How Political Leaders Assess Political Leaders:

Testing Neo-Statecraft Leadership Theory in Conversation with British Party Leaders

Abstract

There is an ongoing methodological debate about how political leaders should be assessed. One leading approach posits that we should assess leaders according to whether they achieve *statecraft*, that is, whether they win and maintain office in government. This article assesses that theory through an innovative method: interviewing prominent British political leaders themselves and asking them for their direct assessment of the theory. Drawing from scientific realist methods and methodologies, the political leaders were employed as co-researchers, asking them to 'test' and revise the model. The interviews provided much support that assessing leaders in terms of winning office was a legitimate and 'fair' test because it is sensitive to the key structural dilemma that leaders face. However, interviewees also provided some causes for revision and criticism of the model in that neo-statecraft theory did not directly allow a leader's broader public and social value to be recognised.

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Introduction

Political leaders matter. The decisions that they make can have a decisive impact on public policy, the economic fortunes of their national economy and the fortunes of their own party. In an age of globalisation, the consequences of their actions go far beyond the nation-state. Even those leaders who take decisions to retreat their economies from free markets and international agreements have major consequences for world markets and geopolitics.

Assessments of leaders are common in political punditry and public opinion. During times of anti-politics and political disengagement these evaluations are commonly critical (Hay 2007; Norris 2011; Stoker 2006). Yet, scholarly methodologies from within political science have been notoriously underdeveloped. It has too often been left for the biographer or historian to write evaluations of their leaders. While rich in history and context, such works lead to an absence of common terminology for identifying the 'good' and 'bad' and the problems involved in making such assessments. A more concerted debate has emerged, however, offering a variety of new competing frameworks which could be appropriate for a variety of political systems (Bennister, 't Hart, and Worthy 2014; Buller and James 2012, 2015; Clarke and James 2015; Clarke et al. 2015; Greenstein 2009; James and Buller 2015c; Royal Holloway Group 2015; Theakston 2011; Theakston and Gill 2011).

One leading framework for assessing political leaders is the neo-statecraft approach. This argued that ultimately leaders could be assessed in terms of whether they win office and power, or at least, move themselves and their party in that direction of travel. It is a framework which has seen considerable interest and recent much theory building. Yet it has been criticised for being rarely 'tested' against empirical data. This article make a contribution to the literature by undertaking such an assessment through a novel methodology: by asking political leaders themselves to assess the theory. Using methodological tools from scientific realism, interviews with former British party leaders in which they were employed as 'co-researchers,' asking them to assess the theory. The argument is that the interviews provide much support for assessing leaders in statecraft terms because it is sensitive to the key structural dilemma that leaders face: winning office is a pre-requisite to making social change and ensuring social value. However, interviewees also provided some causes for revision and criticism of the model in that neo-statecraft theory did not directly allow a leader's broader public and social value to be recognised. Lessons are therefore drawn about how the model should be revised and how leadership should be assessed.

Part 1 of this article outlines how the study of political leadership has progressed in recent years and describes the contours of a debate that has emerged on how we should assess political leaders. Part 2 describes how neo-statecraft, an approach based in elite theories of the state, came to be used to understand political leadership and assess it. Part 3 argues that the ontological and epistemological premises of the theory means that we need to treat the status of the theory in a specific way and explains the methods that are used. Part 4 explains the themes that emerged from the interviews while and Part 5 summarises the conclusions.

1. **The study of political leadership**

The study of political leadership has recently become re-established as the focus of systematic academic attention within political science, after years of neglect. Writings on the significance of political leaders date back to Aristotle, Cicero, Plutarch, Augustine, Erasmus and Machiavelli (Kane and Patapan 2014, 3), but it was widely recognised to have been given disproportionately little prominence in the study of politics and overviews of the discipline (Foley 2013, 7-9). Writing in 1987, Jean Blondel remarked that it was 'prima facie surprising that a general analysis of [political leadership]… should be

so little advanced' (Blondel 1987, 1). He was scathing about existing methods for assessing leaders and the generated classifications that divided leaders into dichotomous categories of 'the real leaders, the heroes (or "villan"), and the (2) "office holders", the "managers", the ordinary men who have little or no effect on the course of events' (Blondel 1987, 20). One of the reasons for the poverty of this approach was that: 'leadership cannot be disassociated from the environment in which it takes place' and it is therefore 'difficult to assess and has proved even more difficult to measure' (Blondel 1987, 17).

From this point a variety of approaches have developed a consensus around the need for an interactionist approach, which in simple terms, is the idea that we need to consider the relationships between political leaders, political leadership, the environment and the relationships between them (Elgie 1995). There are now a substantial variety of approaches and frameworks (also see: Helms 2012; Kane and Patapan 2014; Rhodes and t'Hart 2014; Strangio, Hart, and Walter 2013).

