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Daniel Stevens^a; Jeffrey A. Karp^a; Robert Hodgson^a

^a Department of Politics, University of Exeter, UK

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Party Leaders as Movers and Shakers in British Campaigns? Results from the 2010 Election

DANIEL STEVENS, JEFFREY A. KARP & ROBERT HODGSON

Department of Politics, University of Exeter, UK

ABSTRACT *There is an increasing recognition of the importance of party leaders in British elections. The 2010 election only served to reinforce their perceived importance with the introduction of three leaders' debates. Thus, more than ever, an understanding of contemporary elections necessitates an understanding of the dimensions of leadership that matter most to voters. This contribution examines the influence of perceptions of the three major party leaders as responsive, trustworthy, and knowledgeable. It also examines how the debates and other events unfolding during the campaign served to structure these perceptions. There is evidence that voters' evaluations of party leaders can vary substantially over the course of the campaign and traits such as responsiveness weigh heavily in voters' assessments. There is also convincing evidence of media effects, suggesting that voters are receptive to events unfolding during the campaign.*

Introduction

There is an increasing recognition of the importance of party leaders in British elections. While in the past social class was viewed as the major influence structuring support for parties (Butler & Stokes, 1974), economic and social changes in Britain have contributed to the erosion of traditional class cleavages. At the same time, the media's emphasis on the personalities and activities of party leaders is seen to have contributed to the presidentialization of the office of British prime minister (McAllister, 2005; Mughan, 2000, 2005; Poguntke & Webb, 2005). According to Heffernan (2006, 582), 'An interest in political celebrity, backed by an ever more prevalent interest in process journalism, magnifies the modern prime minister, placing him or her centre stage in key political processes.' The 2010 election served to reinforce these trends. In particular, the introduction of three leaders' debates in the three weeks before polling day lent the campaign a rhythm in which much of the discussion in the media involved an anticipation and dissection of debates. A large part of this discussion centred on the three major party leaders and the implications of their performances for their parties (Denver, 2010; Wring & Ward, 2010).

Correspondence Address: Professor Jeffrey A. Karp, Department of Politics, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4QJ, UK. Email: j.karp@exeter.ac.uk

Campaign events such as political debates are assumed to play a prominent role in elections largely because voters' preferences are less deeply rooted than in the past. Denver (2010: 591) confirms that almost 40% of voters in 2010 said that they decided which party to support during the campaign – and exposure to campaign communications of and about party leaders may play a key role in why campaigns matter. Thus, more than ever, an understanding of contemporary elections necessitates an understanding of how voters evaluate party leaders and how these evaluations are influenced by campaign events. In this contribution, we examine the character traits that mattered most to voters when evaluating the leaders of the three major parties in the 2010 British general election. We focus on traits such as knowledge, trustworthiness, and responsiveness and examine how exposure to the debates and party election broadcasts influenced perceptions of the party leaders. We then assess the relative importance of character traits on evaluations of the leaders and how those evaluations ultimately impact on vote choice.

Leadership Traits in British Elections

A number of studies have established that party leaders are highly visible figures about whom most voters have opinions (Clarke et al., 2004) and that leadership evaluations exhibit a strong and independent impact on party support (Clarke & Lebo, 2003; Clarke et al., 1998) and vote choice (Clarke et al., 2004; Evans & Andersen, 2005; Mughan, 2005; Stewart & Clarke, 1992).¹

While there is little doubt that leaders now matter in Britain's parliamentary system, it is not clear what voters care most about when it comes to party leaders (Bean & Mughan, 1989; Clarke et al., 2004, 2009; Evans & Andersen, 2005; Mughan, 2000, 2005; Stewart & Clarke, 1992). Early research on leadership traits in the United States incorporated the notion of 'presidential prototypes' against which presidents are judged (Kinder et al., 1980). Competence and trustworthiness emerged as 'the preeminent traits for presidents and presidential hopefuls' (Kinder, 1983: 1). Numerous studies since have both confirmed the influence of leadership traits in American elections and the centrality of competence and integrity (Bishin et al., 2006; Funk, 1996, 1997, 1999; Goren, 2002, 2007; Johnston et al., 2004). However, the influence of such considerations in Britain, let alone the extent to which election campaigns affect perceptions of these traits, is not well understood.

In one of the few examples that examine the structure of leader evaluations in Britain, Clarke et al. (2009: 158) examined traits of competence, responsiveness and trust. They contend that competence and trust are the key influences but this conclusion is based on an approach that combines the traits together along with overall evaluations of the leaders.² There are two drawbacks with this approach: affect is as likely to be a mediator of perceptions of distinct leadership traits as to be a separate indicator of overall evaluations of a leader,³ and finding that competence, responsiveness and trust load onto a single factor does not mean that all have the same influence on evaluations of the leaders. In another study, Stevens and Karp (2009)

show that trust in Blair in 2005 was far more important than perceptions of his competence or responsiveness to voters.

The valence politics account of British electoral behaviour suggests that voters should be concerned, above all else, that a prospective prime minister knows what he or she is talking about and is sufficiently competent to use that knowledge in managing the government (Clarke et al., 2004, 2009). If voters' major concern is about an alternative government's ability to manage government effectively rather than about ideology, prime ministerial knowledge might matter more than, for example, an ability to empathize or communicate effectively with the British public. Such considerations may have loomed especially large in evaluations of the incumbent prime minister, Gordon Brown. Brown's reputation as the 'iron chancellor' had been based on his skills as manager of the economy. It was the rapid loss of that reputation following the 'bottled election' of 2007, the collapse of the economy, and sundry public relations disasters – the speedy transformation from Stalin to Mr. Bean that was noted by Vince Cable – that ultimately led to several coup attempts and contributed to the belief that Labour could not win the election with Brown as leader. If Brown was to win the election, it would be because voters deemed him more able to take Britain out of recession rather than because of other qualities.⁴

Voters are likely to have more firmly held opinions about the leadership traits of the incumbent prime minister than of opposition leaders. Certainly David Cameron had worked hard to bolster perceptions of his own abilities via policy changes, low tolerance of dissent within the party, and claims of decisiveness in contrast to Brown's 'dithering'. Cameron and Osborne were also able to wipe out the Labour government's long-held advantage in public opinion on who was best equipped to manage the economy. But perhaps knowledge and competence is not enough. Governments that have been in power as long as Labour had in 2010⁵ are prone to lose popularity and be seen as out of touch, as they run out of ideas and become consumed by infighting. If this is true the trait that may matter most to evaluations of a leader like Tony Blair in 1997 or to David Cameron in 2010 is that he is not out of touch but recognizes and responds to the public's wishes. We expect that this dimension is likely to become more important to the opposition leader the longer an incumbent party has been in office: thus our argument is that being seen to have the public's interests in mind could have been particularly important for Cameron in the context of 2010.

