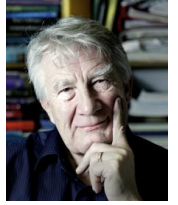


Book Review: Affluence, Austerity and Electoral Change in Britain by Paul Whiteley, Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders and Marianne C. Stewart

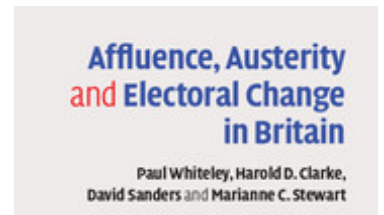
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***Affluence, Austerity and Electoral Change in Britain** sets out to investigate the political economy of party support for British political parties since Tony Blair led New Labour to power in 1997. Using valence politics models of electoral choice and marshalling a wealth of survey data collected in the British Election Study's monthly Continuous Monitoring Surveys, the authors trace forces affecting support for New Labour during its thirteen years in office. This is truly a jewel in the crown of British analytical social science, writes **Ron Johnston**.*



Affluence, Austerity and Electoral Change in Britain. Paul Whiteley, Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders and Marianne C. Stewart. Cambridge University Press. September 2013.

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The British Election Studies based on sample survey data were [launched by David Butler in the 1960s](#), and every general election since has been the subject of a major investigation building on that pioneering work. Much has changed in the intervening five decades, however, not only in the political and electoral context but also the theory and methodology of votin studies.

The 1960s-1990s' BES studies were dominated by a sociological approach to voting behaviour, linking party choice to class and class ideology – but the fourth group to continue the studies – covering the 2001, 2005 and 2010 elections– have changed the orientation. They consider the sociological theory at best obsolescent, and in a series of three volumes (their fir two books were [Political Choice in Britain](#) [2004] and [Performance Politics and the British Voter](#) [2009]) have focused very strongly on their preferred alternative – valence theory. For them there are now few strong and enduring bonds between socio-economic classes and individual parties. Instead, voters' main goals are to elect governments that deliver on the main contemporary political issues – almost invariably dominated by economic concerns (employment, inflation and general prosperity). People vote for the party they think best able to deliver on those issues. The parties may differ on the means but not the end, so governments that have overseen periods of prosperity tend to be re-elected whereas those who have not los if there is a viable alternative available.

Apart from this major shift in theoretical emphasis, the three studies conducted by this team have incorporated major methodological changes, enabled by new means of collecting, collating and rapidly disseminating data via the internet. A face-to-face questionnaire survey of c.2,000 voters maintains continuity with previous studies, but most of the data analysed were obtained through a monthly internet-delivered Continuous Monitoring Survey – inaugurated in 2004 and maintained into 2012; the average sample size was 1,050 – plus a large (c.17,000) Rolling Campaign Panel Survey whose members

responded to internet-delivered survey instruments before, during and immediately after the month-long campaign preceding election day in May 2010. This approach is vigorously defended in the introductory chapter to *Affluence, Austerity and Electoral Change in Britain*, not just on cost-benefit grounds in terms of data collection but also – to the authors much more importantly – because it allows voter attitude and partisan leaning dynamics to be explored over the years, months and weeks before election day, when changing contexts can stimulate variable responses in ways that a single cross-section cannot identify. Continuing the CMS after the election allowed voter reactions to the new (coalition) government and economic context to be uncovered – along with analyses of specific events such as the 2011 referendum on changing the voting system from First-Past-The-Post to the Alternative Vote.

The bulk of this book comprises linked essays testing models based on valence theory, but with some recognition of alternatives – mainly to conclude that they provide little explanatory power. The presentation is detailed, with many valuable graphics plus tables reporting rigorous statistical analyses; some details will be beyond the general reader but the conclusions are clearly stated.

The first analytical chapter considers Tony Blair's premiership (1997-2007), establishing the main features of the core argument: people supported Labour because they believed in its economic competence (relative to the Conservatives) and its positions on other major issues, plus their positive attitudes to Blair (for most of the time) – leader images are presented as important short-cuts to party evaluations for many voters. The next chapter turns to 2005-2010, in particular the period after Gordon Brown became Prime Minister in 2007: confidence in Labour's competence declined, Brown rapidly developed a negative image – and defeat at the polls looked increasingly likely.

These preliminary analyses are presented as very clear confirmations of valence theory's relevance, indeed predominance, in accounting for attitudinal trends. The sociological theory is found largely wanting, and the spatial theory – where both parties and the electorate are divided on policy goals as well as means – also has little apparent impact. The analyses are rigorous and the conclusions valid, but one aspect of the model's operationalization raises queries. A key variable in these – and most of the book's later – analyses is party identification. This well-established concept drawn from American political science was used by Butler and Stokes in the original BES; it depicts voters developing partisan identifications, enduring link with a particular party, having determined – through family history, class locations and other influences – that it is the one they will usually support. Previous BES analyses showed that the class basis of British electoral behaviour has declined and such long-term attachments no longer dominate many people's political attitudes and behaviour. They are more volatile in their evaluations of parties, and to reflect that Whiteley et al. adopt an approach from rational choice theory they describe as a 'running tally'. People's attitudes to parties change – sometimes over just short periods in the light of particular events, such as the Iraq war and Labour in 2003 and student fees and the Liberal Democrats in 2011. Positive evaluations can strengthen voters' feelings about a party, negative evaluations weaken them – even lead to a change in favoured party. Those changes are not identified directly. Instead, respondents were asked 'Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat or what?'; those who picked a specific party were said to identify with it. This is not party identification as many interpret it, therefore (or partisanship as frequently deployed in the book), but rather a measure of 'current party preference'; unfortunately the same terminology is used for two separate concepts.