Elgie (2015) separates out these approaches into those that are 'consistent with' positivism, constructivism and scientific realism. *Positivist approaches* seek a scientific evaluation of leaders. Expert evaluations are used to compose league tables of success based on quantitative measures. The data used to measure the dependent variable of success are mass citizen surveys (Lonnstrom and Kelly 2003) expert academic surveys (Maranell 1970; Schlesinger Sr 1948; Theakston and Gill 2006; Theakston and Gill 2011), the views of parliamentarians (Royal Holloway Group 2015) the legislative support they receive (Edwards 1985), or policy outcomes (Strangio, Hart, and Walter 2013).

Interpretivist approaches argue that that the contextual environment in which leaders are located are ideational constructs. Leaders are thereby assessed according to how they interact with this ideational domain and the change they make through rhetoric and language (Atkins and Finlayson 2013; Finlayson 2014) or their performance (Gaffney and Lahel 2013). Meanwhile, ethnographers and interpretivist often argue that the aim of their study is to understand and explain, rather than assess actors (Rhodes 2011).

Scientific realist accounts include (according to Elgie) evaluations of the political psychology of the leader, whether it is their characteristics and traits (Greenstein 1967; Greenstein 2009) their leadership styles (Barber 1972) and historical institutionalist work on the contextual environment that leaders interact with (Skowronek 1993, 2011). However, while they may be consistent with scientific realism, few (if any) build directly from their concepts this approach.[1] The neo-statecraft approach, is which considered in this article, is one critical relist approach, which was not considered in Elgie's review and is directly situated within scientific realism.

2. Statecraft Theory

Neo-statecraft theory began from the work of Jim Bulpitt. His famous Statecraft thesis was first stated in 1986 as a contribution to a debate on Margaret Thatcher and 'Thatcherism' (Bulpitt 1986). Contrary to the prevailing view (Hall 1988; Hall and Jacques 1983), Bulpitt argued that Margaret Thatcher was not a leader driven by a particular ideological *raison d'etre*. Instead, she was a politician driven by political expediency, making short term tactical moves in order to win elections for herself and her party. Bulpitt therefore held much praise for a leader who sought to re-establish the Conservative's credentials for economic competence and won three elections. For him, there was no such thing as

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[1] Of the realist approaches identified by Elgie, only one item directly cite critical realism in their work – and doesn't particularly deposit it as scholarship on political leadership, as such: Marsh, Smith, and Richards (2003)

'Thatcherism' to explain. Political leaders are primarily interested in statecraft: 'the art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office' (Bulpitt 1986, 21).

Bulpitt therefore conceptualised party leaders as be self-interested, rational and cohesive actors. They don't therefore (necessarily) try to govern in the national interest, or upon the basis of ideological views. What matters is winning, and winning again. They will seek to achieve this through the use of 'governing codes' which are a 'set of relatively coherent principles or rules underlying policies and policy related behaviour' (Bulpitt 1996, 1097) and 'a set of political support mechanisms designed to protect and promote the code and objectives' (Bulpitt 1996, 1097). Bulpitt's original support mechanisms were party management, a winning electoral strategy, political argument hegemony, and most importantly, governing competence (Bulpitt 1986, 22). Leaders operated within a structural context, that Bulpitt called a ‚natural rate of governability', which affected their ability to achieve successful statecraft (Bulpitt 1988, 185).

Jim Buller and Toby James (2012) asserted that the statecraft approach presented a useful method for assessing political leaders. Once clear advantage that it held was that it allowed the structural constraint that leaders faced, the need to keep winning elections, into consideration when we assess political leaders. In the winner-takes-all environment of British politics there is no prizes for second place. As Bulpitt expressed himself: 'Party leaders must…aim to win general elections simply because the consequences of defeat…are so awful' (Bulpitt 1988, 188). Moreover, according to Bulpitt:

> '[T]hese structural characteristics of modern British politics have produced party elites with common, initial, subsistence-level objectives, namely winning national office, avoiding too many problems while there and getting re-elected (Bulpitt 1996, 225).

A second advantage of the approach, Buller and James asserted, is that it treats leadership as a collective exercise (2012, 538-9). Executive decision-making is never collegial and rarely will an individual leader be responsible for the leadership of a government. There will be a small number of senior ministers or advisors who will form a clique and act as a unitary actor over time. Bulpitt's focus was therefore on the 'Court' (a term used to refer to the 'the formal Chief Executive plus his/her political friends and advisors' (Bulpitt 1995, 518)).

