Out with the old, in with the new

The impact of leader change on voter perceptions of parties in Britain

Andrew Francis McKenna

School of Government and Public Policy

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

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This thesis is the result of the author's original research. It has been composed by the author and has not been previously submitted for examination which has led to the award of a degree.

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Abstract

A considerable body of scholarly research suggests that party leaders play an important role in shaping how voters feel about parties, but what happens when a party changes its leader? Focussing on the British Labour and Conservative parties since the 1970s, this thesis examines how leader change impacts voter perceptions of parties. It achieves this through quantitative analysis of aggregate polling data from 1971 to 2023 as well as the British Election Study panel survey, which facilitates investigation into individual reactions to four recent leader changes. In addition, new data on the annual ideological positioning of party leaders is generated through quantitative text analysis of leader conference speeches. This novel data creates an opportunity to develop and test new theoretical ideas about how ideological shifts within and between leadership tenures impact public perceptions of parties.

The empirical contribution of the thesis begins by studying whether leader change serves to increase party support, before exploring potential factors (including ideological differences between predecessors and successors) that moderate this impact. It goes on to investigate whether new leaders receive greater latitude from voters to ideologically reposition compared with leaders who already possess established ideological reputations, and examines the extent to which new leaders take advantage of such opportunities considering intraparty constraints. Finally, the thesis explores how individual voter characteristics influence responses to leader change, arguing that perceptual filters are likely to dictate the extent to which different voters react to leader change. Collectively, the results shed light on various questions surrounding leader change, including the mechanisms that drive the effects of leader change, how long leader change effects can last, and the scope for ideological repositioning available to party leaders.

The thesis also considers why leader change often seems to have a limited impact on party support, which is a recurring implication of previous research in this area.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When a political party has undergone a change of leader, they often seem at pains to ensure that it does not go unnoticed. In British politics, the most obvious example is perhaps Labour's high profile rebrand as 'New Labour' following Tony Blair's ascent to the leadership in 1994 (White & de Chernatony 2002). However, a message of discontinuity also underpinned Ed Miliband's words during his first party conference speech sixteen years later, in which he asserted that the 'new generation of Labour is different. Different attitudes, different ideas, different ways of doing politics' (Miliband 2010). More recently, Labour spotlighted the transition from Jeremy Corbyn to Keir Starmer in 2020 by adopting 'A New Leadership' as its slogan (Watson 2020). This tendency to emphasise change is not exclusive to the Labour party, either. In 1997, Conservative leader William Hague declared that those who doubted whether his new leadership would herald change were 'in for the shock of their lives' (Hague 1997). And former Conservative prime minister Rishi Sunak's inaugural party conference speech in 2023 ended with the words, 'Be in no doubt: it is time for a change. And we are it' (Sunak 2023).

In one sense, it is surprising that parties and their new leaders are not more reticent about the occurrence of leader change. In Leonard Stark's 1996 study of British party leadership contests, he observed that the prevailing wisdom in Westminster and amongst certain scholars of British politics was that leadership transitions are damaging events which make parties appear fractured (Stark 1996). This is a concern that

still persists today (So 2021). And yet, the examples above show little effort by parties to sweep their recent leader changes under the carpet. Instead, the examples indicate both a desire to maintain public consciousness of the leader change and, moreover, to use it as an opportunity to convince voters that even farther-reaching changes are in the pipeline.

Does this mean that it is actually prudent for parties and their leaders to draw voter attention towards, rather than away from, the occurrence of leader change? There are reasons to believe so. Evidence suggests that, when leader change occurs between two elections, the way voters feel about the new leaders relative to the predecessors has a significant influence on their decisions to remain loyal to the same party or switch to another (Johnston et al. 2019). Moreover, there is reason to expect that voters should generally feel warmer towards new leaders, making the aggregate effect of leader change on party support a positive one.

Firstly, new leaders have the benefit of carrying fewer negative associations in voters' minds than their predecessors because they have no track record of failure, so it might be supposed that they will generally be better liked than the person who preceded them. Essentially, a new leader provides a 'fresh face' (Stewart & Carty 1993) that could bring about a 'honeymoon period' (Brown 1992) of positive sentiment towards the party. To put it another way, new leaders may be granted 'an unconditional benefit of the doubt' that is denied to established leaders (Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994, p.224). Outgoing leaders tend to be removed as a result of poor performance (Andrews & Jackman 2008, Ennser-Jedenastik & Müller 2015, Ennser-Jedenastik & Schumacher 2021) and parties are unlikely to deliberately select an equally unappealing replacement (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Stark 1996). Also, by virtue of having no past record, new leaders have an opportunity to credibly frame a new direction for their party without risk of self-contradiction (Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu 2019, Somer-Topcu 2017). To top all this off, leader change tends to draw media attention and attract public interest, giving parties a special platform from which to exploit the general perks of having a fresh face in the leadership position (Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu 2019, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu 2017, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stark 1996).

In the academic literature, leader effects on the vote have become the subject of considerable research, but scholarship exploring the public opinion implications of leader change specifically is less developed, although valuable inroads have been made (as will be seen in the coming literature review). And, contrary to expectation, much of the emerging research that has explored the impacts of leader change on party support tends to draw conservative conclusions about the scope of its potential to impact how voters perceive parties, presenting a conundrum this thesis intends to shed light on.

This thesis studies the effects of leader change to develop a picture of whether it can be beneficial for parties in terms of public support, as well as exploring what factors encourage or impede these benefits. Focussing on the British case, it examines both the direct and indirect effects of leader change and explores how such effects are mediated. Chapter 2 outlines the generation of new annual data on Conservative and Labour leader ideological positions from 1972-2023 using quantitative text analysis applied to party conference speeches. Chapter 3 then utilises aggregate polling data from 1972-2022 to assess the immediate impact of leader change, before restructuring this data into an event history format to assess how long parties tend to experience heightened support after they have changed leader. Chapter 4 builds on these foundations by analysing the potential influence of moderating factors on the short- and long-term impact of leader change while considering what these moderating variables might suggest about the mechanisms that cause leader change to affect public perceptions of parties. Here, it is proposed that, alongside general contextual factors, the impact of leader change on party support can be explained in terms of the benefits of removing problematic predecessors (the predecessor-removal mechanism) and, in some cases, the opportunity to increase the party's appeal through the introduction of a successor with increased popular appeal (the active appeal enhancement mechanism). In Chapter 5, the emphasis shifts towards the indirect effects of leader change by considering whether recently installed leaders are able to alter their ideological positions to a greater degree than established leaders without suffering voter backlash or indifference, granting new leaders greater latitude to adapt their electoral appeal compared with established leaders. This chapter makes use of annual party support data in conjunction with

the full ideological dataset generated in Chapter 2. This data is also used in Chapter 5 to examine whether new leaders are significantly more likely to shift away from their predecessor's ideological position than established leaders are likely to adjust their own positions during the course of their leadership. The final empirical analyses are presented in Chapter 6, which switches to individual-level survey data (2016-2020) to study how voter characteristics, and particularly the likelihood of holding strong prior attitudes, shape the extent to which different voters adjust their perceptions of parties in reaction to leader change and whether certain characteristics inhibit voters from updating their perceptions of a party's leader even after that leader has been replaced.

Taken together, the findings of this thesis go towards addressing a key quandary implied by the extant literature on the effects of party leaders and the impact of leader change. On one hand, a considerable body of work has amassed suggesting that party leaders play a meaningful role in shaping how voters perceive parties and which party they vote for. On this basis, one might expect that leader change should have a considerable impact on the popularity of a party, as it involves swapping out one of the fundamental criteria against which voters evaluate parties. Yet, much of the work on leader change suggests that, while leader change does increase a party's fortunes, any such effect is generally modest and short-lived. Based on the findings of this thesis, several explanations for this quandary are proposed.

Firstly, even though new leaders gain an initial advantage by presenting a clean slate compared with their predecessor, this seems to confer only short-term benefits on the party which dissipate as time passes and the new leader loses their initial appeal (Chapter 3). As a result, leader change will often appear to have a very limited impact in any analysis that does not detect its effect in the immediate aftermath of the change, including studies that look at the effects of leader change on election results. Secondly, the immediate impact of leader change is also contingent on a variety of factors, meaning that the benefit of leader change will not be consistent across every case. For example, the instant impact of leader change is dampened when the predecessor was less beleaguered, if the successor does not offer a more moderate policy stance, when economic circumstances are favourable to a rival party or when the party un-

dergoing leader change is not in government. It is, however, found that leader change can have higher short-term benefits when the party removes a more burdened predecessor or when the new leader presents a more moderate ideological vision than the previous leader. Ideological moderation even seems to increase the likelihood that the heightened party support following leader change will last longer (Chapter 4). In general, a key indirect benefit of leader change is that it gives new leaders an opportunity to credibly express ideological moderation that is unavailable to established leaders, who have already established an ideological record. However, this is not a benefit that new leaders always take advantage of, likely because ideological change risks upsetting contingents within their own party and support base (Chapter 5). Therefore, even indirect benefits of leader change often go unharnessed, offering a third explanation for why the aggregate impact of leader change on party support found seems limited according to prior studies. Finally, the effect of leader change may be more muted than expected because the way in which some voters respond to leader change is biased by their attitudinal predispositions, particularly among voters who are highly educated, politically extreme, pay little attention to politics or are strongly partisan in favour of an opposing party. Such voters do not convert changes in their perception of leaders into renewed party evaluations as readily and, in some cases, do not even update their view of a party's leader even after leader change has occurred (Chapter 6).

The next section of this introductory chapter provides a review of the literature on the effects of leaders in voter choice and the specific works that explore the impacts of leader change. This is intended to deliver an overview of these fields while orientating the reader into some of the key debates raised by prior works. The subsequent section then offers more detail on the findings of the chapters within this thesis and highlights how each of these contribute new insights into the debates identified during the literature review. The final section of this introductory chapter then discusses the empirical focus of this project, explaining the decision to focus on the British Labour and Conservative parties for the purposes of this thesis.

1.1 The literature on leader effects and leader change

1.1.1 The influence of leaders on voter choice

The question of how voters make up their minds about which party to support represents an important puzzle for political science, and the way voters feel about different party leaders is likely to be an important piece of this puzzle. Considerable evidence has amassed to suggest that leader evaluations should generally be understood as an influential criterion used by voters when allocating their party preferences and making electoral choices (Aarts et al. 2011, Bean & Mughan 1989, Bittner 2011, Costa & da Silva 2015, Garzia 2014, Garzia et al. 2022, Karvonen 2010, Lobo & Curtice 2015*b*, McAllister 2007, Mughan 2000). Leader evaluations also appear as components within broader models of voter choice. For example, in their conception of the valence model of voting, the former British Election Study team identify voter sentiment towards party leaders as a vital ingredient in the way voters assess party competence which, in turn, shapes their electoral decisions (Clarke et al. 2004, 2009, Whiteley et al. 2013).

The theory of leader effects on voting provides a compelling explanation for voter choice in part because it does not assume unrealistic levels of engagement from voters. Explanations of voter choice can sometimes run the risk of expecting a level of time investment and cognitive exertion that would be unfeasible for even the most politically astute voter when confronted with the information overload presented by electoral decisions. Forming an opinion about a fellow human being, however, is likely to be a familiar and intuitive task (Bittner 2011, Whiteley et al. 2016). On this understanding of voter choice, leaders act as cognitive heuristics, providing accessible cues that help voters to make their electoral decisions. The theory that voter choice is informed by evaluations of party leaders has been conceptualised as part of a wider process through which leaders as individuals, as opposed to parties as collectives, are coming to take a more central and autonomous role in politics (McAllister 2007). Parliamentary systems of government are no exception to this trend, leading to the suggestion that such systems are undergoing a process of 'presidentialisation' (Poguntke & Webb 2005).

While the body of work attesting to the importance of leader effects on voting

behaviour is considerable, the importance of leader effects is not indisputable. It is generally accepted that leader evaluations play some part in voter choice, but some research maintains that parties retain primacy over leaders in voter decision-making (Daoust et al. 2021, Dentler et al. 2024, King 2002, Quinlan & McAllister 2022). A persistent problem for the study of leader effects on voting is the potential that leader evaluations and other determinants of voter choice could be endogenous (Andersen & Evans 2003, Bellucci et al. 2015, Evans & Andersen 2005). The root of this problem is that the factors that affect how voters view parties are also likely to affect the way they evaluate leaders, resulting in observed correlations between voter attitudes towards leaders and parties that are not necessarily underpinned by a direct causal relationship.

One factor that could influence both a voter's leader evaluation and party preference is partisanship. A foundational school of thought in political science portrays voter choice as the output of a 'funnel of causality', where long-term social factors lead voters to harbour a durable commitment to a particular party, giving them a partisan identity that influences how they react to shorter-term factors like party leaders (Campbell et al. 1960). Although the sociological basis once thought to underpin partisan identity is less plausible following a loosening of traditional social groupings in the latter half of the twentieth century, it remains feasible that long-term attitudinal predispositions still influence how voters interpret contemporary political events (Bartels 2002, Bartle & Bellucci 2009, Converse 1995, Converse & Pierce 1985). If voters can be positively inclined towards a party through an underlying psychological attachment, it is possible that the voter's perception of the party's leader could also be favourably biased. This scenario poses a challenge to the study of leader effects because it suggests that factors like partisanship can affect both the image of the leader as well as their party preference, obscuring causality claims linking voter opinion towards leaders with their attitudes towards parties (Denver & Johns 2021). The partisan voter might 'tend to like a party leader, irrespective of their personal qualities, if that leader were the leader of their own party' (Curtice & Blais 2001, p.5). However, in opposition to this, Garzia (2013) has contended that leader images are better understood as shapers of partisan identity, asserting that the causal arrow goes from leader evaluation to partisan identity and not

the other way around.

A related issue for scholars of leader effects is the debate around whether leaders have direct or indirect influences on how voters feel about parties. The role of a party leader means that they have a hand in many aspects of the party which might influence how voters perceive it. There is therefore an important distinction to be drawn between ways in which leaders might affect the popularity of their parties directly, through the appeal of their personal attributes, or indirectly, through their part in steering the ideological direction of the party's policy or the cultivation of the party's image (King 2002). Leaders may benefit their parties because they personally appear, for example, more charismatic or competent (Bittner 2011, Costa & da Silva 2015). Voters are even liable to be influenced by the visual appearance of political figures (Shephard & Johns 2008, 2012). But alternatively, the impact of leaders on voters' party preferences could have less to do with the leader's own direct appeal, and more to do with the leader's influence on other aspects of the party that affect voters' perceptions, such as the party's ideology. Given that the personalisation literature suggests that leaders wield ever increasing influence over their parties, and voter perceptions of leaders are so entangled with how they feel about other aspects of the party, it could be that 'attempts to ascertain their impact independently of the appeal of their parties might simply be misguided' (Lobo & Curtice 2015*a*, p.5).

As political scientists have become more aware of the potential for leaders to impact voter perceptions of parties, normative concerns have been raised about what this means for the quality of democracy. If voters are evaluating parties based on how they feel about party leaders, does this diminish democratic decision-making to a facile 'beauty contest' (Curtice & Hunjan 2011)? Many scholars reject such a claim, pointing out the utility of assessing individual politicians before giving them a mandate to govern. Perhaps personal impressions of the leader will provide voters with an indication of how they might approach policymaking in response to future events which are not anticipated at the time of an election (Bittner 2011). Research also finds that leaders are as important to the electoral calculations of voters who are sophisticated in their political thinking as they are to politically unsophisticated voters, and that substantive

political assessments often underpin seemingly trivial judgements of leaders' characteristics (Aaldering 2018, Berz 2020, Bittner 2011, Lobo & Curtice 2015*b*). These findings undermine the claim that leader effects indicate shallow voting behaviour.

This thesis will speak to the debates outlined above in several ways which will be discussed later in this introduction. First, however, it is worthwhile to gain an overview of the literature that addresses the impact of party leader change specifically, as this is the main area of interest for the coming chapters.

1.1.2 The impact of party leader change

Impact on party support

If voter behaviour is influenced by leader effects, it is natural to expect that leader change will have an impact on voters' perceptions of a party. And, as discussed earlier, there are a host of factors that might conspire to cause a boost in party support when leader change has occurred. An early attempt at studying the effects of party leader change systematically was conducted by Leonard Stark, who formulated criteria to assess the impact of leader changes on party support (not to be confused with Stark's better-known criteria for explaining the outcomes of leadership elections, which was introduced in the same publication). Stark's impact criteria stipulated that a leader change could be regarded as having had an 'empirical impact' if the party's popularity, leader satisfaction or party unity polls increased by at least eight percentage points following the leader change. Applying this test to sixteen leader changes from 1963 to 1994, Stark concluded that, contrary to common belief, leader change usually has a positive impact on parties in Britain (Stark 1996, p.141-162,164). While Stark cited other scholars of British politics who had previously suggested that instances of leader change can prove beneficial to parties (Brown 1992, Punnett 1992), his work offered a more systematic analytical framework and applied it to a larger number of cases. The criteria proposed by Stark was later revived to assess the transition from Theresa May to Boris Johnson in comparison with other Conservative party leader transitions, with the results generally affirming Stark's conclusions (Heppell & McMeeking 2021).

Prior to Stark, Nadeau & Mendelsohn (1994) had also concluded that leader change

could provide short-term boosts to British party support, but noted that leader change was not a 'magic solution' because it depended on the party being below its average support level and the opposition party faring poorly. Looking beyond British politics, Stewart & Carty (1993) had studied the effects of leader change on election results for Canadian provincial parties. They concluded that the effects of parties changing their leaders were minimal.

Recent research into the effects of leader change has tended to focus on how the newer trend of inviting party members to participate in selecting the new leader serves to moderate the impact of leader change on party support, with a greater emphasis on cross-national data. Pedersen and Schumacher's analysis of data from four European democracies concludes that leader change offers short-term benefits when a membership vote is involved, evidenced by a poll increase in months where leader change through membership selection occurs (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015). They theorise that the inclusive selection process heightens voter attention and media exposure, generating positive interest in the party's new leader (see also Stewart & Carty 1993).

Building on this line of research, Cozza & Somer-Topcu (2021) analyse data from eleven parliamentary democracies by looking at the difference in support a month before and after leader change events, finding that leader change is more beneficial when the selection process for the new leader involved a membership vote. A key contribution of this study is that the authors propose firmer ideas about the theoretical mechanisms that could explain why inclusive leader selections promote boosts in party support. Based on their observational data and a novel experimental survey conducted in Australia, Cozza & Somer-Topcu (2021) find that leaders who are elected by party members are thought to be more legitimate, while the process of winning the contest also endows new leaders with a reputation for hard work, which accounts for the larger polling boost attained after inclusive leadership contests. Further, inclusive leadership selection means that parties are seen to demonstrate an ability to accommodate diverse intraparty perspectives, while the enfranchisement of party members stimulates enthusiasm for the party as the leaders address a wider and more empowered audience than in traditional, more exclusive leader selections. Shifting away from a focus on

selection mechanisms, a study by Somer-Topcu & Weitzel (2024) considers how leader change might have different effects depending, among other factors, on the family a party belongs to. Using data encompassing 50 parties in ten advanced parliamentary democracies, they find that leader change in general has a small positive effect on short-term polls for social democratic parties when in opposition but is harmful for such parties when in government, while other parties benefit from leader change when in government but not during a period in opposition.

A recurring pattern in the existing research into leader change is how modest the observed impacts of leader change tend to be, as well as the consistent failure to find evidence of long-term effects. Although some studies identify short-term effects under certain circumstances, the conclusion reached tends to be that the effects are fairly small (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stewart & Carty 1993). A closer look at the analysis of Stark (1996) shows that, despite advocating the idea that leader changes are generally beneficial, 'empirical impacts' were mostly observed in leader satisfaction ratings, while only one out of sixteen of the leader changes examined led to increases in overall party support that met Stark's (admittedly high) eight-point threshold for an empirical impact. Any positive effect of leader change on parties may be dependent on favourable contextual conditions (Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994). The analysis of Somer-Topcu & Weitzel (2024) finds that, while leader change potentially offers some short-term benefit, it may be harmful for parties belonging to the social democratic family if they are in government and frequent leader changes can damage a party's reputation. Another study by So (2021) finds evidence that the occurrence of contested leader transitions result in a drop in governing party performance between elections, based on data encompassing 14 parliamentary democracies. In general, the immediate impact of leader change on party support seems to be directionally dubious and, assuming it is positive, context dependent.

Moreover, the research to date indicates that any impact of leader change on party support will likely have a brief lifespan. Stewart & Carty (1993) posit that leader changes occurring closer to elections seem to have the best chance of having a positive impact on the result, indicating that the effects of leader change are short-lived, while

Brown (1992) observes that 'honeymoon periods' experienced by new British prime ministers do not tend to last long. Pedersen & Schumacher (2015) find that, regardless of how the new leader was selected, the effect of leader change on party popularity quickly dissipates when comparing the difference in the party's support immediately before leader change with observations more than a month after the change occurred. Moreover, their analysis of election results from 15 countries suggests that the occurrence of leader change between elections has no impact on vote share, indicating that the initial benefits of leader change lack the staying power needed to translate into electoral effects. Likewise, Cozza & Somer-Topcu (2021) find no greater electoral effects for leader changes involving a ballot of party members and Somer-Topcu & Weitzel (2024) find no evidence that election results are significantly affected by the number of leader changes that have occurred since the previous election. Given the perceived importance of leaders on voter attitudes towards parties and the theoretical reasons to believe that leader change will generally have a positive effect, the recurring lack of meaningful and long-lasting effects identified by the existing literature presents a puzzle for this thesis to address.

Other impacts of leader change

There is additional research into leader change that does not directly assess its impact on party support but shows that changes of party leader alter voters' perceptions of parties in other ways. One strand of this literature finds that how voters place parties on an ideological scale seems to adapt more readily and more closely reflects the actual positioning of parties after leader change has occurred, as evidenced by increased consensus among voters about party ideological positions (Somer-Topcu 2017) and greater consistency between voter perceptions and party manifestos (Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu 2019) following leader change. These effects are attributed both to the increased public attention parties receive as a result of leader change as well as the greater credibility enjoyed by new leaders who, unlike their predecessors, do not have existing track records that cause voters to question the plausibility or sincerity of their pledges (Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu 2019, Somer-Topcu 2017).

A final strand of research that requires attention in this literature review emerges from the foundational work on theories of party change. In a time when voting is no longer as rooted in voters' social identities, parties must compete for the favour of voters by continually adapting their appeal; they must function as 'catch-all' parties (Kirchheimer 1966). Yet, in their theory of party change, Harmel & Janda (1994) posit that political parties are generally averse to change in terms of their ideological positions, organisational structures or strategies, knowing that overhaul in any of these areas is likely to attract opposition from within the party and its core support base. However, Harmel and Janda identify factors that could help to enable party change, and a change of leader is one of these factors. Other factors proposed as facilitators of party change are a change of dominant party faction or external shocks, thought to be events such as election losses that cause parties to question whether they are able to successfully fulfil their goals without evolving in some way. The theory also suggests that, rather than leader change alone, the coincidence of an external shock alongside leader change will raise the chances that leader change will engender party change, as the need for the party to improve its performance will endow the new leader with a greater mandate to alter the party's course. As the next section will discuss, this work on party change, alongside the literature on leader effects and the public opinion implications of leader change, will be instrumental in the coming chapters of this thesis.

1.2 The contribution of this thesis

The chapters that make up this thesis intend to contribute to the literature reviewed above in several ways. In Chapter 3, the thesis explores the impact of leader change on party support for the British Conservative and Labour parties. When assessing the immediate impact of leader change, it is proposed that the impact of leader change can be compared to other events known to impact party support in order to make a less impressionistic evaluation of the magnitude of leader change effects. The results show that leader change generally has an instant positive effect and contribute the additional insight that this instant effect is comparable to other key causes of party support boosts (namely, 'rally around the flag' effects and post-election honeymoon periods).

Connecting this chapter to the wider literature on the personalisation of politics, the finding that leader change influences voter perceptions of parties implies that leaders do have some direct and exogenous effect on party support. The chapter goes on to find that leader change very often has only a short-term impact, which is consistent with prior research into the longevity of the impact of leader change (Brown 1992, Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024).

Chapter 4 highlights the importance of considering the distinctive features of different cases of leader change and how these factors moderate its impact on party support. It finds evidence that a range of factors serve to influence the extent to which leader change is likely to impact party support in the short-term, offering a potential explanation for why leader change has often been found to have a relatively minor impact in the literature. Specifically, the analysis finds that leader change is dependent on whether economic conditions favour support for the party and whether the party is in government. It also finds that leader change is more impactful when the predecessor is likely to have been less successful (in terms of tenure length or recent party support losses) and when the successor offers a more moderate ideological position than the previous leader. In terms of the mechanisms driving the effect of leader change, these findings firstly indicate that an important aspect of leader change is simply the removal of the predecessor, who is associated with a backlog of performance failures which drag on the party's support until the unburdened new leader refreshes the slate. In advancing this theory of leader change, the thesis draws on the insights of the 'costs of governing' literature, which proposes a mechanism for why incumbent governments tend to lose support while newly elected governments receive a temporary uplift in voter support (Green & Jennings 2017).

However, Chapter 4's finding that successor moderation increases the impact of leader change also suggests that the effect of leader change on party support is not wholly dependent on the predecessor-removal mechanism, but also the opportunity leader change presents to actively increase the party's appeal. The chapter therefore highlights the importance of considering how leader-specific factors (ideological positioning, in this case) also play a role in moderating the impact of leader change, broad-

ening the scope of the leader change literature beyond an emphasis on the selection mechanism as the main moderating variable. This insight is achieved by making use of the new ideological data generated specifically for this thesis (discussed in Chapter 2).

