election as Tory leader, asking what these might tell us about what went on - or what didn't go on - under his immediate predecessors. Finally, it reminds us that employing the theories developed by others not only illuminates a particular case, it also allows us to feed back into and to flesh out those theories, thus improving our understanding of party competition and change in Britain and elsewhere.

## **The law of inertia?**

In a seminal article on party competition, Ian Budge (1994: 446) argues that, given the lack of expert consensus surrounding what voters think and what motivates them to choose one alternative over another, parties are likely to stick with what they know best rather than risk change. Ideology, after all, not only 'provides politicians with a broad conceptual map of politics into which political events, current problems, electors' preferences and other parties' policies can all be fitted' but also has a vital 'role in maintaining the separate identity of the party and promoting activist involvement in the first place'. Thus, inertia is likely whether the most pressing competition comes from existing rivals, whose strategies (unlike their basic orientation and place in the policy space) can only be guessed at, or from new entrants, whose appearance and potential threat to parties' current vote share 'will have the effect of anchoring their frame of reference even more firmly in their own ideology and in considerations of keeping their own supporters happy' (Budge, 1994: 449).

Yet for all his stress on inertia and the lack of latitude enjoyed by parties needing to preserve their coherence and credibility, Budge is nonetheless interested in how and why parties do change - or at least tailor - their policy offers, and to this end emphasises the importance of past election results. The latter are one of the few reasonably reliable indicators possessed by party leaders, who, rightly or wrongly, often take the blame or the credit for them and are expected at the very least to 'do something' rather than nothing. It is hardly surprising, then, that performance in the most recent election helps drive parties' policy stances, even in parties supposedly more interested in policy (or ideology) than in office or votes - particularly, it should be said, in Britain (Budge, 1994: 453-4 and 462). Indeed, looking only at Britain in the post-war period, the American political scientist Jack Nagel (2001) confirms this stimulus-response pattern, while Budge himself concludes that reacting to the previous election explained Conservative Party policy shifts in two-thirds of the elections between 1945 and 1992.

But while parties may want to change, it is rarely easy. Two US-based political scientists, Herbert Kitschelt and Philipp Rehm, commenting on their extensive cross-national research on the mixed fortunes of social democratic parties, note (2005: 21), for example,

how difficult and time-consuming it is to recalibrate an existing party's credible strategic appeal. Politicians may not try strategic innovation because intra-party forces hold them back. Even if they try it, they are unlikely to reap electoral success sufficiently fast to prevent their detractors from reversing the course and returning to familiar messages. Whatever success innovative politicians achieve may result more from incremental shifts of party positions on traditionally salient issue baskets...than from efforts to stake out sharply contoured positions on hitherto deemphasized issue dimensions.

Inertia or, at best, incrementalism predominates, Kitschelt and Rehm argue, because a party's reputation is both a blessing and a curse. Voters with short attention spans but long memories need parties as brands (see Snyder and Ting, 2002) yet those brands place limits on what those voters are prepared to believe or accept from each party. As Kitschelt and Rehm (2005: 14) put it,

Parties cannot adjust instantly in credible ways. Either they are credible, but to a certain extent “out of sync” with the up-to-date demands and expectations of electoral constituencies. Or they attempt to adjust instantly, but cannot make their new positions credible to rightfully suspicious voters.

Adams et al. (2004), in another quantitative cross-national investigation this time looking at parties across the ideological spectrum, also acknowledged the power of inertia, even finding - perhaps counter-intuitively and contra Budge (1994) - that parties ‘show no significant tendency to adjust their policies in response to past election results’ (Adams et al., 2004: 590). That said, they do, ‘find strong evidence that parties [particularly ‘disadvantaged parties’] adjust their policies when public opinion clearly shifts away from them’ (Adams et al., 2004: 606):

Perhaps this, along with a journalistic preference for agency and action, is why change, rather than stability characterises the political narrative (see Shenhav, 2006) that has become conventional in recent years in the UK. The tale of New Labour, after all, tells of a single-minded politician, aided and abetted by others who believed in ‘the project’, apparently taking a hopeless case by the scruff of its neck and dragging it not just into the twenty-first century but to an unprecedented series of victories over an enemy that many had come to see as little short of invincible.