The chapters on the 2010 election cover the campaign period – with a major focus on leader images, and particular reference to the three televised debates and their short-term impact on voting intentions – and then how respondents voted. Once again, the conclusions are clear: the valence model provides the major contributions to accounting for party choice, with party identification, leader images, and party positions on the respondents' main issues the main determinants.

The conclusions are consistent with theory, model and analytical results. But alternative interpretations are available. For example, the sociological model is dismissed because most of the variables representing it – age, education, gender, income, social class, union membership, employment sector etc. – are only weakly linked to party choice in the regression equations relative to those links associated with valence model variables – leader images, partisanship, party policy positions. This is at odds with some of the findings. Table 5.1, for example, shows that when only the socio-demographic variables are included they correctly classify 71.5 per cent of voters according to whether they voted for Labour or another party; when only the valence model variables are included, that percentage is 87.7; and when all variables are included it is 88.8. Is the first group of variables really irrelevant? And if the sociological model is obsolescent, why are 'several sociodemographic variables [incorporated] as statistical controls' in some of the models (p.202)?

This suggests unexplored collinearity. The authors refer to the well-known 'funnel of causality' model, whereby some variables precede others as determinants of voting choice. (In the classic sociological model, social class precedes – largely determines – party identification.) In the valence models, therefore, people from one class may be more likely to identify with one party rather than the others, more likely to prefer one party leader over the others, and so forth – but these relationships get submerged in model-fitting that includes all variables in one analysis. The authors summarise their analyses of the 2007-2010 period in a flow diagram that recognises such a 'funnel of causality' (p.89), but it is never tested. Like most analysts of British electoral behaviour (the present author included), Whiteley et al. pay passing recognition to the funnel argument, but do not test it with the appropriate method – structural equations, with which, for example, the direct and indirect influences of

class variables could be evaluated; perhaps the sociological model is not as obsolescent as we are led to believe?

The remaining chapters move beyond the 2010 election. Chapter 6 uses the CMS to assess voter attitudes after formation of the coalition government and its austerity programme implemented – again validating the valence model. The next chapter turns to the AV referendum: some voted according to their opinions on this form of electoral reform; others relied on the party leaders' positions and whether they trusted them.

The eighth chapter is innovative, revisiting the valence model with a new intervening variable – life satisfaction. Citizens may not respond favourably to some initiatives, so governments seeking re-election should focus on policies with the largest positive impacts on public subjective well-being. Questions asking people how satisfied they are 'with their life as a whole' address this, alongside others asking whether CMS respondents had any direct experience of a particular policy area – such as treatment by the NHS – and whether they were satisfied with the outcome. Those most satisfied were most likely to support the governing party – but they also tended to feel more satisfied if the party they voted for was in government, an endogeneity problem requiring further analysis (the funnel of causality again).

Finally, Chapter 9 assesses electoral prospects in the context of valence and austerity politics, setting the British situation in wider European context. This is probably the most difficult chapter for readers unused to the modelling strategies deployed, but the conclusions are clear and largely uncontroversial: whether one or both of the parties that formed the government in 2010 will retain power after the 2015 contest will depend on success of their economic policies plus their impact on subjective well-



Gordon Brown at Davos 2009. Credit: [World Economic Forum](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

being. The policies may succeed (i.e. in reducing the deficit, keeping inflation low and reducing unemployment) on their own terms but voters who feel their well-being has not improved – real wages have declined for many since 2010 – may not judge them positively.

This conclusion continues the stress on valence politics, linked to subjective well-being, but one of the difficulties with that model relative to its competitors, especially the spatial model, concerns cause-and-effect. Is the valence model winning out in the analyses reported in *Affluence, Austerity and Electoral Change in Britain* because there is no alternative? If the parties converged in true Downsian fashion over the last few decades – thereby enabling Blair's 1997 and 2001 substantial victories – then if they are indistinguishable ideologically another means of discriminating among them is needed, hence the valence argument. But if the parties diverge – and some of Miliband's policy proposals as the long campaign for 2015 got under way in late 2013 suggest that is happening, with Cameron moving rightwards on several issues to counter the UKIP threat – then maybe the spatial model will become more relevant?

This is an incredibly rich book analytically – all undertaken and written-up little more than 18 months after election. The authors claim to have made six major innovations: their theoretical and empirical extension of the valence model; the use of 'fast and frugal heuristic' models to account for the short-cuts voters take when making electoral choices (as with the use of leader images); the detailed analyses of campaign dynamics; the CMS data; the study of the AV referendum; and the introduction of subjective well-being as a linking variable within the valence model. The sheer volume of work reported almost overwhelms: certainly it cannot all be fully considered in a single review. There are many points of detail where the adopted

strategies can be challenged – as with the use of tactical voting as an independent variable with no recognition of the local context. Indeed, apart from some use of regional dummy variables – largely unjustified; research has shown that the main variations occur at much finer-grained scales – the important geographical variation in the decision-making contexts goes largely ignored.

In its own terms, this book is a major success, overwhelmingly validating the authors' chosen approach; it will have a major impact. This might initially be on the authors' own terms, but the many issues raised, theoretical and operational as well as analytical, may mean that in the longer term it becomes a major stimulus to rethinking the relevance of various theories. To achieve that is a major contribution, as is the massive innovation that the authors have made in data collection and dissemination. The book is a further jewel in the crown of British analytical social science – sustained by the ESRC.

Ron Johnston is a professor in the School of Geographical Sciences at the University of Bristol. His books include *Environmental Problems: Nature, Economy and State* (1989) and *Nature, State and Economy: A Political Economy of the Environment* (1996). [Read more reviews by Ron](#) .