Chapter 4 also illustrates how leader change's impact, despite being short-lived, could be sustained in cases where the leader seeks to actively increase the appeal of their party through ideological strategy. The initial attraction of leader change may dwindle as new leaders lose their novelty and come to seem as fallible as their predecessors, but voters are more likely to stick around when the new leader gives them reason to do so. This could be because leaders who ideologically moderate not only have higher personal appeal but also have indirect effects on the appeal of the party itself, since they bring it closer to the preferences of the greater portion of the electorate who do not occupy the ideological extremes. This links with the literature suggesting that much of the effect leaders exert on their parties' appeal is indirect (King 2002). However, ideological moderation is also connotated with other positive traits in voters' minds (Huber 2015, Johns & Kölln 2020), meaning that ideologically moderating leaders might directly boost perceptions of the leader's personal qualities as well.

An important question left unanswered by Chapter 4 is whether a long-standing leader can reap the rewards of ideological repositioning in the way that new leaders do. In other words, is scope for ideological repositioning exclusive to new leaders or can any leader reap these rewards? With this question in mind, Chapter 5 explores differences in how the public responds to ideological repositioning effected by new leaders compared with self-repositioning by established leaders. The chapter finds that new leaders are able to benefit from ideological moderation whereas the same ideological manoeuvres have no benefits, and might even incur costs, for established leaders. This analysis builds on work around the credibility gap between new and established leaders, revealing how holding a prior reputation can act as an impediment to repositioning for leaders who have already occupied the role for an extended period (Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu 2019). The chapter then explores the extent to which new leaders seek to take advantage of this benefit, finding that they often maintain similar positions to their predecessors despite the potential rewards of repositioning (though some evidence

is found to suggest that successors could be more likely to ideologically moderate if there were signs of party decline under the predecessor). This failure to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by leader change could explain why leader change is often found to have only limited benefits on party support. It also connects with the idea, originating in the literature on party change, that while a change of leader can be a facilitator of party change, party change is nonetheless a risky strategy that new leaders may be wary of pursuing in absence of an external trigger (Harmel & Janda 1994).

The final empirical analyses presented in Chapter 6 examine how the impacts of leader change are affected by attitudinal predispositions held by individual voters. Therefore, this chapter looks at leader change from a different angle than the previous chapters, which focus on aggregate effects, by examining the role of individual-level differences in shaping responses to leader change. The idea that prior dispositions distort the way voters experience new political developments has long been central to political science through the theory of partisan identification (Campbell et al. 1960). Although partisan identification is no longer as central to explanations of voter choice as it once was, the idea that voter reactions to new information can be biased by prior attitudes continues to have mileage (Bartels 2002, Bartle & Bellucci 2009, Converse 1995, Converse & Pierce 1985). Drawing on this perspective, Chapter 6 presents evidence that voters with a higher level of education are less likely to connect changes in their leader evaluations to their perceptions of that leader's party. Moreover, those who harbour strong partisan ties towards an opposing party or extreme ideological values are more likely to fail to update their evaluations of both party leaders and their parties even after a significant leader change has occurred. Likewise, people who pay less attention to politics are less reactive to leader change. This demonstrates that psychological factors other than the actual image of the leader can contaminate how voters perceive leaders, contributing to the debate around the exogeneity of leader effects by showing how voter perceptions of leaders are themselves filtered by other factors, including partisanship and other attitudinal orientations. Finding that some pockets of the electorate are less likely to react to leader change also further explains why leader change is not a more sizeable booster to party support.

The studies contained within this thesis also shed some light on the normative concerns surrounding the effects of leaders and the worry that democratic elections are at risk of becoming hollow personality contests. The evidence that the ideological positioning of new leaders matters to voters provides reassurance that meaningful political considerations remain important in voter decision-making. Moreover, observing that some voters do not react as readily to leader change suggests that the party preferences of voters are not uncritically swayed by whoever is leading a party at that given time. As suggested by prior work, voters factor politically salient aspects of leaders into their evaluations (Aaldering 2018, Berz 2020, Bittner 2011, Lobo & Curtice 2015*b*).

1.3 The empirical focus: Britain since the 1970s

The analyses presented in this thesis focus on public opinion and instances of leader change in Britain between 1972 and 2023. By focussing on the post-1960s period, the purview of this study excludes the earlier time in Western European politics where voting was largely dictated by the 'frozen' social identities and party loyalties of voters (Lipset & Rokkan 1967). After this period, voters' alignment to social cleavages loosened, creating an electoral environment where voters adapt their party preferences in response to ongoing party competition and parties function as 'catch-all' parties (Kirchheimer 1966) by continually modifying their appeal to attract support (Webb & Bale 2021). In this post-1960s period, leaders – and by extension leader change – likely became more relevant factors in the political thinking of voters. Because leader changes tend to be infrequent, it is useful to analyse such a wide window of time to ensure an adequate number of leader change occurrences are available for study. Nine Labour changes and ten Conservatives changes are studied across this thesis.

The personalisation or presidentialisation of politics is often regarded as a growing trend, with leaders gaining progressively greater emphasis in voter decisions (Garzia et al. 2022, Poguntke & Webb 2005). This raises the concern that studying the effects of leader changes occurring in, say, the 1970s alongside the 2010s is a problematic strategy, since the importance voters ascribe to leaders today will not be the same during the earlier observations. However, reassurance comes in the form of evidence

that, in fact, the meaningful role played by leaders in how voters perceive parties has been observable throughout the past half century (Bittner 2018, Curtice & Holmberg 2005, Nadeau & Nevitte 2011). Webb & Bale (2021, p.185) provide a handy illustration of this by quoting a *Times* editorial from 2nd June 1970, which opined that the 1970 General Election had asked the electorate 'to vote not for a Member of Parliament, but for a Party; not for a Party but for its leader'.

While this thesis encompasses a wide span of time, the focus on Britain means that its spatial focus is relatively narrow. In sum, the empirical scope of this project means there are 19 leader changes available for analysis. Although this narrower focus goes against the grain of much of the recent literature on leader change, which has tended to embrace cross-national data, and incurs costs in terms of the number of leader change instances available for analysis, the focus on Britain has the benefit of enabling the use of data that facilitates many of the novel contributions of this thesis. This data would pose serious challenges if more countries had been included in the project. As outlined in Chapter 2, data on annual leader positioning was generated using automated text analysis for use in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 (in conjunction with polling data). Incorporating other countries into this data generation process would not have been possible without adapting to issues of inconsistent availability of textual data across different country contexts. Britain also has a strong tradition of collecting polling data (Bailey et al. 2021), which means that long time series are available for study. This data availability facilitates the wide temporal scope of the analyses presented in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. Chapter 6 then examines data from the British Election Study internet panel survey (Fieldhouse et al. 2023), which is highly suited to the analysis of leader change (for reasons discussed within the chapter) but only samples members of the British electorate.

As well as offering advantages in terms of data availability, focussing on a single country also enables a degree of contextual awareness when modelling the data and interpreting the results that is less attainable when more cases are considered within a single analysis. In this way, although this thesis adopts a quantitative approach, the analyses presented over the course of this work share some of the advantages of

qualitative case study research, particularly with regards to internal and conceptual validity (George & Bennett 2005).

Despite focussing on one country in its empirical analysis, this research is nonetheless intended as a contribution to the field of comparative politics. Taking each leader change as an individual case (within the wider case of Britain), they match the definition of a case as 'an instance of a "class of events"', which are studied 'with the aim of developing theory (or "generic knowledge")' (George & Bennett 2005, p.18). Therefore, although the leader changes studied within this thesis occurred exclusively within the context of British politics, the effects of these leader changes and variation between them is taken as representative of the phenomenon of party leader change in parliamentary democracies more broadly. Many analyses presented in the coming chapters are comparative in the sense that they exploit temporal variation by looking at several different leader changes that occurred at different points in time, even though these all occurred within Britain. Other analyses are based on comparisons of observations in times where leader change occurred with the (far more numerous) observations where it did not. Applying a typology proposed for case study research, the inferences made within these analyses are therefore derived from longitudinal comparison as opposed to spatial comparison (Gerring & McDermott 2007).*

The extent to which leaders affect voter perceptions is likely to vary across different country contexts (Barisione 2009), so it is worthwhile to consider how the features of British politics relate to current knowledge on the conditions most likely to support leader effects. This has implications for the generalisability of this thesis, because if British voters are likely to be atypical in their relationship with party leaders – either by being particularly susceptible or immune to the influence of leaders – then the external validity of this enquiry into leader change is jeopardised.

Reassuringly, as a seedbed for the impact of leaders and leader change the British political system provides an encouraging mix of hostile and hospitable conditions. On the hostile side, despite the general tendency towards partisan dealignment, British

*Chapter 6 is an exception to this rationale, because the basis of this chapter's analysis is how respondents from a large-N survey reacted to four recent leader changes. In this chapter, variation between leader changes is less important than variation between individuals in how they react to leader change.

voters have habitually voted for the same parties at successive elections to a greater extent than other European countries (Bartle & Bellucci 2009). These stable party preferences suggest that British voters are less likely to allow short-term influences like party leaders to inform their perceptions of parties because contexts where there are stronger voter cleavages and higher levels of party identification have been observed to reduce the impact of leaders on voter choice (Curtice & Lisi 2015). Moreover, the UK is a parliamentary system which means that individual leaders will not loom so large in the psyche of British voters as they do for voters living within presidential systems (Curtice & Holmberg 2005, Curtice & Hunjan 2011, Curtice & Lisi 2015). From these perspectives, Britain has the characteristics of a critical case for the study of leader change, because it fosters conditions that theoretically should prevent overinflated impacts of leaders on public opinion towards parties.

However, in other ways, British voters are unlikely to be particularly less receptive to the impacts of leader change than voters in other parliamentary democracies. Party competition in Britain has generally been dominated by two parties, with Westminster elections operating under a majoritarian (first-past-the-post) system and governments usually comprising of only one party (with the exception of the 2010-2015 coalition government). These three factors – two-party competition, majoritarian electoral systems and single-party governments – have all been shown to increase the influence of leaders on voter choice within parliamentary systems (Curtice & Holmberg 2005, Curtice & Hunjan 2011, Curtice & Lisi 2015, Formichelli 2015, Holmberg & Oscarsson 2011, Nadeau & Nevitte 2011), although leader evaluations do seem to be important in countries with proportional systems as well (Bittner 2011). In general, these factors imply that Britain should not be characterised as a thoroughly critical case.

For this thesis, it is ultimately intended that the conditions fostered by Britain adhere to something akin to the 'Goldilocks principle'; they are neither too encouraging nor too inhibiting of leader effects to raise concern about the generalisability of results. Many of the concerns identified by the cross-national literature on the personalisation of politics have also been discussed with regards to Britain specifically, including debates around direct-versus-indirect leader effects (Denver & Johns 2021, Webb & Bale 2021),

suggesting that Britain is certainly closer to a typical than a deviant case (Seawright & Gerring 2008).

Ultimately, no single case is apt to provide perfectly optimal conditions for generalisability. For this reason, this thesis instead aims to deliver research into the effects of leader change that: firstly, has high internal validity within the context of British politics; secondly, studies a country that possesses characteristics which make it likely to be a broadly representative case in terms of the general effects of leaders; and, thirdly, formulate and provide initial tests of new theoretical ideas that can stimulate future cross-national research. On this final point, the coming chapters engage readily in the existing cross-national literature and seek to develop new hypotheses that could go on to be tested in an internationally comparative study. Therefore, while this thesis certainly intends to rectify the 'limited academic analysis on the impact of leadership transitions in British politics' (Heppell & McMeeking 2021, p.63), it also intends to enter dialogue with the wider comparative literature on leader change as well. Certainly, there are questions to be asked about how the findings of this work translate to other parliamentary democracies, especially countries with multi-party governments and/or proportional electoral systems, but these are entrusted to future research.*

*Another factor that has not been discussed here is that, by focussing on Labour and the Conservatives, this thesis does not address leader change in the smaller parties. More discussion on this matter is offered in the concluding Chapter 7.

Chapter 2

Generating annual data on the Left-Right positions expressed by Conservative and Labour leaders, 1971-2023

The adage that 'all politicians are the same' is an enduring fixture of political discourse, but the reality, at least in terms of party leaders, is more complicated. On one hand, party leaders can indeed exhibit similar attributes, for example when a new leader fails to shake off the ideological legacy of their predecessor. Sometimes this is deliberate, as when modern Conservative leaders seek to style themselves as heirs to Margaret Thatcher, but it can also occur when a previous leader casts a shadow that is too influential to escape (Alexiadou & O'Malley 2022, Helms 2024). But on the other hand, there are clear distinctions between the likes of John Major and Boris Johnson, or Tony Blair and Jeremy Corbyn, in terms of both political style and ideological vision. Moreover, party leaders have potential to vary not only from person-to-person, but also over time as they evolve individually during their careers. This poses challenges for the study of leader change, as it creates demand for data that will provide information on both the outgoing leader as close as possible to the end of their tenure and the

incoming leader as close as possible to the beginning of their leadership. This chapter describes how annual time series data on the expressed ideology of British leaders was generated to meet this demand, using automated content analysis of Conservative and Labour leader conference speeches from 1971 to 2023.

Data on voter evaluations of party leaders is readily available. This is frequently deployed as a predictor of party support, for instance, to demonstrate the linkage between voter attitudes towards leaders and their electoral choices (Clarke et al. 2004, 2009, Whiteley et al. 2013). Much rarer, however, is data pertaining to the individual characteristics of the party leaders themselves. Hitherto, studies into leader change have tended to focus on aspects of leader change that are readily codifiable, such as the selection mechanism through which the leader was chosen (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015) or how many years the outgoing leader had occupied the position (Horiuchi et al. 2015). These variables are undeniably informative, but they are not sensitive to the ways leaders vary over time as individuals or between predecessors and successors. As an illustration, consider Labour leaders Jeremy Corbyn (2015-2020) and Keir Starmer (since 2020), who were both selected through a party membership ballot after their predecessors had served approximately half a decade in opposition. Clearly, there is a greater difference between these two politicians than such variables can account for, with Corbyn regarded as a leftist pathbreaker while Starmer adopted a notably more moderate, managerial approach to party leadership.

It is important to note that the data presented in this chapter is not the first to measure characteristics of leaders. Comparative data produced through expert surveys has been able to shed light on matters relating to leader control and autonomy (Marino et al. 2022) or domination over their parties (Schumacher & Giger 2017). However, the observations in these datasets tend to be separated by gaps of time than can stretch to multiple years. This means that any changes effected by these leaders between observations are not accounted for and short-serving leaders are entirely absent from the data. When it comes to data on ideology, annual data is sometimes available for parties (Armingeon et al. 2023, Cruz et al. 2021) and, in some cases, leaders (Brambor & Lindvall 2018, Herre 2023). However, such data tends to categorise ideological posi-

tions into broad groups ('Left', 'Centre' and 'Right' or similar) rather than continuous measures. While nominal observations of this sort are valuable for comparison between parties and countries, they are too broadly defined for use in the study of leader change. This is because two leaders from the same party are likely to be grouped into the same category even if they are very different from an internal party perspective. Moreover, if change did occur within the same party (from 'Centre' to 'Right', for example), the data gives no sense of the magnitude of this change. While acknowledging the value of these data sources in a range of comparative political science applications, this thesis makes an alternative contribution by generating data on a continuous scale with relatively frequent observations.

The next section of this chapter provides a justification for measuring ideology on the unidimensional Left-Right scale, rather than encompassing multiple dimensions or specific issue areas. This is followed by an explanation of the Wordscores text analysis models used to generate the data and justification of the decisions made in configuring the analysis. The chapter then concludes by presenting and discussing the validity of the resulting data, which is later incorporated into empirical analyses within Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

2.1 Justifying the Left-Right conception of ideology

The conception of ideology that situates political actors within a unidimensional space ranging from left-wing to right-wing is commonplace and has proved invaluable for developing theory about party competition (Downs 1957). However, this straightforward view of ideology still requires some justification, particularly considering developments that highlight the fundamental multidimensionality of ideology and call into question the salience of the unidimensional Left–Right approach in explaining how political agents situate themselves within the ideological space (Bakker et al. 2022, Dassonneville, Hooghe & Marks 2024, Dassonneville, Fréchet, Jabbour, Ferland & Homola 2024, Dassonneville et al. 2023). It is actually plausible to conceive of different ideological dimensions for every area of policy that is politically salient at a given time, such as

healthcare or the environment. A common approach to incorporating ideological diversity used by studies is to consider not only the Left-Right dimension on economic terms, but to incorporate an additional 'GAL/TAN' dimension where the spectrum ranges from green, alternative and libertarian positions through to traditional, authoritarian and nationalist positions (Dassonneville, Hooghe & Marks 2024). This raises questions for any researcher resorting to the unidimensional Left-Right spectrum.* However, the Left-Right axis remains central to understandings of ideological space among both the public and politicians (McDonald & Budge 2005, Webb & Bale 2021) and is still shown to be empirically useful in recent analyses of voter behaviour (Ferland & Dassonneville 2021). In any analysis of public opinion, it is worthwhile to consider how the public views the political domain, and the unidimensional Left-Right spectrum continues to have potency in the minds of voters as a means of cutting through the potentially unfathomable complexity of issue positioning. Therefore, while the unidimensional conception of ideology inevitably condenses the full diversity of ideological variation in exchange for methodological parsimony, the simple Left-Right axis continues to function as an effective summary indicator of ideology both for research purposes and, more importantly, in how voters process political information (Hakhverdian 2009).

A further point of possible contention regarding the value of a leader ideology time series is whether ideology remains a relevant consideration to contemporary voters. Valence theory, for example, proposes that the competence of parties and politicians has an important place in voter evaluations, undermining the primacy of ideological considerations in voter choice (Clarke et al. 2004, 2009, Whiteley et al. 2013). It is certainly implausible to suggest that ideology can capture the full gamut of factors affecting party competition and voter preferences. However, recent studies indicate that changes in party positioning remain a relevant factor in electoral choice (Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009, Buckler & Dolowitz 2009, Ferland & Dassonneville 2021), while the feeling of being ideologically represented also plays a role in voter satisfaction with

*In Britain, the GAL/TAN dimension seems particularly salient in light of the issues raised by the 2016 Brexit referendum and its aftermath. However, it has been found that the postmaterialist values often regarded as central to post-Brexit polarisation have considerable overlap with voter position-taking on the more traditional Left-Right dimension, suggesting a considerable degree of alignment between these dimensions (Lindell & Ibrahim 2021).

democracy (Brandenburg & Johns 2014, van Egmond et al. 2020). Ideological positioning also remains a key component of how leaders appeal to voters, as it serves as a heuristic for the actions they would take in government (Bittner 2011). Furthermore, ideological position can be interdependent with other criteria that voters use when evaluating parties, including competence. Voters are more likely to turn to competence evaluations where there is little ideological choice, indicating that ideology steers the emphasis voters place on competence in the first place (Green 2007). Moreover, evidence suggests that party ideological positions are considered by voters when making competence or leadership evaluations (Bellucci et al. 2015, Sanders et al. 2011). For example, it has been observed that voters take more moderate policy positions as indicators of competence while more extreme ideologies are associated with incompetence (Johns & Kölln 2020). To summarise, ideology still matters, and it is highly plausible that variations in ideology expressed by leaders will play an important part in how voters react to leader change.

2.2 Generating the data

2.2.1 The texts to be scaled (the 'test set')

Studying the impact of changes in leaders' expressed ideological positions requires data that situates the party leaders on an ideological scale across their time in the role. To begin generating such data, all Conservative and Labour party leader conference speech transcripts since 1971 were collected from the British Political Speech archive (Atkins & Finlayson n.d.). Annual conferences are major events in British parties' political calendars, with leader speeches serving as the centrepiece. Attracting intense media and public attention, these speeches represent special opportunities for leaders to communicate their positions to the public, yielding ideologically informative textual data that has the additional benefit of occurring on a routine basis (Finlayson & Martin 2008, Pettitt 2012). Because the British Political Speech archive does not contain speeches beyond 2018, conference speech texts from 2019 to 2023 were sourced from

other online resources.* Also, William Hague's first conference speech in 1997 was transcribed by the author from video footage available from C-SPAN (Hague 1997) and, because there was no Conservative conference in 1974, that year is missing. The resulting textual dataset is comprised of 53 Labour leader speeches and 52 Conservative leader speeches from 1971 to 2023. After data collection, the contents of these texts were converted into numeric data on a Left-Right ideological scale using the quantitative text scaling method Wordscores (Laver et al. 2003).

2.2.2 The Wordscores approach

Wordscores is a supervised approach to automated text scaling that is less labour intensive and susceptible to human bias than hand coding, but which still requires careful input from the human analyst. It is a 'bag-of-words' approach, meaning the units of analysis are individual words ('unigrams') and the model takes no account of the context provided by surrounding words (unless the analyst chooses to cluster neighbouring words into pairs or larger groups and analyse these 'n-grams' instead, though this creates more unique units which is not always desirable for this kind of analysis).

The first task for the analyst is to source a selection of appropriate 'reference texts' that have already been allocated varied ideological scores through a non-automated method (Laver et al. 2003). The Wordscores algorithm then assigns a numeric value to each individual word that appears in the reference texts based on the pre-coded score given to the document the word appears in. For words that appear within multiple reference texts, the score assigned to that word will be a weighted average of the scores assigned to the texts it appears in, taking into account how frequently the word appears in each text against the overall length of the text. If a word appears in only two reference texts, one pre-coded as -10 and the other pre-coded as 10, then that word's score would be zero. If it occurs more frequently in one reference text than the other, the score

*Speech transcripts unavailable from the British Political Speech archive and sourced elsewhere were the Conservative and Labour speeches delivered in 2019 (Corbyn 2019, Johnson 2019), 2020 (Johnson 2020, Starmer 2020), 2021 (Johnson 2021, Starmer 2021), 2022 (Starmer 2022, Truss 2022) and 2023 (Starmer 2023, Sunak 2023).

for that word would be skewed towards the score associated with the text in which it appears more frequently. The result is that, if a word appears disproportionately in more extreme reference texts, that word will be given a more extreme score. The score given to each word is taken as a reflection of the probable ideological position of any text that includes that word.

Once each word has its own score, these 'word scores' can then be used to estimate ideological values for the documents that have not received prior scaling, known as the 'test set', which in this case are the leader conference speeches. For every occurrence of a word within a test set document that also appears in the reference texts, the ideological score generated for that document will be calculated as closer to the score assigned to that word based on relative word frequencies. In this way, it is possible to estimate ideological scores for texts that have not been previously coded (the test set) using data from texts that have (the reference texts).

2.2.3 Reference text selection

For this analysis, the leader conference speeches are the test set to be scaled, and UK election manifestos hand coded by the Manifesto Project (Volkens et al. 2020) comprise the reference text set. Unlike speeches, pre-coded ideological scores are more readily available for manifestos, and the Manifesto Project is a preeminent resource in this regard. Election manifestos are also advantageous because they tend to be fairly lengthy texts, providing a wide array of words (the 'word universe') to form the basis of the estimates, which should minimise problematic instances where words appear in the speeches but are absent in the manifesto reference texts (Laver et al. 2003). The hand coded 'RILE' (RIght-LEft) scores, assigned by the Manifesto Project to each manifesto (Volkens et al. 2020), were used as the basis for the word scoring. The Manifesto Project attains these RILE scores by hand coding each textual unit (phrases that have independent meaning) within the manifesto into a particular issue category, half of which are considered right-wing and the other half left-wing. The RILE index is calculated by subtracting the sum percentage of textual units in the document that have been coded into a left-wing category from the sum percentage that were coded into

a right-wing category (Manifesto Project 2018). This means RILE has a theoretical range of -100 (purely left-wing) to 100 (purely right-wing), though no manifestos are likely to be wholly left- or right-wing in practice.

In the Wordscores analysis conducted for this thesis, the reference texts are comprised of all election manifestos archived in simple text format by the Manifesto Project. This equates to every Conservative and Labour election manifesto since 1964 until 2019, excluding 2010, for a total of 15 manifestos per party. Labour manifestos were used when scaling Labour speeches and Conservative manifestos were used when scaling Conservative speeches. This means the speech scores are calculated on the basis of the specific party's application of each word within their own ideological lexicon. This is valuable since Proksch & Slapin (2009) show that different parties can use the same word in different ways. It also reduces the possibility of a leader's score being affected by potentially critical reference to the opposing party's policies.

A potential concern about the choice of manifestos as reference texts is that the Wordscores estimates could be invalidated as a result of lexical differences between manifestos and speeches (Laver et al. 2003, Proksch & Slapin 2010). However, past studies go some way to alleviate this concern by making successful use of manifestos as reference documents when scaling spoken texts (Bäck et al. 2016, Bäck & Debus 2016, Baumann et al. 2018, Mickler 2018). The context in which the text was generated, whether that be spoken at a party conference or written in a manifesto, should be of less concern than the general suitability of the words as indicators of the dimension of interest, which in this case is Left-Right ideology (Bruinsma & Gemenis 2019). In this regard, party manifestos seem a fitting choice, as they are perhaps the closest of all available texts to 'encyclopaedic statements of policy positions' and, taken in their entirety (rather than subset to statements regarding specific policy areas), can reasonably be used as the basis for estimating Left-Right ideology on a single dimension (Proksch & Slapin 2009, p.331).