Of course, the real story is far more complicated (see, among others, Shaw, 1994, Fielding, 2002, and Cronin, 2004): Weber once defined politics as the ‘strong and slow boring of hard boards’ - a phrase that would surely have resonated with both Neil Kinnock and John Smith, both of whom did much to prepare the way for Tony Blair. Labour may have got things badly wrong in 1983, but within months of Michael Foot’s departure the party was signalling furiously that it was on its way back to the hallowed ‘centre-ground’ on which British general elections are fought and won. Notwithstanding the momentum lost by the party during the miners’ strike of 1984-5, nobody observing Labour’s campaigns of 1987 and 1992 could have been in the slightest doubt that the party was attempting to achieve convergence between its policies and the preferences the electorate. Indeed, the puzzle for political scientists was to explain why a party that appeared to be closer to voters on most salient issues than the Conservatives carried on losing elections, with one obvious answer being that, until Tony Blair, Labour lacked a leader capable of persuading people across all classes and all regions of the extent and the reality of the changes it had made (see, for example, Worcester and Mortimore, 1999, Crewe et al., 2000, and Heath et al., 2001).

The same cannot be said of David Cameron, or at least of the Conservative Party he took over in the autumn of 2005. True, Cameron may well be the ‘heir to Blair’ when it comes to his determination and his rhetorical ability to signal change. But, unlike the Labour Party when Blair took over in 1994, the party that Cameron leads has not been spending almost a decade moving fairly consistently to the centre. Far from it, in fact. In the Tories’ case, the conventional narrative (see for instance Wheatcroft, 2005) is that, too long in power and unable to come to terms with the matricide of Margaret Thatcher, the party sank into sleaze and a poisonous internal row over Europe. And it was this row which prevented it choosing the one leader interested in and capable of steering it back towards the centre, ensuring that any nascent attempts to do so collapsed into the cul-de-sac of the so-called ‘core vote’ strategy – an appeal that in both 2001 and 2005 proved predictably unattractive to the ‘floaters’ that the party also has to impress to put it in contention.

In the Conservatives' case, the conventional narrative would appear to be a fair representation of the reality, at least in as much as academics are able to capture the latter (see Garnett and Lynch, 2003 and also Seldon and Snowden, 2005). The party's crisis was not just one of style but of substance. As Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski neatly show using data from the 2001 election, the Tories, out of sync with the prevailing 'policy mood' and stranded way to the right of the so-called 'zone of acquiescence', spent their time 'fishing for votes far beyond where they were located' (Norris and Lovenduski, 2004: 99-101). Given the Conservative Party's traditional, even consummate, capacity to accept harsh realities, adapt to them and move on – a characteristic that saw it become Britain's 'natural party of government' throughout most of the twentieth century – its failure on this occasion to do so, or to do so very quickly, is all the more striking.

### **Staying put: some off-the-peg explanations**

Norris and Lovenduski acknowledge a number of possible explanations for the Conservative Party's failure to reposition itself where the votes were before going on to argue for one of their own. They begin by noting (2004: 90) that

Multiple organizational barriers may prevent political parties from rationally adapting to the public mood in pursuit of office.... Long-standing principles and symbolic traditions...are woven into each party's distinctive identity. Party organizations, like other large-scale institutions, may be unable to innovate due to bureaucratic entrenchment. Any attempt to modify policies in factionalized parties could trigger even deeper fissures. The leadership may be convinced of the need for change and yet powerless to influence the views of their party membership, if constituency workers are more concerned with the purity of ideological principles than with electoral success. Party leaders may believe that their central task is to persuade, rather than to follow, public opinion.... Parties adopting zigzag policy shifts willy-nilly may lose public trust. The recruitment process can reinforce a 'one-of-us' mentality if party members select parliamentary candidates similar in profile to existing incumbents, rather than picking representatives with broader ideological appeal to the electorate as a whole....

For them, however, the most fruitful explanation is derived from social psychology and in particular the phenomenon of 'selective perception' - the tendency to interpret evidence according to one's existing convictions, even to the extent that discordant information actually reinforces those convictions. Accordingly, as Norris and Lovenduski (2004: 90) put it,

parties may be capable of reinventing themselves, but politicians may not perceive the need to change if they believe that they are already in tune with public opinion, even though they may be lagging behind or running ahead of the zone of acquiescence.