Bulpitt's original statecraft approach has received much praise, but has been subject to much criticism. Firstly, the body of work that Bulpitt wrote was light in quantity and his concepts were accused of being 'vague and ill-defined' (Evans 2006, 53). Much of his work was unpublished and sometimes contradictory, claimed Rhodes and Tiernan (2013), arguing that he was 'no system builder'. Secondly, and more fundamentally, Griffiths has argued that statecraft theory reduces ideology and values to 'a means for gaining power' but this is an over-simplistic account of the complex motivations of leaders. Power grabbing alone:

> 'this does not seem to ring true as an explanation for the role of ideology in politicians' lives… it does not simply seem to be the case that ideologies are no more than instruments to be picked up, tried and dropped at will, in a bid to win elections' (Griffiths 2015, 4).

Thirdly, the approach has been claimed to be untestable. Rhodes has claimed there is no counterfactual to the approach (Rhodes 1988, 33). Even Bulpitt accepted that '…the thesis [is] untestable, [it] cannot be disproved' (Bulpitt 1983, 239), but Griffith goes further to blast that 'there is no appropriate methodology to apply Statecraft theory... politicians rarely chose to describe their actions in terms of Statecraft. Statecraft theorists tend to provide an account of the motivation for the actions of a politician at odds with accounts politicians give themselves. This also puts the analyst in the awkward position of having to defend the Statecraft hypothesis in the face of evidence to the contrary' (Griffiths 2015, 5). Fourthly, critics have asked whether Bulpitt's support mechanisms are in

fact those which will secure successful statecraft. Why has governing competence been selected over and above all other factors? What role is there, for example, of personality? (Griffiths 2015, 5-6).

Neo-statecraft

However, newer scholarship, acknowledging and responding to some of these criticisms, has built upon Bulpitt's foundations to develop a *neo-statecraft* approach.

The starting point is to ground the approach epistemologically and ontologically in the critical realism associated with scholars such as Andrew Sayer (2000, 2010), Margaret Archer (1982; 1995), Roy Bhaskar (2008) and Bob Jessop (2001). Although there is variation between these authors in important respects, there are some common points, from which neo-statecraft proceeds. Unlike interpretivists, realists argues that there is a real world which exists independently of our knowledge of it. There is necessity in this world and objects and agents therefore have causal powers. The difficulty for the researcher, is that there are multiple domains of reality to which she does not have access. The domain of the empirical realm, consists of experienced events which are directly observable. However, there are also the actual realm, consisting of events and experiences, not all of which are experienced), and the real which consists of the generative mechanisms.

Using philosophical realism is useful, argue proponents of neo-statecraft, because it overcomes the criticism of a lack of falsifiability. As James (2012, 76-9) notes, such a criticism has positivist origins. While the belief that falsifiability is widely held, and reflected in key works on positivist political science such as King, Keohane, and Verba (1994), it is inappropriate for a framework of this type.   It is also important because it provides a way of conceptualising the relationship between structure and agency (Buller and James 2015).

Secondly, there has been work to provide a clearer way to operationalise some of the concepts that Jim Bulpitt originally developed for empirical research. Buller and James (2012) drew from work in electoral studies and comparative party politics to provide a way in which concepts such as governing competence and party management could be assessed, although they were keen to stress that evaluations of leaders should not be reduced to a quantitative measure and requires the 'analyst to exercise some individual interpretation and judgement' (James and Buller 2015b, 32). In so doing, they give justification for why the support mechanisms help to achieve statecraft. Governing competence is so important, for example, as the literature on valence politics documents because it is often the 'economy stupid' (Clarke et al. 2004; Clarke et al. 2011; Whiteley et al. 2015). New concepts have been added on the basis of empirical research. In *Elite Statecraft and Election Administration*, James (2012) argues that the Court will often seek to change the constitution to maximise their chances of successful statecraft. Bending the rules of the game is therefore a fifth support mechanism that they will seek to achieve and by which they should be evaluated (also see: James and Buller 2015a, 26-9).

Thirdly, neo-statecraft has been carefully delimitated from rational choice theory and situated within historical institutionalism. Rational choice theorists make actors' rational and self-interested behaviour an *a priori* assumption to the analysis. For neo-statecraft theorists, however, the motives of elites derive from the institutional landscape in which they operate (James 2016). The winner takes all environment enforces a Darwinian logic in which they must fight for office or lose their job. Moreover, elites will not always act in a self-interested way. The extent to which they do so depends upon their knowledge of policy options and interests: there is an *elite policy-agenda* with peaks and troughs in the issue attention of a leader in any given policy area (James 2011).