A possible alternative to scaling conference speeches would have been to infer the position of party leaders directly from the party manifestos produced during their leadership. However, this would have been problematic because the contents of manifestos

are the product of a collective priority-setting process by various intraparty groups (Ceron & Greene 2019). Accordingly, party manifestos cannot be reliably regarded as homogeneous expressions of the party leader's individual stance. Although party speeches are not solely authored by the leaders themselves, they are ultimately delivered by the leader and are intended as a representation of their vision. In addition, the first conference speech given by a leader will generally provide a measure of the leader's expressed ideological position fairly soon after their selection (within a year), increasing the likelihood that the first ideological position recorded for that leader is reflective of the position they stood for at the beginning of their leadership. This is important for the analysis of leader change. By contrast, a leader might have been in place for a number of years before a new election manifesto is called for, raising the possibility that their ideological stance might have evolved and that the manifesto does not reflect the initial impression they gave to voters at the time of the leader transition. This analysis therefore scales the expressed ideological positions of leaders based on their annual conference speeches, using manifestos as reference texts in the word scoring process.

2.2.4 Configuring Wordscores for time series

The use of Wordscores to generate time series data from texts collected across a span of over 50 years requires extra consideration from the analyst, as the developers of Wordscores advised caution when using the method on texts spread across a broad period of time (Benoit & Laver 2007). The concern is that semantic or lexical change could lead to instability in the language associated with the two poles of the Left-Right spectrum over time, invalidating any single text model that is applied to texts that are spread across many years (Benoit & Laver 2007, Laver et al. 2003). Evidence of this issue has not been found in Wordscores analyses where repeated estimations were performed on the same test set using reference texts from different periods, as broadly similar estimates were attained from each estimation (Hakhverdian 2009). However, preliminary analysis of the leader conference speeches scaled here did indicate a shift

in speech content for both parties that seemed to occur around the 1990s.* This is not necessarily surprising considering how the advent of New Labour disrupted the ideological playing field of British party competition during that time, but it does invite extra consideration when analysing the texts.

For this Wordscores analysis, two separate scaling processes are carried out for each party, resulting in four implementations of the model in total. The speeches are divided into those that occurred from 1971 to 1992 and from 1993 to 2023. As well as avoiding issues associated with linguistic change, an additional benefit of this strategy stems from the fact that manifestos have become longer over time and now encompass a greater number of issues than they used to (Greene 2016), and it is not desirable for reference texts from later in the timeframe to have greater influence on the scaling of older speeches than the older manifestos. The approach pursued here is influenced by Hug & Schulz (2007), who likewise ran separate Wordscores analyses using different reference texts when scaling documents that occurred at different times periods. Slapin et al. (2018) also structured their Wordscores analysis of welfare ideology in British legislative speeches to account for the advent of New Labour.

Within each of the four implementations of Wordscores, the conference speeches from the relevant period are modelled against the manifestos produced during the same time window. However, because there are potential drawbacks to simply using reference texts from the same period as the speeches, a few manifestos from before the period of analysis are also included as reference texts. This is necessary because, at times of ideological repositioning, British parties are known to appeal to party loyalists by claiming that their new positions have 'provenance' in the party's past and are therefore rooted in the party's ideological heritage (Buckler & Dolowitz 2009, 2012). As a result, developments in British party policy can be deliberately constructed to

*Before applying Wordscores, the speeches were scaled using an alternative model called Wordfish (Slapin & Proksch 2008). Wordfish provides an unsupervised alternative to Wordscores, whereby the reference text stage is bypassed and the model scales the test set according to word frequencies within the test set itself. This approach did not provide data that passed face validity tests, leading to the decision to anchor the Left-Right dimension using reference texts through the supervised Wordscores method. Proksch & Slapin (2010) have indicated that Wordfish can be less reliable when applied to speech data. However, the Wordfish estimation did indicate a disjoint in the content of the speeches occurring circa 1985-1995, which informed decisions made during the Wordscores modelling.

echo past positions. Likewise, contemporary leaders are often regarded as resurrectors of an earlier mode of politics, evident from the argument that Jeremy Corbyn's politics marked a return to the 1980s or that more recent Conservative leaders are reviving the politics of Margaret Thatcher. Even Tony Blair, thought to be an ideological path-breaker when selected as leader in 1994, was building on foundations laid by his predecessors Neil Kinnock and John Smith over the preceding decade (Heffernan 2000). Therefore, uses of 'outdated' political language may be informative. For this reason, manifestos from a decade prior to the start of each set of speeches are also included in each implementation of Wordscores as well as manifestos that occurred within the period, broadening the word pool to increase the ability of the analysis to pick up on retrograde ideological speech. It is intended that this strategy strikes a balance between avoiding the drawbacks of using reference texts from too wide a time frame, while also being sensitive to the potentially limiting effects of using only reference texts that are contemporaneous with the test set. For clarity, Appendix A contains a table showing each combination of speeches alongside the set of manifestos that were used as reference texts for scaling that combination.

Slapin & Proksch (2008) specify three assumptions that must be made when using Wordscores for time series purposes. Firstly, it must be assumed that the political lexicon has remained relatively stable across the time period. Britain has largely remained a two-party system throughout the five decades looked at in this study (Bartle 2021), with relatively stable lines of ideological competition between Labour and the Conservatives. Where this does not apply (due to the disruption brought about by New Labour in 1990s), adjustments to the modelling strategy have been made as discussed above. The second assumption is that the reference texts selected encompass vocabulary that is inclusive of words from throughout the period, and the third assumption is that the reference texts will encompass the most extreme positions that arose during the period. By including all available election manifestos in the Manifesto Project archive from within each period of study, it is intended that the word pool will be as inclusive as possible and will represent the extremes reached by each party during the timeframe.

2.2.5 Text pre-processing

Conventional pre-processing procedures were applied to all documents to optimise the analysis. Wordscores models have a centripetal effect on the scores assigned to the test set because the most common words also tend to be ideologically uninformative and are accordingly allocated middling scores (Lowe 2008, Martin & Vanberg 2008). This means that the estimates for the test set are pulled towards the median reference text score. Modifying the texts before analysis can help to mitigate this and attain better estimates. Therefore, stopwords (common generic words that are ideologically neutral) and scarce words (words used fewer than five times across the texts) were removed from the documents. To further prepare the data, numbers, punctuation marks and special characters were removed and all words were stemmed, which means they were reduced to a common root word. To further deal with the centripetal tendency of Wordscores, the original rescaling transformation proposed by Laver et al. (2003) was applied to adjust the estimates so that they are distributed on a comparable scale to the Manifesto Project RILE index they are based on. All text processing and analysis was implemented using the programming language R with the quanteda text analysis package (Benoit et al. 2018).

2.3 Validating the data

While Wordscores has potential to deliver effective and efficient scaling of texts, any computational content analysis can only offer an approximate translation of text into numeric data and requires careful input from the human practitioner (Grimmer & Stewart 2013). This manual input does not stop when the analysis has been completed, as the researcher must subsequently verify that the model has delivered suitable output by performing validity checks (Bruinsma & Gemenis 2019, Grimmer & Stewart 2013, Lowe 2008). To this end, the output of the Wordscores models are now subjected to validity tests and it is argued on the basis of these tests that the data provides a valid measure of leader ideological positioning that is appropriate for the needs of this research project.

2.3.1 Reviewing the allocated word scores

The first step in the validation process followed by this analysis was to inspect the scores allocated to the words. As discussed earlier, the Wordscores process calculates a score for every individual word contained in the reference texts, based on the pre-assigned scores allocated to those texts. These calculated word scores then form the basis of the scaling of the test set. It is worthwhile to get a broad sense of the kind of words that have been allocated more left- or right-wing scores, as this helps to confirm that the reference texts have successfully anchored the model onto the desired ideological dimension. It also provides insights into the nature of the ideological divisions that will be reflected in the analysis.

To this end, Figure 2.1 presents plots showing the words drawn from the reference texts (the manifestos) and indicates the values they were allocated by Wordscores. Every word used in the analysis is present in the plots and the scores allocated to each word are derived from the RILE index assigned to the manifestos that the word appears in. When these words appear in the leader speeches, their individual scores will be used to determine the ideological estimation for that speech. Because there were four sets of reference text depending on party and time period, a separate plot is presented for each implementation of Wordscores. The y-axes indicate how frequently each word appears within the reference texts, while the x-axes display the predicted score for each word. The triangular distribution occurs because more extreme words also tend to be rarer, while ideologically neutral words (which have middling scores) occur more commonly. Because the analysis involves thousands of words, a selection of ideologically informative words are highlighted to aid validation. These highlighted words were chosen subjectively by manually scanning over the allocated word scores for each analysis and picking out words that seem potentially ideologically informative and indicative of broader patterns across the four implementations of the model.

Reviewing these plots, a few patterns emerge across the four analyses. Generally, economic terms, and particularly those that relate more closely to free market and small state principles, were assigned higher right-wing scores (for example: enterpris, privatis, growth). Meanwhile, terms that suggest an interest in state intervention to

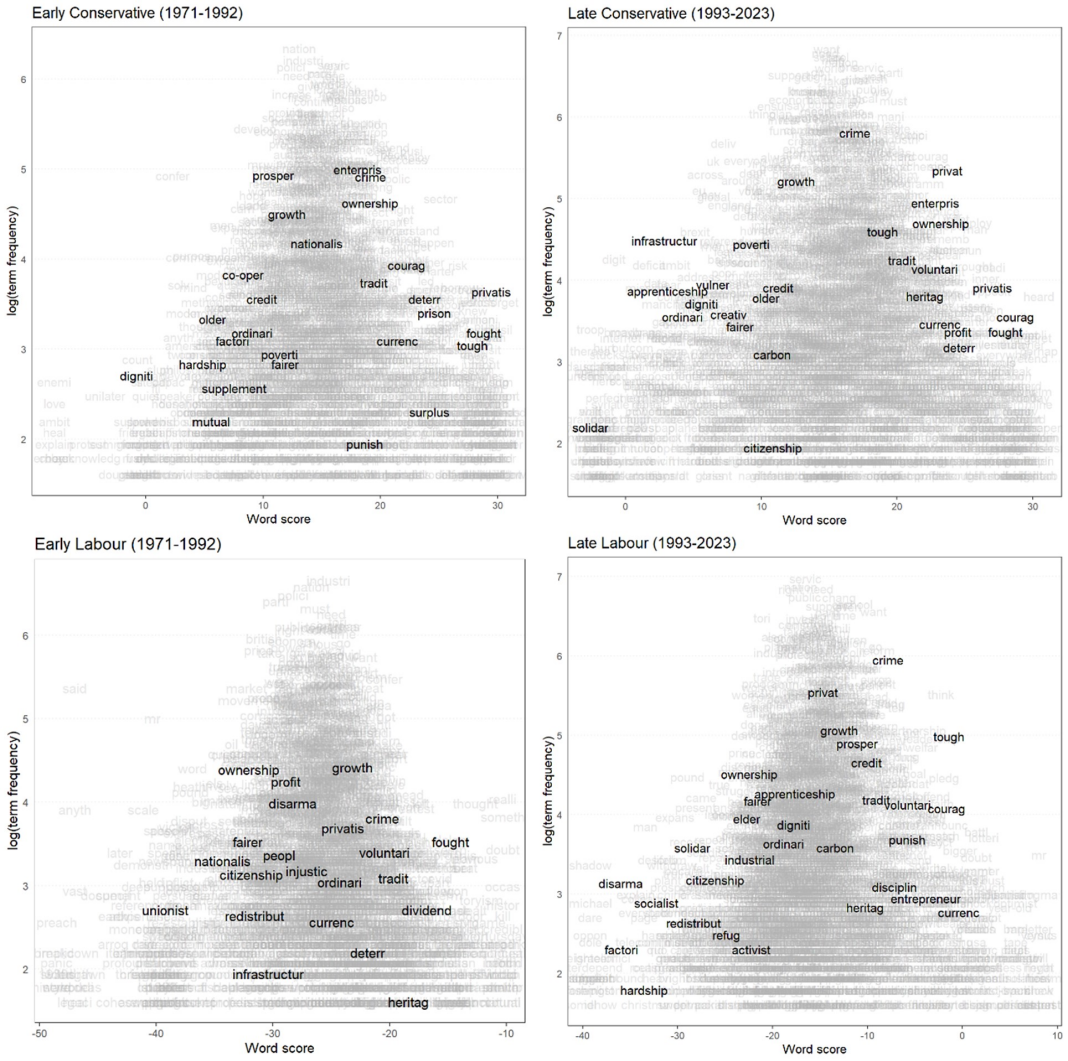

Figure 2.1: The Left-Right ideological score allocated to each word by the Wordscores models alongside the frequency of each word

NOTE: In each plot, the y-axis indicates how frequently each word appears within the reference texts (the party manifestos), while the x-axis displays the predicted score given to each word, which is based on their prevalence within each manifesto and the RILE ideological score assigned to that manifesto by the Manifesto Project. In the RILE index, lower figures (down to -100) are more left-wing while higher figures (up to 100) are more right-wing. When one of these words appears in the leader speeches, its individual score will inform the final Left-Right value allocated to that speech. Each plot represents the word scoring for each periodised implementation of Wordscores performed for this analysis. Certain potentially ideologically charged words have been highlighted to aid validation of whether the analysis seems appropriately anchored around left- and right-leaning vocabulary.

help disadvantaged citizens received more left-wing scores (poverti, fairer, nationlis, redistribut). Words suggesting concern for 'ordinary people' and the working class also tended to receive more left-wing scores (e.g. ordinari, factori, industrial). These outcomes reflect the traditional orientation of ideological competition in economic terms. Also noteworthy is that words suggesting a more combative or steadfast tone appear more commonly towards the right of the word scaling (tough, fought, courag). Likewise, more right-wing scores are attached to words that reflect concern about discipline or the preservation of tradition (disciplin, crime, punish, prison, heritag, tradit). These reflect some of the non-economic concerns that are associated with right-wing values. In sum, the valid positioning of these words from the reference texts provides encouragement that the Wordscores model has been suitably configured and will serve as an appropriate basis for scaling the texts in the test set.

2.3.2 Assessing the speech estimates

Following the example of Hakhverdian (2009), a reasonable next step in validating the Wordscores output is to assess whether the data is broadly consistent with generally accepted historical understandings of the parties' ideological trajectories. To this end, the results of the Wordscores models are plotted in Figure 2.2 (for the Conservatives) and Figure 2.3 (for Labour).

Viewing Figure 2.2 suggests that the broad trajectory of the Conservative estimates is in line with historical expectations. It is notable that Margaret Thatcher, while clearly exhibiting a more right-wing ideology than predecessor Edward Heath, does not reach the most extreme level of right-wing positioning until a few years after entering office. Political historians have suggested that Thatcher took a pragmatic approach in the face of a party split between the staunchly conservative 'dry' and moderate 'wet' factions, and did not fully unleash the political brand she would become known for during her early phase of opposition leadership (Norton 2012, Seldon & Collings 2000). Following Thatcher, subsequent Conservative leaders fail to break new ground ideologically, which is consistent with established narratives of Conservative leaders between Thatcher and David Cameron, as well as theory regarding the difficulty of

escaping the influence of a highly impactful forerunner (Alexiadou & O'Malley 2022, Bale 2016). Despite this, the data suggests that some post-Thatcher leaders did adopt increasingly more moderate positions prior to the arrival of David Cameron in 2005, but that Cameron was the first leader to adopt a more moderate position right at the start of his leadership, whereas his predecessors all began their leaderships by stepping back towards the territory that Thatcher had occupied. In the post-Cameron period, the model fails to provide an unambiguously valid estimate for the expressed ideology of Liz Truss, who briefly led the Conservatives in 2022. This issue will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

Switching attention to Labour's estimates, plotted in Figure 2.3, these are likewise generally commensurate with established narratives of recent Labour history. For example, the early phase of the plot shows Neil Kinnock shifting away from the more staunchly left-wing positioning of Michael Foot, before Tony Blair pulls the party more definitively into centrist territory. Subsequent Labour leaders maintained this moderate positioning until the selection of Jeremy Corbyn in 2015, who reverted to a more traditional leftist footing before the return of more moderate politics under Keir Starmer since 2020. Those who associate Michael Foot with the 1983 manifesto dubbed 'the longest suicide note in history' for its left-wing tendencies might be surprised that his estimate is not more extreme than his predecessors. However, Foot was confronted with a fractured party that had by then lost several members to the newly formed Social Democratic party. Foot therefore aimed to establish a 'soft left' position in contrast to the more radical leftism of figures like Tony Benn, which might account for why he does not appear as radically distinct from his predecessors or even successor Neil Kinnock in the Wordscores estimates (Gouge 2012). As an additional point, while Foot's successor Kinnock is regarded as a moderniser, his moderation of Labour's position was effected in a piecemeal manner, continually adjusting his position as time passed (Griffiths 2012). This incremental rightwards movement is reflected in the Wordscores estimates across Kinnock's period of leadership.

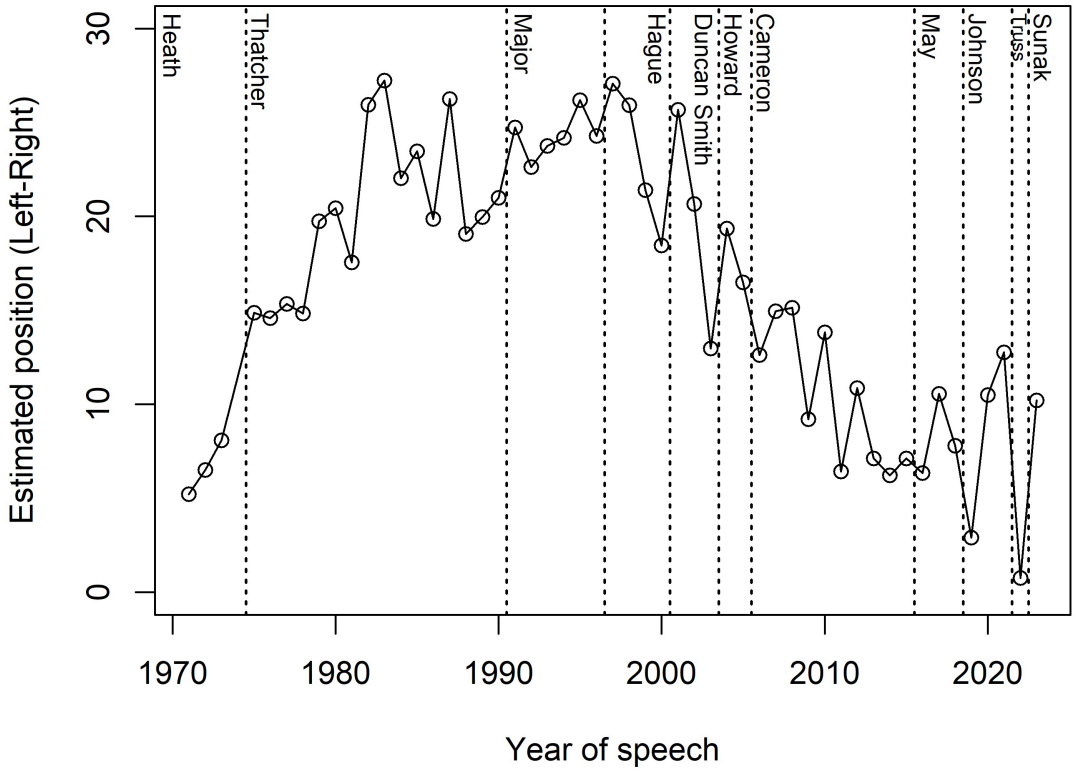

Figure 2.2: Wordscores estimates of the Left-Right ideological positions expressed in Conservative leader conference speeches, 1971-2023

NOTE: Each speech is scaled to be consistent with the Manifesto Project RILE index, where lower figures (down to -100) are more left-wing while higher figures (up to 100) are more right-wing. The estimate for Liz Truss does not conform to expectations - this issue is discussed further in Section 2.4.

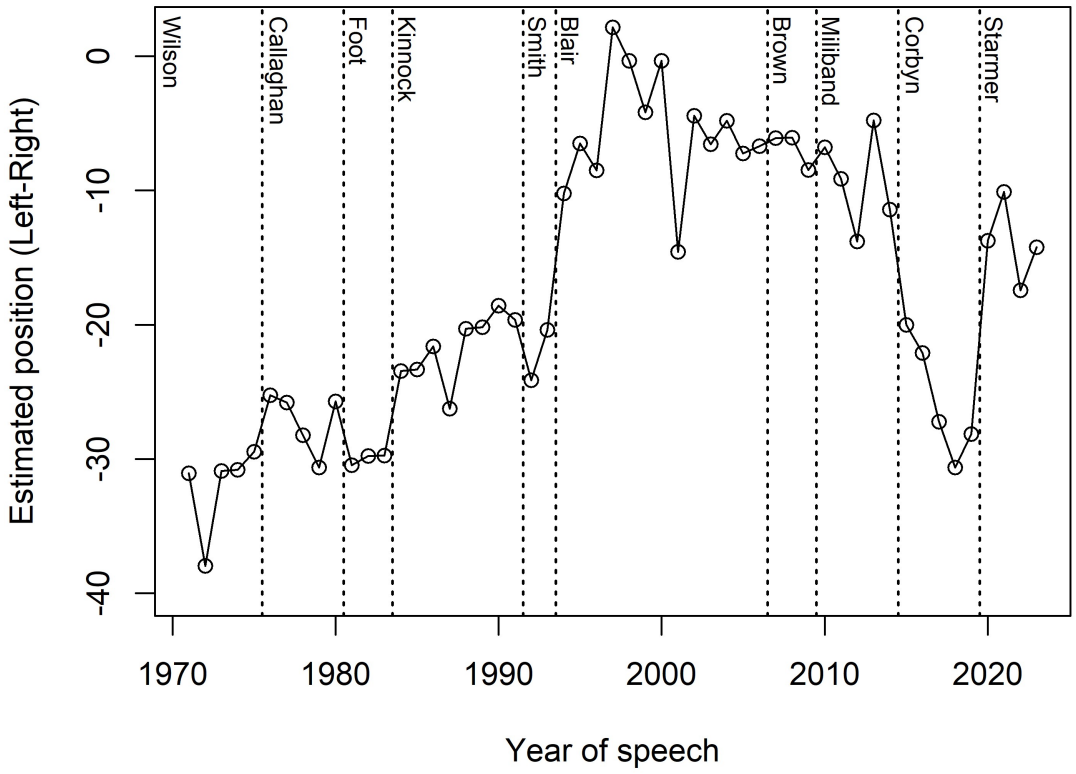

Figure 2.3: Wordscores estimates of the Left-Right ideological positions expressed in Labour leader conference speeches, 1971-2023

NOTE: Each speech is scaled to be consistent with the Manifesto Project RILE index, where lower figures (down to -100) are more left-wing while higher figures (up to 100) are more right-wing.

2.4 Limitations

While the text analysis models have delivered data that broadly conforms to expectations, there will unavoidably be individual estimates that would inspire contention among political historians. In part, this is attributable to the fact that, as Griffiths (2012, p.142) observes, history 'is viewed through the changing lens of the present'. But in other cases, it will be a byproduct of the limitations that come with any attempt to convert qualitative data into quantitative form. A clear drawback of the model is the estimate for the speech given by Liz Truss, who briefly served as prime minister in 2022. Truss appears to be the most left-wing Conservative leader across the entire period, which is inconsistent with the libertarian economics associated with the Truss leadership (Behr 2022, Cliffe 2022).

One possible explanation for the model's failure to provide a reasonable estimate of Truss's expressed position could be that her speech was too light on substantive policy content, as has been suggested by contemporary political commentators (Crace 2022). On the other hand, there may be more substantive reasons why Truss was given a more left-wing score than expected. Truss's speech demonstrated a clear intention to frame herself as someone concerned about the 'everyday struggles' of ordinary people, even though her economic perspective was more aligned with libertarian, free market principles usually associated with the right (Keaveney 2022). Addressing the conference, Truss implied that her policies were in the interests of working British people (naming factory workers, commuters, white van drivers, hairdressers and plumbers). Truss also acknowledged the need to support households during the ongoing energy crisis and affirmed the party's commitments to address climate change. In these regards, Truss appears to occupy a space outside the usual Conservative ideological framework by not conforming to the Left-Right axis in the traditional way, but by adopting elements from both sides. If this is so, the left-wing estimate for Truss's speech would be a result of the model detecting uses of left-wing terminology in her vocabulary.*

*Truss also discussed experiences of sexism and suggested she was the first prime minister to have attended a comprehensive school. Among the words that appear in Truss's speech, the top 100 with the most left-wing word scores include: daughter, solidar, femal, girl, zero (used in reference to net zero carbon emissions), household, commut, energ, childcar, climat, worker.

The possibility that an alternative ideological perspective is emerging within the Conservative Party is evident in the formation of factions like the Popular Conservatism (PopCon) group which Truss helped to launch, who embrace a more populist form of conservatism (Jones 2024). If these newer conceptions of what it means to be a Conservative take long-term root in the party, this will have to be factored into future analyses of the ideological positioning of the party and its leaders when more data becomes available. For present purposes, it is simply acknowledged that the validity of the Truss estimate is dubious and the analyses in subsequent chapters are adapted to address this. Considering that Liz Truss was an unprecedented leader, adopting a highly controversial approach and remaining in office for an exceptionally brief time, the divergent result arising from Truss's conference speech is not inexplicable.