Unfortunately, the evidence Norris and Lovenduski adduce, while highly suggestive, is not ultimately capable of testing their hypothesis. The gap they observe between the (tax-spend and EU) positions of Conservative candidates and MPs, on the one hand, and the median voter, on the other, is indeed large, as is the gap between where Tory politicians place Tory voters and where those voters are actually located (Norris and Lovenduski, 2004: 95 and 98). However, there is a problem: the politicians are being asked about what they regard as their 'own' voters rather than the average voter or voters as a whole; it could be, for example, that Tory politicians overestimated how right wing their own supporters are, but were more realistic about the electorate in

general. And, in any case, what is missing is evidence that selective perception, assuming it did exist, was what prevented those in charge from responding rationally to repeated electoral defeat - evidence that would almost certainly need to be gathered by qualitative rather than quantitative methods.

Before abandoning the latter, however, we should note two stimulating pieces of research on party competition in that tradition – one based on formal theory in the rational choice idiom and the other on a more dynamic, computerised stimulation. In the first, Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca (2004) uses a utility function to investigate why ‘moderation is not always the automatic response to electoral defeat’ and, on the basis of his equations, notes that (2004: 326)

A party in opposition could conclude that the improvement in policy that would be achieved if it moderates, wins the elections and makes a moderate policy closer to its ideal point than the policy currently made by the incumbent, would not be sufficient to compensate for the ideological sacrifice moderation implies.

In fact, moderation is less likely, he finds (2004: 335, 339), the more ideologically rigid the opposition party (for obvious reasons), the smaller the ideological distance between it and the incumbent (because in that event the policy gains of moderating would not be that great), and the greater the gap between it and the median voter (because it would mean a longer and more painful journey to close it). One could argue that all three of these conditions applied in the Conservatives’ case: they had become obsessive, among other things, about European integration, the desirability of tax cuts, and the need to clamp down on migration; New Labour was (rightly or wrongly) seen to pose little threat to the Thatcher settlement; and they were really quite a long way (as Norris and Lovenduski show) from the average voter. Given this, according to Sánchez-Cuenca’s logic (2004: 327), the only way moderation could occur would have been

some shock that alters the degree of ideological rigidity of the party: for instance, a transformation of the rules of the party that modifies the internal balance of power between the more dogmatic and the more pragmatic members, or a generational change led by party cadres of a more pragmatic persuasion.

The second piece of quantitative (indeed, initially pure) research that may have something interesting to say about the Conservative’s failure to moderate is Michael Laver’s ‘dynamic agent-based analysis of policy-driven party competition.’ Laver sets up - and then tests in the real world of Irish politics - a computer simulation of party competition in which he ascribes each competitor with one of four adaptive strategies. These operate as ‘simple rules of thumb’ for more or less hard-pressed (and essentially instrumental) party leaders, who are more likely to look backward and learn what works from the past (including the immediate past as measured by polling) than they are suddenly to develop the impressive far-sightedness with which they are often endowed by game theorists. These strategies are summed up as follows (Laver 2005: 263):

‘Aggregator’ (adapt party policy to the ideal policy positions of party supporters), ‘Hunter’ (repeat policy moves that were rewarded; otherwise make random moves [in the other direction]), ‘Predator’ (move party policy toward the policy position of the largest party), and ‘Sticker’ (never change party policy).

‘Aggregating’ and ‘sticking’ are more likely to be pursued by party leaders who are constrained by their supporters and/or members, whereas predating and hunting (the latter being the most successful strategy, it seems) are options open to leaders who are relatively ‘unconstrained.’ Laver, though he does not mention the Conservatives or the Lib Dems (classic ‘Aggregators’ perhaps?) nevertheless makes a brief excursion into British politics, mentioning that one of the reasons Labour was able to start acting like a Hunter or Predator was that it reformed its internal decision-making processes to centralize control over policy (Laver, 2005: 280). This, of course, raises the interesting question of how and why parties move between the strategies on offer, and indeed whether internal battles within parties represent contests over which should be chosen - something that Laver does not have the time or space to deal with. With respect to the Tories, for instance, one could argue that its traditionally unconstrained leadership has for most of the last one hundred years played the Hunter or Predator, but more recently painted itself into the corner often occupied by Stickers and Aggregators. Not that either strategy need be an unmitigated disaster (Laver, 2005: 273, 274). If we see New Labour as a ‘lone Hunter’, the Tory Sticker’s ‘ideological intransigence’ may, as Laver’s simulation predicts, have pulled said Hunter toward it in search of votes and therefore been ‘instrumentally rewarded’ in policy terms. Alternatively,

Aggregator parties competing with ‘unconstrained’ party leaders (Hunters and Predators) rarely go to the center of the policy space, where Hunters and Predators tend to compete, and are typically not the largest party; but neither do they do very badly in such competitions. An Aggregator’s continuous adaptation to the center of its current set of supporters keeps it backing away from close contact with other parties, including those that attack its support base. If the Aggregator’s support base erodes as a result, then its declining pool of supporters becomes less vulnerable to attack by party leaders using more aggressive [strategies]; the decline is thereby halted

