

Labour faces important strategic challenges as new social cleavages emerge

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How do voters decide on which party to support? **Eric Shaw** explains that, rather than being 'rational', most people follow cognitive short-cuts, reaching conclusion on the basis of their perceptions of economic competence and the quality of party leadership. Labour faces issues on both of these counts: Ed Miliband is widely regarded as a weak leader and the public has largely accepted the coalition's frame; namely, that Labour was responsible for crashing the economy. Moreover, new patterns of social attachment have emerged, reshaping both political and policy preferences. Norms, lifestyles and ethnicity have replaced class as key markers, presenting important strategic challenges for Labour.



Not long after the 2010 election, Labour's polling score recovered by several percentage points as it gained disenchanted Lib Dem votes. The party's support then advanced a little further, retreated and then stagnated, even slipping a little. What is happening? Let's try and step back a little from Westminster frenzy to explore why.

It is now widely recognised that the decay of class identity and solidarity and traditional party attachments has reconfigured the electoral landscape. But what are the new shaping forces? Some optimistic commentators ('rational choice' theorists) contend that the 'expressive' voter – the unthinking habitual loyalist – has been replaced by the cool, sophisticated and discriminating elector, scrupulously and rationally calculating which package of policies service him or her best. Meanwhile, back on planet earth, a quite different school of thought – the 'valence' theorists – present a rather different view. In essence they subscribe to the following propositions:

1. The key political questions are matters on which most voters agree – *valence issues* – (e.g. rising living standards), and not where they disagree – *position issues* – (e.g. levels of equality). These issues tend to dominate political debate.
2. Most voters (call them 'the non-Broadsheet readers') are not motivated to find out much about policies: they either lack the interest, inclination or information-processing capacity to absorb political knowledge easily.
3. It follows that, as cognitive short-cuts, voters reach conclusions about parties on the basis of their perceptions of their economic competence and of the quality of their leadership (i.e., their governing capability).

But how are perceptions formed given most voters' political indifference and knowledge gaps? Three quick answers: by broad impressions communicated by the media; by ideas and values in general currency – the 'conventional wisdom' about policies, problems and people; and by the way perceptions are filtered by group affiliations.

What follows from all this? *Personalities matter*. In this respect, Labour has a problem with Ed Miliband. Recently YouGov reported that only 27 per cent think he's doing well as Labour leader, while 59 per cent think he's doing badly. (40 per cent think David Cameron is doing well as prime minister, 52 per cent badly). Miliband is widely regarded as a weak leader with a fuzzy image, failing to instil confidence as a potential prime minister. Many appear to regard him as a 'geek', weird and difficult to relate to. All this may be an absurd caricature, attesting to the influence of the media and the irrational and impoverished nature of British political discourse, but it is none the less real for all that.

The economy matters. Everyone accepts this but few reflect on how voters reach judgments about respective economic competence. Put very simply, the economic credibility of a party is heavily influenced by how economic

problems are *framed* – *how they are diagnosed and understood*. Labour's problem is that many voters accept the Tory/Lib Dem frame; that the financial crisis was caused by the Labour government's 'profligacy', maxing out on the nation's credit card and piling-up huge debts. Hence the need for Tory/Lib Dem austerity. However bizarre and irrational this belief may be (whatever happened to securitised American sub-prime mortgages? etc. etc.), it has the virtue of simplicity and has severely damaged Labour's economic reputation.

The way in which people construe problems matters. Of the three major electoral concerns (according to YouGov polls) in only one is Labour in the lead: the NHS. The economy we have already noted. The other two – both highly emotive – are welfare benefits and (in particular) immigration. On both these issues, voters prefer the Tories by a wide margin.

We haven't the space to investigate why this is the case, not least because, as research has shown, on both issues popular perceptions are wildly at odd with the facts. But one societal trend (not confined to the UK) is worth noting: new societal cleavages and new pattern of social attachment have emerged and reshaping both political and policy preferences. Generations ago the British working class used to be fractured between the 'rough' and the 'respectable' working class. This, it has been suggested, has been restructured and revived in the form of a new divide between 'ordinary working families' and immigrants, scroungers and strivers; a cleavage in which norms, lifestyles and ethnicity have replaced class as the key markers.

This is the negative side of Labour's balance sheet. There is a plus side to: the Tories have yet to benefit much from the (partial) economic revival, and although UKIP is taking votes from both major parties it is shipping more to the Conservatives whilst the Lib Dems continue to limp along. The electoral system too (for the moment) is working in Labour's favour. But how to cope with Labour's strategic challenges? On this point the party and leadership is divided, but difficult decisions cannot for long be delayed.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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