Moving past the obvious limitation regarding the estimate for Liz Truss, it should be noted that, compared with manifestos or large concatenations of parliamentary speech, conference speeches are relatively short texts to use as the basis of ideological estimates. Future research might consider possible alternatives to conference speeches that would provide a firmer basis for estimating leader positions, perhaps by exploring the political customs of other countries and the textual data they generate. However, any such texts would have to be regular and representative of the leader's broader public messaging if they are to be useful for analysis of public opinion over time, which is the focus of this project. Using parliamentary speech, as is common in quantitative text analysis in other areas of research (Slapin et al. 2018), might be problematic as it is not directly addressed to or received by the public to the same degree as conference speeches. By the same token, alternative reference text configurations could be considered for future Wordscores applications. Researchers interested in moving past the unidimensional Left-Right scale could consider running multiple text analyses, configuring each model differently to scale the texts according to positions on different policy areas (Proksch & Slapin 2010). This would address the drawbacks that arise from collapsing ideology into a single dimension (Lauderdale & Herzog 2016), but again it might prove less useful for public opinion research, as voters often base their opinions on overall impressions of party ideology rather than discrete issue domains (Hakhverdian 2009).

Acknowledging these areas for future enquiry is not intended to negate the overall usefulness of the analysis presented by this chapter. As evidenced during the validation process, the overall veracity of the estimated data is robust and the models demonstrate clear sensitivity to variation in the expressed ideology of leaders. Note, for example, the successful detection of Keir Starmer's clear shift away from the position of Jeremy Corbyn in Figure 2.3, which shows that the model has captured this development in the Labour Party leadership even though the reference text set contains no manifesto produced under Starmer.

2.5 Concluding remarks

This chapter has described the generation of Left-Right ideological data that tracks annual Conservative and Labour leader positions from 1971 to 2023. It has provided support for the measurement validity of this data, while acknowledging its limitations and highlighting some potential avenues that could be explored by future work.

In two of the chapters upcoming in this thesis, the utility of this data will be demonstrated by incorporating it into empirical analyses. In Chapter 4, the data is used alongside other variables to explain variation in the impact size of different leader changes, focussing on the first ideological observation for each leader compared with the final observation for their predecessor. It finds that new leaders who ideologically moderate from their predecessor's position tend to gain a greater initial advantage for their parties and that this advantage may be longer lasting than the support boost attained by successors who offer lower ideological moderation. Then, in Chapter 5, the full annual time series of leader positions is utilised to assess whether new leaders tend to change from their predecessor's ideological position to a greater extent than established leaders change their own position, and whether voters are less sceptical of ideological repositioning by newly installed leaders compared with leaders who are already established. Together, these two chapters highlight the value of incorporating ideological repositioning between and within party leaderships when developing theory about the impact of leader change. The leader ideology data developed here is instrumental in empirically putting these theories to the test.

Before these analyses, however, the next chapter temporarily sets aside the data on leader ideology in order to offer a more general assessment of the immediate impact of leader change and the subsequent longevity of this impact.

Chapter 3

The impact of leader change on British party support: Direction, magnitude and longevity

Party leader changes generate considerable public and media interest, yet how they affect party popularity remains elusive. For some, conventional wisdom holds that the impact of changing the party leader should generally be positive, commonly justifying this belief with the argument that getting rid of burdensome predecessors will have a beneficial effect (Cowley 2022, Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994, Stewart & Carty 1993, Wells 2016). Yet, Leonard Stark (1996) observed a completely different conventional wisdom within Westminster and among some political scholars. This alternative view held that leader changes are dangerous and best avoided. While it is likely that the media attention and public intrigue attracted by the novelty of leader change gives parties enhanced visibility and prompts voters to reconsider their political preferences (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Stark 1996), this does not necessarily mean that voter reassessments will turn out positive for the party, particularly given the likelihood that rival parties will endeavour to cast the leader change in a negative light (Somer-Topcu 2017). Leader change moreover puts parties in jeopardy of exposing internal divisions through public contestation for the leadership (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, So 2021). Given that appearing divided can have negative consequences for a party's

image (Greene & Haber 2015), and considering leader changes may evoke a sense of party instability (Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024), there is justified cause for concern that leader change could in fact be a liability.

Recent events in British politics certainly cast some doubt on the presumed benefits of leader change. The election of Liz Truss as Boris Johnson's replacement in September 2022 did not benefit the Conservatives, as some had speculated it might (Cowley 2022). Instead, the party experienced a sharp decline in voter approval and Truss's premiership lasted only 44 days. The question is: does this case represent an exception, in that leader change is generally a reliable source of a poll boost, or is there really no overriding trend in the impact of leader change?

This chapter seeks to offer some clarity by testing the effect of leader change on British Conservative and Labour support using party approval data from the past 50 years. It also seeks to offer a firmer grasp on the relative magnitude of the effect of party leader change by comparing its impact with other events that are generally thought to trigger poll bounces. This builds on the extant literature by seeking to reach a more concrete judgement about the comparative size of the immediate impact of leader change, contextualising its role as a predictor of party support boosts. Finding support for the hypothesis that leader change in general does tend to create an immediate increase in party support, the chapter then shifts to an event history approach in order to assess how long the benefits of leader change tend to last. In line with past research into the electoral effects of leader change (Brown 1992, Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024), the analysis finds that support boosts attained through leader change are generally short-lived, often lasting less than half a year, although there is some heterogeneity in the sense that parties sometimes seem able to hang on to the initial benefits of leader change for a longer time.

The chapter begins with a broad outline of why theory might guide us to expect a short-term boost in party support following leader change and why much of this effect is likely to diminish in the long-term, incorporating theoretical insights from the broader literature on electoral honeymoon periods and the 'costs of governing' experienced

by governments (Green & Jennings 2017). It then proceeds to present a time series regression analysis of monthly party polls in Britain, comparing the instant impact of leader change with other events, followed by an event history analysis of the survival of leader change support boosts. This chapter lays the foundation for Chapter 4, which goes on to explore how different factors might moderate the impact (both short- and long-term) of leader change on party support.

3.1 How, and for how long, might leader change benefit a party?

Reviewing the literature on party leader effects, the idea that a change in leader would have at least some effect on party support is compelling. This branch of political science – arising from the so-called 'personalisation of politics' and the associated process of 'presidentialisation' observed in parliamentary systems – highlights the relevance of voters' impressions of party leaders in shaping their electoral choices (Aarts et al. 2011, Bean & Mughan 1989, Bittner 2011, Costa & da Silva 2015, Garzia 2014, Garzia et al. 2022, Karvonen 2010, Lobo & Curtice 2015*b*, McAllister 2007, Mughan 2000, Poguntke & Webb 2005). Complementing this, developments in the valence literature also foreground party leaders, suggesting that voters prioritise the perceived competence of parties when forming party preferences and that their impressions of leaders are important heuristic drivers within these performance evaluations (Clarke et al. 2004, 2009, Whiteley et al. 2013). If, as these literatures suggest, impressions of party leaders enable voters to sidestep the complex intellectual demands of evaluating party performance, and instead allow their opinions to be guided by their view of party leaders, it is reasonable to speculate that changing the fundamental basis of these evaluations through leader change will have a significant impact on party support. Work by Johnston et al. (2019) supports this speculation, finding that voter impressions of new party leaders relative to the previous leader function as significant predictors of loyalty and vote switching between the 2015 and 2017 UK general elections (for a perspective from Italian politics, see also Garzia 2017).

Of course, the existence of a link between how voters evaluate leaders and their parties does not automatically mean that leader changes will have a positive effect on party support. After all, voters might just as easily like the new leader less than they liked the previous leader. However, there are reasons to regard this as improbable. Unlike their predecessor, a new leader represents a 'fresh face' (Stewart & Carty 1993), with a public image that is unburdened by past blunders and disappointments (Cowley 2022, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Wells 2016). Accordingly, scholars have found evidence for a 'honeymoon effect', whereby general favour is allocated to parties in the immediate aftermath of leadership transitions (Brown 1992, Heppell & McMeeking 2021, Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stark 1996). Leader change is also accompanied by a period of intensified media attention, which gives parties a platform for self-promotion that coincides with the introduction of a new leader who was likely chosen on the assumption that they would prove more popular than their predecessor (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Stark 1996). After all, leaderships are more likely to be terminated following poor performance (Andrews & Jackman 2008, Ennser-Jedenastik & Müller 2015, Ennser-Jedenastik & Schumacher 2021), which gives newly installed successors a favourable baseline to be compared with.

Much of this literature on the effects of leadership change invites parallels with the concept of the 'costs of governing' (Green & Jennings 2012, 2017). Emerging from theories of competence voting, this strand of literature seeks to account for the 'law of shrinking support' that causes governments to consistently lose popularity over time in office (Cuzán 2015, pp.416-417). Green & Jennings (2012, 2017) attribute this tendency to the lack of information voters initially possess about a new government's competence, which leads voters to blame party failures on the preceding government and grant new incumbents temporary leniency. The result is that new governments enjoy a 'honeymoon period' in public opinion, albeit one that diminishes over time as negative information about the government's performance accumulates in voters' minds. This negative information incurs an increasingly malignant effect as it builds up and is bolstered by a bias that causes voters to emphasise negative information in their preference formation (Green & Jennings 2012, 2017). If the notion of blame

accumulation followed by a temporary 'honeymoon period' is recontextualised from governments to individual party leaders, it offers a convincing framework to explain one way in which leadership change might boost a party's fortunes simply by removing beleaguered leaders. In a qualitative study of leader successions in Germany, Helms also identifies the capacity for the 'costs of governing' literature, typically applied to governments, to be transferred to the context of party leader change, suggesting that party leader changes serve to present 'fresh faces as a functional equivalent to a genuine alternation in power' (Helms 2024, 5). In other words, leader change within parties could affect public opinion in a way that emulates the benefits of government turnover.

A striking feature of the honeymoon theory is that it is not fundamentally concerned with the appeal of the new leader or the positive effect leader change can have on the broader image of a party. Instead, the theory implies that new leaders enjoy a honeymoon simply by virtue of not having an accumulated track record like their predecessor, which makes them inherently favourable by comparison. But it is also possible that new leaders could actively bring desirable qualities to the table or that leader change can make parties seem more attractive. For example, leader change that includes party members in the selection process might make a party seem more attractive, for example by creating a sense of deliberation and making the new leader look more legitimate and hard working (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015). Ultimately, the mechanisms driving the impact of leader change – whether they be predecessor removal or actively increasing the appeal of the party and its leader – can be set aside for now, as they will be more fully considered in the next chapter. At present, it is sufficient to observe that there are compelling reasons to hypothesise that leader change will impact party support, and that this impact will be positive.

Hypothesis 3.1 Party support will increase substantially following a change of party leader

While initial increases in support are one potential outcome of leader change, they do not provide a complete picture of its impact. It is also important to consider the longevity of any such effect, since short-term benefits are unlikely to be of much utility

to vote- and office-seeking parties. While studies into the effects of leader change generally agree that its immediate effect is beneficial, they often raise doubts about its potential to have a long-term impact, finding that polling boosts seem to dissipate quickly or that there are no electoral benefits (Brown 1992, Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stewart & Carty 1993). Going further, So (2021) finds that contested leader changes can actually harm governing parties' vote shares from one election to the next, and have no significant effect for opposition parties (uncontested changes were also found to have no significant electoral effect in So's study).

The explanation for the brevity of the leader change effect could be embedded in the honeymoon mechanism already discussed. Research into the costs of governing suggests that voters attribute their grievances to the previous incumbent following government transition, but this forbearance is only temporary (Green & Jennings 2017). If this same mechanism is applied to individual leaders, then the benefit of leader change will only last until the new leader inevitably starts accumulating their own bank of grievances. Accordingly, while new leaders initially receive a clean slate and generate positive media interest, they cannot be buoyed by their novelty indefinitely and their initial appeal could soon wear off as they begin accumulating their own costs of governing. Over time, voters come to recognise that the successor is as fallible as the previous leader was and revert to their previous impression of the party (Cowley 2022, Wells 2016). This rationale justifies a second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 3.2 Parties who change leader will only experience increased popularity for a short period of time

3.2 Analysing the immediate impact of leader change

The first task for this analysis is to investigate how sizeable the effects of leader change on party support tend to be. Hypothesis 3.1 suggests that leader change will cause party support to increase 'substantially', but determining what counts as a substantial impact is not straightforward. The Stark criteria of impact suggested that an individ-

ual leader change must result in a poll increase of at least eight points to be considered 'empirically significant', motivated by the ±4 error margins of the Gallup data used in that analysis (Stark 1996). However, while the analysis found that this threshold is frequently attained in polls of leadership approval, the threshold sets a restrictively high bar for polls of party approval, which is reflected in the findings of both Stark and a more recent attempt to reapply his criteria (Heppell & McMeeking 2021). Rather than testing the impact of leader changes individually against a predetermined threshold, an alternative approach is to group leader change observations into a single variable which can be compared against a baseline where there is no leader change. A regression model including observations where leader change both did and did not occur facilitates this type of approach, which has been pursued in more recent scholarship (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, So 2021, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024). However, without any criteria for discerning a 'substantial' effect, the researcher can only make an impressionistic judgement about whether the observed impact is noteworthy. It is difficult to set an objective boundary for how much leader change needs to boost party support before it can be considered meaningful. To this end, the analysis presented here incorporates additional variables that measure the impact of other qualitative events often thought to boost party support. These are intended to provide objective points of comparison, enabling a more grounded assessment of the magnitude of the impact of leader change.

To initiate this process, OLS models are fitted with first-differenced monthly time series of Conservative and Labour support as the dependent variables. The party support data is mainly sourced from PollBasePro, which uses a statistical model drawing on an extensive pool of existing voting intention polls to generate a daily 'chain' of estimated vote intention percentages that fill in the gaps for every day between fixed general election results (Bailey et al. 2021). In estimating daily party approval scores, the PollBasePro model also takes account of the noisiness of polls, their irregularity (and the issue of data collection on a single poll occurring over a span of numerous days) as well as biases arising out of survey design choices within different polling houses. This data was topped up with YouGov (2023) polling data from February 2022 until September 2023. For this analysis, the final available observation for each month

is retained as the monthly observation point and the series run from February 1971 to September 2023. The resulting dataset consists of 611 observations (months) per party and covers a total of 19 leader changes: ten for the Conservatives and nine for Labour. First differencing transforms the data so that each observation (t) represents the change in party support percentage since the previous month (t–1), resulting in a stationary time series where each observation of the dependent variable is independent of its previous values.*

For this analysis, the key independent variable is whether leader change occurred during the observation month. To model the impact of leader change, a dummy variable was generated for each party, taking the value of one for months where leader change occurred and zero for all other months.† To provide a comparative perspective on the impact of leader change, other events known to impact party support are incorporated into the analysis. A prominent theory of government support is that incumbent parties benefit from a 'rally around the flag' effect, whereby voter support increases when the home state becomes engaged in an international crisis (Clarke et al. 1990, Kuijpers 2019, Lai & Reiter 2005). The effects of participation in an international crisis can therefore provide a basis for comparison with the benefits of leader change. The International Crisis Behavior (ICB) project collects data on the occurrence of international hostilities up to 2019 (Brecher et al. 2023, Brecher & Wilkenfeld 2000). Based on the ICB actor-level dataset, four dummy variables were created with values of 1 marking the months where the UK responded to an international crisis. These variables are split according to whether the crisis occurred while the party was in government or opposition, so that a distinction can be drawn between the effects of international crises occurring during periods in government and opposition. Under each circumstance (government or

*To further ensure that the time series variables used in this analysis were free of autocorrelation, which can violate the assumption of independent observations in regression analysis, ARIMA models were fitted to these variables so that only the 'white noise' form of the variables were modelled. Appendix B sets out this process in more detail.

†For the Labour transition from Harold Wilson to James Callaghan, the leader change variable is coded one for March 1976 although Callaghan did not formally become leader until April. This is because the elimination of Denis Healey in the second ballot of Labour MPs in March made it arithmetically almost inevitable that Callaghan would defeat Michael Foot and become prime minister. This was how the leadership election was portrayed in the media at the time (Parkhouse 1976*b*,*a*) and the party support data reflects this understanding of events, indicating that voters reacted to the change from Wilson to Callaghan in March rather than April 1976.

opposition), one variable records crises that the ICB classifies as full-scale conflicts while the second variable denotes crises that entailed a lower level of violence (these could involve no violence, minor clashes or serious clashes). This distinction is important because past findings suggest that only threats with the highest stakes consistently instil significant rally effects (Lai & Reiter 2005).

Alongside the ICB variables, two general election dummy variables are also incorporated in the analysis for each party. The first takes the value of one for months where the party has won an election and the other takes the value of one when the party has lost an election.* The value of zero is assigned to all the remaining months. This is to allow comparison between the impact of leader change and support boosts arising from election honeymoons (Green & Jennings 2017).

Additional control variables are included to more fully specify the model. A dummy independent variable marks all months where the party is in government. Economic conditions are controlled for using a differenced variable for lagged unemployment (Office for National Statistics 2024). Because economic conditions are likely to affect government and opposition parties differently, these are interacted with the incumbency variable. A separate model is run for each party. Due to the importance of comparing effect sizes in this analysis, the main results from these models are presented visually as coefficient plots in Figure 3.1 (the Δ symbol denotes that a variable has been first-differenced). The reported standard errors are robust to address potential heteroskedasticity, although the results are broadly similar when conventional standard errors are applied (the following discussion highlights instances where the choice of standard errors has affected the main results). As the data is differenced, the near-zero coefficients for the constant can be taken to indicate no trend in the original time series.

*Any election resulting in the party forming a government is regarded as an election win, while any election after which the party was in opposition is regarded as an election loss. This is a useful way of coding the variables because an electoral honeymoon period is likely to follow any election which enables a party to attain (or maintain) governing status. However, electoral fortunes could also be coded in other ways, such as by considering the party's vote share and how it compares with their performance in the previous election. Resorting to alternative conceptions of electoral success or failure would be particularly important in studies where the parties under analysis do not operate within a majoritarian system (where there is less chance of outright 'winning' an election due to coalitions), or if the parties under analysis are smaller parties where success cannot be measured in terms of government formation.

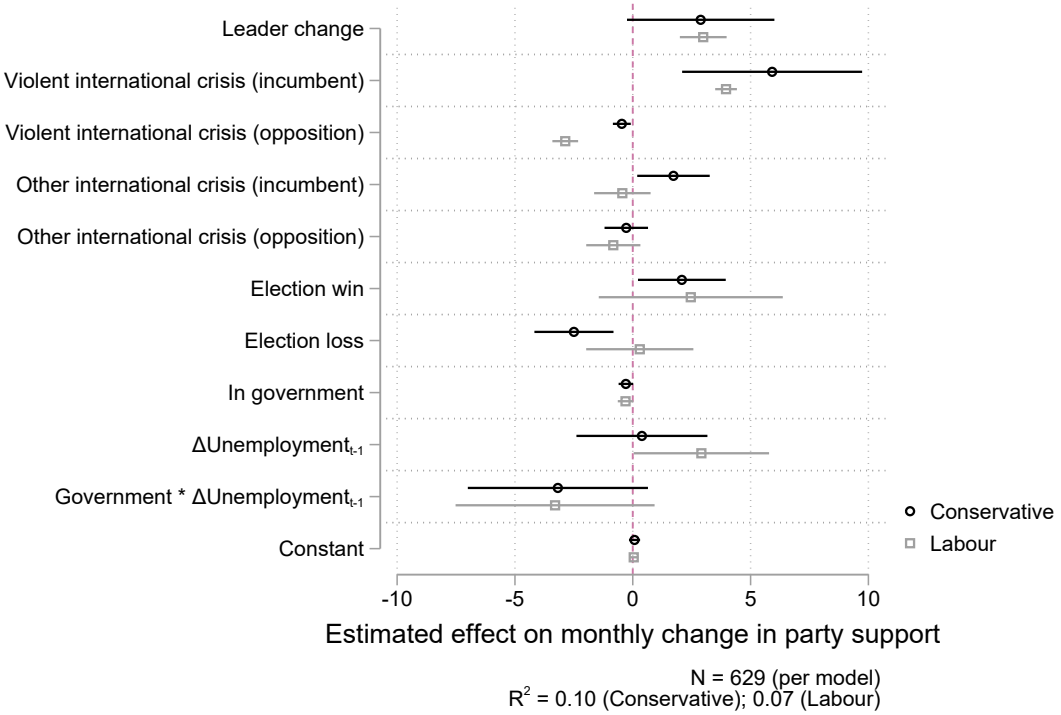

Figure 3.1: Coefficients and robust standard errors from OLS models estimating the effect of independent variables on monthly change in the percentage of voters supporting the Conservative and Labour parties, May 1971-September 2023

For both parties, the leader change coefficient is positive and statistically significant at the 0.1 level or lower, suggesting that leader changes do prompt a positive change in party support. For the Conservatives, leader change results in an average support increase of 2.88 (this is significant at the 0.05 level without robust standard errors but only at the 0.1 level with them). This is only about half the size of the average rally effect that occurs when a Conservative government engages in a violent international crisis (5.91) but it is about one point higher than the rally effect received after engaging in a less severe international crisis (1.73). The effect is also greater than the average honeymoon effect received in months when the Conservatives win a general election (2.08).

For Labour, the average effect of leader change is a rise in party support by around 2.99, suggesting no major differences between the parties in terms of the benefits of leader change. As with the Conservatives, this effect is smaller than the rally effect a Labour government tends to receive when they engage in a major international crisis (3.96), but is clearly greater than the slightly negative effect seen when Labour participates in a lower-level crisis (-0.44), which has no statistically significant effect. In fact, leader change within the Labour party has a similar positive impact on party support as the negative effect Labour experiences when the country enters a major international crisis while the party is in opposition (-2.87). For Labour, the positive impact leader change is slightly higher than the effect of their electoral honeymoons (2.46), although this honeymoon effect is only significant with conventional (not robust) standard errors in Labour's case.

Taken together, these results broadly support Hypothesis 3.1 by indicating that the occurrence of leader change does have an impact on party support that is comparable to election honeymoon and rally effects. Leader change can therefore be considered alongside these events as a likely predictor of party support boosts. However, in contextualising the impact of leader change, it must be qualified that it is not quite of the same magnitude as the rally effects experienced by governments who take their countries into high-level international crises. This difference is particularly pronounced for the Conservatives, possibly because supporters of right-leaning parties are more

likely to welcome military action than those who support social democratic parties like Labour (Koch & Sullivan 2010, Wagner 2020).

3.3 The longevity of the leader change effect

Having established that the initial impact of leader change on party support tends to be positive and relatively substantial, the question of how long this effects persists remains to be answered. An event history approach is taken to shed light on this (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones 2004). To build the event history dataset, a record is created for each of the nineteen leaders under analysis, and the party support data is used to observe the party's polling level at yearly intervals starting from six months after the start of the leadership until five and a half years into the leadership (66 months). The event of interest (or, in event history language, the 'hazard') is the point where the leader has spent two consecutive months with their party's popularity at a level beneath the average polling score of the party across the year running up to the leader change. For each leader, the number of time observations it takes for them to succumb to this hazard is recorded. The time-to-event is therefore recorded as a discrete rather than continuous measure in this instance, with observations grouped into annual periods (following an initial six month period). The data is set up this way because there are only 19 leader changes, which means there are only 19 individual survival durations. Grouping the time points into windows allows multiple leader changes to contribute to the same outcome observation, dealing with the general scarcity of observations.

The choice of hazard (spending two consecutive months below the average support level across the year before leader change) was reached because this threshold provides a clear indication that the honeymoon period following the leader change has ended; a new leader might be able to recoup their losses, but these later gains cannot be traced back to the party sustaining the original benefits of the leader change. Once the successor has spent two consecutive months in a position below the party's average in the year before they became leader, it seems safe to conclude that the leader change dividend has fully expired.

The hazard threshold is set at the party's average support 12 months before the

leader change rather than, say, three months because many predecessors are likely to have suffered particularly poor polling in their later months. Therefore, setting the threshold at less than 12 months could be too easy a standard for parties to maintain after leader change. Parties are not likely to consider a leader change successful if it only keeps them above the popularity level endured in the final months of a failing leader, but maintaining a level above the predecessor's final year is likely to be a more acceptable standard. It should be noted that some previous studies have used event history approaches where the hazard is the ultimate termination of the leadership (Alexiadou & O'Malley 2022, Andrews & Jackman 2008, Claessen 2024, Ennser-Jedenastik & Müller 2015, Ennser-Jedenastik & Schumacher 2021, Horiuchi et al. 2015, So 2018, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024). However, as it is possible for leaders to continue in the role after the initial benefits of leader change have worn off, the analysis conducted here is more suited to exploring the longevity of leader change effects as opposed to the survival of leaders themselves.

In the event history data, leaders who did not succumb to the hazard within their first five and a half years (David Cameron and Tony Blair), never experienced the hazard for the duration of their entire leadership (John Smith) or had not succumbed to the hazard by the end of the observation period (no polling data was collected beyond September 2023, by which point neither Keir Starmer nor Rishi Sunak had experienced the hazard), are recorded as right censored. This means they are factored into the analysis as survivors for the time points they are observable for, but do not influence time points in which they could not be observed. The observation period contains only six observations ending at five and a half years (66 months) because there are only two cases where the party continued to evade the hazard beyond this point, and neither succumbed within the subsequent 12 months. This means that, unless the window between observations was stretched beyond a year, none of the cases would register as experiencing the hazard in the seventh observation. It was decided that keeping the time intervals between observations consistent would aid interpretation, so there are no observations beyond 66 months. Also, five years encompasses the maximum time between general elections in the UK, making this a politically meaningful cutoff point

as support boosts that are sustained for this length of time are likely to have affected the party's electoral fortunes.