For the Liberal Democrat leader it is less clear whether perceptions of Nick Clegg's knowledge, responsiveness or trustworthiness would matter most to voters. As the third party leader who was likely at most to become *kingmaker* and very unlikely to become king, to the extent that people evaluated him positively it was perhaps more likely at the outset to be based on perceptions that Clegg had what it took to be prime minister, especially after the first debate, than that he was in touch with public opinion. By the end of the campaign, however, Clegg had emphatically won the first debate and continued to do well in the polls with his message about the 'broken promises' of the 'old' parties and the Liberal Democrats as symbolic and real agents of change. Issues of trust and responsiveness were at the forefront of Clegg's message.

We would expect leadership traits to become more strongly associated with overall evaluations of the leaders after the election because of the educative effects of campaigns and their concomitant impact in making voters more certain of their perceptions and attitudes (Peterson, 2009). But how might campaign communications have affected perceptions of the leaders' traits in 2010? We examine three media of campaign messages: leaders' debates, party election broadcasts and press coverage.

By their nature 'leadership' debates focus attention on leaders' demeanour and body language as much as, or more than, the substance of what they say. Indeed, Druckman's (2003) re-examination of the Nixon–Kennedy debates in the United States showed television viewers becoming more influenced by the candidates' images relative to their policies compared to radio listeners. On the other hand, America's experience with debates is that they are not 'game changers'. Even gaffes that in popular myth swung an election, such as Gerald Ford's in 1976, did no such thing (Zaller, 1998). Rather, debates tend to inform voters and reinforce perceptions of the candidates and where they stand. Any effects on preferences usually recede quite rapidly: 'what seems to be a shift in opinion immediately following the debate appears to recede back toward the predebate level of support within a few days' (Holbrook, 1996: 107–108). This is very much consistent with what seems to have happened in the 2010 election in Britain:

Following Clegg's opening performance media speculation focused on whether it might provide the catalyst for his party to overtake Labour. And although this was reflected in some of the mid-election polls, this apparent surge in support failed to materialise at the ballot box. (Wring & Ward, 2010: 805–806)

However, the extent to which the leaders' debates in Britain affected perceptions of the leaders and whether Clegg's rise and fall operated through changing perceptions of his traits as a leader remains unclear.

Party election broadcasts (PEBs) have a longer tradition in British elections but findings from past research are mixed. On the one hand, Norris et al.'s (1999) experiments during the 1997 election uncovered few effects of negative or positive advertising. However, Johnston and Pattie (2002) find consistent effects of exposure to PEBs in 1997, both on leaders' images and those of their party. These effects were usually in the intended direction, e.g., exposure to Conservative PEBs strengthened perceptions of John Major as caring and a strong leader and lowered perceptions of Tony Blair as a strong leader, although in the context of the 2001 campaign Norris and Sanders (2003) found that exposure to a negative Conservative PEB increased support for Labour. In an examination of perceptions of the three major party leaders' competence in 2005, Norris finds some impact of exposure to PEBs from all three parties but, in an echo of Norris and Sanders (2003), exposure to Labour PEBs raised perceptions of Michael Howard's competence as well as Tony Blair's, and exposure to Conservative PEBs was also associated with positive

change in perceptions of the traits of the two leaders. Thus, if past research is our guide, we might expect exposure to PEBs to affect perceptions of the major party leaders but the direction of those effects is uncertain.

The PEBs in 2010 were also very much focused on leaders for two of the parties, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, for both of whom their leaders were clearly seen as assets. However, the broadcast that received the most attention was the Conservatives' about 'The Hung Parliament Party', which did *not* include David Cameron at all, perhaps because it was emblematic of two recurring themes of the campaign: the Liberal Democrat 'surge' and the scramble among the other two parties to adjust their strategies. Labour's PEBs differed in having their messages delivered by a combination of celebrities and ordinary people, with their unpopular leader being invisible in these messages.

Finally, we examine the impact of exposure to television news and newspapers. There is a difference here, of course, in that newspapers are partisan and television is not. Even if television news is neutral, however, some of the events it reported in 2010, such as 'bigotgate' may not have been neutral in their effects. With regard to newspapers, 2010 represented something of a reversion to the period before New Labour, with only *The Daily Mirror* continuing to urge its readers to vote Labour, while many more newspapers – most famously *The Sun* – endorsed the Conservatives and, moreover, provided scathing copy on Brown and Clegg. If 'readers select a paper to fit their politics, and newspapers select particular types of readers' (Newton & Brynain, 2001: 265) we would expect the editorial stance of a newspaper to be associated with positive perceptions of the traits of its preferred leader and negative perceptions of the other two party leaders.

Data and Methods

We address the issue of leadership traits in the 2010 general election using data from the British Election Study (BES) campaign panel survey, which was administered on the internet. Although concerns have been raised about the use of internet surveys in terms of their representativeness, the BES team have found that they can nonetheless provide useful data that in principle produce equivalent results to those of more traditional survey methods (Sanders et al., 2007). The advantage of internet surveys is that they are less costly and provide a much larger sample than is possible with traditional face to face or telephone surveys. Internet surveys are also well suited to panel studies, which allow one to discern changes at the individual level.

The 2010 BES conducted an initial baseline survey ($n = 16,816$), which first went into the field on 29 March, five weeks before the election, and was completed on 7 April. The sample was drawn from a panel recruited by YouGov. These respondents were then selected again on a random day during the election campaign as part of a rolling cross-sectional survey design (RCS). The essence of the design is to take a one-shot cross-section and distribute interviewing on a daily basis during the course of the campaign. Interviews commenced on 7 April, with the last interviews

completed just before the polls opened on election day. Surveys completed on a daily basis varied from a low of 251 (not including the first day of interviewing) to a high of 914, yielding a total sample of 14,622. Most of these respondents, 13,356, also completed a post-election survey forming a third wave. The bulk of those surveys, 85%, were completed within four days of the election on 6 May but the last was completed on 24 May.