These points aside, it remains that the case that neo-statecraft theory has not been regularly tested against empirical evidence and there is further scope for doing so. Bulpitt wrote very little and it has been used as a conceptual framework in only a limited number of policy areas. Although five key support mechanisms have been identified, we should remain open to the view as to whether these are the five most important, or whether there are others of importance. It has been noted that leaders face a structural context, the precise features of this structural context has not been mapped out.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

The article focusses on four research questions:

- Is the neo-statecraft framework a 'fair' test for a political leader in Britain?
- Are the statecraft support mechanisms the most important ones?
- What are the key features of the structural context that leaders face?

The neo-statecraft thesis was tested as a framework for evaluating leaders using interviews with past former leaders of the main three nationwide UK political parties between 1983 and 2010. Seven of the twelve leaders were interviewed, with at least two from the main parties, as listed in Table 1.

Leader	Party	General elections fought	Time in Office as Leader
Tony Blair	Labour	3	2 May 1997 – 27 June 2007
Neil Kinnock	Labour	2	2 October 1983 – 18 July 1992
Michael Howard	Conservative	1	6 November 2003 – 6 December 2005
William Hague	Conservative	1	19 June 1997 – 13 September 2001
Paddy Ashdown	Liberal Democrats	2	16 July 1988 – 11 August 1999
David Steel	Liberal Party / Liberal Democrats	3	7 July 1976 – 16 July 1988, 3 March 1988 – 16 July 1988
Nick Clegg	Liberal Democrats	1	18 December 2007 – 16 July 2015

Table 1: List of interviewees

There are some obvious methodological criticisms that could be raised with the approach taken. Firstly, it is common for interviewees to be tempted to not state their real beliefs and instead will present themselves and their motivations in the best possible light. This is especially the case for elite politicians who are skilled at promoting their public image. As noted above, James (2012, 77-8) has argued that elite activity takes place in actual and real domains of reality. The stated opinions of politicians, that which is experienced in the empirical realm, therefore misses what is unobservable. Elite interest are a covert mechanism. One response to this is that the researcher, being present, may be able to judge the sincerity and guardedness of the interviewee. Realist approaches to science stress that knowledge In the case of the interviews, the view of the researcher was that Michael Howard was the more guarded and cautious respondent, while William Hague and Neil Kinnock, seemed to speak more freely. Their answers could therefore be given greater weight.

However, innovations in realist social science methodologies provide a toolkit to help overcome this challenge and generate more reliable engagement from interviewees. Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley

(1997, 153-82) have outlined a realist approach to interviewing in which, contrary to more conventional approaches, 'the subject and the subject matter are not one and the same thing' (p.155). Interviewees are employed as co-researchers in testing and revising theory. The aim of an interview is therefore not to obtain objective information about the interviewee. Instead, 'the researcher's theory is the subject matter of the interview, and the subject (stakeholder) is there to confirm, to falsify and, above all, to refine that theory' (1997, 155). The subject is not therefore the quality of the leader's tenure, but the quality of the theory which the experience from their tenure can be used to illustrate.

The interviewer therefore has two key strategies. The first is the use of the *teacher-learner* function in which the interviewee is taught the conceptual structure. The second is *conceptual refinement* process where the interviewee delivers their own thoughts in the 'context of, and (perhaps) as a correction to, the researcher's own theory' and are given 'an opportunity to explain and clarify that thinking' (p.168). Interviewees were therefore provided with a draft book chapter which outlined the statecraft approach in advance of the interview.[2] Interviewees were asked how they thought contemporary party leaders should be judged and then asked to evaluate the theory, drawing from their own experience. They were then asked questions relating to their own tenure using the framework as a way of ascertaining the sufficiency of the theory in how they narrated their time in office. In advance of the interview, leaders were provided with draft book chapter outlining statecraft theory. The chapter also outlined a range of factors that might make up the structural context, based on a literature review of the comparative politics literature. These are provided in Table 2.

Statecraft task	Contextual factors
Winning electoral strategy	• Party resources and campaign infrastructure • Unfavourable electoral laws (constituencies, election administration, electoral system, party finance) • Partisan alignment of the press • Ability to call election when polls are favourable
Governing competence	• Party reputation • Conditions for successful economic growth • Foreign policy disputes • Time in office
Party management	• Presence of credible rival leaders • Rules for dethroning • Levels of party unity • Available mechanisms for party discipline • Time in office
Political argument hegemony	• Ideological developments at the international level • Alignment of the press • Available off-the-shelf strategies in the 'garbage can' • Developments in the party system • Time in office

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[2] This was later published as James and Buller (2015b)

Bending the rules of the game	• Presence of policy triggers or favourable conditions to enact (or prevent) change

