

# Tories and Labour: mainstream parties riding on conflict

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In the assessment of the current state of the British public debate presented by [Emanuele in this volume](#) based on the original data collected by the CISE as part of a broader comparative research project ([De Sio and Paparo in this volume \(a\)](#)), we have seen that British voters have a great deal of interest in shared goals, although divisive economic policies are quite relevant as well, with the traditional left-wing positions having the upper hand.

Here we look at political parties. Basically, what we have already seen in both France and the Netherlands is that two different strategies emerge ([De Sio and Paparo in this volume \(b\)](#)). On the one hand, they can present a consensual face, omitting conflicts and campaigning on their credibility to solve shared problems. This is the strategy recently adopted by both Macron and Rutte, and, more in general, by mainstream parties. On the other hand, a second strategy consists in emphasizing contemporary conflicts (such as the one emerging between winners and losers of globalization), choosing sides, and vigorously campaigning on them. This is the strategy used by Le Pen in France and Wilders in the Netherlands. Challenger, anti-establishment parties tend to choose this campaign strategy.

Turning now to the British case, the hypothesis we want to test is whether also in Britain mainstream parties have the most favourable campaign issues on shared goals and valence issues, on which their competence in solving problems can most be rewarded, while on the contrary challenger parties have more favourable prospects on divisive goals, those emerging on one of the two rival sides of conflictual, positional issues.

To verify whether this is the case, we report Table 1, which shows the most credible four parties on the different (shared or divisive) goals. The table also shows the fractions of the electorate deeming the various parties credible in achieving that specific goal, along with their level of support and priority.

We can clearly see that, with respect to shared goals (those having by definition 100% support, reported on the top of the table) the two mainstream

parties are most credible. Out of the ten overall shared goals Tories and Labour are ranked as the two most credible parties on eight of them – the eight having the highest level of priority, by the way. Only on controlling immigration the UKIP is (slightly) more credible than the Labour, which ranks third; and on protecting the environment the Greens are (by far) more credible than both Labour and Tories, basically tied in second place.

Before moving to the analysis of divisive goals, we need to underline the clear advantage emerging for the Conservative Party on valence issues. It is considered the most credible party in achieving seven out of the ten related shared goals, six over the seven with the highest priority, including law and order goals, economic goals, and even some welfare-related goals (such as school quality). Furthermore, Tories enjoy an average credibility lead of 14 points on the second-most credible party, with the gap often being even larger than that – for instance, it is 25 points on the most salient issues (protecting from terrorism). Only on improving the quality of schools and reducing unemployment Conservatives are virtually tied with the Labour; still, though, they rank first. The Labour is the most credible party only on protecting the pensions and the NHS, with a margin on the Tories that in both cases is a little above 10 points. The latter issue is particularly important, as is it almost as salient as terrorism among UK voters.

The pattern of higher credibility on valence, shared goals for mainstream parties is then clear in the UK as well. However, if we scroll down the table and look at divisive goals, we find a striking fact: mainstream parties are again the most credible. Focusing first on the 18 majority goals (those being indicated as preferred over their opposites by a majority of the electorate), we find that Labour is considered the most credible party 9 times, while Tories 8. Only on banning the Islamic veil from public spaces, supported by 63% of UK voters but with a quite low priority, the UKIP is the most credible party – and with a small margin on the Conservatives.

The Labour appears as a classic social-democratic party (job-market regulation, welfare, redistribution) with a pinch of civil rights (gay marriages). It needs to be stressed how all these goals are preferred by significant majorities of the electorate – among them, the nationalization of the railways, indicated by two third of the respondents. On the other hand, the Conservative Party is able to capture voters' credibility on demarcation issues: leaving the EU and Schengen (supported by 54% of the electorate), not allowing Scotland a second referendum of leaving the UK (again 54%), welfare chauvinism (76%), immigrants assimilation (65%).

Even if we look at minority goals, those selected by a smaller fraction than the one preferring its opposite, the picture does not change. The issue yield theory ([De Sio and Weber 2014](#)) suggests that small parties might cultivate their areas of issue ownership on such goals. This is exactly what we found

in France ([Paparo, De Sio and Michel in this volume](#)) and particularly in the Netherlands ([Paparo, De Sio and van Ditmars in this volume](#)). But this is not the case in the UK. Here the two mainstream parties are the most credible on these goals as well. The Labour Party is the most credible on seven goals, including all the integration ones, which are less supported than the demarcation ones – on which, as we have seen above, Tories are the most credible. On the other hand, Tories are the most credible in achieving nine minority goals, including all the *laissez-faire* goals on economic matters, which are currently less popular than their opposites in the UK. Only the Greens appear as the most credible party on prohibiting fracking (which is actually supported by 49,6% of the electorate), although the Labour credibility is quite similar. Finally, the SNP is the most credible in allowing a new Independence referendum in the Northern British region.