Leadership evaluations, the dependent variable in much of the analysis that follows, are based on thermometer ratings ranging from strongly dislike (0) to strongly like (10).⁶ Figure 1 shows how these evaluations vary across the campaign. The trends, which show the proportion of those respondents indicating that they like each of the three leaders (i.e., 5 or above) reveal a surge in support for Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat leader, increasing from about 45% to 65% after the first debate. In contrast, evaluations of the two major party leaders remain relatively stable, ranging within a 10% band.

We initially examine how traits affect leadership evaluations rather than vote preference because they provide a cleaner test of the influence of leaders' traits. Vote choice is affected by extraneous factors such as constituency context and tactical voting – roughly 1 in 6 voters in the BES campaign panel survey said that they

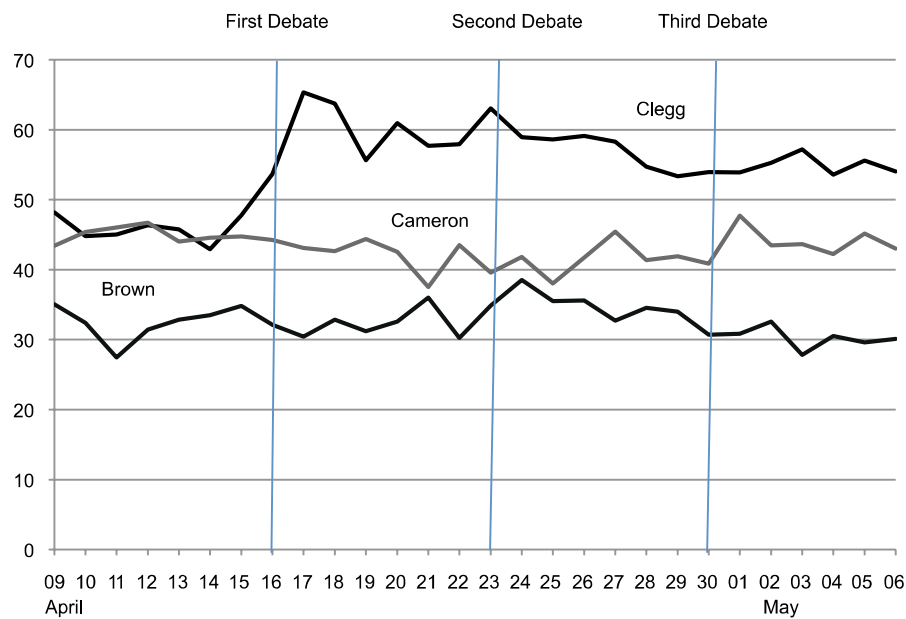


Figure 1. Leadership evaluations over the campaign.

Note: Figures indicate the proportion who evaluate leader above 5 on scale from 0 to 10.

Source: BES Campaign Internet Panel Survey (2010).

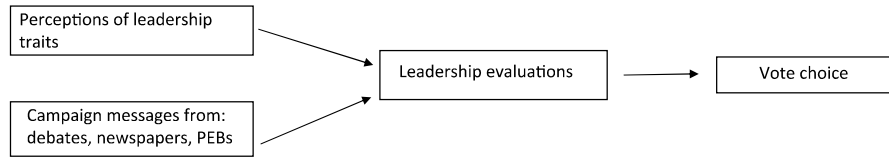


Figure 2. Key estimated relationships.

voted for a party that was not their first choice. Figure 2 provides a schematic representation of the various relationships examined.⁷

For leadership traits we draw on a series of items that asked respondents about their perceptions that ‘he knows what he is talking about’ (knowledge), which would seem to be a combination of depth of knowledge and the ability to use it productively, ‘has my interests in mind’ (responsiveness), a measure of recognition of and responsiveness to voters’ concerns, and ‘tells the truth’ (trustworthiness).⁸ Responses on these dimensions were collected in the baseline pre-campaign survey and the post-election survey.

We begin with an initial test of the influence of leadership traits by examining their impact on evaluations of each leader before the official campaign began and again after the election was over. We estimate evaluations of Brown, Cameron and Clegg in multivariate models that control for the influence of the other leadership traits and for other variables that the literature tells us matter and that were asked about in the surveys: party identification, interest in the campaign, age, education, and social class. The generic model for the pre- and post-election estimates is as follows. Using Gordon Brown as an example:

Brown evaluation = $f(\text{Responsiveness, Trustworthiness, Knowledge, Attention to politics, Age, Sex, Education, Class, Conservative Party identifier, Liberal Democrat Party identifier, Other party identifier, No party affiliation})$.

These models allow us to establish which traits mattered most in evaluations of the leaders in 2010 and whether there were changes in the relative importance of these traits over time.⁹

Having established what influence, if any, perceptions of responsiveness, trustworthiness and knowledge had on leadership evaluations, we examine the effects of campaign communications on leadership evaluations. For example, we model evaluations of Brown as follows:

Post-election Brown evaluation = $f(\text{Watched any of the leaders’ debates, Read Conservative paper, Read Labour paper, Read independent paper, Watched Conservative PEB, Watched Labour PEB, Watched Liberal Democrat PEB, Attention to politics, Age, Sex, Education, Class, Conservative Party identifier, Liberal Democrat Party identifier, Other party identifier, No party affiliation, pre-campaign Brown evaluation})$.

Here we take advantage of the panel study design and include a control for leadership evaluations measured before the campaign. Therefore we are effectively examining the effects of campaign communications in accounting for *changes* in those evaluations.

Finally, we examine how leadership evaluations shape vote choice. We use two models: one that estimates the influence of pre-campaign evaluations on the vote and another that estimates the relationship between post-election campaign evaluations and vote preference as follows:

Labour vote = f(Brown evaluation, Cameron evaluation, Clegg evaluation, Age, Sex, Education, Class, Conservative Party identifier, Liberal Democrat Party identifier, Other party identifier).

