INTRODUCTION:
ASSESSING POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN CONTEXT – BRITISH PARTY LEADERSHIP DURING AUSTERITY

Political leaders world-wide have been facing challenging times. The Great Financial Crisis of 2007-8 is considered by many economists to have been the worst since at least the Great Depression (Krugman 2012). It led to many leaders having to campaign for (re)election and govern with significant public deficits, stagnant growth and public unrest. Electoral support and membership of the main political parties has been in long-term decline in many democracies. There is also frequent public cynicism about politics, politicians, political leaders and the political class (Hay 2007; Norris 2011).

All of these challenges have been particularly acute for British party leaders, but the political consequences of the crash stand out. A banking crisis, ‘credit crunch’ and major recession followed. Gordon Brown was faced with the collapse of Northern Rock and a downturn in economic fortunes that could undermine his credentials for economic management, only months after taking office from Tony Blair in 2007. David Cameron and George Osborne, whose Conservative Party came to power in 2010 in Coalition with the Liberal Democrats, inherited a budget that many thought required tax rises, public spending cuts or both. They were also to govern during a continued period of turbulence in the international economic environment, especially within the Eurozone. Ed Miliband, elected as Labour Party Leader in September 2010, was faced with the challenge of forming an opposition to Cameron and Clegg, with his prospects
for electoral victory likely to be affected by Labour’s newly tarnished reputation for economic management.

Who was successful? Who was not? Did the crisis positively or negatively affect the leaders’ prospects of winning and/or maintaining the Prime Ministership? What other challenges did they face? In more general terms, how can we gauge each leader to have been successful or otherwise? What yardsticks or frameworks should we use? How can or should we factor the contextual circumstances that leaders face, such as the effects of the crisis, into our judgements of them? As Jim Buller and Toby James argue in their article in this issue, it is commonly accepted that context matters and should be factored into our assessments. The existing literature, however, is less clear on how to do this.

This collection of articles, drawn from a workshop at the University of East Anglia, all focus on the capacity of leaders to win and maintain power during these difficult times. They make an important contribution to this debate in two ways. Firstly, they provide case study assessments of political leaders during times of austerity in Britain by providing assessments of rival party leaders from 2007-2014. Secondly, the papers contribute towards the range of available political science methodologies for assessing political leaders and factoring context into this assessment.
Buller and James, building on their earlier development of the statecraft approach (2012), propose a theoretical framework for conceptualising the structures and the structural changes that leaders (as agents) face. This requires that we are sensitive to, among other things, the nature of capitalist social relations and changes within them when assessing political leaders. There is a risk that structural transformations, like the financial crisis, can throw the political fortunes of leaders off course, and we should ‘reward’ leaders who successfully navigate such choppy waters in our assessments. Using this approach they argue that Gordon Brown did exceptionally well in adjusting to such a difficult set of economic problems and should be given more credit than he has received so far.

Andrew Gamble also uses a statecraft framework to assess Osborne’s political strategy. He argues that the financial crash was less of a constraint and more of an opportunity for the Conservatives to develop a new statecraft strategy. The crisis offered them the opportunity to ‘take back the mantle of economic competence from the Labour party... for the first time since the ERM debacle in 1992’. Whatever the economic merits (or otherwise) of Osborne’s response to Britain’s economic challenges, his management was politically astute statecraft. By skilfully playing the austerity narrative Osborne kept Labour on the back foot.

Mark Bennister and Richard Heffernan provide an assessment of David Cameron rooted in their previous work on prime ministerial power. This explains how a prime ministers power waxes and wanes over time by identifying their personal and institutional resources. The twin constraints of having to work in coalition with the
Liberal Democrats and having a large segment of the Conservative parliamentary party hostile to his political agenda were the key constraints facing Cameron. This had the effect of constraining his authority within the executive and his autonomy from his parliamentary party. As a result, Bennister and Heffernan argue that Cameron has failed to be a predominant prime minister, often unable to fully assert himself on either his party or government, like Thatcher or Blair.

Tim Bale argues that being the leader of the opposition in itself provides strategic opportunities and constraints. Leaders of the opposition are at the disadvantage of being taken less seriously by the media and can't issue ‘give away goodies’ for voters in the way that incumbent governments can. They may therefore need to accommodate rather than shape the preferences of the electorate. Bale offers a framework for assessing leaders of the opposition, based on the earlier work of Stuart Ball, before applying it to Miliband. Bale concludes that Miliband has, following one of the Labour party’s worst ever electoral defeats, succeeded in many of the tasks required to bring a party back to power from opposition, and therefore deserves praise.

Paul Whiteley et al. focus on the relationship between the economy and electoral support for the main parties from 2004-13. The economy is usually thought to be an important determinant of the political fortunes of incumbent governments and is at the heart of valence model of electoral choice that the authors have developed elsewhere (Clarke et al. 2009). Their study shows how the fortunes of the Labour party was strongly influenced by the economy while they were in office. The Conservatives
and Liberal Democrats, however, have failed to gain from the upturn in the economy which has taken place since early 2013. Overall, they point to a failure of all parties to convince the public that they can successfully manage the economy.

We therefore hope that this collection make an enduring contribution to our understanding of the era of austerity politics in Britain, but also the more theoretical political science literature on assessing political leadership in context which will be of interest to those studying leadership in democracies worldwide.

Bibliography