As a final confirmation of the high credibility of mainstream parties on rival goals, let us provide an additional piece of evidence. As we have mentioned, out of the 36 rival goals, both Labour and Tories are the most credible 33 times. If we look at the second-most credible party, the two big parties occupy this place on 27 instances. The UKIP is more credible than the Labour on 5 demarcation goals, and the LibDems are more credible than the Tories on 3 integration ones – which is also the case for the Greens as to dismantling nuclear weapons.

From our investigation, the UK emerges as profoundly different from the cases we have previously analysed in our comparative project. In both France and the Netherlands mainstream parties suffered from the challenges both on the left and on the right. On the right, the demarcation issues rewarded populist right-wing parties (FN and PVV) at the expense of the mainstream options (Republicans and VVD, CDA). On the left, national representatives of the PES were not the most credible on classic economic left goals (as reducing income differences), on which they were beaten by less moderate actors (France Insoumise and SP). In the UK, on the contrary, Labour and Tories maintain their credibility in achieving divisive goals, as well as the shared ones.

Our findings indicate that the two traditional UK parties have coped with the challenges of contemporary transformations better than their continental counterparts, being able to successfully integrate (or reintegrate) in their platforms goals emerging as a consequence of those transformation – anxiety towards immigrants and foreigners on the one hand, and desire for redistribution and economic protection on the other. Basically, both Labour and Tories have embraced current conflicts, rather than denying them. The Labour appears as a classic social-democratic party from the Seventies (welfare, redistribution, even nationalizations), which has added integration and civil rights: in the current UK opinion, it wins on the economy but loses on integration. The Tories are a classic Anglo-Saxon right-wing party on the economy (free

Tab. 1 – Shared and divisive goals, by general priority, with most credible parties

Statement	% Support	% Priority for those favouring the goal	% General priority	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Δ 1st-2nd
Protect the UK from terrorist attacks	100%	90%	90%	CONS 58%	LAB 33%	LIBDEM 20%	UKIP 18%	+25
Improve the NHS	100%	89%	89%	LAB 45%	CONS 32%	LIBDEM 20%	GREEN 9%	+13
Fight crime and keep our communities safe	100%	84%	84%	CONS 46%	LAB 35%	LIBDEM 18%	UKIP 13%	+11
Boost economic growth	100%	81%	81%	CONS 47%	LAB 29%	LIBDEM 13%	UKIP 8%	+19
Reduce unemployment	100%	80%	80%	CONS 41%	LAB 40%	LIBDEM 18%	UKIP 9%	+1
Provide leadership for the country	100%	79%	79%	CONS 49%	LAB 27%	LIBDEM 10%	SNP 8%	+23
Improve the quality of schools	100%	77%	77%	CONS 39%	LAB 36%	LIBDEM 19%	GREEN 8%	+3
Protect pensions	100%	75%	75%	LAB 41%	CONS 30%	LIBDEM 17%	SNP 8%	+11
Control immigration	100%	74%	74%	CONS 45%	UKIP 31%	LAB 24%	LIBDEM 9%	+14
Protect the environment	100%	66%	66%	GREEN 52%	LAB 25%	CONS 25%	LIBDEM 17%	+27
Restrict access to welfare benefits for immigrants	76%	82%	62%	CONS 38%	UKIP 26%	LAB 13%	LIBDEM 6%	+12
Raise taxes and spend more on health and social services	72%	79%	57%	LAB 36%	CONS 25%	LIBDEM 12%	GREEN 7%	+10
Increase the minimum wage	80%	69%	56%	LAB 46%	CONS 23%	LIBDEM 16%	SNP 7%	+23
Invest more public money to build affordable homes	72%	74%	54%	LAB 37%	CONS 19%	LIBDEM 13%	GREEN 8%	+18
Ban zero hours contracts for workers	79%	67%	53%	LAB 42%	CONS 16%	LIBDEM 10%	GREEN 7%	+25
Leave the European Union	54%	86%	47%	CONS 32%	UKIP 17%	LAB 8%	LIBDEM 3%	+15