Results

We begin by displaying summary statistics in Table 1 of perceptions of the three leaders before the campaign began on the four leadership traits of competence, responsiveness, knowledge, and trustworthiness and after the election on the latter three traits. The pre-campaign figures show that prior to the campaign Brown lagged furthest behind Cameron and Clegg in judgements of his competence and was also seen as less trustworthy. Perceptions of his knowledge were on a par with those for the other two leaders, perhaps surprisingly given that Brown's reputation was rooted in his command of policy and his 'substance', reflected in the advertising campaign that followed his elevation to prime minister and described him as 'not Flash, just Gordon'. Brown was also seen as similarly responsive to the public as Cameron but

Table 1. Changes in mean scores on leadership traits (0–1 scales)

	Gordon Brown		David Cameron		Nick Clegg	
	Pre-campaign	Post-election	Pre-campaign	Post-election	Pre-campaign	Post-election
Competence	0.39 (0.31)		0.53 (0.28)		0.50 (0.22)	
Responsiveness	0.39 (0.30)	0.43 (0.31)	0.43 (0.29)	0.45 (0.30)	0.49 (0.24)	0.51 (0.25)
Trustworthiness	0.42 (0.29)	0.44 (0.29)	0.51 (0.27)	0.51 (0.27)	0.57 (0.22)	0.58 (0.23)
Knowledge	0.50 (0.31)	0.54 (0.31)	0.54 (0.28)	0.57 (0.28)	0.53 (0.23)	0.55 (0.24)

Note: Standard deviations are in parenthesis.

Source: BES Campaign Internet Panel Survey (2010). The pre-campaign survey was administered between 29 March and 7 April 2010; The post-campaign survey was administered between 7 May and 24 May 2010.

less responsive than Clegg. In general, the pre-campaign figures show that Brown and Cameron were the more polarizing figures – the standard deviations around their mean evaluations are similar and both are greater than Clegg’s – and that Clegg, like Charles Kennedy in 2005, was viewed most positively of the three leaders.

The post-election means on the three traits measured are all slightly more positive than before the campaign, though only slightly. However, this masks a lot of movement among respondents. For Brown and Cameron, the perceptions of about two-thirds of respondents on each trait changed between surveys. Somewhat more of that change was positive than negative. For Nick Clegg, in a reflection of the fact that the public knew less about him beforehand, the perceptions of more than three-quarters of respondents on each trait changed from before to after the election, with positive change again somewhat outweighing negative.

Table 2 estimates the impact of the three leadership traits on evaluations of each of the party leaders both before the campaign began and after the election. We also control for party identification, education, class, age, and sex. The estimates show that all three traits have a strong influence on leadership evaluations before the campaign and at its conclusion but that their effects change. Starting with the pre-campaign estimates, perceptions of Brown’s trustworthiness had a relatively large impact compared with the other leaders. As discussed previously, Stevens and Karp (2009) show that trust in Blair in 2005 was far more important than perceptions of his other traits, reflecting questions over the decision to invade Iraq. The effect of the Iraq invasion on Gordon Brown’s reputation is naturally less clear-cut, but it was clear from Gordon Brown’s deposition to the Chilcot inquiry that he was attempting to distance himself from the decision to go to war. Further, both the opposition parties were keen to emphasize the necessity of his involvement given his position as chancellor. The relatively large impact of perceptions of Gordon Brown’s trustworthiness compared to the other leaders suggests that Iraq remained an important issue and as a consequence trustworthiness remained salient to overall evaluations of the Labour party leadership. However, perceptions of the responsiveness of Gordon Brown had a comparable impact to trustworthiness on evaluations of him, both pre- and post-campaign, while the trait of knowledge mattered far less.

For David Cameron, perceptions of his responsiveness represent the single largest factor in determining overall perceptions of Cameron in the pre-campaign and post-election estimates, and a somewhat greater influence than for either Brown or Clegg. The public appears to have been less concerned about Cameron’s trustworthiness or knowledge. It is not that the cues from these traits do not matter at all but it appears, as we suggested, that the more important cue about the alternative prime minister was that he was in touch with voters’ concerns. Lack of previous experience and Cameron’s relative youth, as reflected in perceptions of his knowledge, appear not to have had a great effect on overall evaluations of Cameron before the campaign – less than perceptions of his responsiveness – and became less important by the end of the campaign.

These effects of traits on leadership evaluations are in particular contrast with Nick Clegg, the third party alternative. Clegg’s first big interview of the campaign,

Table 2. Effect of leadership traits on leadership evaluations (OLS)

	Gordon Brown				David Cameron				Nick Clegg			
	Pre-campaign		Post-election		Pre-campaign		Post-election		Pre-campaign		Post-election	
	Coef.	Robust S.E.	Coef.	Robust S.E.	Coef.	Robust S.E.	Coef.	Robust S.E.	Coef.	Robust S.E.	Coef.	Robust S.E.
Responsiveness	3.53 **	(0.12)	3.99 **	(0.12)	3.68 **	(0.11)	4.27 **	(0.12)	2.16 **	(0.11)	2.81 **	(0.11)
Trustworthiness	3.42 **	(0.12)	4.01 **	(0.12)	2.34 **	(0.11)	3.19 **	(0.12)	1.86 **	(0.11)	3.44 **	(0.11)
Knowledge	1.53 **	(0.09)	1.12 **	(0.09)	2.55 **	(0.10)	2.06 **	(0.10)	3.29 **	(0.11)	2.77 **	(0.10)
Attention to politics	-0.03 **	(0.01)	-0.02 **	(0.01)	-0.04 **	(0.01)	-0.03 **	(0.01)	-0.03 **	(0.01)	-0.02 **	(0.01)
Age	-0.01 **	(0.00)	0.00 **	(0.00)	0.00 *	(0.00)	0.01 **	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)	0.00 *	(0.00)
Female	0.09 **	(0.03)	0.12 **	(0.03)	-0.03	(0.03)	-0.02	(0.03)	0.08 **	(0.03)	0.10	(0.02)
GCSE	-0.01	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)	0.08 **	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)	0.01	(0.03)	0.03	(0.03)
A level	-0.01	(0.04)	-0.06	(0.04)	0.01	(0.04)	-0.05	(0.04)	0.04	(0.04)	-0.01	(0.03)
Middle class	-0.11 **	(0.03)	-0.14 **	(0.03)	-0.11 **	(0.03)	-0.12 **	(0.03)	-0.07 **	(0.03)	-0.03	(0.03)
Conservative	-1.39 **	(0.04)	-1.01 **	(0.05)	1.67 **	(0.04)	1.29 **	(0.04)	0.02 **	(0.03)	0.12 **	(0.03)
Liberal democrat	-0.82 **	(0.05)	-0.63 **	(0.05)	0.40 **	(0.05)	0.34 **	(0.04)	0.82 **	(0.04)	0.56 **	(0.04)
Other party	-0.78 **	(0.05)	-0.47 **	(0.05)	0.70 **	(0.05)	0.63 **	(0.05)	0.11 *	(0.05)	0.10 *	(0.05)
No party affiliation	-0.80 **	(0.05)	-0.53 **	(0.05)	0.81 **	(0.05)	0.68 **	(0.04)	0.14 **	(0.05)	0.17 **	(0.04)
Constant	1.27 **	(0.08)	0.73 **	(0.09)	-0.03	(0.08)	-0.64 **	(0.07)	1.16 **	(0.09)	0.53 **	(0.08)
Observations	14,443		12,032		14,063		11,846		12,180		11,533	
R ²	0.77		0.81		0.75		0.83		0.53		0.71	