Table 2: Contextual Factors in the Assessment of Statecraft

A second concern that could be raised is that leaders may describe good or bad leadership according to their own world view but this does not give their views a philosophical, normative underpinning. Leaders are powerful political actors whose interests may different from society. The interviews may confirm neo-statecraft theory to be consistent with their view of how leaders should be assessed, but shouldn't scholarship seek to critique and not reinforce their views and values? Critical realism is so called, suggests Pawson (2006: 18:-9), because Margaret Archer and Roy Bhaskar stressed that social scientists can provide normative and critical narratives to mistaken and popularly held accounts of the world. For this reason, it is therefore important that frameworks for assessing leaders are not reduced to *only* those which leader themselves approve. However, there are no other actors that have experience of being leaders other than leaders themselves. They therefore have a unique practical knowledge and experience from which they can make observations. Realist theory stresses the importance of practical knowledge (Sayer 2010). Subjecting the theory to their knowledge is therefore a logical but potentially very significant advance.

4. Results and Analysis

The centrality of statecraft

The discussion of the interviews begins with the question of whether the interviewees thought statecraft to be a good test of political leadership. Is 'good' British party leadership all about power and statecraft?

The leaders were clear that there were other objectives outside of statecraft that were important. Leaders were clear that they had a variety of aims, each of which could be tests of their leadership, with some reservations made about the statecraft approach. Not all leaders entered politics wanting to become leaders. They were often affected by the context of their times and wanted to bring about positive social change either in policy or ideological terms. William Hague explained that:

> 'growing up in South Yorkshire… with a small business background, which was the family I was brought up in. The context was one of widespread nationalised industries, large local authorities, considerable state housing and Britain being the so-called, 'sick man of Europe'. You really felt change was necessary'

Meanwhile, Nick Clegg suggested that he was inspired by the anti-apartheid movement and was mobilised by the divisiveness of Margaret Thatcher's policies and politics. Leaders, Michael Howard suggested, typically want to 'make a difference and make your community a better place'. These difference could be on specific policies. Neil Kinnock had the local levels of poverty and deprivation impressed on him, while Michael Howard was partly motivated in more ideological terms:

> 'from the time I started to think about politics, I always rejected socialism. It seemed to me that it was basically misguided and that the right way forward was to encourage the individual rather than to seek collective answers to the challenges that every community faces.'

Leadership was also thought of in more abstract terms. Leadership is, according to Tony Blair, 'the ability to set a clear direction and to follow it – overcoming those obstacles.'

There was evidence, in support of the Greenstein thesis, that there are particular personality characteristics that make leaders more successful. These can, in turn, be considered tests of a leader, argued Greenstein. This is an approach that has been applied to Britain by Kevin Theakston (2011). The characteristics cited by the leaders are outlined in Table 3, and bear many similarities to those sketched out by Greenstein.

Important Leadership Characteristics	Example quote
Political intelligence	'You need, as I said earlier, political nous - 'political intelligence': to understand the terrain, the nature of the enemy, the strengths and weaknesses of your own forces, how to build the former and how to diminish the latter. But you also need basic intelligence – insights, comprehension, creativity too.' – Neil Kinnock
Courage	'You have to have courage, otherwise any other gift you have vanishes in the morning dew.' – Paddy Ashdown 'it is very difficult to avoid the loneliness ' – Neil Kinnock
Calmness	'You need calmness… As long as it doesn't disable you, or interfere with your necessary speed of reaction, it is a real quality.' – Neil Kinnock
Patience	'patience in the sense that so much of politics now is breathless, hyperbolic, who's up, who's down, nasty backstabbing and all the rest of it. You just have to keep a sense of patience and perspective – and then be clear in your own mind about what you're trying to do, and go for it, just go for it.' – Nick Clegg
Empathy	'The Italian word for what I want to describe is *simpatico* but we haven't really got an equivalent in the English language. There are different kinds of empathy. There is a kind of empathy that makes people know that you want to understand and respect them but you're not going to patronise them….There can even be an empathy of fear… There can be an empathy… of manifest directness, which means that… the leader can be bruising but it is the genuine… It means that the leader may be coruscating but he is treating you and your honesty with respect.' – Neil Kinnock
Charisma	'There are some people who walk into a room and everybody looks that they are there and there are other people who kind of float around in the corner and nobody notices and so on.' – Michael Howard
Physical resilience	'Do not underestimate how physical frontline politics is. It is an unbelievably physical job; it was one of the things that surprised me the most. I learnt the hard way, because I didn't look after myself for the first year or so, and my health really suffered. I then got fit, ate better, did exercise, kickboxing every morning, and so on Physical resilience is unbelievably important.' – Nick Clegg
Vision	'I think that the most important criteria is that you have a clear vision for the country and where it goes, and are prepared to locate that vision of the country in an understanding of how the future is going to work.' – Tony Blair
Authority	'The ability to convey a sense of authority. That is critical, you have to be able to convey a sense of authority. Authority after all is almost the essence of leadership.' – Michael Howard
Self-awareness	'One of the key qualities of the leader is to know their deficiencies, and therefore to compensate for them in the people you have around you' - Paddy Ashdown.
Loyalty	'British politics is a team affair, where you need to play with the team, have loyalty to the team. So I think loyalty is an extremely important quality. And that means loyalty in leaders to their troops as well, rather than just troops to their leaders.' Paddy Ashdown