To address Hypothesis 3.2, the survival functions calculated from the event history data are displayed in Figure 3.2. These Kaplan-Meier survival estimates indicate the probability of leaders making it past each observation point without having experienced the hazard. Since the first observation point was six months, the survival rate is fixed at 100% until that point and declines at each yearly time point thereafter, reflecting the diminishing likelihood of surviving the hazard. Because there are few observations (19 leaders and 54 time points), the confidence intervals are wide. Nevertheless, the plot indicates that the probability of surpassing six months of leadership without experiencing the hazard are around 70%. Clearly, this provides support for Hypothesis 3.2: the honeymoon period arising from leader change is often short-lived, not even lasting half a year for a sizeable contingent of leaders, which reflects conclusions drawn by Brown (1992). The survival rate then drops to around 50% beyond 18 months, suggesting a serious risk of losing the benefits attained through leader change within a year and a half. Given that elections tend to occur years apart, it is hardly surprising that many studies fail to find evidence that leader change has any electoral effects (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, So 2021, Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021). However, it is worth bearing in mind that the 50% probability of maintaining a higher level of support beyond 18 months still indicates that short-term depletion of the advantage gained through leader change is not inevitable.

3.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter has provided evidence in support of the hypothesis that, in general, the immediate impact of leader change on party support is a positive one. It further sought to contextualise the impact of leader change by assessing its effect in relation to other events commonly regarded as party support boosters. The results suggested that leader change should be included in the canon of qualitative events thought to raise party support, but qualified this by observing that leader change tends to be less impactful than the 'rally around the flag' effect experienced when a governing party engages

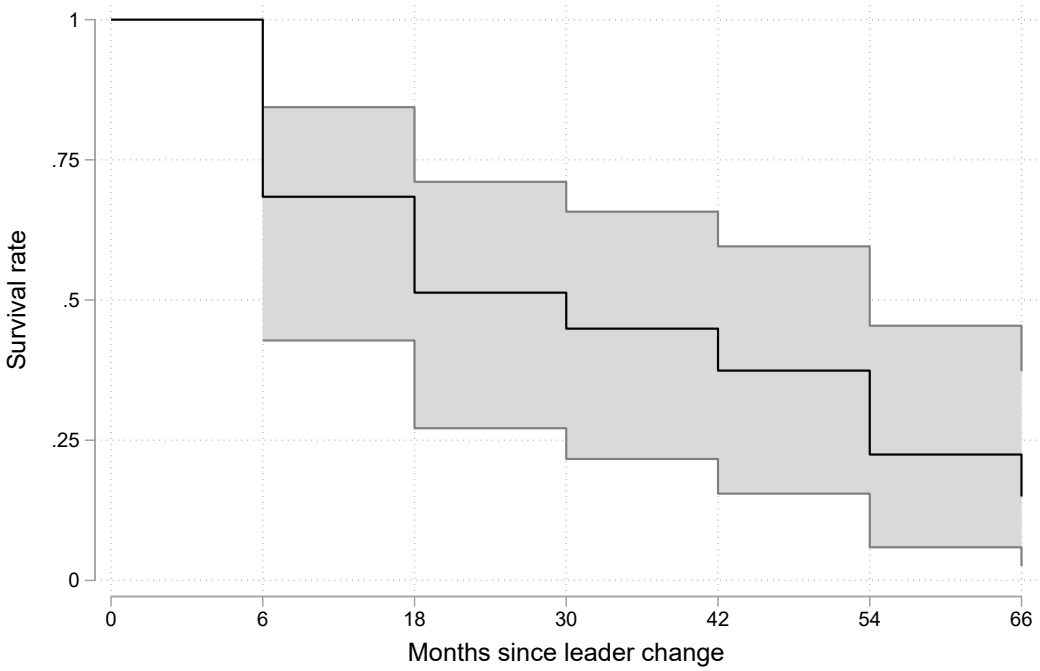

Figure 3.2: The event-history survival rate of the increase in party support following leader change

NOTE: The survival rate reflects the length of time a party evades the hazard following leader change. In this analysis, the hazard is met when the party spends a second consecutive month polling lower than it did on average in the year prior to the leader change, suggesting any beneficial effects of leader change have fully expired.

in a major international crisis. This comparative dimension adds nuance to previous research into the effects of leader change on party support, where the substantiveness of the scale of the effect has remained open to interpretation (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015).

This research has clear implications for the personalisation of politics literature. If leader change is taken as an 'exogenous shock' (Garzia 2017) that changes the leader image of a party while keeping other factors constant, the finding that voters respond immediately to leader change suggests that leaders do exert a direct and exogenous role in shaping how voters feel about political parties. Undoubtedly, some of the effect that leaders have on support for their parties will be indirect, as it is exerted through their influence over the party rather than their personal appeal (King 2002). Moreover, attempts to ascertain the role of leaders in shaping how voters feel about parties can be obfuscated by potential endogeneity, with voters automatically liking a certain leader because that leader is associated with 'their' party while disliking leaders of rival parties (Andersen & Evans 2003, Bellucci et al. 2015, Curtice & Blais 2001, Denver & Johns 2021, Evans & Andersen 2005). However, evidence that leader change has an immediate impact on party support suggests that at least some of the leadership effect must be direct and independent of voters' prior feelings towards the party. Chapter 6 will show that, for some voters (including those who are highly educated, politically extreme, rival partisans or pay low attention to politics), leader change is less impactful on how they feel about parties. This suggests that the aggregate effect of leader change observed here is likely suppressed by the presence of such voters within the electorate.

The final phase of the chapter concluded that the benefits of leader change are often short-lived, with a considerable chance of lasting less than six months and a discouraging likelihood of extending beyond a year a half. This indicates that the potency of leader change as a booster of party support is limited. Adopting the framework of the costs of governing, this depletion in the support premium attained through leader change could be because the successor, while initially presenting a clean slate in comparison with the previous leader, comes to accumulate a negative reputation of their own. This brings their honeymoon period to a close and, based on the findings of this

chapter, new leaders fall victim to this grievance accumulation effect fairly rapidly.

The next chapter extends the analyses conducted here, revisiting both the monthly party support and event history data to examine factors that might moderate the magnitude of the initial support boost arising from leader change, as well as to investigate how one of these moderating factors (successor ideological moderation) might influence how long parties are able to sustain these initial gains. While this chapter has revealed that leader change has a positive effect on average, initially increasing party support by around three points, the next chapter nuances this finding by showing how, under different conditions, some leader changes have a bigger impact while others are less impactful.

Chapter 4

The impact of leader change on British party support: Moderators and mechanisms

In November 1990, Margaret Thatcher's 15-year leadership of the Conservative party came to an end and John Major became Thatcher's successor. In that same month, Conservative polls bounced remarkably by over 10 points (Bailey et al. 2021, Brown 1992), even though Major was seen by many – including Thatcher herself – as someone unlikely to upend the Thatcherite status quo (Rawnsley 2013, Seldon & Collings 2000). By then, Thatcher's leadership had been compromised by, among other things, an attempt to implement a deeply unpopular poll tax policy and internal party divisions over Europe (Landale 2015, Seldon & Collings 2000). These circumstances suggest that the poll bounce the Conservatives experienced might have had more to do with removing Thatcher than the active benefits brought about by the installation of John Major. On this basis, the common assumption that leader changes lead to honeymoon periods because they get rid of troublesome predecessors seems vindicated (Cowley 2022, Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994, Wells 2016).

However, just a few years after Major replaced Thatcher, the Labour party's leader change from John Smith to Tony Blair would challenge this interpretation of the benefits of leader change. John Smith died unexpectedly in May 1994, only a week after the

governing Conservatives had experienced sharp losses in local elections. There was therefore little to suggest that Smith was a particular hindrance whose removal would automatically benefit the party, yet Labour's polling score exceeded 50% for the first time in four years in the month of Blair's election (Bailey et al. 2021). It therefore seems necessary to look to other explanations than predecessor removal to account for the public response to this leader change. For example, 1994 marked the first time Labour members were involved in selecting the leader and, in Blair, the party had chosen a successor with a distinctly modernising agenda. These two examples raise clear questions about the factors that moderate the impact of leader change on party support and, relatedly, the mechanisms through which these effects function.

Having established that leader change is generally beneficial to party support in the previous chapter, this chapter goes deeper by proposing a selection of variables that might have a moderating impact on the magnitude of these support boosts. In doing so, it also considers what these moderating variables might indicate about the mechanisms that drive leader change to bring about increases in party support, particularly exploring the roles of predecessor removal and active enhancement of party appeal as two mechanisms through which the effects of leader change function. Parties might receive a poll bounce simply because they are getting rid of a leader who has become a liability, in which case we would expect leader change to be more impactful when conditions promote the removal of the predecessor. But leader change might also serve to actively improve the party's image. This would be evident if, for example, support boosts are greater when the party utilises an inclusive selection procedure that involves a membership ballot – making them appear more deliberative and dynamic (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021) – or when the new leader expresses an ideological position with greater mass appeal than their predecessor.

This chapter begins by identifying seven variables that could serve to moderate both the instant impact of leader change as well as the longevity of this impact. It is argued that the first four variables, as well as functioning as moderators, can also be taken as suggestive indicators of either the predecessor-removal or active appeal enhancement mechanisms. Three additional variables are also proposed, reflecting general

contextual factors that could hamper the benefits of leader change in terms of economic favourability, governing status and cause of predecessor's departure.

A key contribution of this study is that variables suggested by disparate sources on leader change, including earlier papers (Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994, Stewart & Carty 1993) alongside more recent works that focus on the effect of including party members in the leadership election (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015), are brought together here. The chapter also seeks to theoretically illuminate the causal mechanisms underlying the effects of leader change by drawing links between the variables that moderate the impact of leader change and considering what these could suggest about the causal drivers of leader change effects. In addition, the chapter seeks to take advantage of the data generated in Chapter 2 to test new theoretical insights by exploring how the benefits of leader change can be sustained for a longer period through ideological repositioning on the part of new leaders.

The analysis revisits both the party support time series and event history data introduced in the previous chapter, operationalising and incorporating new variables regarding leader change into the study. The results provide evidence that leader changes result in larger boosts in party support when there was a greater deficit in the party's popularity and when the predecessor served for a particularly lengthy or short period of time. On this basis, it is argued that the predecessor-removal mechanism is likely to play a role in the short-term impact of leader change. However, the analysis also suggests that successors who seem more ideologically moderate trigger greater support boosts, suggesting that active appeal enhancement also has a part to play in explaining the benefits of leader change, although no evidence is found for the effects of membership inclusion in this study. The analysis also observes that leader change is more beneficial for governing parties and at times when economic conditions do not favour a rival party.

Moving from the time series to the event history data, a discrete-time model is used to address whether ideological moderation by new leaders impacts the longevity of leader change support boosts. It finds that more ideologically moderate new leaders seem to prolong the benefits of leader change, suggesting that active efforts by new leaders to attract a larger contingent of voters adds to the durability of the leader

change effect. In sum, the analysis suggests that both mechanisms play a role in the immediate impact of leader change, but the importance of active appeal enhancement could be more important in sustaining the initial gains arising from leader change once the benefits of predecessor removal have diminished. It also finds that the impact of leader change can be constrained by various factors, which goes some way to explaining recurrent past findings that leader change does not have a consistently positive impact on party support (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stark 1996, Stewart & Carty 1993).

4.1 Out with the old: The benefits of removing predecessors

As discussed in Chapter 3, one explanatory theory for why leader change is expected to cause an increase in party support centres around the idea of a honeymoon effect, which has clear parallels with the theory of the costs of governing (Cuzán 2015, Green & Jennings 2012, 2017). According to this mechanism, leader change is beneficial because departing leaders have amassed a record of past failures and disappointments which repel voters, whereas their successors represent an unburdened clean slate (Cowley 2022, Heppell & McMeeking 2021, Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Stewart & Carty 1993, Wells 2016). Importantly, this line of argument is generally indifferent towards the qualities of the incoming leader or how the process of conducting a leader change can reflect positively on a party. Ultimately, the honeymoon effect functions through predecessor removal. The party enjoys a honeymoon simply because their new leader casts off the backlog of voter grievance that the predecessor had accumulated.

If there is merit in this theory, we would expect leader changes occurring under conditions where the party stands to gain most from predecessor removal to result in a higher increase in party support. This raises the question of what moderating variables can be used to gauge the effect exerted by the predecessor-removal mechanism on voter reactions to leader change. Ultimately, the effect assumes that predecessors act as

barriers which deter voters from supporting the party who might otherwise do so. It therefore follows that when there are signs that the predecessor was proving particularly unsuccessful, then leader change should have a larger effect on party support.

An initial variable useful in gauging the success rate of the predecessor is how far the party has dropped below its standard contemporary support level when leader change occurs. In other words, the more the party is polling below what might be expected of it, the more rewarding leader change will be (whereas parties which are polling higher than their recent standards will experience less of a positive effect from leader change). This variable was previously proposed and tested by Nadeau & Mendelsohn (1994) in their short study of British Labour and Conservative leader changes from 1955 to 1994. Here, the party's 'standard' performance level (taken as their average poll score over the previous five years) is taken to reflect the latent support base for the party within the electorate. The expectation is that the further the party is polling below this level in the three months prior to a leader change, the greater the impact that leader change will have on the party's support level.* This is because the variable reflects the likelihood that the outgoing leader had become an obstacle for voters who would otherwise be inclined to support the party (and might previously have done so before defecting). Leaders presiding over subpar polls are also likely to be generally off-putting for prospective voters, since electoral performance is a key yardstick for measuring leader performance (Andrews & Jackman 2008, Ennser-Jedenastik & Müller 2015, Ennser-Jedenastik & Schumacher 2021, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024). Leaders who seem likely to lose votes in the next election will be a stronger deterrent to voters than leaders who are maintaining stable party support levels, so their removal will be more beneficial. If leader change serves to 'wipe the slate clean' by removing the burdened predecessor, then this will be more effective when the predecessor's slate is dirtier.

*The study presented in this chapter follows the lead of Nadeau & Mendelsohn (1994) by coding support deficit as a continuous variable, where the party's five year average support prior to leader change is subtracted from its three month average. The result is a variable where higher figures suggest a larger support deficit and lower figures suggest a smaller deficit (negative figures indicate that the party was actually experiencing higher support under the predecessor).

Hypothesis 4.1 Leader change will have a greater immediate positive impact on party support the larger the party's support deficit was under the predecessor

As well as thinking about the party's support level in the latter phases of the predecessor's leadership, it is also worth considering the length of a predecessor's time in office as an additional factor that could moderate the impact of leader change. Research into leadership survival has found that successors of longer serving leaders are at greater risk of experiencing shorter periods in office as they are compared unfavourably to their tenacious predecessor (Horiuchi et al. 2015, So 2018). It has been suggested that this could be because a long tenure implies that the predecessor will have exerted a stronger influence over their party, making it harder for the successor to assert themselves (Alexiadou & O'Malley 2022, Helms 2024). Underlying this line of research is the idea that short-serving leaders are less intrinsically bound up with their parties and have had less time to attain a reputation as effective party premiers. It would therefore seem likely that voters will be happier to see such leaders replaced through leader change. However, extending the ideas of the costs of governing literature to the question of predecessor tenure would imply that the removal of an especially long-serving predecessor will also be seen as a positive development by voters. Helms (2024) makes the point that, despite the apparent success implied by a long leadership, it is often still expected that such leaders will have attracted a degree of public discontent by the time they leave office. Inevitably, leaders who hold the position for a longer stretch of time accumulate a larger portfolio of failures which, in combination with the negativity bias that causes voters to weigh failures greater than successes (Green & Jennings 2017), could mean that voters will be particularly receptive to the departure of very long-standing leaders.* To summarise, this argument suggests that leader change will offer greater short-term benefits to parties when the predecessor's time in office was neither excessively short nor long.†

*This theory applies in the short-term, at least. As Horiuchi et al. (2015) show, successors to long-serving leaders often struggle to escape the shadows of their predecessors (see also Alexiadou & O'Malley 2022).

†Of course, multiple consecutive instances of leader change where the predecessor had a short tenure will lead to a high frequency of leader turnover overall, which is likely to incur damage to a party's image and stability (Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024). The argument being made suggests that leader

Hypothesis 4.2 Leader changes that remove a leader who had an especially short or long tenure will have a greater immediate positive impact on party support

4.2 In with the new: Actively increasing party appeal through leader change

4.2.1 Inclusively selected successors

While the effect of leader change could have a lot to do with the removal of the predecessor, as hypothesised above, it is also possible that the process of leader change itself might actively serve to make a party seem more appealing. For example, the process of changing leader could enable a party to exhibit attractive qualities, such as inclusivity or deliberation, or it might give rise to a new leader with greater electoral appeal.

One way in which leader change could enhance a party's appeal arises from the growing tendency for parties to democratise the process through which new leaders are selected, moving from more exclusive selection procedures to leadership elections in which rank-and-file members are invited to vote in openly competitive leadership contests (Cross & Blais 2012, Kenig 2009*a*, Quinn 2012). With this development has come interest in the effect that more competitive and inclusive leadership contests have on the polling impacts of leadership change. On one hand, there is cause for concern that such processes may be harmful for parties because they publicise party competition, which in turn exposes a party's internal divisions (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, So 2021). This is concerning because the appearance of (dis)unity is an important factor in how voters evaluate parties (Greene & Haber 2015). On the other hand, if kept within reasonable boundaries, some degree of intraparty competition is necessary and may even be beneficial, creating an impression of healthy internal democracy (Hazan & Rahat 2010). Membership inclusion could also mitigate the general disadvantages of contestation because more inclusive selectorates could lead to less competitive contests

changes following short-tenured leaders will generally be more beneficial than those occurring after the predecessor served a normal amount of time, since there is likely to be less demand for a refresh when the previous leader had neither failed prematurely nor outstayed their welcome. However, the argument assumes that this is not part of a destabilising pattern of rapid leadership turnover within a party.

(Kenig 2009*b*), although alternative evidence has cast doubt on this idea (So 2021).*

There are various sources of evidence suggesting that more inclusive leadership contests will yield greater benefits for parties. A study of Canadian provincial parties suggested that leader changes carry slightly larger electoral benefits when the leader is selected through a more competitive procedure (Stewart & Carty 1993). Following the same line of enquiry, Pedersen & Schumacher (2015) found that a change of leader can slightly increase support for European parties, but only when the leadership election is contested and when the process used to select the new leader was more inclusive. They suggested that this could be explained by the additional public attention and media spotlight attracted by inclusive leadership contests, which helps parties to attract new supporters (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Stewart & Carty 1993).

Cozza & Somer-Topcu (2021) also find evidence that leader changes involving a ballot of party members have a greater initial impact on party support than other types of leader change, though this is not reflected in long-term election results. A key contribution of their study is that, by complementing their observational data with an experimental survey fielded in Australia, they provide a richer understanding of the theoretical mechanisms through which member involvement serves to benefit parties. Some mechanisms centre around the succeeding leader, suggesting that leaders who have gained the support of party members acquire an image of legitimacy and hard work. In addition, inclusive leader change selection procedures can improve the image of the party itself, by making it more deliberative and exciting. This suggests that the benefits of membership inclusion increase the appeal of both the new leader personally and have wider positive effects on the image of the party as well.

Hypothesis 4.3 Leader change where the process of selecting the successor included party members will have a greater immediate positive impact on party support

*An additional concern, derived from the classic 'law of curvilinear disparity' (May 1973), is that active party members might have more ideologically extreme preferences than both casual supporters and the parliamentary party, meaning their inclusion in the selection process could cause the selection of leaders that other corners of the party cannot get behind. However, evidence from the British case suggests that this is not generally the outcome of inclusive selection procedures, and that members tend to use similar criteria for selecting leaders as the parliamentary party (Quinn 2012). Similarly, evidence does not suggest that leaders selected by the party membership are more ideologically extreme (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021).

4.2.2 Ideologically moderating successors

When leader succession occurs in any context, a key question is how the new leader will compare with their predecessor: will they be an 'heir or innovator' (Bynander & 't Hart 2006, p.718)? Political parties are no exception to this, and leader change by no means guarantees a shift in the actual direction the leader proposes to steer their party (Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu 2019). After all, breaking with the status quo is a risky step for new leaders that has potential to aggravate factional disputes within the party (Harmel & Janda 1994). Therefore, whether a new leader takes this risk and expresses a distinctive ideology, or cleaves to the relative security of their predecessor's position, could be an important factor in understanding public reactions to leader change. Despite the risks, changes of leader are among the few events that have the potential to instigate broader change within parties, which are generally averse to change (Harmel et al. 1995, Harmel & Janda 1994). Moreover, new leaders may find themselves in an uncommonly amenable position to present an alternative ideological vision. A benefit of being new to the leadership is that voters have no memory of the successor pursuing a different ideological path since becoming leader, which lends a new leader's messages of change a sense of credibility that is unavailable to established leaders who are loaded with prior ideological baggage (Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu 2019). For more on this, see Chapter 5.

Considering that leader changes can also be junctures for broader changes within the party, the question that arises is how this distinction between path-breaking and continuity leaders impacts voter responses to the leader change. A clear illustration of the distinction can be seen in the contrast between Conservative leader David Cameron, who sought to embody a clear departure from the party's past, and his four immediate predecessors – John Major, William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard – who failed to 'convey a sense that the Conservatives were really moving on' (Bale 2016, p.5). Given that reconfiguration of the policy position is an important component of a party's recovery after electoral defeats (Bækgaard & Jensen 2012, Ball 2005, Somer-Topcu 2009), with electoral failures emboldening leadership candidates to differentiate themselves from their predecessors (Greene & Haber 2016), the failure to deliver a path-

breaking leader proved electorally problematic for the Conservatives in the aftermath of Margaret Thatcher's leadership. Case study evidence of recent leadership transitions in Germany further shows that, even after taking over from a highly influential and long-serving predecessor, there is an expectation that new leaders should differentiate themselves in order to rejuvenate the party and dispel any dissatisfaction with the status quo likely to have arisen under the predecessor (Helms 2024).

Overall, it seems likely that the question of whether a new leader continues in the same ideological vein as their predecessor, or seeks to take advantage of the extra latitude afforded by their novelty, will be a key factor in determining the impact of leader change on party support. In line with the median voter theorem, new leaders who express a more moderate ideological stance than their predecessor should stand to attract greater support boosts for their party, as moderation shifts them closer to the space where they can draw upon a higher concentration of voters (Downs 1957) and in some cases will correct for ideological drift towards the extremes on the part of predecessors.* Concluding an edited volume on British opposition leaders, Heppell supports this claim by arguing that 'Opposition politics requires that the party leadership reorientate the party towards the centre ground and the location of the median voter' (Heppell 2012, p.247). Of course, this rationale also has a flip side: new leaders who are more ideologically extreme than their predecessors will undermine the support boost brought about by their novelty, as they signal a step away from the median voter and make the leadership seem more out of touch with the preferences of the electorate.†

Even aside from the logic of the median voter theorem, a leader who seems to represent ideological change has a greater novelty factor, making such leadership changes

*It has been suggested that voter perceptions of governing party positions tend to drift away from the median as the party spends longer in office enacting their preferred policies (Wlezien 2017). It is possible that party leaders in general tend to nudge their parties towards the extremes as they impose their vision on the party over time, having a similar effect on the party's perceived positioning.

†While this argument concerning the ideological moderation of leaders is expected to apply in general, it is worth noting that there can be specific cases where ideological change in any direction, not specifically in terms of moderation, could benefit a leader. Responding to Heppell (2012), Dutton raises the point that 'there are also times when an emphasis on "change" is all-important and this may not necessarily point to the centre ground, as Margaret Thatcher demonstrated in 1979' (Dutton 2013, p. 111). Also, smaller parties whose core goal is to represent a particular issue position, with less emphasis on electoral success than mainstream parties like Labour or the Conservatives, are less likely to benefit from a more moderate leader who is seen to move the party away from its fundamental principles. See Chapter 7 for further discussion of non-mainstream parties.

a more compelling spectacle. The impact of leader change hinges on the assumption that the change in leader will prompt voters to reevaluate the party (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015). This seems more likely to occur when the new leader represents a more moderate position, because voters are more likely to update their perceptions of party ideology when leader change is accompanied by a notable shift in the party's Left-Right positioning (Somer-Topcu 2017). Somer-Topcu (2017) also proposes that the rise of policy-shifting leaders draws greater media and public attention, while Pedersen & Schumacher (2015) argue that the media exposure that accompanies leadership change could be an important factor in the increased support parties receive following leadership change, as it provides a platform for self-promotion. A new leader with a more moderate position gives the party something positive to promote. In addition, ideological moderation can increase a party's perceived level of competence (Johns & Kölln 2020) and moderation from leaders tends to enhance their personal likeability (Huber 2015). Therefore, leaders who present themselves as moderating pathbreakers may not only be more appealing in terms of median voter proximity, but might also be assumed to have superior personal qualities as well.

These benefits of successor moderation could arise directly following the occurrence of leader change, as the new leader will likely set out their stall early (often having already started the process during the leadership election) while the media eye remains fixed on the party.

