UK gives priority to problem solving, but leftist positions dominate economic issues

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In view of the next general election in Britain, to be held next 8th June, the CISE (Italian Centre for Electoral Studies) has conducted a CAWI survey on the adult British population. Similarly to what we have recently done before the Dutch parliamentary election last March and the French Presidential election last April, British respondents were asked to express their support on 18 positional issues (divisive issues that refer to two rival goals, e.g. public spending vs. tax cuts). Specifically, each respondent was asked to position himself/herself on a 6-point scale where the points 1 and 6 represent the two rival goals to be pursued on a given issue. Later, respondents were asked to indicate the priority they assign to the selected goal for each of these issues. The questionnaire also included 10 valence issues ([Stokes 1963](#)), namely issues that refer to one shared goal, over which a general agreement is assumed (e.g., protection from terrorism). On these issues, a support of 100% is set by design and respondents were only asked to attribute the level of priority. The selection of both positional and valence issues was made in cooperation with a team of British researchers.

By examining the level of priority attributed to different goals, we are able to map the current state of British public opinion, and also the potential structure of opportunity for parties in this campaign. Table 1 ranks the issues according to the priority attributed by all respondents. For the 18 positional issues, the percentage reported is nothing but the sum of the priorities assigned to both the two rival goals. By doing this, positional issues (where priority is asked to the respondent only for the goal previously selected) and valence issues (where instead priority is asked to all respondents given that a support of 100% to that goal is assumed by design) can be properly compared.

By comparing the priority attributed by voters to both types of goals (shared vs. divisive goals) this analysis clearly shows that shared goals are by far considered the most salient by British voters. Indeed, out of the top 8 pri-

Table 1. The current state of the British public debate: priority assigned to each issue among all respondents. For positional issues, the sum of both rival goals is considered. Percentages reported represent the share of respondents attributing a high priority to that issue. Issues in italics are the shared (valence) ones

Statement	% General priority
Protect the UK from terrorist attacks	90%
Improve the NHS	89%
Fight crime and keep our communities safe	84%
European Union	83%
Boost economic growth	81%
Reduce unemployment	80%
Provide leadership for the country	79%
Improve the quality of schools	77%
Access to welfare benefits for immigrants	76%
Protect pensions	75%
European Single Market	74%
Control immigration	74%
Taxes and social services	74%
Freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	74%
Build affordable homes	69%
Protect the environment	66%
Minimum wage	65%
Zero hours contracts for workers	61%
Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident)	59%
Preservation of their own culture for foreigners in Britain	58%
Cost of university tuition fees	56%
Use of fracking to produce more oil and gas	56%
Reduce income differences	56%
Britain's railways	53%
Islamic veil in public spaces	51%
Scottish referendum on independence	49%
Law that allows gay marriages	47%
Provision of grammar schools	46%

orities for the next government, only one is a divisive goal against 7 shared goals (and, by extending the scope of the comparison, the divisive goals are only 3 out of the top 12 priorities). As expected, the only divisive goal emerging as very important for voters is related to the largely debated matter of the European Union. This latter shows an aggregated priority of 83%, composed

by a larger priority to 'Leave', 47% against a 36% for the 'Remain' option, as displayed in Table 2, where priority is reported for each side of the divisive goal. After all, Prime Minister Theresa May has called the early election to strengthen her pro-Brexit majority and increase her negotiating power *vis-à-vis* the European Union. Not by chance, other two EU-related issues, concerning the European Single Market and the freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain rank both third among the divisive issues, with a high priority attributed by 74% of the respondents.

By looking at Table 1, the presence of a relatively large group of issues considered as priorities by the 80% or more of the respondents reveals that there is a common priority pattern in the country, suggesting the presence of a relatively homogeneous 'British agenda'. In other words, regardless of partisan affiliations, and despite the ongoing tough campaign opposing the different parties and their policy proposals, the British people share some common problems and expect the next Prime Minister to deal with them, whoever he/she will be. This shared agenda includes the need to protect the country from terrorist attacks and from crime, improve the NHS, bring the country out of the European Union, boost economic growth, and fight unemployment.