Communication	'Nowadays you certainly need to be at ease with television. I think each of the modern leaders in our party have been.' – David Steel
Reachable	'I think you just have to be thought to be reachable, and in contact with real life.' –Steel.
Adaptability	'What you have to go on to realise is that having the credibility to manage the government at the time is not the same as changing the country. That I certainly learned. One of the biggest things about modern democratic politics is that you run for office as the Great Communicator but once you are in government you have to be the Great Executor. Now, that is a completely different skill set. – Tony Blair

Table 3: Fourteen personality characteristics thought to be important for 'good' leadership

The central theme, however, was that achievement of power was a key criteria for success and statecraft was therefore a fair test. While Tony Blair suggested that there were other measures of success, statecraft was a pre-requisite for this:

> 'It is an important test of a leader that you are sufficiently politically competent and astute so that you are in a position that you can lead. If you lose the election, then no one is going to end up asking that question about you particularly…. There will always be something in politics that will be about being sufficiently competent in the business of politics so that you are able to win and that will involve compromises and trade-offs and so on.'

The importance of winning power was also shared by Liberal leaders too, leaders who have historically had much lower expectations for vote share and could never have been expected to win power outright for themselves. For Paddy Ashdown:

> 'Listen, there's only one answer I can give you on that, which is how close did they get to power?

David Steel argued that 'there can only be one criterion and that is: how successful were they in terms of seats [sic].' Meanwhile, Nick Clegg, claimed that:

> 'I've always been a politician who believes that in politics you've got to grab the opportunity to put your views and your beliefs into practice. I still feel that very strongly. So I was unambiguously of the view that the Liberal Democrats should seek to make the journey from opposition into government'

For this reason, there was considerable support for the premise of the neo-statecraft approach, that winning elections, or moving your party towards that goal, is the primary criteria against which leaders should be judged:

> Neil Kinnock: 'In the end it's about winning elections. There are contributing factors but in the end they are covered broadly by the statecraft criteria. But nothing replaces winning elections.'

> William Hague: 'Well overall I think yes… do think overall, flexibly interpreted, it's a fair framework. '

Without winning elections, any wider goal such as enacting positive social change was not possible. Ashdown argued that:

> 'I could see no point in this great philosophy of Liberalism reduced to being a furry little animal on the edges of British politics, proposing good ideas that other people borrowed from and being satisfied with simply

opposing. The party had to be prepared to take the risk of being in government in order to implement the things we believed in, to change the condition of people's lives. I've always wanted to move the party towards power and away from just opportunism and oppositionalism.'

According to Bulpitt:

'Party leaders must ensure that they stay in the major league and must aim to win general elections simply because the consequences of defeat, for an increasingly professional elite, are so awful' (Bulpitt 1988, 188).

Although unsaid, it is implied that they would be expected to resign. When asked about the consequences of defeat, leaders thought that their position would often be untenable after defeat. However, it would usually depended on the margin of that defeat and previous expectations. For an opposition leader, William Hague explained, 'I think if you are in my position, or Neil Kinnock's position in the 1980s, people understand that it would likely take two terms to get back into government… however, you can't lose in opposition for more than two terms'. 'Rules of thumb' therefore develop within the party and Westminster as to what would be an acceptable 'progress' on the previous general election or mitigating circumstances. Howard reflected that he had decided that if he had lost in 2005 but 'managed to destroy the overall majority then I would stay' but if Labour won with 'an overall majority then I would go.'

In sum, statecraft therefore provides an effective way of *measuring cunning political leadership* – the extent to which a leader is successful in winning power, office and influence. It is not a test of *leadership led by conscience* – where the aims, chosen methods and outcomes that are principled and morally good. The former is a pre-requisite for realising many of the goals of the latter, especially in majoritarian political systems such as the UK. Personality was considered an important test alongside this because it could affect the leaders' ability to achieve these ends.

Revising the support mechanisms

In order to win office or move your party in that direction, the neo-statecraft model suggests that five support key tasks should be achieved, admittedly with varying importance. Did the leaders agree?

The leaders generally agreed that the mechanisms proposed by neo-statecraft theory were accurate depictions of the tasks that they faced. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Tony Blair though that governing competence was 'absolutely a precondition of winning again'. As a result:

'I was obsessive about the notion that we had to show in the first term, we had to establish the credibility to govern. Therefore you have to be careful.'