In short, then, the research in the comparative, quantitative tradition outlined above serves to emphasise that there is something about the Conservative’s failure to adapt that needs explaining. It also suggests that there are some off-the-peg explanations out there that might help us with the task - a task that is all the more intriguing for two reasons. The first is the fact that we are dealing with a party with a history of, and a structure well suited to, rapid adaptation (see Ball and Seldon, 2005). And the second is that, since David Cameron’s election to the leadership, the party at long last appears to be adapting in the way we might have expected it to in the first place.

### **What took you so long? Towards a tailored explanation**

We do of course have to recognise, as Budge stresses, that inertia is important and that politicians have to shape strategy with only fuzzy information about their environment and the precise consequences of any changes they make. Nevertheless, at least as a simplifying assumption which helps us to ask and answer general questions about the dynamics of party competition in a specific case, this paper contends that what the Tories needed to do after their devastating defeat in 1997 was not rocket (let alone political) science. Like Labour after 1983, the Conservative Party needed to consistently, and therefore convincingly, project some kind of progress back to the centre ground on which, in Britain at least, elections are generally won. The key first question, then, is not so much whether the Conservatives should have made such a move, or whether it would have resulted in them winning (see Sanders, 2006), as what

took them so long to do it? Why, despite repeated evidence that it was doing them harm (or at least doing them no good), did they persist in staying outside (and well to the right of) Norris and Lovenduski's 'zone of acquiescence'? Put another way, what stopped them picking up and acting upon the signals that would have persuaded any rational actor to have made the move to the centre earlier than they themselves are now doing under David Cameron? What locked in an essentially suboptimal strategy for nearly ten years? How did this happen to a party famous throughout its history for its capacity to respond quickly to shifts in the political climate? And what was it, other than its new leader's sheer force of personality and will, which changed in order to allow the party finally to do the right thing?

Obviously, any convincing explanation will be complex and therefore holistic. But it can be initially pursued by reducing things to four possible answers or hypotheses, using these to inform the largely qualitative research - interviews with party elites and a reading of available written and broadcast sources - and then building back up.

The first hypothesis, which clearly resonates with the one favoured by Norris and Lovenduski, revolves around the ideas of group polarisation (or 'risky-shift') and groupthink (Moscovici and Zavalloni, 1969, and Janis, 1972; see also Surowiecki, 2005: 173-191), as well as path dependence (Pierson, 2004). Put briefly, it holds that an insulated and ideologically convinced elite was genuinely convinced that it really was doing the right thing to win - possibly because it believed that voter preferences could and should be shaped rather than simply accommodated - and discounted evidence to the contrary. The party had become, in Laver's terms, something of a 'Sticker'.

The second hypothesis also sees the party as a 'Sticker' but on the more rational grounds highlighted by Sánchez-Cuenca's equations. In short, during the 1980s and 1990s, the Conservatives became so dogmatic that, facing a Labour incumbent content to preserve most of the Tories' achievements during those decades, as well as an electorate who were much more moderate than they were, a pragmatic move to the centre simply wasn't worth it.

The third hypothesis suggests that the Conservative leadership was, indeed, composed of clear-sighted (if boundedly) rational actors forced to trade off between policy, office and votes (see Müller and Strøm, 1999). The party's elite may have been aware that their 'clear blue water' or 'core vote' strategy was suboptimal in terms of ousting Labour. But it believed that pursuing a centrist route would have little or no effect in a hostile prevailing political climate and, in fact, might prove counterproductive, involving unacceptable losses in terms of party unity, future credibility, policy and votes (possibly to minor parties on the populist right) in return for putative gains that may never materialise (Robertson cited in Budge, 1994: 451). In short, the party 'satisfied' (Simon, 1947) and in so doing became something of an 'Aggregator', in Laver's terms.

The fourth hypothesis also sees the Conservative Party as an 'Aggregator' in Laver's terms, but for different reasons. It was unable fully to return to its traditional role as 'Hunter' or 'Predator' because what Panebianco (1988) calls the 'dominant coalition' within the party, while it knew or suspected that it

needed to make a move toward the centre, simply wasn't dominant enough. In other words, the traditional authority of the Tory leadership had so deteriorated under John Major that it was unable to impose its will on other strata (MPs, professionals and constituencies), especially when many occupying those other strata were still so Thatcherite.