Note: **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; #p < 0.10 (two-tailed test).

Source: BES Campaign Internet Panel Survey (2010).

with Jeremy Paxman on the BBC, began with Paxman asking, 'What planet are you on, you're not going to claim you're going to be the next PM?' This epitomizes a problem for the third party leader – they are often liked (as seen in Figure 1) but they are not seen as being a viable prime minister. Thus, as we suggested above, the trait that mattered most for evaluations of Clegg *before* the campaign was not responsiveness to voters or even his perceived trustworthiness but perceptions that he knew what he was talking about. Interestingly, this had changed by the end of the campaign. Clegg's message of the possibility of a 'new politics' that would break with the pattern of broken promises by the 'two old parties' appears to have resonated such that trustworthiness had become his most important trait, having been the least important when the campaign began. While, like Brown and Cameron, the influence of perceptions of Clegg's knowledge declined over the course of the campaign it remained a bigger force in evaluations of him than of the other two potential prime ministers. The overall fit of the pre-campaign model is also weakest for Clegg, suggesting that voters' evaluations of him as a leader were less structured than those of the other two leaders. However, in the post-election survey, the model fit increases to 0.71, which is comparable to the fit of the models for evaluations of the other leaders, indicating that the campaign elevated the importance of his traits as a leader in evaluations of Clegg.

To better illustrate the impact of traits on evaluations, Table 3 provides estimates of the average leadership evaluations when traits are at their minimum and maximum values. These estimates reveal that the largest impact is that of responsiveness on Cameron's evaluations. Those who ranked Cameron at the lowest category of responsiveness are expected to be very cool toward him (mean of 2.76) as compared to those ranking him at the highest degree of responsiveness (7.04). Similar effects are seen on Clegg's evaluations, as trustworthiness varies from a low of 3.73 to a high of 7.16.

As for the controls, party identification is consistent with expectations with regard to its effect on Gordon Brown and David Cameron such that Labour identifiers felt more positive towards Brown and Conservative identifiers more negative than identifiers with other parties or with no party, while for David Cameron these effects are reversed such that Labour identifiers feel more negative and Conservative identifiers more positive. Conservative identifiers demonstrate strong negative evaluations of Nick Clegg, more than of Gordon Brown. Labour identifiers, on the other hand, while also having more negative evaluations than identifiers with other parties or identifiers with no party, do not feel so strongly, with an effect size approximately a seventh of that for Conservative identifiers. Women and younger individuals were also more positive in their evaluations of both Gordon Brown and Nick Clegg. The effect of age is particularly strong for Nick Clegg.

The analysis thus far suggests that both leadership traits (as measured prior to the campaign) and party identification are the main determinants that structure how citizens evaluate the party leaders before and after the campaign. This might suggest that events that unfold during the campaign have little or no impact. To test this directly, we estimate another model using rolling cross-section data, where

Table 3. Estimates of leadership traits on leadership evaluations

	Responsiveness											
	Gordon Brown				David Cameron				Nick Clegg			
	Mean	Most negative	Most positive	Maximum effect	Mean	Most negative	Most positive	Maximum effect	Mean	Most negative	Most positive	Maximum effect
Pre-campaign	3.61	2.23	5.78	3.55	4.63	3.03	6.72	3.69	5.09	4.02	6.18	2.16
	3.89	2.18	6.19	4.01	4.68	2.76	7.04	4.28	5.71	4.23	7.10	2.87
Post-election												
	Trustworthiness											
	Gordon Brown				David Cameron				Nick Clegg			
	Mean	Most negative	Most positive	Maximum Effect	Mean	Most negative	Most positive	Maximum effect	Mean	Most negative	Most positive	Maximum effect
Pre-campaign	3.61	2.18	5.60	3.42	4.63	3.44	5.78	2.34	5.09	4.02	5.87	1.85
Post-election	3.89	2.15	6.15	4.00	4.68	3.06	6.25	3.19	5.71	3.73	7.16	3.43
	Knowledge											
	Gordon Brown				David Cameron				Nick Clegg			
	Mean	Most negative	Most positive	Maximum effect	Mean	Most negative	Most positive	Maximum effect	Mean	Most negative	Most positive	Maximum effect
Pre-campaign	3.61	2.84	4.37	1.53	4.63	3.26	5.82	2.56	5.09	3.34	6.63	3.29
Post-election	3.89	3.30	4.41	1.11	4.68	3.51	5.57	2.07	5.71	4.20	6.93	2.73

Notes: Estimates are derived from Table 2 and are based on a middle class female, educated to school level. Attention to the campaign, age and the part identifiers are set to their means. Trustworthiness and knowledge are set to their means for the responsiveness simulations, responsiveness and knowledge are set at their means for the trust simulations and responsiveness and trustworthiness are set at their means for the knowledge simulations.

leadership evaluations measured during the campaign are a function of exposure to the leaders' debates, newspaper coverage, and party election broadcasts. A dummy variable is used to capture exposure to each of the debates, where 1 indicates those who reported watching the debates, and 0 represents those who either did not see the debate or were interviewed prior to the debate. We also include an interaction term between exposure to the debate and the number of days after the debate a respondent was interviewed in order to test whether the effects of the debate increase or decrease over the course of the campaign.