Conservative leaders Howard and Hague agreed that it was to a large extent it was 'the economy stupid' that shaped the results of elections and a focus on governing competence was therefore right. But it was the *perception* of competence that mattered, and not necessarily reality. Both stressed how the economy was doing well in 1997, but as Howard put it:

'the visuals of our emergence from the ERM and Norman Lamont standing on the threshold of the Treasury were so entrenched in people's minds that what was actually happening in the economy didn't cut through.'

The importance of party management was unquestioned. As Kinnock expressed it: 'Divided, irresolute and self-obsessed parties have no appeal to the electorate'. Moreover, poor management of the party can quickly undermine the credibility of leader for governing competence, especially when in opposition, and it is not possible to establish a record by governing. Aware of the importance of party

management, Clegg stress that he would attend every week's parliamentary party meeting to 'constantly try and absorb all the narkiness and bitchiness.'

Constitutional management (or 'bending the rules of the game'), was stressed too. Kinnock pointed out that:

> 'When I first entered Parliament in 1970 the question of the constitutional implications of a policy or strategy wouldn't have been asked. Now you've got to ask it. This is a new idea in British politic - certainly since Ireland in the 1920s or – to a lesser extent – Europe in the '70s. It should be one of the test questions for leaders: Is what you are about to do in this innocuous Green Paper going eventually to lead to an absolute car crash?'

Moreover, the failure to achieve the statecraft support mechanisms often contributed to the leader's downfall. Kinnock reflected that he failed to win the battle of ideas on key policy areas and this undermined his chances of success:

> 'I don't think that I or my colleagues, but certainly I, sought to really fight the battle of ideas. That was partly because I didn't sufficiently believe in the significance of doing so. I should have believed in that more, especially since, as it turned out, I had eight years to play with. From the start we thought that winning was going to take "a two innings match" – and I should have taken the "ideas bat" to the crease. … This is not a mistake that Tony Blair, Alistair Campbell and their associates made. From July 1994, or certainly from conference 1994, they started to build a *narrative*…. I didn't do it and I think that was in the end something I paid the price for.'

Although Kinnock would have been unlikely to have known Bulpitt's work at the time, he was asked whether, in retrospect, he was working statecraft criteria in mind. Kinnock suggested:

> 'I should have known it in any case, whether someone had defined this criterion academically or not.'

Interviewees were keen to stress other support mechanisms in addition to those present in the framework that was presented to them. The ability to demonstrate competence in foreign policy, as well as economic policy was put forward, although arguably this is covered by the concept of governing competence since this refers to all policy areas. A second suggestion was, for Hague, building long term capacity and institutional strength in the party. Hague bemoaned those leaders who left the party infrastructure in such a poor state that success for their successors would be challenging. This arguably should therefore be considered a key component of party management in the model. Lastly, and related, it was suggested that building institutional capacity in local government was important. Hague argued that 'active and numerous councillors with a ward level organisation are important for fighting campaigns':

> 'I gave a lot of attention to party recruitment in local government. I spent, what would have been for most leaders in those circumstances, an excessive amount of time on local government… Now, strength in local government happens almost of its own accord in opposition, but not entirely of its own accord. You need to put some time in.'

This point was also stressed in the Liberal interviews. Again, this may therefore need greater recognition as a part of developing a winning electoral strategy in the model and the evaluation of leaders using the framework.

The structural context

As noted above, a review of the literature was undertaken to identify commonly cited structural factors that might make up part of the structural context. Were these accurate or missing important challenges?

There were few points of disagreement with the model. Instead, additional challenges were stressed. The importance of contingency and context was continually stressed. As Howard suggested:

> 'looking at election performances is a bit too mechanical. It doesn't really give full weight to what you call context and what I would call events'.

The Miner's Strike was cited as a challenging turn of events for Kinnock, while Steel argued that the Falklands War 'that wiped domestic politics off the map' and hindered his progress in the 1983 election.

Discussion focussed on governing competence, party management and developing a winning electoral strategy and the relationship between these support mechanisms. When it came to achieving governing competence it was noted that this was exceptionally difficult for parties in opposition and especially smaller parties. The support mechanism remained important, but demonstrating competence required the government of the day to fail in order to demonstrate success. It can also take a long time for the public's perception of a party to change, suggested Hague, pointing out that he suffered from the Tories' blow to their reputation five years earlier and Labour's difficulties after 2007/8.

