Party differences?

It seems logical that when people go to the polls, they vote for the candidate who is in greatest agreement with them about the issues. But detailed research by Professor Paul Whiteley and Professor David Sanders of Essex University shows that in contemporary Britain that’s not quite how it works.

These are days of consensus politics. When it comes to key issues such as the economy and terrorism, political parties are pretty much on the same side. Voters therefore need to judge who they believe will perform most effectively to bring about a thriving economy and who will keep our cities safe.

Professors Whiteley and Sanders call this ‘performance politics’, and the agreed-upon policy goals are called ‘valence issues’.

“In the world of valence politics, nearly everyone holds the same opinion on issues that matter for electoral choice”, they state in their recently published book, *Performance Politics and the British Voter*.”Performance, actual and anticipated, in achieving consensually agreed-upon policy goals is how parties and their leaders are judged.”

Yet reliable information about who can best deliver these outcomes is hard to come by. Voters need to use cues delivered by party leaders in official material and on websites, television and in newspapers. “Rating leaders in terms of characteristics such as competence, responsiveness and trustworthiness enables voters to choose a party whose leader will be a ‘safe pair of hands’ – someone who will manage the affairs of state effectively and make consequential decisions with prudence and sagacity”, say Professors Whiteley and Sanders.

Their study, which has tracked the same people over seven sets of interviews from the 2005 election until 2009, attempts to show the way voters process information and respond to party leaders and policy issues.

The September 11th attacks in New York added to the 2005 mix of election issues in Britain. Once a consensus formed that the then Prime Minister Tony Blair had been wrong to invade Iraq, his sparkling image was severely tarnished. This “translated into a significant reduction in Labour support in the 2005 election”. Resolving the Iraq War had become a valence issue.

As a result, Labour strategists emphasised the booming economy as the key reason why voters should give Labour another term. Partisanship helped too. Voters disillusioned with Labour were likely to refrain from voting rather than migrate to rival parties. On top of that, voters were unimpressed with Conservative leader Michael Howard and his predecessors.

Voters’ feelings about a leader are inextricably intertwined with the way they think about the whole party, say the researchers. Writing in 2008, before the full force of the credit crunch corroded Labour’s fortunes even further, they explained: “Saddled with an economic downturn, and lumbered with an avalanche of negative publicity about the failure to hold a referendum on the EU Treaty of Lisbon, a controversial plan to detain terrorist suspects for 42 days without charging them, and a widely criticized U-turn on tax policy, Mr [Gordon] Brown and his party have crashed together in the polls.” Now, immigration and terrorism supplement traditional ‘valence’ issues such as the economy, health care, and education.

The researchers believe that people’s judgments about the performance of parties and their leaders influence their feelings about the entire system. Their trust in Parliament, the police, or local government ebbs and flows in response to the political performance judgments they make. “Performance politics is at the heart of contemporary British democracy.”