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Statement	% Support	% Priority for those favouring the goal	% General priority	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Δ 1st-2nd
Scrap or reduce the cost of university tuition fees	70%	62%	43%	LAB 36%	CONS 12%	LIBDEM 11%	GREEN 7%	+24
Require foreigners in Britain to fully adapt to British culture	65%	66%	43%	CONS 24%	UKIP 22%	LAB 12%	LIBDEM 6%	+3
Reduce income differences	71%	61%	43%	LAB 34%	CONS 11%	LIBDEM 11%	GREEN 7%	+23
Keep Britain in the European Single Market	57%	76%	43%	LAB 20%	CONS 15%	LIBDEM 15%	SNP 9%	+5
End freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	54%	78%	42%	CONS 26%	UKIP 22%	LAB 9%	LIBDEM 3%	+5
Maintain Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident)	63%	62%	39%	CONS 41%	LAB 11%	UKIP 8%	LIBDEM 6%	+30
Ban the Islamic veil in public spaces	63%	59%	37%	UKIP 26%	CONS 19%	LAB 8%	LIBDEM 4%	+7
Nationalize Britain's railways	65%	56%	36%	LAB 36%	CONS 11%	GREEN 5%	LIBDEM 5%	+25
Keep Britain in the European Union	46%	79%	36%	LAB 16%	LIBDEM 12%	CONS 10%	GREEN 8%	+4
Keep the law that allows gay marriages	73%	45%	33%	LAB 30%	CONS 28%	LIBDEM 21%	GREEN 13%	+2
Allow freedom of movement of people from the EU into Britain	46%	69%	31%	LAB 20%	LIBDEM 15%	CONS 10%	GREEN 8%	+5
Leave the European Single Market	43%	72%	31%	CONS 24%	UKIP 13%	LAB 7%	LIBDEM 2%	+10
Prohibit the use of fracking to produce more oil and gas	50%	58%	29%	GREEN 18%	LAB 14%	CONS 7%	LIBDEM 4%	+4
Do not allow Scotland to vote in another referendum on independence	54%	52%	28%	CONS 31%	LAB 12%	UKIP 7%	LIBDEM 5%	+20

Statement	% Support	% Priority for those favouring the goal	% General priority	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Δ 1st-2nd
Allow the expansion of fracking to produce more oil and gas	50%	54%	27%	CONS 25%	LAB 10%	UKIP 5%	LIBDEM 4%	+15
Expand the provision of grammar schools	53%	51%	27%	CONS 34%	LAB 9%	LIBDEM 7%	UKIP 4%	+24
Allow Scotland to vote in another referendum on independence	46%	45%	21%	SNP 20%	LAB 11%	CONS 10%	LIBDEM 6%	+9
Dismantle Britain's nuclear weapons (Trident)	37%	55%	20%	LAB 14%	GREEN 8%	CONS 5%	LIBDEM 4%	+6
Limit the provision of grammar schools	47%	40%	18%	LAB 24%	CONS 9%	LIBDEM 8%	GREEN 4%	+15
Keep Britain's railways in private	35%	47%	17%	CONS 21%	LAB 6%	LIBDEM 4%	UKIP 3%	+15
Cut taxes and spend less on health and social services	28%	60%	17%	CONS 11%	LAB 7%	LIBDEM 3%	UKIP 2%	+4
Allow foreigners in Britain to preserve their own culture	35%	44%	15%	LAB 14%	CONS 8%	LIBDEM 8%	GREEN 5%	+6
Rely on the private sector to build affordable homes	28%	53%	15%	CONS 13%	LAB 7%	LIBDEM 3%	UKIP 2%	+5
Allow the Islamic veil in public spaces	37%	39%	15%	LAB 16%	CONS 10%	LIBDEM 10%	GREEN 7%	+6
Repeal the law that allows gay marriages	27%	51%	14%	CONS 7%	LAB 5%	UKIP 4%	LIBDEM 3%	+2
Maintain current levels of access to welfare benefits for immigrants	24%	57%	14%	LAB 11%	LIBDEM 5%	CONS 5%	SNP 4%	+6
Maintain the present cost of university tuition fees	30%	43%	13%	CONS 19%	LAB 5%	LIBDEM 3%	UKIP 3%	+14
Do not reduce income differences	29%	45%	13%	CONS 15%	LAB 6%	LIBDEM 4%	UKIP 2%	+9
Do not increase the minimum wage	20%	46%	9%	CONS 10%	LAB 4%	LIBDEM 2%	UKIP 2%	+6
Maintain zero hours contracts for workers	21%	39%	8%	CONS 11%	LAB 5%	LIBDEM 2%	SNP 1%	+6

market, free market, free market) which has embedded demarcation to its platform. It loses on the economy, but wins on the second dimension (Kriesi et al. 2006) – and it is much more credible on shared goals.

Surely, the electoral system with its first-past-the-post districts has helped Tories and Labour in defending themselves from radical challenges in maintaining their crucial role within the system. However, that is not the all picture. The two parties have also taken clear steps to prevent the vulnerability to conflict shown by continental mainstream parties. In spite of the electoral system, the UKIP emerged as a strong actor, receiving over an eight of the general vote two years ago, though only winning one district – not to mention its results in the (proportional) European election the year before, when it was the first party with 27.5% of the vote. Our data indicates that the Conservative Party is now more credible than the UKIP for both demarcationist and anti-EU goals: that does not come from the electoral system. Rather, it is a consequence of specific choices made by the Tory leaders. Who knows how many seats would the UKIP win in this election hadn't the Brexit referendum been held? And same happened for the Labour. In 2015 the SNP won 56 of 59 Scottish seats definitely by campaigning on independence, but also exploiting the space left by Miliband's Labour on its left. If in the upcoming election the SNP will retreat, it won't be because of changes in the electoral system, but because the Labour has re-positioned itself on a classical social-democratic platform through the appointment of Corbyn as leader.

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