### **All change: a second big question - and back to the first**

Which of the four hypotheses seems most convincing will also to some extent determine the answer to a second big question that follows naturally from the first, namely why did things change so quickly after the 2005 election? Why and how did the Conservative Party - even though it was unable to reverse its much-regretted move to internal democracy on leadership selection - manage to give up 'sticking' and 'accommodating' and get back to 'hunting' or at least 'predating'?

If groupthink and the self-reinforcing sequences posited by path dependence were so important, how were they so swiftly undermined or disrupted? If, on the other hand, moderation was simply irrational given the party's ideological rigidity, a relatively tame Labour incumbent and an electorate far from sharing Tory preferences, which of the three conditions changed and why? If, instead, the party's leaders were clear-sighted rational actors who believed winning was unlikely and had simply stressed ideology to minimise their losses and keep their core support happy, what caused their cost-benefit calculations to alter in such apparently radical and rapid fashion, and why did they suddenly seem not only to get the message but to act on it? If, though, it problem had been a lack of authority, how was that authority regained? In other words, what are the nature, sequence and extent of the endogenous developments and exogenous shocks that cause parties - and this party in particular - to adapt?

Asking this second question about change, of course, feeds back on the first question concerning the lack of it. In so doing, it raises the possibility that, in trying to explain the latter, we are looking through the wrong end of the telescope. After all, as we have seen, inertia is seen by many as the norm - a position that is also the point of departure for the team of researchers that has looked most rigorously at party organisational and identity change (Harmel and Janda, 1994, see also Harmel et al., 1995, Harmel, 2002, and Harmel and Tan, 2003). Yet Harmel and co, too, believe that even if adjustment 'doesn't just happen', it still happens! They focus in particular on three drivers, namely electoral performance, a new leader, and a change in the 'dominant faction' that (to a greater or lesser extent) controls the party. Their research concludes that poor electoral performances account for only around a fifth to a quarter of party change - and, perhaps counter-intuitively, even less than that in the Conservative Party (which just happens to be one of the cases in their quantitative analysis). Leadership change, however, is if anything more important - especially (and perhaps less counter-intuitively, given its traditions) in the Conservative Party. On the third driver, factional change, their results are less conclusive, not least because such change often coincides with a replacement of the leader. But Harmel and colleagues suggest that the former can boost the effect of the latter and that factional change is more important when it results in a cohesive coalition in charge of the party - an outcome that is by no means guaranteed.

On the face of it, all – or at least two – of these drivers are present from autumn 2005 and could be used to explain what has happened since then - a development that would also tie in with Budge's contention (1994: 453) that, militating against inertia, there may be an almost natural or 'in-built' tendency toward policy alternation in competitive political parties that have recently, say, 're-emphasized party orthodoxy last time...to reassure the faithful, particularly in the light of potential threats from new entrants'. Yet all three of the factors identified by Harmel and his colleagues were arguably also present after the 1997 and 2001 elections when change – or at least policy moderation – was minimal or at best aborted. As such they are clearly not sufficient, even if they are necessary, conditions. Does this mean we, like everyone else, are left with a combination of Labour fatigue and the 'x-factor' – Mr Cameron's charisma – or can we do a little better than that?

## Conclusion

Leaving that challenge hanging in the air is perhaps appropriate for a paper designed to raise questions and suggest possible (as opposed to definitive) answers on matters that should concern not just political scientists in the comparative, quantitative, and formal theoretical traditions, but also those interested in what some think of as the 'self-contained discipline' of British politics (Kettell and Kerr, 2006). But, hopefully, even this interrogatory excursion into applying more general explanations to a particular puzzle serves to suggest that thinking about lack of party change may also help us to think about further sources of change - and vice versa. By the same token, thinking about these issues as they impact on a particular party in a particular time and place, and using qualitative methods to do it, may also allow us to feedback on more general understandings of the dynamics of party competition. As Adams et al. (2004: 609) observe, scholars in the comparative, quantitative and formal theoretical traditions may be well on their way when it comes to *how* parties shift or stand pat in response to shifting public opinion and good or bad results, but they still need 'thickly descriptive' case studies of elite decision making if they are 'to explain in detail *why* parties behave in this way.' Working out why, in Laver's terms, one of the political world's most accomplished Hunters or Predators turned – even if only temporarily – into an Aggregator or a Sticker is therefore doubly worthwhile.

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