Hypothesis 4.4[short-term] Leader change where the successor expresses a more moderate ideological position than the predecessor will have a greater immediate positive impact on party support

There is also reason to suppose that ideologically moderating successors, as well as attaining higher short-term boosts for their parties, might also instil longer-lasting benefits than those normally associated with leader change. Whereas predecessor removal effects are only likely to last until voters recognise that the new leader is as fallible as the predecessor, leaders who express ideological change are more likely to exert an indirect effect on their parties that tangibly changes its electoral appeal. This gives

voters who convert to the party following leader change a reason to remain loyal that is absent in leader change where the successor fails to disassociate from their predecessor's politics. Any benefits to the leader's personal image that are associated with their more moderate position will also ensure that voters have better feelings about the leader after the initial novelty factor has expired. Therefore, successor moderation could be an important part of the puzzle in explaining how parties can extend the benefits of leader change, which research has shown tend to be limited to the short-term (Brown 1992, Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stewart & Carty 1993).

Hypothesis 4.4[long-term] Leader change where the successor expresses a more ideologically moderate position than the predecessor will have a longer-lasting positive impact on party support

4.3 Additional contextual variables

In addition to the variables outlined so far, there are a range of other contextual factors that could plausibly moderate the impact of leader change on party support, which do not clearly point towards either the predecessor-removal or active appeal enhancement mechanisms. The first of these contextual variables, based on the work of Nadeau & Mendelsohn (1994), relates to the favourability of the economy for the party at the time of the leader change. A party experiencing favourable economic conditions (a good economy if the party is in government or a poor economy if the party is in opposition) before leader change should enjoy a larger support boost upon changing leader. This expectation reflects the fact that, when economic conditions favour the opposing party, voters are less likely to be won over by leader change and instead remain loyal to the economically attractive rival. In other words, leader change is not able to overcome economic disadvantages for a party.

Another potentially relevant contextual variable concerns the circumstances under which the preceding leader left office. If the predecessor resigned in the immediate aftermath of an election loss, for instance, then the rival incumbent party is likely to

be experiencing an electoral honeymoon which could diminish the pool of potential defectors that might otherwise be drawn to the party with the new leader. This logic has parallels with arguments made by Nadeau & Mendelsohn (1994). Similarly, leaders who depart due to dissent within their own parties are likely to leave behind a party that looks fractured, which could undermine the benefits of leader change as voters are deterred by the perception of disunity (Greene & Haber 2015). Therefore, leader changes arising as a result of electoral defeat or intraparty unrest are, alongside unfavourable economic conditions, likely to be less conducive to the positive effects of leader change as they make the party as a whole seem less attractive.

Hypothesis 4.5 Leader changes that occur when conditions under the predecessor were unfavourable (in terms of economy, election defeat or intraparty disunity) will have a lower immediate positive impact on party support

The final contextual variable considered in this study concerns whether the party is in government or opposition when leader change occurs. It is worthwhile to control for this variable, even though theory points towards different expectations for its effect on the impact of leader change. On one hand, incumbent parties might benefit from leader change more than opposition parties because outgoing leaders who were serving as prime minister are likely to have accumulated more tangible negative public reputations seeing as their actions translated directly into government policy, giving voters a more concrete basis for grievance accumulation (Green & Jennings 2017). By the same token, if the new leader is immediately given the office of prime minister, any increase in perceptions of the party or leader's qualities could be more impactful as voters expect these benefits to be reflected immediately in government policy. Prior research into Canadian provincial parties found a positive link between incumbent leader change and subsequent electoral success (Stewart & Carty 1993). This suggests that removing the successor can be more beneficial for incumbent parties. On the other hand, research suggests that leader change can be particularly damaging for parties when in government as voters judge these parties on the basis of actions rather than rhetoric, meaning that impressions of incompetence arising from leader change cannot be rhetorically reframed in the same way as they can for opposition parties (So

2021). Equally, whereas leader change among opposition parties could be perceived as responsiveness to the party's failings, governing parties will be punished (Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024). In light of these conflicting expectations, this study sets no specific expectations for the role of incumbency as a moderator of the impact of leader change.

4.4 Testing the effect of moderating factors on the immediate impact of leader change

4.4.1 Variable operationalisation and visualisation

To clarify the set of variables that have been introduced in this chapter, all seven are laid out in Table 4.1. The table specifies the moderating effect each variable is expected to have on the impact of leader change as well as the mechanism the variable is associated with if applicable (predecessor-removal or active enhancement of the party's appeal). Information on how the variables are initially measured is also provided within this table, though some variables will be recoded before regression modelling, which will be discussed later in this section. The values of these moderating variables for each case of leader change covered in this thesis can be viewed in Appendix C. The information to create these was acquired from various sources, including exploration of the main monthly polling dataset used by this analysis and the Left-Right ideological data generated using Wordscores. Information on leader selection rules for the membership vote variable was sourced from House of Commons Library briefing papers (Johnston 2019, 2020). If the rank-and-file party membership participated in a ballot during the selection process, the procedure is considered inclusive. Each leader's length of tenure and cause of exit was determined by reviewing the biographical information provided on the relevant leader's page on Wikipedia.com, which is a community written reference website. Economic data comes from unemployment rate records provided by the Office for National Statistics (2024).

To test the hypotheses framed by this chapter, the party support data used in Chapter 3 is combined so that the observations for both Labour and the Conservatives are pooled into a single dataset. This is because there are relatively few leader change

Table 4.1: Summary of variables proposed as moderators of the impact of leader change

Moderating variable	**Expected effect**	**Associated mechanism**	**Measurement**
Support deficit	Support boosts following leader change will be higher when the party was further below its contemporary standard support level prior to leader change (Hypothesis 4.1).	Predecessor removal	The difference between the party's average support level across the five years and in the final three months before the leader change (Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994).
Predecessor longevity	Support boosts following leader change will be higher when the outgoing leader experienced neither a particularly short nor long tenure (Hypothesis 4.2).	Predecessor removal	The number of whole years the predecessor served as party leader.
Membership vote	Use of a membership vote to select a new leader will lead to a larger poll bounce (Hypothesis 4.3).	Active enhancement of party appeal.	The involvement of a party member ballot to select the new leader (dummy variable).
Successor moderation	If the successor expresses more moderate ideology than their predecessor, this will lead to a bigger positive impact arising from leader change (Hypothesis 4.4).	Active enhancement of party appeal.	The difference between predecessor's final and successor's first ideological score from the Wordscores estimates, scaled in line with the Manifesto Project RILE index (technically ranging from -100/extreme left to 100/extreme right). Coded so that lower negative values indicate shifts to more extreme ideology and higher positive values movement to a more moderate position (assumed to be leftwards for the Conservatives and rightwards for Labour).

Continuation of Table 4.1			
Economic favourability	Voters will be less likely to be attracted by leader change when the economy favours remaining loyal to the opposing party (Hypothesis 4.5).	NA (contextual)	The difference between the national unemployment level two years before leader change and average unemployment three months before leader change. Reversed (multiplied by minus one) if the party is in opposition because the favourability of the economy is dependent on government or opposition status (Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994).
Departure cause	Leader change occurring after election loss or intraparty unrest will have less of a positive effect on party support (Hypothesis 4.5).	NA (contextual)	Two dummy variables marking whether the predecessor resigned in the immediate aftermath of an election (or referendum) or when under pressure from their party (meaning the reference category contains leaders whose departure was unconnected to these negative factors).
Incumbent leader change	Ambiguous expectations (no hypothesis).	NA (contextual)	Whether the party was in government at time of leader change (dummy variable).

observations in the data (19) and analysing the parties separately would exacerbate this data scarcity by reducing the number of leader change observations available for each analysis. In the next section, the leader change variables are incorporated into this data and modelled using formal OLS regression models. However, because there are so few leader change observations, it is worthwhile to begin by simply visualising the bivariate relationship between these variables and changes in party support following leader change. This approach has the benefit of facilitating a baseline assessment of the

potential role of these variables in moderating the impact of leader change as well as offering a guide on how best to code the variables for the upcoming regression modelling. Failure to account for the functional form of these variables, for example by assuming a simple linear relationship in every case, will be especially costly to regression inferences when there are so few observations to work with.

Figure 4.1 presents the bivariate associations between the four continuous leader change variables and the dependent variable, which is the change in party support percentage since the month before leader change*, for the months where a leader change occurred. The remaining three moderating variables are binary, meaning they are set aside for this visual analysis but will be modelled as dummy variables in the upcoming regression analysis. It is important to note that there are three Conservative leader changes in the data that exhibit exceptional qualities and are therefore discounted to avoid obscuring the overriding effects of the leader change variables (these three observations are still plotted with grey points, but are not factored into the lines). The first is the transition from Margaret Thatcher to John Major that occurred in 1990, which marked the end of a very long and controversial premiership. According to the data, Conservative support increased by an extraordinary 14 points in that month. By contrast, the second-largest change in Conservative support was only eight points in April 1982, which was the start of the Falklands War. The second exceptional leader change is the transition from Boris Johnson to Liz Truss and the third is from Liz Truss to Rishi Sunak. These occurred in September and October 2022 and, as discussed in Chapter 2, the leadership of Liz Truss did not conform to typical expectations. In September 2022, Conservative support dropped by seven points following Truss's election, which is by far the biggest decline occurring in a leader change month (the second biggest was by less than one, when William Hague became Conservative leader in 1997). There is therefore good cause to regard all three of these leader changes as exceptional cases.

Plot A within Figure 4.1 visualises the support deficit variable and indicates that larger shortfalls in party support generally lead to higher support boosts following

*Incorporating the additional time series processing outlined in Appendix B.

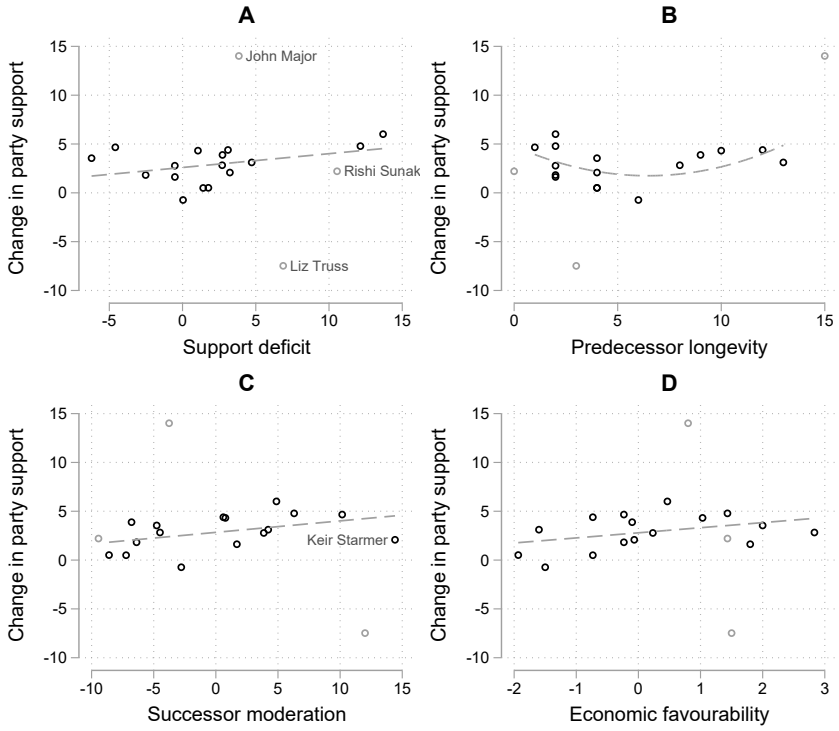

Figure 4.1: Plots displaying bivariate relationships between continuous leader change moderating variables and the initial impact of leader change on the percentage of party support

NOTE:
Support deficit - The difference between the party's average support level across the five years and in the final three months before the leader change (based on Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994).
Predecessor longevity - The number of whole years the predecessor served as party leader.
Successor moderation - The difference between predecessor's final and successor's first ideological score from the Wordscores estimates, scaled in line with the Manifesto Project RILE index (technically ranging from -100/extreme left to 100/extreme right). Coded so that lower negative values indicate shifts to more extreme ideology and higher positive values movement to a more moderate position (assumed to be leftwards for the Conservatives and rightwards for Labour).
Economic favourability - The difference between the national unemployment level two years before leader change and average unemployment three months before leader change. Reversed (multiplied by minus one) if the party is in opposition because the favourability of the economy is dependent on government or opposition status (based on Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994).

leader change. This is consistent with Hypothesis 4.1, but it is notable that two cases clearly undermine this trend. These two data points represent occasions where leader change occurred but the party was not suffering any shortfall in its standard support level. They are the Labour transitions from John Smith to Tony Blair (1994) and James Callaghan to Michael Foot (1980). It is likely that the favourable level of party support acted as a contextual factor making voters more open to the benefit of leader change, undermining the otherwise positive relationship between party support deficits under the predecessor and the impact of leader change. To account for this in the regression, party support will be modelled linearly, but with a separate contextual dummy variable representing the two cases where there was a distinct lack of a support deficit (high party support).

A curvilinear relationship is identified for the effect of predecessor longevity in Plot B, which is consistent with the suggestion of Hypothesis 4.2 that both particularly long and short predecessor tenures would increase the impact of leader change. In terms of operationalising this variable for the regression analysis, this variable is recoded so that leaders who last less than four years represent one category while leaders whose tenure exceed six years represent a second category. The result is two dummy variables, with a reference category consisting of leader changes that occurred when the predecessor had served for 4-6 years (which is around the average tenure of the predecessors in the data). Conceptualising a leader as long-serving after only seven years may seem short in light of the much lengthier tenures experienced by certain leaders (such as Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair), but six-plus years can still be regarded as a long leadership in general given that tenure lengths for leaders in Britain and Europe are commonly shorter (as suggested by Helms 2024).

Positive effects are also evident for successor ideological moderation (Plot C) and the economic favourability contextual variable (Plot D), which is supportive of Hypothesis 4.4[short-term] and Hypothesis 4.5 respectively. There is some hint of non-linearity in these relationships. The change from Jeremy Corbyn to Keir Starmer, in particular, undermines the linear trend identified for ideological moderation, because Starmer effected considerable ideological moderation from Corbyn's position yet Labour did not

initially attain such a high support boost when Starmer took over. Nonetheless, because the relationships are not heavily curved by the few observations that go against the general linear trend, and because fitting quadratic terms would further reduce degrees of freedom that are already limited by the small sample of leader changes, these variables will simply be modelled as linear effects in the upcoming regression models.

4.4.2 Regression analysis of the influence of moderating variables on the initial impact of leader change

To formally test the effect of the moderating variables proposed in this chapter, this analysis now proceeds to model them using OLS regression. These analyses model the full monthly time series dataset previously studied in Chapter 3. The models feature all the same independent variables analysed in the previous chapter, but additionally incorporate the seven leader change moderation variables introduced for this chapter. To integrate these variables into the monthly dataset, each variable is assigned a value of zero for all months where there was no leader change. So that these variables can be interpreted as moderating effects, the original dummy variable denoting leader change months is still in place, meaning the coefficients for the moderating variables convey their effects controlling for the baseline fact that leader change has occurred.* Because the analysis pools data from both parties, whether each observation represents the Conservatives or Labour is accounted for as a fixed effect using a dummy variable for party (with Conservative observations coded as zero and Labour as one). The three exceptional leader changes identified above are also modelled as fixed effects, meaning that the models contain separate dummy variables denoting the occurrence of each of these three leader changes.

Due to the lack of observations featuring a leader change within the data, the vari-

*In effect, these leader change variables can be interpreted as interactions with the dummy leader change variable. However, no multiplicative interaction term is present because each leader change moderation variable fully overlaps with the general leader change dummy variable (they are always zero when it is zero and only take non-zero values when it is one). If these variables were multiplied to produce a third interaction term, the resulting interaction terms would be exact replicates of the leader change moderation variables. In this instance, therefore, attempting to estimate the model with both the original and multiplied interaction terms would not be possible as it would cause perfect multicollinearity (Brambor et al. 2006).

ables are tested sequentially across four models to avoid basing the results solely on a single, heavily specified model containing all the variables at once. Such a small number of observations leaves few degrees of freedom when estimating the effect of the leader change variables, and additional variables within each analysis reduce these degrees of freedom further. As a result, the first three models separately incorporate the variables associated with the predecessor-based mechanism, the active appeal enhancement mechanism and the additional contextual variables in turn. Then, a final model incorporates all of the variables. This final model is restricted by the high number of leader change variables being modelled against so few leader change observations. Unsurprisingly, significant effects are not attained within this model, but the direction and magnitude of the coefficients are still considered informative when interpreting the results.

The regression models are presented in Table 4.2. The first model incorporates variables relevant to the predecessor-removal mechanism. The results suggest that leader changes occurring when the predecessor presided over a greater party popularity deficit yield larger boosts in party support. For every one point increase in the party's support deficit, the effect of leader change increases by an average of 0.24. This means that, if a party was four points below its five-year average in the predecessor's later months, the impact of the subsequent leader change would be around one point higher. As discussed in the previous section, this effect is contingent on controlling for leader changes that occurred when the party was experiencing a particularly high level of support (a negative support deficit). The high support variable controls for leader changes occurring when the support deficit was less than minus three (this applies to the Labour leader changes that introduced Tony Blair and Michael Foot). Under such favourable contexts, the effect of leader change seems to be an average of around four points higher. Overall, the analysis provides support for Hypothesis 4.1; the extent to which a party is struggling under the predecessor affects the size of the party's rebound when they replace that leader. This also provides evidence that the effect of leader change is, at least in part, driven by the predecessor-removal mechanism.

Further evidence is found to suggest that leader changes that replace longer serving

Table 4.2: OLS regression models of monthly change in party support percentage incorporating leader change moderating variables, May 1971-September 2023

	Dependent variable: ΔParty support (monthly)			
	Model 1 Predecessor removal	Model 2 Appeal enhancement	Model 3 Contextual factors	Model 4 All variables
	Leader change moderating variables			
New leader	0.177	3.309***	3.084***	-0.596
	(0.906)	(0.633)	(1.145)	(3.135)
Support deficit	0.237**			0.163
	(0.116)			(0.142)
High support	4.125**			4.443
	(1.755)			(3.716)
Short tenured predecessor	2.044*			1.353
	(1.167)			(1.534)
Long tenured predecessor	2.919**			2.143
	(1.218)			(1.959)
Membership vote		-1.173		0.224
		(0.992)		(1.304)
Successor moderation		0.153**		0.044
		(0.076)		(0.097)
Economic favourability			0.702*	0.185
			(0.358)	(0.521)
Post-election resignation			-1.584	0.920
			(1.268)	(2.855)
Intraparty unrest resignation			0.046	1.693
			(1.435)	(2.450)
Incumbent leader change			2.101*	1.190
			(1.175)	(1.658)
Thatcher to Major	10.281***	11.553***	8.501***	9.254***
	(2.037)	(1.971)	(2.195)	(2.278)
Johnson to Truss	-10.703***	-10.804***	-13.134***	-12.648***
	(2.064)	(2.132)	(2.277)	(2.804)
Truss to Sunak	-2.140	0.719	-3.651	-2.620
	(2.149)	(2.056)	(2.252)	(2.889)
	Additional variables			
Violent international crisis (incumbent)	5.304***	5.301***	5.306***	5.305***
	(1.074)	(1.077)	(1.076)	(1.076)
Violent international crisis (opposition)	-2.136**	-2.129**	-2.141**	-2.141**
	(1.074)	(1.077)	(1.076)	(1.076)
Other international crisis (government)	0.331	0.324	0.333	0.334
	(0.565)	(0.567)	(0.566)	(0.566)

Continuation of Table 4.2				
Other international crisis	-0.462	-0.455	-0.464	-0.465
(opposition)	(0.565)	(0.567)	(0.566)	(0.566)
Election win	2.264***	2.263***	2.265***	2.265***
	(0.521)	(0.522)	(0.521)	(0.522)
Election loss	-0.846	-0.839	-0.849	-0.850
	(0.521)	(0.522)	(0.521)	(0.522)
In government	-0.328***	-0.316***	-0.333***	-0.334***
	(0.113)	(0.113)	(0.113)	(0.113)
ΔUnemployment$_{t-1}$	2.005**	1.969**	2.033**	2.032**
	(0.898)	(0.899)	(0.897)	(0.901)
In government *	-3.317***	-3.347***	-3.334***	-3.315**
ΔUnemployment$_{t-1}$	(1.276)	(1.277)	(1.275)	(1.279)
Party	-0.056	-0.050	-0.050	-0.055
(ref = Conservatives)	(0.111)	(0.111)	(0.111)	(0.111)
Constant	0.102	0.093	0.101	0.104
	(0.105)	(0.106)	(0.106)	(0.106)
N	1258	1258	1258	1258
R^2	0.131	0.125	0.129	0.132
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

leaders (those in place for over six years) yield greater support boosts. This is evident from the statistically significant coefficient observed for the long-serving leader variable, which suggests that support boosts are around three points higher following the departure of longer serving leaders compared with leaders whose tenures were closer to the average (4-6 years). The regression results also suggest that the departure of shorter serving leaders (those in place for under four years) also leads to higher support boosts by around two points. There is therefore clear support for Hypothesis 4.2, which also suggests that there is good cause to believe that predecessor-removal is an important mechanism in the functioning of leader change effects. Also, the large coefficient for the John Major fixed effect suggests that the removal of Margaret Thatcher had a sizeable initial impact which, given the difficulties faced by Thatcher in the later stages of her leadership (discussed at the start of this chapter) as well as the long span of her tenure, also points towards the causal significance of predecessor removal.

Moving on to the second model in Table 4.2, which contains leader change variables relating to the active appeal enhancement mechanism, this analysis fails to find con-

sistent evidence that involving the party membership in selecting the successor leads to a greater poll bounce. The effect does not appear to be significant in the regression analysis. This is puzzling considering the conclusions drawn by prior studies that membership involvement likely increases the positive effect of leader change (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015). There is the possibility that, within the British context, the open contestation that accompanies leadership elections of this sort tends to be too acrimonious and offsets any benefits (Cowley 2022). Nevertheless, past work has also found that inclusive leader selection contests fail to increase the perceived trustworthiness and appeal of parties in Belgium (Wauters & Kern 2021). The insignificant finding for this variable must be considered in light of the small sample of leader changes and narrow geographic focus at play in this analysis but, on the basis of the results presented here, Hypothesis 4.3 cannot be accepted.

Hypothesis 4.4[short-term] shows more promise, with the second model suggesting that successors who express more moderate ideological positions instil higher initial boosts in their party's support following leader change. According to the second model, a one unit change in the Wordscores estimate of the leader's position (based on the Manifesto Project's RILE scale) translates to a statistically significant support boost that is around 0.15 points greater. This implies a mild but noteworthy effect, whereby a successor who presents themselves as much more moderate than the previous leader could achieve a greater positive effect on their party's support. However, this coefficient is severely diminished to only 0.04 in the fourth model. Given the small sample of leader changes, this does not justify wholesale rejection of Hypothesis 4.4[short-term]. However, the reduction in this effect could be taken to suggest that a significant portion of this variable's effect is subverted when predecessor-removal and contextual factors are accounted for. The initial effect of successor ideological positioning is also likely to be modest because voters are still learning (and deciding whether to trust) the leader's position in the immediate aftermath of leader change. Reviewing Figure 4.1 (Plot C), it is notable that the Labour transition to Keir Starmer (from Jeremy Corbyn) undermines the overall slope observed for this variable, possibly because Starmer's messaging was

not initially heard above the noise created by the Covid-19 pandemic.*

Turning attention to the remaining contextual variables, presented in the third model of Table 4.2, the results indicate that when economic conditions towards the end of the predecessor's leadership are in favour of the party, the support boost following leader change is greater. The implication is that the impact of leader change is hampered when the economy encourages support for the rival party, as a change of leader cannot override the opposition's advantage. This illustrates a key limitation of leader change as a booster to party support. By contrast, the cause of the predecessor's exit does not emerge as a statistically significant moderator of the impact of leader change. Voters do not seem to react differently to leader change regardless of whether the change occurs in the aftermath of an election loss or intraparty unrest. Therefore, the economic favourability variable provides some evidence that unfavourable contextual factors do undermine the effects of leader change, in accordance with Hypothesis 4.5, but this is not given further support by the cause of exit variable.

Finally, the results suggest that leader changes that occur when a party is in government lead to larger support boosts. The coefficient for this effect is positive and attains significance in the third model. It therefore seems likely that voters react more positively to leader change when the change also means a switch in prime minister, perhaps because they felt a greater level of grievance towards a governing prime minister leader than they would towards an opposition leader. It could also be that this effect in some ways reflects the fact that leader changes occurring after election losses will overlap with this variable, since parties will always be in opposition in the aftermath of an election loss. Overall, it can be concluded that contextual factors, particularly opposition status and economic conditions, can play a part in dictating the effects of leader change.

*Britain was in the early stages of its first national lockdown when Starmer became leader in April 2020 and the governing Conservative party was experiencing a rally effect that could also have undercut the support boost Labour might otherwise have received.

4.5 Do ideologically moderating successors receive longer term support boosts?

The final stage of this analysis tests the prospects that ideological moderation can lead to longer-term benefits for leader change. The event history data from Chapter 3 is therefore revisited and modelled using a discrete-time event history model (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones 2004). As a reminder, this data records the time until each leader has spent two consecutive months polling below the party's average support level during the predecessor's final year. In event history terms, this represents the 'hazard'. The first observation for each leader was taken at six months since the leader change and was followed by yearly observations thereafter. Leaders could be observed up to six times, with the final observation occurring at five and a half years (66 months), assuming the leader had not succumbed to the hazard earlier. Leaders whose leaderships ended within five and a half years but never experienced the hazard were treated as censored. Likewise, leaders who had not experienced the hazard even after the five-and-a-half-year observation period were also treated as censored.