Party management can be made more difficult by internal party antagonism to potential partners. For example, Ashdown found that many within his party had developed 'quite a strong antipathy to any closer relationship with Blair.' Parties can develop internal cultures which are resistant to change. 'The Labour Party has gone through the birth of quins,' suggested Kinnock, 'every time it has become apparent that a big societal or political change is on'. Creating a party culture can be a challenge when parties merge, as the SDP and Liberals did. Party management can also be time intensive with leaders needing to spend sufficient time massage egos, and visiting policy committees or executive meetings. Leaders who take over opposition parties who have been in recently been in power can be left to manage, as Hague noted:

> '"big names" who were substantial figures in previous governments but you need to move on from them. I gave a lot of time and attention to reshuffles, to changing the personnel of the party.'

A common challenge in developing a *winning electoral strategy*, suggested some of the leaders, is that public opinion can shift. Changing an image can be difficult and needs to be done from the start, but 'decisions that you have taken earlier on, by the time you have got to the election, narrow your options very considerably,' Howard explained, and by then it is 'too late'. Blair argued that this was one of Attlee's failures:

> 'With Attlee, you see, I don't think that they noticed early enough that the public was moving on from the rationing era after the war. They did not quite get that the public did not just want a continuation of this time where 'the state must protect us'. Six years on from 1945, the public had moved on from that, frankly.'

Public opinion can also come into conflict with party opinion, presenting a conflict with the party management mechanism. As Kinnock noted, this presented him with the:

'constant dilemma of having a party that was so distant from the electorate, including people who actually cherished that distance, meant that if you appealed, even in modest and convincing terms to the party, you were going to get caricatured by the press and therefore misunderstood by the electorate. If you went straight for the electorate then you were going to get serious frictions and distractions in the party.'

The party's track immediate past electoral record can leave the leader well or weakly positioned to force change in the electoral strategy. According to Blair:

'Now, maybe I was lucky. One of the things that I often wonder about is if I had been leader of the Labour Party when they had spent four years in opposition. It might have been a different task! After eighteen years of opposition – all but the dumbest could work out that we are obviously doing something wrong. So the space was there for someone to say, look, I know where we are going, we are going this way, and provided it seemed to work, people were more less happy to go virtually anywhere.'

While some leaders thought that the blaming the media for poor coverage or misrepresentation would be making excuses, others thought that expressions of concern were legitimate. Clegg argued that his party faced the 'wrath of the press' while he was in government as they were: 'offensive to their business model, so they have to turn on us – and boy, did they'. The Liberal leaders also claimed that it was often more difficult to 'get noticed.'

Conclusions

This article has sought to contribute towards an ongoing debate about how to assess political leaders. It has assessed one prominent theory, neo-statecraft theory, which assesses leaders in terms of their ability to win and maintain power, and demonstrate competence in office. It has done this through an innovative method of deploying past leaders as co-researchers. They were invited to refine and redevelop the theory in conversation with a researcher and author of some of the theory. This was argued to be a suitable methodology given the realist understanding of science that underpinned the theory.

Interviewees broadly agreed that winning elections and power is an essential component of political leadership. Statecraft does therefore appear to be a fair test of leaders in British politics, and by logical extension, all other electoral democracies. It is a necessary and not a sufficient test of successful party leadership, however. Leadership is also about much more than winning elections. It is also about securing policy goals, providing direction to the country and other normative achievements. Statecraft only assesses political cunning and guile – not leadership in ethical or normative terms, or conscientious leadership. But achieving those goals, requires winning seats, power and influence.

The interviews also suggest that the support mechanisms that are sketched out in the framework, hereto criticised for not being empirically tested, are a good heuristic fit. They provide a useful organising perspective for understanding why leaders succeed and fail, and the challenges they face in contemporary party politics. Leaders also stressed the importance of context. Although some factors that were important to defining a structural context were identified with and not disagreed with by the leaders, they were able to suggest many other combinations of events and contextual situations that may make them weak or strong. These are ground out imbalances in resources, but also sequences of events and embedded in different meanings. This makes fine-grained theory building difficult. The interviewees also pointed to individual characteristics that are important in leaders to help them achieve their goals, reaffirming the literature on personality. This literature it

seems can be integrated into that on statecraft: personal characteristics shape human agency, and in turn, their ability to decide upon and implement a statecraft strategy.

Leaders are complex individuals who have a variety of goals, and have been inspired and motivated by a variety of events and people during their lives. Not all leaders think in statecraft terms. But this can contribute towards their undoing electorally and their success, as leaders acknowledged. Therein lies a critical contradiction for democratic governance. Some politicians may enter politics with altruistic goals and aspirations. But the realities of electoral politics requires them to become consumed with short-term goals within an electoral cycle, or less. Strengthening their personal power can help altruistic goals to become realised. These are the structural conditions that causes leadership can become short-termist, toxic or dysfunctional (Heppell 2011). The consequences for policies, policy change and social value can be profound (James 2016).

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