We take advantage of the panel design and include a control for pre-campaign evaluations. In this way we can evaluate how some groups' opinions shifted over time relative to other reference groups. These lagged endogenous variable specifications are well suited for examining change in panel data (Markus, 1979), and are a conservative test for opinion change since they can be biased against rejecting the null hypotheses.

The results are reported in Table 4. Even after controlling for partisanship and evaluations of the leaders prior to the campaign, a number of media effects are statistically significant, providing convincing evidence that exposure to media can alter what people think about party leaders. For example, exposure to the first debate has a positive and significant impact on evaluations of the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg. The second debate appears to have increased evaluations of Brown but exposure to the third debate lowers Brown's evaluations. The interaction term indicates that although Nick Clegg benefited from his performance after the first debate, the boost to his evaluations decreased somewhat with every passing day. Brown appears to have also benefited slightly from his performance in the second debate but lost ground after the third debate. This suggests that the debates have the potential to change evaluations but they appear to be short-lived. While exposure to the debates appears to have affected how people evaluate the Labour and Liberal Democrat leaders, there is no significant effect for the Conservative leader, David Cameron, suggesting that he neither benefited nor suffered from his performance. As for Conservative newspapers, we find more consistent evidence for all three leaders. Cameron is more positively evaluated among those reading Conservative papers while Clegg's evaluations are significantly lower. On the other hand, readership of independent papers is associated with higher evaluations of Clegg.

Conservative PEBs also appear to be successful in boosting support for Cameron while reducing support for Brown and possibly Clegg. Liberal Democrat PEBs also have a positive impact on evaluations of Clegg but no discernible impact on those of Brown or Cameron. We can be confident that these differences are not an artefact of self-selection because we control for evaluations measured before the campaign as well as partisanship. Altogether, these results provide convincing evidence of media effects.

To examine the extent to which leadership evaluations influence vote choice, we estimate separate logit models for each of the three parties, where 1 represents voting for that party and 0 otherwise.¹⁰ We estimate two models for each party, one of vote choice as a function of leadership evaluations measured prior to the

Table 4. Campaign effects on overall leadership evaluations (two-wave panel): OLS

	Gordon Brown		David Cameron		Nick Clegg	
	Coef.	Robust S.E.	Coef.	Robust S.E.		
Exposure debate #1	0.13#	(0.07)	-0.06	(0.07)	1.11**	(0.11)
Exposure x days after debate #1	-0.04	(0.03)	-0.04#	(0.02)	-0.29**	(0.04)
Exposure debate #2	0.15*	(0.07)	0.08	(0.05)	-0.06	(0.08)
Exposure x days after debate #2	-0.08*	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)	0.04	(0.05)
Exposure debate #3	-0.16**	(0.05)	0.09	(0.07)	0.18	(0.14)
Exposure x days after debate #3	0.09*	(0.04)	0.01	(0.04)	-0.08	(0.11)
Read conservative paper	-0.07*	(0.03)	0.21**	(0.04)	-0.32**	(0.04)
Read labour paper	0.18*	(0.07)	-0.09	(0.07)	-0.08	(0.09)
Read independent paper	-0.07	(0.10)	-0.01	(0.09)	0.38**	(0.12)
Watched labour party political broadcast	0.14**	(0.04)	-0.05	(0.05)	-0.15*	(0.07)
Watched conservative party political broadcast	-0.12*	(0.05)	0.20**	(0.05)	-0.09#	(0.05)
Watched liberal party political broadcast	-0.07	(0.04)	-0.03	(0.04)	0.29**	(0.06)
Attention to politics	0.00	(0.01)	0.02*	(0.01)	-0.09**	(0.01)
Age	0.00	(0.00)	0.01**	(0.00)	-0.01**	(0.00)
Female	0.14**	(0.03)	0.02	(0.03)	0.08#	(0.05)
GCSE	0.00	(0.04)	0.07*	(0.03)	0.10	(0.06)
A level	0.02	(0.04)	0.03	(0.05)	0.13	(0.09)
Middle class	0.02	(0.04)	-0.03	(0.05)	-0.02	(0.08)
Conservative	-0.83**	(0.06)	1.15*	(0.08)	-0.50**	(0.10)
Liberal	-0.42**	(0.09)	0.21*	(0.08)	0.76**	(0.10)
Other party	-0.55**	(0.08)	0.43**	(0.08)	-0.42**	(0.10)
No party affiliation	-0.50**	(0.06)	0.48**	(0.09)	0.08	(0.11)
Pre-campaign leadership evaluation	0.82**	(0.01)	0.78**	(0.01)	0.60**	(0.01)
Constant	1.14**	(0.16)	-0.19	(0.12)	3.57**	(0.20)
Observations	6,134		6,096		5,710	
R ²	0.81		0.79		0.40	

Notes: **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; #p < 0.10 (two-tailed test). Robust standard errors are adjusted for clustering by day of interview.

Source: BES Campaign Internet Panel Survey (2010).

campaign and the other of vote choice as a function of leadership evaluations measured after the election.