The discrete-time event history approach requires the data to be restructured so that it can be modelled using conventional logistic regression (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones 2004). A record is created for each leader change, starting with the first observation point (six months since the change). If the party has experienced the hazard within that time window, the outcome variable is coded as one. If they have not succumbed to the hazard, the variable is coded as zero and another record is made for that leader, representing the next observation point (one year later). This process is repeated for each leader change until the hazard is experienced or there is a record for all six time points. The constructed variable then acts as the binary dependent variable in a logistic regression. To test Hypothesis 4.4[long-term], the successor moderation variable used previously is incorporated simply as a time-invariant variable. This means that the difference between each leader's first position estimate and their predecessor's final estimate is added to each record relating to that leader. The model predicts how this initial ideological difference impacts the likelihood of experiencing the hazard further

down the line. It is also sensible to factor the influence of time into event history models. Here, the duration dependency – which captures the effect of the passage of time – is modelled as a factor variable, accounting for the potential impact of time since leader change using separate dummy variables for each time observation point (with the first observation omitted as a reference category).

The results are presented in Table 4.3, displaying risk ratios (the exponent of the logit β coefficient) for each variable. Values above one suggest that the variable is associated with meeting the hazard sooner after leader change, whereas values below one indicate a delay in the occurrence of the hazard. The analysis excludes the observations for the Conservative 2022 leader changes due to their exceptional nature (as already discussed).

Assessing the results, the time variable suggests that the likelihood of experiencing the hazard is not significantly influenced by the amount of time that has elapsed since leader change. However, new leaders who express a more moderate ideological position do appear to experience a slower depletion of their leader change support bounce, as proposed by Hypothesis 4.4[long-term]. The risk ratio of 0.89 suggests a leader who ideologically moderates from the predecessor's position by an additional point on the Wordscores scale at the beginning of their leadership has an 11% reduced risk of losing their initial advantage. This is a meaningful finding, as it suggests that leaders may be able to harness leader change for a longer period of time if they take active steps to increase their appeal relative to their predecessor.

It should be noted that the other leader change variables were also individually modelled as time-invariant variables using the event history data (due to the lack of observations, it is inadvisable to model all the variables at once). No consistent evidence was found to suggest that these variables significantly affect the rate at which leaders experience the hazard.

4.6 Discussion

Ultimately, this chapter proposed a selection of variables as potential moderators of the impact of leader change on party support. The first two variables reflected the extent

Table 4.3: Discrete-time event history model estimating the survival of increases in party support following leader change

	Hazard: Experiencing second consecutive month since leader change where polling is lower than its average across the year prior to leader change
18 months	0.818
(ref = 6 months)	(0.730)
30 months	0.446
(ref = 6 months)	(0.564)
42 months	0.641
(ref = 6 months)	(0.812)
54 months	2.453
(ref = 6 months)	(2.804)
66 months	1.589
(ref = 6 months)	(2.297)
Successor moderation	0.889*
	(0.054)
Constant	0.377*
	(0.214)
N (observations)	51
N (leaders)	17
Pseudo R^2	0.106
Note:	*p<0.1
	(Results reported as risk ratios)

to which the party was below its standard support level (the party's support deficit) and the predecessor's length of tenure. It was argued that these variables can be taken as suggestive evidence of the predecessor-removal mechanism, whereby the benefit of leader change can be explained by the removal of the old leader and the installation of a 'fresh face'. The analysis provided support for the hypothesis that parties experiencing a greater support deficit enjoy a larger support boost following leader change. It also found that leader change is more impactful when the predecessor served for a particularly short or long period of time. These results suggest that predecessor-removal is an important component of leader change as the predecessor's failings are lifted from the party, temporarily increasing its appeal.

A further two variables concerning ways in which parties and leaders might actively

increase their appeal through leader change were also proposed. The first concerned whether the party membership were involved in the selection of the new leader, but no evidence was found to suggest that this has either immediate or long-term effects on the impact of leader change in Britain. On the other hand, it was found that leader change is more impactful in both the short- and long-term when the new leader expresses a more moderate ideological position. This suggests that voters welcome leaders who work to actively increase their mass appeal in terms of ideology and that they are more likely to stick with the party under these conditions. An important debate within the literature on the electoral effects of leaders concerns whether leaders affect their party's popularity directly, through the appeal of their personal qualities, or indirectly, through their role in determining the direction and image of the party itself (King 2002). The results of this study suggest that the long-term impact of leader change could be dependent on the indirect effect of leaders taking their parties in a different ideological direction. However, ideological moderation could also make the leader seem more personally appealing, as voters associate moderation with competence and positive character traits (Huber 2015, Johns & Kölln 2020). In any case, this finding highlights the value of incorporating personal variation between predecessors and successors when researching the effects of leader change on party support.

Another important outcome of this analysis was the finding that contextual factors can serve to impede the impact of leader change. For example, the impact of leader change is limited if voters have an economic incentive to remain loyal to a rival party or if the party is in opposition. Combined with the evidence that leader change is hampered if the new leader fails to moderate or when there is less cause for voters to celebrate the removal of the predecessor, it becomes clear that leader change is not an automatic catalyst of party support boosts. Clearly, leader change does not offer an unconditional payoff for parties, which helps to make sense of recurrent past findings suggesting that leader change is not as impactful on party support as might be expected (Brown 1992, Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stark 1996, Stewart & Carty 1993). Indeed, given that the impacts of leader change are clearly contingent on various factors, the specific combination of

leader changes incorporated within any given analysis could have a notable influence on the observed effect of leader change as a whole.

4.7 Concluding remarks

Just as recently elected governments receive a honeymoon period in public opinion, new leaders are likely to be regarded as more likeable than their predecessors simply by virtue of their novelty and unblemished public record. But, according to the costs of governing literature, while governments initially benefit from appearing comparatively preferable to their predecessors, they too will succumb to the effects of blame accumulation over time (Green & Jennings 2017). The same is likely to go for party leaders: new leaders will inevitably disappoint voters who were initially attracted by their novelty and start accruing their own backlog of failures, which brings their honeymoon period to an end. However, it is possible that when a new leader gives voters a more substantive reason to remain loyal to the party once the initial attraction of leader change (and the removal of the tarnished predecessor) has subsided, then the party is more likely to remain in a better position than it was prior to the leader change. According to the results of this chapter, one way that leaders can offer voters a substantive reason to continue supporting the party is by adjusting their party's appeal through ideological repositioning.

A total of seven variables were proposed as potential moderators of the impact of leader change in this chapter. With only a small sample of leader change observations within the data, this posed challenges by introducing many parameters to model against a relatively small pool of relevant observations. This is why the data on the two parties was combined and the findings were based on the results of multiple model specifications. Ultimately, these analyses served to bring together numerous factors raised by previous research as potential influencers of the impact of leader change and provide an initial test of new theoretical proposals, such as the role of ideological differentiation between predecessors and successors. The lack of data points featuring leader change could be further addressed in future research by taking a comparative approach, building on the foundation provided by this chapter while incorporating

data on a greater range of countries and parties. Implementing this research will require a considerable data gathering effort to collect information on the circumstances surrounding leader changes across different country contexts and, to acquire measures of leader ideology, the hurdles discussed in Chapter 2 will also have to be overcome. Further discussion of avenues for future research is provided in the concluding chapter (Chapter 7).

It should be noted that the variables discussed within this chapter are not mutually exclusive. It is possible, for example, that new leaders are more likely to shift ideologically if their party is experiencing a larger support deficit (indeed, some evidence for this is found in Chapter 5). Equally, it is possible that membership votes could give rise to more moderate leaders*. The additional legitimacy and authority endowed on leaders who receive a membership mandate could empower them to moderate their position without the same fear of backlash that new leaders elected through more exclusive procedures might face (Harmel & Janda 1994, Poguntke & Webb 2005). This possible endogeneity between membership balloting and successor moderation might partly explain why other studies that do not consider the influence of leader ideology have found membership votes to be a significant determinant of the effects of leader change. Of course, the failure to find the same effect here could also be attributed to idiosyncrasies in how voters in Britain perceive inclusive leadership competitions, given that other studies into this effect utilised comparative datasets (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015).

It is not suggested that the variables explored here are exhaustive of every possible factor that could moderate the impact of leader change. For example, the number of successive leader changes that a party has experienced could be an important factor in how leader change is perceived, with repeated leader changes increasingly destabilising a party and undermining its appeal (Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024). Likewise, evidence has been found to suggest that social democratic parties suffer electorally as a result of leader change whereas other party types benefit (Somer-Topcu & Weitzel

*The logic of the law of curvilinear disparity (May 1973) would suggest that party members will be inclined to vote for more extreme leaders, meaning that their involvement will result in the selection of leaders who are less moderate than those chosen by exclusive selectorates. However, recent analysis suggests this is not the case (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021).

2024). Though the results of the Chapter 3 suggest that this does not apply to the initial impact of leader change on British Labour party support, it is worth further consideration from a cross-national perspective.

The implications of this chapter raise some key questions. One concerns the finding that leader ideological moderation can increase party support in both the short and longer term. Does this mean an established leader could reap the same rewards if they seek to moderate their own position? This possibility is explored in the next chapter, which finds that leader change affords new leaders special latitude that is not available after their novelty has worn off. As a result, increased scope for ideological repositioning is an important indirect benefit of leader change, giving new leaders an opportunity to reconfigure their party's appeal that will not always remain available. An interesting additional question would be whether the long-term impact of successor moderation is at all contingent on whether the new leader's position extends beyond mere rhetoric and media posturing, or if simply expressing a more moderate position is sufficient to make a lasting positive impression on voters. If the latter is the case, then it may be that ideologically moderating leaders simply have direct effects on party support because they are more personally appealing, while their indirect influence on their party (in terms of the party's ideological position) is irrelevant. This question is pertinent for cases such as Conservative leader David Cameron, who went to some lengths to frame himself as a moderniser when he became leader in 2005 but whose self-branding did not so clearly translate into meaningful change within his party (Bale 2008, Buckler & Dolowitz 2012). However, because the Wordscores data only measures the expressed ideology of leaders, the question must be deferred to future research.

Chapter 5

Do new leaders have more room to manoeuvre? The implications of ideological moderation for new versus established leaders

Success in a contemporary democracy often requires parties to adapt their appeal in order to attract and maintain the support of uncommitted voters (Kirchheimer 1966). Yet, parties and their leaders often face a paradox when seeking to increase their support through ideological repositioning. On one hand, they are motivated to adjust their ideological position to gain new voters (Ferland & Dassonneville 2021), which will often involve widening their appeal through adoption of a more moderate policy stance (Downs 1957). But this strategy carries clear risks. Firstly, ideological moderation could be perceived (and portrayed by rival parties) as an unprincipled and pandering attempt to secure votes that makes the party seem inconsistent and weak (Adams et al. 2011, Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009, Fernandez-Vazquez 2019, Somer-Topcu 2009). Or maybe voters will simply pay no attention, rendering the strategy of ideological repositioning futile (Adams et al. 2011). Secondly, ideological moderation risks displeasing factions within the party or amongst its support base whose ideological preferences

are more extreme. In this event, moderation will damage intraparty cohesion and, by making the party appear disunited, harm its public image (Greene & Haber 2015). Collectively, these factors jeopardise the efficacy of ideological change as a strategy for increasing party support.

While this state of affairs applies to the ideological manoeuvring of parties in general, the same logic is likely to apply at the individual level of the party leader. Voters associate leaders with a particular ideological outlook, which makes attempting to change ideological position a risky or, at best, futile endeavour. However, new leaders might be granted immunity from this problem. Having no prior ideological commitments since starting their leadership and signalling a more tangible change within their parties, new leaders may enjoy a time-limited opportunity to bring the ideological profile of the leadership into more appealing territory without suffering the voter indifference and scepticism that their predecessor would have attracted. Nonetheless, new leaders are still at risk of upsetting those within their party who do not agree with their more moderate perspective, which may simultaneously restrict their scope for ideological repositioning despite the potential electoral benefits.

This chapter draws on annual Conservative and Labour polling data from 1971 to 2023 in conjunction with the full dataset of yearly Left-Right leader positions generated using Wordscores in Chapter 2. It seeks to achieve two main goals. The first is to test whether voters respond more positively when new leaders change to a more moderate position than their predecessors', but do not react positively when established (i.e. not new) leaders moderate their own positions. The second goal is to investigate actual leader behaviour, identifying whether leaders tend to act according to their status as new or established leaders when making choices about ideological (re)positioning. The chapter proceeds by providing a more detailed overview of the theory for why moderation is likely to be rewarding for new leaders and unrewarding for established leaders. It then sets out opposing hypotheses relating to leader behaviour. From a public opinion point of view, newly appointed leaders are empowered and motivated to offer more moderate positions while established leaders may be better off avoiding major ideological repositioning. However, new leaders also face internal pressures that could

discourage them from being any more ideologically transformative than established leaders.

The outcome of the first analysis is that new leaders who offer more moderate positions instil a greater positive impact on their party's support, whereas the same effect does not apply to established leaders. The evidence actually indicates that adopting more extreme positions may in fact be more likely to benefit established leaders under certain circumstances. However, the second analysis finds that while new leaders generally tend to change the ideological position of the leadership to a greater extent than established leaders, this is not consistently the case and they are not generally more likely to shift towards moderate (as opposed to extreme) positions. This likely reflects the pressures facing new leaders from within their own parties and amongst their core supporters.

The findings of this chapter build on those of Chapter 4, which found that new leaders who are more ideologically moderate tend to have greater positive effects on their party's support. This finding left open the possibility that any leader could gain votes through ideological moderation regardless of whether leader change had occurred. However, the upcoming analysis clarifies that the benefits of ideological moderation are stronger when effected by newly installed leaders. The conclusions of this chapter also have implications for long-standing theory on party change. Influential work by Harmel & Janda (1994) proposed that, although parties are generally averse to change, the selection of a new leader creates an opportunity for wider-reaching party changes (including changes in issue position) to occur. However, Harmel and Janda also anticipated that intraparty factors could inhibit party change, and that a performance shock will often be needed before parties accept the need to adapt their appeal even after the installation of a new leader (see also Panebianco 1988). By finding that new leaders frequently 'play it safe' in terms of ideological repositioning, this chapter supports Harmel and Janda's proposition that leader change alone is not always enough to trigger party change. Furthermore, preliminary evidence is found to suggest that new leaders may be more likely to moderate when the predecessor had experienced declining support, affirming the idea that performance shocks are a prerequisite for

party change (in ideological terms) even in the aftermath of leader change.

5.1 Voter reactions to ideological repositioning by new versus established leaders

When a leader seeks to increase support for their party, one strategy they might consider is to adjust their ideological stance. The reasoning for this is simple: by situating themselves somewhere more electorally appealing on the ideological spectrum, such as shifting closer to the median voter (Downs 1957), a greater share of the electorate will be likely to consider supporting their party. While ideological shifts are certainly not the only means of winning over voters, evidence persists that, to at least some extent, voter loyalties can turn on the ideological manoeuvring of parties (Ferland & Dassonneville 2021). However, this strategy may not be as straightforward as it seems, because moving from one position to another inevitably involves a degree of self-contradiction. If a leader is on record for holding one position, changing to another position risks being perceived as a calculated and inauthentic departure from their 'true', original position. Parties, and by extension their leaders, may appear pandering or opportunistic if they change their policy positions (Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu 2019, Somer-Topcu 2009). Voters might also suspect that the change is merely tactical and temporary (Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009). As a result, even if a change in the leader's ideology should theoretically improve a party's public standing, leaders will be unable to reap these rewards because the adjustment is met with scepticism. British Labour leader Neil Kinnock was arguably a victim of this when, after his party lost the 1987 general election, he sought to accelerate the party's shift away from the hard left by amending his policy platform. In response, Kinnock was framed as an unprincipled opportunist (Griffiths 2012). Overall, it seems likely that leaders who have been in the position long enough to have established an ideological record will face complicated headwinds if they attempt to alter their stance.

New leaders, however, might be granted immunity from this barrier by virtue of having no previous policy record since the start of their leadership. Successful ideologi-

cal manoeuvres tend to involve a rejection of the recent past, framing it as a failure that needs to be abandoned in favour of the new ideological position (Buckler & Dolowitz 2009, 2012). For established leaders, pursuing this approach would require open self-criticism, but this is not so for new leaders. Evidence suggests that voters are more receptive to the ideological placement of parties following a change in leader, tending to view a party's platform more accurately and showing greater general consensus about where a party stands after a new leader has been installed (Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu 2019, Somer-Topcu 2017). This implies that scepticism towards the ideological manoeuvring of parties is reduced when there is a fresh voice at the top of the party. Kellner (2017) argues that the policy positions of leaders are only successful if voters feel that they are authentic expressions of that leader's personal convictions, positing that Tony Blair's more moderate ideology led to success for the Labour party not only because it was electorally attractive, but because it also seemed like a sincere expression of Blair's ideals. It is notable that Blair articulated the values of New Labour immediately upon becoming Labour leader, so he enjoyed a blank canvas that would not have been available a few years into his leadership. Of course, new leaders will have expressed ideological positions during their time as backbenchers or cabinet ministers, but these will be less high-profile or widely known amongst the general public than the positions they adopt upon becoming leader. New leaders can reap the benefits of ideological moderation because they are not burdened by well-publicised previous positions that contradict their new ideological commitments.

Of course, the argument so far assumes a level of voter attentiveness that might not be realistic. In fact, rather than attracting voter scepticism, changes in party ideology may simply go unnoticed by voters, who will continue to view the party according to its former ideological profile despite the party's efforts (Adams et al. 2011). Evidence suggests that voters hold on to old information and update their perceptions in light of new information at a delayed rate (Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009). However, the possibility that voters will fail to register ideological change is also mitigated by leader change. A change of leader is an eye-catching and newsworthy event, which makes it harder for voters to miss and prompts them to update their perceptions of the party

(Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu 2017). The novelty of the new leader may spur voters into discarding old information about the party more readily because the leadership turnover delivers a tangible and highly publicised signal that the party has fundamentally changed.

Following the logic of the median voter, which assumes that voter distribution on the Left-Right spectrum forms a broadly symmetrical bell curve (Downs 1957), it is likely that new leaders adopting more moderate positions will usually reap the greatest electoral rewards, as moderation will bring the leader's position closer to the point where voters are most highly concentrated.

Hypothesis 5.1 New leaders who adopt a position that is more moderate (as opposed to extreme) than their predecessors' position are more likely to experience an increase in voter support for their party

When an established leader attempts to change their own ideological position, there are two potential outcomes. The first is that voters will continue to associate the leader with their previous position, due to either inattentiveness or scepticism towards the sincerity of the change. In this event, the ideological change is made ineffective as a strategy to increase party support. The second, more concerning possibility is that the move towards a more moderate position could prove actively damaging to the party's support level. In either case, it is anticipated that, unlike new leaders, established leaders who moderate their ideologies will find that their parties are no better off than they were before the ideological change.

Hypothesis 5.2 Established leaders who adopt a position that is more moderate (as opposed to extreme) than their own previous position will experience no increase in voter support for their party

5.2 Constraints on ideological repositioning for new leaders

The two hypotheses framed so far are derived from theory about how party support is affected by changes in leadership ideology, depending on whether the leader is new or established. How leaders actually behave in the face of conflicting pressures and demands, however, is a separate matter. If new leaders are uniquely positioned to change the ideological message of the party leadership, it might be expected that leader positioning will be most volatile between leader transitions and be comparatively stable within the course of a single leadership. This assumes that new leaders choose to take advantage of the window of opportunity created by the leadership change, while established leaders are more cautious about changing their positions for fear of being dismissed or accused of opportunism.

On one hand, new leaders are clearly motivated to moderate. Party leaders shoulder much of the responsibility for the fulfilment of their party's goals (Ennser-Jedenastik & Müller 2015) and electoral success is likely to be a primary goal (Strøm 1990). This implies that, when a new leader takes up the position, they are motivated to occupy an ideological position that maximises their party's electability. Conservative leader David Cameron's efforts to shed the legacy of Margaret Thatcher and her successors are a case in point (Buckler & Dolowitz 2012). Likewise, Labour leader Keir Starmer represents a clear instance of a leader who sought to differentiate his position from his predecessor in pursuit of sunnier electoral prospects. Starmer's approach was therefore to moderate the ideological stance promoted by his leadership following the more overt socialism of Jeremy Corbyn (Goes 2021). In addition, new leaders are likely to want to 'make their mark' and to consolidate their power by distinguishing themselves from their predecessor (Harmel et al. 1995, Helms 2024). The empirical implications of this can be framed as the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5.3 New party leaders are more likely to depart from their predecessor's ideological position than established party leaders are likely to alter their own ideological position

Conversely, there are also reasons to expect that new leaders might be more inhibited in the extent to which they adjust their position from their predecessor's, despite the opportunities afforded by their novelty. In their influential theory of party change, Harmel & Janda (1994) observed that leader change represents a 'facilitating event' for broader change in parties, but they also pointed out that there is equally incentive for new leaders to minimise disruption and avoid aggravating factional disputes within the party. Intraparty politics can have consequences for the successful fulfilment of party goals at least as much as ideological positioning, because voters are less likely to regard a party as competent if it appears riven by internal discord (Greene & Haber 2015). On a personal level, leaders also have clear incentives to maintain party harmony, as leader survival is partly dependent on the level of support the leader has within their party (Ennser-Jedenastik & Müller 2015). New leaders are motivated to make an impression early on, mindful that their time in the position could prove limited (Harmel et al. 1995). However, although a platform of change provides appealing rhetoric from a candidate seeking to secure the leadership, the realities of leading a party can prove more constraining. The successors to Margaret Thatcher, from John Major until David Cameron, provide an illustration. Taking the reins from a strong leader who was both ideologically transformative and electorally successful creates difficult conditions for any successor (Alexiadou & O'Malley 2022), and none of Thatcher's successors were able to break away from the core position she had adopted as prime minister (Bale 2016). This indicates just how difficult it can be for new leaders to convincingly effect change.

These examples demonstrate that, even though the beginning of a leadership might be the optimal time to present an altered ideological position from a public opinion perspective, new leaders might not in fact be eager to adjust the position held by their predecessor too radically. On this point, Harmel & Janda (1994) theorise that an internal development, such as leader change is unlikely to lead to wider party change in the absence of an external stimulus that calls to question the party's ability to attain its core goal (which, for mainstream parties in a two-party system like the Conservatives and Labour, is winning votes in order to attain office). New leaders might therefore

avoid rocking the boat unless external events demand it. In view of these conflicting conceptions of the situation new leaders face, a rival to Hypothesis 5.3 can be posed.

Hypothesis 5.3[rival] New party leaders are no more likely to depart from their predecessor's ideological position than established party leaders are likely to alter their own ideological position

There is a final question of whether the direction of ideological change varies according to whether a leader is new or established. Generally, the median voter theorem implies that moving to a more moderate ideological position is likely to increase party support. New leaders should therefore be more likely to present themselves as more moderate than their predecessors. Established leaders, on the other hand, might be sensitive to the fact that the same strategy risks being regarded by voters as cynical electioneering, as they lack the credibility that comes with being a new leader. However, shifts to more extreme ideologies, although unlikely to increase general support, are at less risk of seeming opportunistic and cynical to voters (Fernandez-Vazquez 2019, Fernandez-Vazquez & Theodoridis 2020). When making ideological changes, therefore, new leaders might be more likely to moderate whereas established leaders are as likely to move to more extreme ideologies.

Hypothesis 5.4 New party leaders are more likely than established leaders to shift towards more moderate, as opposed to extreme, ideological positions

On the other hand, recall that new leaders face conflicting incentives. While increasing their mass appeal through ideological moderation is likely to be an attractive option, new leaders can also face intraparty or grassroots pressures that turn ideological change into a minefield (Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009). If leading in the aftermath of a highly successful and ideologically visionary leader who held a tight grip over the party, it could be politically very challenging to deviate from the former leader's position, which may have gained the status of unchallengeable orthodoxy (Alexiadou & O'Malley 2022). As well as winning elections, an additional party goal that some leaders might prioritise is the advancement of the policy preferences of the party's support

base, which might steer them away from adopting more moderate positions (Harmel & Janda 1994, Kitschelt 1994). This could explain the socialist turn taken by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in 2015. Under difficult circumstances, leaders might also perceive prioritising the policy areas their party has a good reputation for as the best option to maximise their support rather than fighting the opposition on their policy strengths, even if these policy areas do not align with the median voter's priorities. This theory has been used to explain the behaviour of Thatcher's successors (Green 2011). In sum, these pressures could result in new leaders being as likely to shift towards more extreme positions as moderate ones. This reasoning creates a rival to Hypothesis 5.4.

Hypothesis 5.4[rival] New party leaders are no more likely than established leaders to shift towards more moderate, as opposed to extreme, ideological positions

5.3 Analysing the effect of ideological moderation by new and established leaders on party support

5.3.1 Method

To test whether changes in leader ideology expressed by new leaders are associated with a more positive effect on party support than changes expressed by existing leaders, Labour and Conservative poll scores measured at annual intervals are modelled using OLS regression, with changes in leader ideology as the main independent variable. As in previous chapters, the dependent variable is sourced from PollBasePro (Bailey et al. 2021), while the independent variable makes full use of the data generated with Wordscores in Chapter 2. This Wordscores data provides an annual ideological measure of leader ideology on the Left-Right spectrum, using leader conference speeches as the basis for estimation and anchoring the scores to the Manifesto Project RILE index.