Unsurprisingly, the most important issue to be addressed by the government is the protection against terrorist attacks, with a priority of 90%. This finding confirms how this goal has become crucial in the current Western European public debate. This result is indeed very similar to what emerged also from the Dutch and the French surveys. Also in these two countries, protection from terrorism was considered as the most important goal, with a priority of, respectively, 85% in the Netherlands and 91% in France (see Emanuele, De Sio and van Ditmars in this volume; Emanuele, De Sio and Michel in this volume). Moreover, an interesting difference in comparative perspective is the relatively lower importance of 'reducing unemployment' in the United Kingdom. While in France and the Netherlands this issue was considered as the second top priority after fighting terrorism, in the UK it is only the sixth one, although with still the 80% of people attributing a high priority to it.

Finally, a general overview on the ranking of positional issues shows that British voters attribute a higher priority to economic issues than to cultural issues. Indeed, issues related to the classic economic left-right dimension (taxes vs. social services) or to other matters connected to economic protection (investments to build affordable homes, minimum wage, zero hours contract) are all considered a priority by more than 60% of the respondents, while cultural issues (the preservation of their own culture for foreigners, and the allowance of the Islamic veil in public spaces) stand in a lower position. Moreover, as reported in Table 2, is the 'leftist' goal of each economic issue to be perceived as a higher priority.

Table 2. The current state of the British public debate: priority assigned to each goal among all respondents. Percentages reported represent the share of respondents attributing a high priority to that goal. Goals in italics are the shared (valence) ones

Statement	% General priority
Protect the UK from terrorist attacks	90%
Improve the NHS	89%
Fight crime and keep our communities safe	84%
Boost economic growth	81%
Reduce unemployment	80%
Provide leadership for the country	79%
Improve the quality of schools	77%
Protect pensions	75%
Control immigration	74%
Protect the environment	66%
Restrict access to welfare benefits for immigrants	62%
Raise taxes and spend more on health and social services	57%
Increase the minimum wage	56%
Invest more public money to build affordable homes	54%
Ban zero hours contracts for workers	53%
Leave the European Union	47%
Scrap or reduce the cost of university tuition fees	43%
Require foreigners in Britain to fully adapt to British culture	43%
Reduce income differences	43%
Keep Britain in the European Single Market	43%
End freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	42%
Maintain Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident)	39%
Ban the Islamic veil in public spaces	37%
Nationalize Britain's railways	36%
Keep Britain in the European Union	36%
Keep the law that allows gay marriages	33%
Allow freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	31%
Leave the European Single Market	31%
Prohibit the use of fracking to produce more oil and gas	29%
Do not allow Scotland to vote in another referendum on independence	28%
Allow the expansion of fracking to produce more oil and gas	27%
Expand the provision of grammar schools	27%
Allow Scotland to vote in another referendum on independence	21%
Dismantle Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident)	20%
Limit the provision of grammar schools	18%

Statement	% General priority
Keep Britain's railways in private	17%
Cut taxes and spend less on health and social services	17%
Allow foreigners in Britain to preserve their own culture	15%
Rely on the private sector to build affordable homes	15%
Allow the Islamic veil in public spaces	15%
Repeal the law that allows gay marriages	14%
Maintain current levels of access to welfare benefits for immigrants	14%
Maintain the present cost of university tuition fees	13%
Do not reduce income differences	13%
Do not increase the minimum wage	9%
Maintain zero hours contracts for workers	8%

This result represents a clear difference with respect to France and, to a lesser extent, the Netherlands. In France, cultural issues, especially those related to immigrants, held the lion's share (both in terms of support and priority). In the Dutch case, issues related to the 'demarcation/integration' dimension (Kriesi et al. 2006), despite being very divisive, displayed higher priority than the traditional economic issues. For instance, the question related to the Islamic veil is considered as a priority only by the 51% of the respondents, against the 64% in France, while the adaptation of foreigners to the national culture is considered as a priority by the 58% of voters in the UK against the 69% in the Netherlands.

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