The results, shown in Table 5, indicate that leadership evaluations exert a strong influence on vote choice, *ceteris paribus*. In all three cases, the effect of leadership

Table 5. Effects of leadership evaluations on vote choice (Logit)

	Labour				Conservative				Liberal Democrat			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef.	Robust S.E.	Coef.	Robust S.E.	Coef.	Robust S.E.	Coef.	Robust S.E.	Coef.	Robust S.E.	Coef.	Robust S.E.
Brown (pre-campaign)	0.36**	(0.01)			-0.23**	(0.01)			-0.06**	(0.01)		
Cameron (pre-campaign)	-0.12**	(0.01)			0.47**	(0.02)			-0.13**	(0.01)		
Clegg (pre-campaign)	-0.11**	(0.02)			-0.14**	(0.02)			0.27**	(0.01)		
Brown (post-election)			0.41**	(0.01)			-0.16**	(0.01)			-0.11**	(0.01)
Cameron (post-election)			-0.14**	(0.01)			0.69**	(0.02)			-0.20**	(0.01)
Clegg (post-election)			-0.17**	(0.02)			-0.30**	(0.02)			0.50**	(0.02)
Age	-0.005#	(0.002)	0.00	(0.00)	0.01**	(0.00)	0.00	(0.00)	-0.01**	(0.00)	-0.01**	(0.00)
Female	0.18**	(0.06)	0.10	(0.06)	0.10	(0.07)	0.06	(0.07)	-0.03	(0.05)	-0.08	(0.05)
GCSE	0.19**	(0.07)	0.17*	(0.07)	-0.01	(0.07)	0.04	(0.07)	-0.14*	(0.06)	-0.12*	(0.06)
A level	0.03	(0.10)	0.01	(0.10)	-0.09	(0.10)	0.06	(0.10)	-0.06	(0.08)	-0.03	(0.08)
Middle class	-0.01	(0.07)	0.04	(0.07)	0.12	(0.08)	0.17*	(0.08)	0.24**	(0.06)	0.18**	(0.06)
Conservative	-3.01**	(0.17)	-2.86**	(0.16)	2.33**	(0.11)	2.15**	(0.11)	-0.92**	(0.12)	-0.81**	(0.11)
Liberal	-2.54**	(0.12)	-2.48**	(0.12)	-0.58**	(0.15)	-0.29*	(0.15)	2.28**	(0.09)	2.06**	(0.09)
Other party	-2.06**	(0.12)	-2.13**	(0.12)	0.11	(0.13)	-0.10	(0.13)	-0.15	(0.10)	-0.12	(0.10)
No party affiliation	-1.57**	(0.09)	-1.49**	(0.09)	0.80**	(0.11)	0.79**	(0.11)	0.68**	(0.08)	0.69**	(0.08)
Constant	-0.73**	(0.19)	-0.83**	(0.18)	-3.47**	(0.21)	-3.66**	(0.22)	-1.56**	(0.17)	-2.94**	(0.18)
Observations	11,176		12,231		11,176		12,231		11,176		12,231	
R ²	0.47		0.49		0.54		0.60		0.26		0.32	

Note: **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; #p < 0.10 (two-tailed test).

Source: BES Campaign Internet Panel Survey (2010).

evaluations increases when measured in the post-election wave though the size of the coefficient varies considerably across the three leaders. Cameron's evaluations have the largest impact while the effects for Brown are comparatively weak. In the pre-election model, Clegg's evaluations, while significant, have a much weaker effect on vote choice. However in the post-election wave, the size of the coefficient nearly doubles. In addition, the fit for the Liberal Democrat vote choice model improves from .26 to .32 indicating that by the conclusion of the campaign evaluations of Clegg helped further structure vote choice for the Liberal Democrats.

Discussion

What did voters care about in 2010 when it came to the three party leaders? For the unpopular incumbent, Gordon Brown, perceptions of his responsiveness and trustworthiness were equally important while knowledge, usually seen as an asset for Brown, was less influential. For his main adversary, David Cameron, we suggested responsiveness could be more important than other traits because he represented the alternative to a leader and a government that were seen as out of touch. The evidence supports this: for Cameron responsiveness mattered most, with trustworthiness less influential and knowledge least influential. As the least well known leader at the outset, Nick Clegg saw the most change in which traits were influential. Before the campaign began, variation in perceptions of Clegg's knowledge was most important in evaluations of him but by the end of the campaign Clegg's message of a new politics that would contrast with the cycle of betrayals by the other two parties appears to have resonated. Clegg's trustworthiness had become his most important trait and perceptions of his responsiveness as important as perceptions of Clegg as knowledgeable.

Indeed, for all three leaders we find their responsiveness and trustworthiness became more influential over time while voters seemed to become less concerned by whether or not the leaders appeared to know what they were talking about. The importance of trustworthiness as a leadership trait is consistent with findings from the previous election in 2005, which found that voters' evaluations of Tony Blair were based more on perceptions of trustworthiness than anything else (Stevens & Karp, 2009). This suggests that the kinds of leadership cues that may be most influential to British voters are not so much related to leaders' knowledge or competence but pertain to integrity and responsiveness. This may be a function of an era in which the war in Iraq and the MPs' expenses scandal have loomed large (e.g., see Stewart & Clarke, 1992 for different findings for the 1987 election) but 2010 also occurred in the context of the greatest recession since the Depression when a knowledgeable leader might have been expected to be of paramount importance. A more likely explanation is that the leaders were seen as similarly knowledgeable and it is the differences with other leaders that are uppermost in people's minds when they evaluate them.

We also find that the campaign, in terms of the leaders' debates, PEBs, and newspapers influenced evaluations of the leaders. The most dramatic debate effect was

for evaluations of Nick Clegg after the first debate although, just as Holbrook (1996) suggests of debate effects in America, there was a decay in the bounce Clegg received in the days after the first debate. Interestingly, we also showed that evaluations of Brown were affected by each debate – the first two positively and the last negatively – but that these effects soon dissipated and that evaluations of Cameron, who had seemingly wanted the debates because he thought they would advantage him (Green, 2010), were unaffected by them.

Exposure to PEBs also affected evaluations of the leaders. In no instance do we see the kind of unintended effects found in past research on PEBs, however. Exposure to Labour PEBs raised evaluations of Brown and lowered those of Cameron and Clegg; exposure to Conservative PEBs raised evaluations of Cameron and lowered those for Brown and Clegg; exposure to Liberal Democrat PEBs raised evaluations of Clegg without having a discernible impact on those of Brown or Cameron. Thus PEBs in 2010 appear to have been unusually effective but it is not clear why. There was no step change in production values and nothing unusual about the tone of the messages, which were the usual combination of positive and negative.

There was much comment that in 2010 the ‘Tory press’ rediscovered its voice (e.g., Wring & Ward, 2010). Some of the coverage of Gordon Brown and Nick Clegg was indeed reminiscent of the Tory press of the 1980s, particularly that of Clegg after the first debate. It is, therefore, interesting that even controlling for pre-election feelings towards the leaders, i.e., controlling for factors such as *The Sun*’s shift from Labour to Conservative, some of the biggest effects from newspaper reading were in more positive evaluations of Cameron and more negative evaluations of Clegg among Conservative newspaper readers. Clegg may have made up some of this lost ground through the endorsements of *The Guardian* and *The Independent* (Wring & Ward, 2010) but it is worth remembering that their readership is a fraction of that of the Tory press in 2010. The Tory press did not win it for Cameron but they seem to have helped ensure that he did not lose the election. The consistent effects of PEB and newspaper coverage require more examination but one reason for them would appear to be that a large number of voters were undecided at the outset of the campaign (Denver, 2010) and thus responsive to messages received during the campaign.

Finally, evaluations of the leaders, which we have shown were themselves reflections of different weights given to responsiveness, trustworthiness and knowledge, depending on which leader was the focus, also influenced vote choice. For David Cameron and Nick Clegg these evaluations were substantially more important at the end of the campaign than at the beginning.

Thus 2010 showed once again that evaluations of the leaders as individuals mattered and that these evaluations are not affected equally by the specific traits of different leaders. Perceptions of leaders’ traits are not merely rationalizations of overall evaluations of them; for example, the trait of responsiveness was more influential in evaluations of Cameron than of Brown or Clegg. In addition, their influence changed during the campaign, most dramatically for Nick Clegg, and campaign communications played a big part.

Notes

1. Although the claim is by no means settled (Bartle & Crewe, 2002).
2. A factor analysis suggests that all the traits in 2005 load onto a single factor. These findings contrast with those of Stewart and Clarke (1992) who find that competence and responsiveness loaded onto two separate dimensions in the 1987 election.
3. Sobel tests of the influence of competence, responsiveness, trust, and evaluations of the leaders on vote preferences confirm that evaluations mediate the impact of the three other dimensions (Stevens & Karp, 2009).
4. Evidence to support this is also confirmed by the Gillian Duffy affair which, while acutely embarrassing for Brown, did not appear to cost him much support because the public did not think of Brown as a nice person who could communicate with voters.
5. Or the Conservatives in 1964 or 1997; we restrict ourselves here to the 2010 election. Similarly, the sense that he was more responsive to voters' concerns was a large part of Bill Clinton's appeal in the 1992 US election after three consecutive terms of Republican presidents.
6. 'Now, thinking about party leaders for a moment. Using a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how do you feel about [Gordon Brown/David Cameron/Nick Clegg]?'
7. Although we assume that campaign messages affect leadership traits we do not test this directly. Such an analysis would ideally require media content data. Other research, however, has found convincing evidence of media effects on candidate traits such as perceived honesty (see Johnston et al., 2004).
8. The pre-campaign survey also asked about perceptions of competence, presumably an important cue to voters in a system characterized by valence politics, but the post-election survey did not include competence. Unfortunately, this precludes analysis of competence, though we provide some evidence of its influence in the appendix.
9. Unfortunately, we are unable to take advantage of the RCS design to examine how the traits changed throughout the campaign because these questions were not included in the campaign wave.
10. Multinomial logit (MNL) could be used to estimate a three-choice model. However, MNL assumes the independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA). Therefore, we would have to assume that the probability of voting Conservative is completely independent of voting for Labour. Such an assumption may be unrealistic. An alternative method that does not carry the same assumption is to omit one of the alternatives and estimate three binomial logit models. Omitting the alternative from the model is inefficient but will produce the same results as MNL if the IIA assumption is valid (Green, 1997: 921)

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Appendix: Coding of Variables

Responsiveness: When you listen to what [Gordon Brown] has to say, do you think he has your best interests in mind, or that he does not think about your best interests? (aaq192, aaq193 and aaq194): 0–1 scale where 1 = my interests.

Trustworthiness: When you listen to what [Gordon Brown] has to say, do you think generally that he tells the truth, or that he does not tell the truth? (aaq195, aaq196 and aaq197): 0–1 scale where 1 = always

Knowledge: When you listen to what [Gordon Brown] has to say, do you think that in general he knows what he is talking about, or that he doesn't know? (aaq189, aaq190 and aaq191): 0–1 scale where 1 = knows

Attention to politics: (aaq131): 0–10 scale where 10 = most attention

Age: (aaq151): in years

Female (aaq186): 1 = female, 0 = male

GCSE: education at 16 years or less (aaq154, aaq158 and aaq159)

A level: Beyond GCSE but not university

Middle class (aaq171): 1 = Middle class ('professional or higher technical work', 'manager or senior administrator', 'clerical', 'sales or services', 'small business owner'), 0 = other occupations, unemployed, or never worked

Liberal Democrats/Conservative/other/no party identifier (aaq28): 1 = identify with Liberal Democrats, 0 = do not identify with Liberal Democrats; 1 = identify with Conservative Party, 0 = do not identify with Conservative Party; 1 = identify with other party; do not identify with other party; 1 = do not identify with any party, 0 = identify with party.

Read Conservative/Labour/Independent paper (aaq145, 147): Conservative paper = 1 reads Daily Express, Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph, Financial Times, Sun or Times, 0 = did not read any of these paper/read no paper; Labour paper = 1 reads Daily Mirror, 0 = did not read this paper/reads no paper; Independent paper = 1 if reads Star, Guardian or Independent, 0 = did not read any of these papers/ reads no paper;

Watched any of the debates: Watched first debate (bbqtv1): 1 = watched first debate, 0 = did not watch first debate; Watched second debate (bbqtv2): 1 = watched second debate, 0 = did not watch second debate; Watched third debate (bbqtv3): 1 = watched third debate, 0 = did not watch third debate.

Party election broadcasts: Watched a Labour PEB (ccq86_1) 1 = watched Labour PEB, 0 = did not watch Labour PEB; watched a Conservative PEB (ccq86_2): 1 = watched Conservative PEB, 0 = did not watch Conservative PEB; Watched a Liberal Democrat PEB (ccq86_3): 1 = watched a Liberal Democrat PEB, 0 = did not watch a Liberal Democrat PEB.