The PollBasePro data was converted from daily to monthly format for the previous chapters, but for consistency with the ideological data it now needs to be adjusted to an annual format. Choosing the point in the year to measure party support for this analysis requires careful consideration. It is crucial that any change in leader ideology reflected

in the Wordscores data has been expressed within the window between observations of party support, meaning the observation must be recorded after each conference speech was delivered. Equally, there must be no possibility that the leader might have changed their ideology again since delivering their speech by the time party support is measured. The dependent variable is therefore observed the day after the delivery of the leader conference speech that formed the basis of the ideology variable.* This means the observations are spaced roughly a year apart, with some minor variation depending on when exactly the party held its conference. The only exception is a two year gap from 1973 to 1975 for the Conservatives, who did not hold a conference in 1974. These (mostly) annual observations are then first-differenced (denoted by Δ), so that they measure the change in the party's support from one time point to the next. The main independent variable, after being transformed through first-differencing, is change in ideological position expressed from one speech to the next, where negative values indicate a shift towards the left while positive values indicate a rightwards shift. So that this variable captures moderation rather than Left-Right positioning, this variable is recoded so that the direction of each value is reversed for all Conservative leader observations.†

Testing Hypotheses 5.1 and 5.2 requires an additional interaction effect to be incorporated into the model, as they predict that the effect of leaders expressing ideological change will be moderated by whether the leader has been replaced since the previous year. This is achieved by incorporating a dummy variable into the analysis, which takes the value of one when leader change has occurred and zero when the leader is the same. Interacting this dummy variable with the ideological moderation variable enables assessment of whether ideological change expressed by the new leaders prompts a different reaction than change implemented by existing leaders.

Additional independent variables are also modelled in a similar manner to the

*Party support observations for 2022 and 2023 were sourced from YouGov (2023) because PollBasePro does not currently provide data for these later time periods.

†A core assumption of this strategy is that the median voter will always be situated somewhere between the Conservatives and Labour; this assumption would not hold in the case of parties who do not compete along the same clear ideological lines as the mainstream British parties, and use of public opinion data would be necessary to attain direct insight into the positioning of parties relative to the median voter in such cases.

monthly data analyses in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. These include variables measuring whether an international crisis had occurred in the window between observations, based on data from the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) project (Brecher et al. 2023, Brecher & Wilkenfeld 2000). A total of four crisis dummy variables are included, capturing whether the crisis was violent or lower-level and whether the party was in government or opposition when the crisis occurred. These variables are intended to measure the impact of 'rally around the flag' effects (Lai & Reiter 2005). To control for economic influences, the model incorporates change in unemployment level (Office for National Statistics 2024), recorded in September each year (shortly before party conferences) and interacted with a dummy variable reflecting whether the party was in government or opposition at the time of the observation. In addition, dummy variables denoting whether the party has experienced an electoral loss or win since the previous observation are incorporated. A lag of the dependent variable in level form (i.e. not differenced) is modelled as an independent variable, to account for the tendency for party support to revert to an equilibrium position while also addressing issues of autocorrelation.* Because there are validity concerns regarding the ideological estimate for Conservative leader Liz Truss (see Chapter 2 for discussion), Liz Truss and her successor Rishi Sunak's observations are modelled as fixed effects using dummy variables for the Conservative observations in 2022 and 2023.

5.3.2 Results

Table 5.1 presents the results of the regression analysis, which consists of three models (one for each party, then a third where the observations for each party were pooled into a single dataset with an additional party dummy variable). Generally, the results suggest that parties do not tend to receive a statistically significant increase in support when they have a new leader. Given that the data is measured annually here, that is

*Whereas the monthly party support series were more thoroughly processed prior to analysis in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 (as discussed in Appendix B), the same process is not followed here because preliminary tests indicated that the annual party support series was stationary, albeit with significant first-order autocorrelation. Under these conditions, modelling the dependent variable in differences and including the lag of the same variable in levels as a predictor, as is standard practice in Error Correction Modelling (ECM), serves to address autocorrelation (De Boef & Keele 2008). Nonstationarity was consistently detected for the unemployment series, which was therefore first-differenced.

consistent with the idea that leader changes generally have only short-lived impacts on party support (Brown 1992, Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stewart & Carty 1993). In terms of the effect of leader ideological moderation, the coefficients for the moderation variable without interaction suggests that party support tends to diminish in years when an established leader has moderated their own position. This outcome is significant in the Labour and combined models (though the effect is much smaller and insignificant in the Conservative model). However, interacting leader moderation with the leader change variable suggests that moderation expressed by new leaders is received differently by voters.

The effect of leader moderation depending on whether the leader is new or established is visualised in Figure 5.1, which displays the predicted margins from the combined model. The plot indicates that, when new leaders express a more moderate ideology than their predecessors, they are likely to be rewarded by an increase in support for their party, as anticipated by Hypothesis 5.1. Closer inspection of the data revealed that Labour leaders Tony Blair and Keir Starmer were particular beneficiaries of this effect, implementing the biggest ideological shifts from their predecessors and also receiving the greatest increases in party support. Conversely, leaders who start their leadership by adopting more extreme positions than their predecessors appear to put their party in a worse position than it was under the previous leader the year before. This could be because the new leader is less appealing to the median voter and seems unresponsive to the demands of the electorate. Another factor could be that damage to the party's image caused during the collapse of the previous leadership persists into the new leadership due to the new leader's failure to offer an alternative ideological position that attracts renewed support for the party.

Meanwhile, it appears that existing leaders who change their own ideological position do not reap any reward in terms of increased party support, which is in line with Hypothesis 5.2. In fact, leaders who moderate their own position appear more likely to experience a decline in party support, possibly because voters do not look favourably on a party whose leader seems to be making an unprincipled ploy for popularity at the expense of ideological consistency (Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu

Table 5.1: OLS regression models of annual change in Conservative and Labour party support percentage, 1972-2023

	Dependent variable: ΔParty support (yearly)		
	Model 1 Conservative	Model 2 Labour	Model 3 Combined
Party support$_{t-1}$	-0.385***	-0.407***	-0.398***
	(0.110)	(0.139)	(0.092)
New leader	-0.764	1.211	0.694
	(2.084)	(2.468)	(1.634)
Leader moderation	-0.036	-0.478**	-0.250*
	(0.221)	(0.194)	(0.150)
New leader * Leader moderation	0.295	0.969***	0.720***
	(0.434)	(0.339)	(0.261)
Violent international crisis	13.154***	-7.639	5.288
(incumbent)	(3.858)	(6.195)	(3.433)
Violent international crisis	0.890	-5.501	-3.146
(opposition)	(4.809)	(4.593)	(3.358)
Other international crisis	2.342	-1.995	-1.115
(incumbent)	(2.369)	(2.972)	(1.919)
Other international crisis	1.240	-4.159	-0.346
(opposition)	(2.598)	(3.049)	(1.916)
Election win	5.004**	0.808	2.722
	(2.035)	(3.407)	(1.940)
Election loss	-0.367	-0.874	0.102
	(3.046)	(2.587)	(2.001)
In government	-3.244	0.063	-2.109
	(1.968)	(2.199)	(1.514)
ΔUnemployment	3.853**	0.371	1.051
	(1.479)	(1.154)	(0.889)
In government * ΔUnemployment	-5.545***	-5.752**	-2.827**
	(1.694)	(2.307)	(1.260)
Johnson to Truss	-16.262**		-21.890***
	(6.721)		(6.139)
Truss to Sunak	2.193		0.910
	(6.318)		(6.185)
Party			0.393
			(1.246)
Constant	14.902***	16.933***	15.867***
	(4.331)	(5.939)	(3.787)
N	51	52	103
R^2	0.631	0.537	0.416
Note:			*p≤0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

2019, Somer-Topcu 2009). Also, by moderating their ideological position, the leader shifts away from the party's core support base whose ideological values are aligned with the party's traditional position. While this loss of core supporters could be justifiable if the new position attracts more voters from the vicinity of the median voter, the trade-off will backfire if the change in position is not detected or trusted by the more moderate voters the leader is seeking to entice. As a result, the leader will have sacrificed some of their party's core support base by moderating their position but gained no new support through courting the median voter, resulting in lower party support overall.

By contrast, the results suggest that established leaders are more likely to benefit from switching to more extreme positions rather than more moderate ones. This implies that voter scepticism towards established leaders may be restricted to cases where a more moderate ideological position is adopted, while shifts towards extreme positions are regarded as sincere because they are not so easily dismissed as opportunistic attempts to drum up party support (Fernandez-Vazquez 2019, Fernandez-Vazquez & Theodoridis 2020). Inspection of the data identified four distinct cases where a party considerably increased its support after an established leader had shifted to a more extreme position. The first two occurred when Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher shifted to more extreme positions in 1982 and 1987, after the Falklands War had ended in Argentina's surrender and after the Conservatives had won their third consecutive general election. It is therefore likely that the Conservative government was benefitting from public satisfaction with the outcome of the Falklands War in 1982 and an electoral honeymoon period in 1987. In the Labour party, Tony Blair shifted to a more extreme left-wing position while experiencing increased party support in 2001, after the September 11^{th} attacks had likely prompted a 'rally around the flag' effect amongst the British public. Keir Starmer likewise adopted a more extreme position and gained support in 2022, during the period when Prime Minister Liz Truss was experiencing exceptionally low public approval. These cases indicate that, under cer-

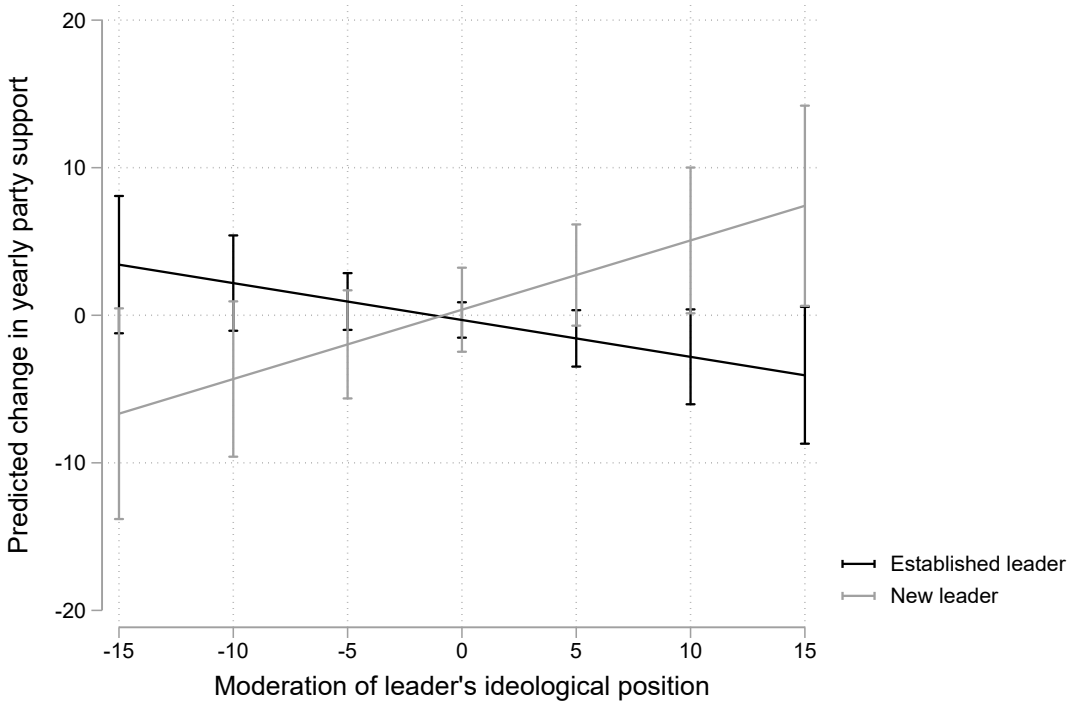

Figure 5.1: The predicted effect of leader ideological moderation on yearly changes in party support percentage for new versus established leaders

NOTE: This visualisation is derived from the combined model in Table 5.1. On the x-axis, positive values indicate the extent to which the leader has become more ideologically moderate on the Left-Right scale, while negative values represent shifts towards more extreme ideological positions (zero denotes no change in ideological position). Ideological data is derived from the Wordscores estimates discussed in Chapter 2 and is measured on a comparable scale to the Manifesto Project RILE index (which technically ranges from -100/extreme left to 100/extreme right).

tain circumstances, shifts to more extreme positions from established leaders can be positively received by voters.

There is potential for this argument to be afflicted by reverse causation, whereby the movement to more moderate positions by established leaders coincides with lower support because leaders employ moderation as an attempt to remedy a prior decline in their party's popularity. On this understanding, moderation does not cause reduced support but is instead a reaction to it. Because the observations are annual, the data is not granular enough to test whether changes in party support precede or follow from changes in leader ideology. However, the results provide support for Hypothesis 5.2 regardless of which causal explanation is favoured. If moderation by established leaders is associated with reductions in party support because leaders are more likely to respond to declining polls by moderating, then the results suggest that gambits of this sort are generally unsuccessful, as these leaders continue to experience lower party support despite moderating their ideological position. Regardless of whether an established leader's ideological repositioning causes a decline in voter support or is a response to it (or, in the event of simultaneity bias, a combination of the two), the manoeuvre does not yield the rewards that new leaders receive when they moderate.

Overall, while confirming that leader change tends to have only short-term benefits, this analysis also points towards a way in which new leaders might be able to take advantage of their novelty and indirectly benefit from opportunities created by leader change in a way that could have a lasting impact on their party's electoral standing. To check the robustness of these findings, additional variations of this analysis are presented in Appendix D. Firstly, the appendix contains a variation of the model found in Table 5.1 but dropping the observations for the years when Tony Blair and Keir Starmer became leader of the Labour party. This is to ensure that the results remain valid in absence of these influential cases. Also, because changes in party support could be affected by shifts in the central tendency of the electorate's ideological position (as opposed to ideological repositioning by the party leader), the appendix presents another version of the analysis that incorporates an additional control variable reflecting ideological dynamics in public opinion. This variable draws on UK responses from the

Eurobarometer (2024) survey and was not presented in the main body of this chapter because the Eurobarometer did not consistently ask respondents about ideological self-placement until 1976. As a result, it is not possible to incorporate observations of public ideological change before 1977, meaning the model cannot include the first observations of Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher or Labour's James Callaghan. This loss of two crucial observations of leader change mean that this model is presented only as appendix material. In all the additional models, the results discussed in this section remain stable, albeit with some costs in terms of effect magnitude and significance which are discussed within the appendix.

5.4 Comparing the ideological strategy of new versus established leaders

5.4.1 Do leader positions differ when the leader has changed?

The implication of the previous analysis was that it can be prudent for new leaders to moderate their ideological position from that of their predecessor, whereas the same effect does not apply when established leaders alter their own position. The question remains, however, whether this is reflected in the actual behaviour of new versus established leaders. Are established leaders less likely to radically change their own position, while new leaders take advantage of the opportunity to depart more significantly from the position of their predecessors? To investigate this, the leader ideology variable is converted into a measure of absolute ideological change (the direction of change is discarded by converting all negative values to positive). Figure 5.2 presents this variable as a boxplot, grouped by whether the leader is new or established, to enable assessment of whether the level of change differs depending on leader status. Because of the issues with the Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak observations, their speeches are discarded from this analysis.

The plot supports the prediction that new leaders change ideology more than established leaders, with a median change of around five among new leaders compared to approximately half that among established leaders. This seems to support Hypothesis

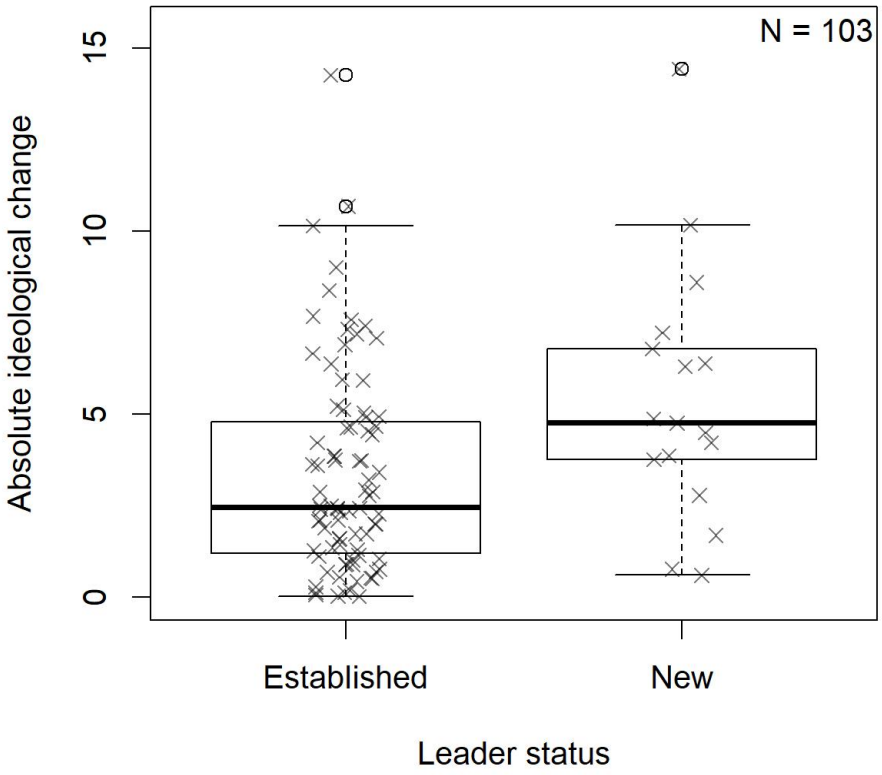

Figure 5.2: The distribution of ideological shifts since the previous year implemented by new versus established leaders

NOTE: Annual ideological data is derived from the Wordscores estimates discussed in Chapter 2 and is measured on a comparable scale to the Manifesto Project RILE index (which technically ranges from -100 to 100). This plot displays observations of absolute ideological change, meaning direction of change (left or right/moderate or extreme) has been discarded and the scale reflects the total magnitude of the change in ideological position.

5.3 over Hypothesis 5.3[rival]: new leaders do indeed take advantage of the opportunity afforded by their novelty to implement ideological change, while established leaders are more hesitant to change their position.

Because there are relatively few observations of new leaders, it is also informative to assess the positioning of the individual data points in Figure 5.2, signified in the boxplots using X marks. While the central tendency of the points representing new leaders is clearly higher, there are undoubtedly occasions where established leaders also implement changes of similar magnitude to those effected by the most pathbreaking new leaders, while some new leaders make very little change to the position of their predecessors. Therefore, support for Hypothesis 5.3 must be qualified by acknowledgement that, while new leaders do tend to make the biggest changes, they do not do so consistently and established leaders also make sizeable adjustments to their own positions. This finding reflects the work of Fernandez-Vazquez & Somer-Topcu (2019), who observe no significant difference in the extent of change exhibited by party manifesto positions when leader change has occurred.

5.4.2 Are new leaders more likely to moderate?

To identify whether the direction of ideological change differs between new and established leaders, an additional OLS analysis was conducted. This time, leader moderation is the dependent variable, while the main independent variable is the dummy leader change variable. The purpose of this analysis is to assess whether higher levels of moderation are exhibited by new leaders. Ideological moderation is also included as a lagged independent variable, as leaders may be more likely to shift back towards their previous position following a temporary departure. Because leaders might adjust their ideological position in response to changes in their party's public standing, lagged change in party support is included as another independent variable. This variable reflects the trajectory of party support between two and one years before each observation. The lagged form is justified because parties have been shown to react to changes in public opinion with a delay (Somer-Topcu 2009). Modelling the contemporaneous change in poll score would run into the same issues of reverse causation discussed in the previous

analysis. The lagged change in poll score is also interacted with the leader change variable. This interaction will enable the analysis to identify whether new leaders are more likely to moderate when their predecessor had experienced a decline in support between their final two conferences.

Additional predictor variables are carried over from the previous regression. These are the dummy variables measuring the occurrence of international crises, election wins and losses, and government status. Unemployment is also modelled (to account for possible ideological change in response to shifting economic conditions) and interacted with the government variable. As before, the observations of Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak are modelled as fixed effects.

As with the previous regression analysis, three models were implemented. These are presented in Table 5.2. The coefficients for the lagged dependent variable indicate that, after a shift towards a more moderate (or extreme) position, leaders are likely to revert towards their previous position in the following year. Evidence is also found to suggest that leaders react to earlier gains in party support by becoming more moderate, while earlier drops in party support result in leaders adopting more extreme positions. The coefficient for this lagged change in party support variable sits at around 0.12 and 0.2 and is statistically significant in the combined model. The implication that leaders express more extreme ideologies in the years following a reduction in support might seem counterintuitive, as the median voter theorem would imply that declining support is best remedied by shifting closer to the centre. However, under circumstances of declining support, parties and their leaders might instead react strategically by emphasising the policy areas they have firmer reputations for, appearing more extreme because they foreground their 'owned' issues, or seek to consolidate support among their 'core' support base who would favour a more extreme position in line with the party's fundamental ideological orientation (Green 2011). This course of action may seem more preferable to a beleaguered party than risking voter cynicism by moderating their position (Fernandez-Vazquez 2019, Fernandez-Vazquez & Theodoridis 2020).

In terms of Hypothesis 5.4, the analysis does not suggest that new leaders are generally more likely to adopt either more extreme or moderate positions than estab-

Table 5.2: OLS regression models of the level of moderation in the ideological positioning of Conservative and Labour leaders since the previous year, 1972-2023

	Dependent variable: Leader ideological moderation		
	Model 1 Conservative	Model 2 Labour	Model 3 Combined
Leader moderation$_{t-1}$	-0.258*	-0.286*	-0.181*
	(0.135)	(0.146)	(0.093)
New leader	-0.218	-1.531	-0.196
	(1.759)	(2.617)	(1.309)
ΔParty support$_{t-1}$	0.124	0.196	0.165**
	(0.107)	(0.119)	(0.078)
New leader * ΔParty support$_{t-1}$	-0.336	-1.396***	-0.999***
	(0.453)	(0.449)	(0.254)
Violent international crisis	-7.084**	1.129	-4.980*
(incumbent)	(2.872)	(5.817)	(2.665)
Violent international crisis	6.131	-1.069	2.277
(opposition)	(3.712)	(4.149)	(2.626)
Other international crisis	0.719	0.364	1.653
(government)	(1.892)	(2.614)	(1.483)
Other international crisis	3.046	-4.000	0.746
(opposition)	(1.814)	(2.868)	(1.505)
Election win	-4.814***	-3.832	-4.776***
	(1.500)	(2.944)	(1.456)
Election loss	-2.928	-5.903**	-3.680**
	(2.266)	(2.347)	(1.547)
In government	1.603	-0.772	0.021
	(1.475)	(2.090)	(1.251)
ΔUnemployment	0.355	-0.447	-0.535
	(1.245)	(1.009)	(0.706)
In government * ΔUnemployment	-0.005	-0.577	0.407
	(1.406)	(1.904)	(0.970)
Johnson to Truss	10.405**		10.019**
	(3.810)		(4.379)
Truss to Sunak	-10.853		-21.827***
	(8.769)		(5.860)
Party			-0.684
			(0.974)
Constant	-0.379	1.531	1.107
	(1.223)	(1.287)	(1.115)
N	50	51	101
R^2	0.659	0.378	0.421
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

lished leaders. The coefficients for the new leader variable suggests that new leaders are actually more likely to be less moderate than their predecessors, but as this is not statistically significant in any of the models the main conclusion is that new leaders are generally no more likely to moderate than established leaders. This reflects the theory that leader change on its own is unlikely to bring about wider party support, as parties are generally resistant to change and ideological repositioning is risky for incoming leaders (Harmel & Janda 1994).

On the other hand, the analysis does offer some evidence that new leaders may react differently to earlier declines in party support than established leaders, as the interaction variable shows a negative (and, in the Labour and combined models, significant) relationship between the new leader variable and lagged change in party support. The implication is that new leaders are more likely to moderate when party support had declined in the year before the leader change, whereas established leaders react to such drops by becoming more extreme. However, any conclusions drawn from this result must be qualified because the variable is insignificant for the Conservatives and the significance of the outcome in the other models is contingent on the inclusion of Labour leader Keir Starmer's first year (2020). Starmer represents an influential case because he expressed a particularly high level of ideological moderation and his predecessor (Jeremy Corbyn) had experienced a particularly sharp decline in party support between his final two conferences. Dropping the observation for Labour in 2020 from the analysis, the interaction effect between the new leader and lagged change in party support variable is less pronounced and loses statistical significance. Figure 5.3 plots the predicted effect of lagged change in party support and leader ideological moderation depending on whether the leader is new or established. Two plots are displayed in this figure. One is derived from the combined model in Table 5.2 whereas the other is derived from the same model but with the first observation of Starmer excluded. The latter plot indicates the weaker relationship when the effect of Starmer is discounted, while the large confidence intervals reveal the sizeable increase in statistical uncertainty.

Setting aside these important qualifications, the implication of the result is that when the previous leader experienced a greater decline in party support, their successor is more likely to offer a more moderate ideological position. This is consistent with the influential theory of party change which suggests that leader change is more likely to facilitate party change when it occurs in conjunction with external circumstances that cause parties to worry that they are unable to achieve their main goal (Harmel & Janda 1994). Parties 'change only when it is established that there is good cause and not simply for the sake of change' (Harmel & Janda 1994, p.265). Party factions and core supporters may be more likely to tolerate a new leader who expresses a more moderate ideological position when the previous leader was failing to maintain party support because this calls into question the party's ability to achieve electoral success.

What other factors seem to influence the ideological repositioning of leaders? The analysis suggests that, for the Conservatives at least, a more extreme (right-wing) position is taken by leaders in years when they have engaged in a major international crisis. This is likely an example of a leader taking advantage of public goodwill generated from a rally effect, as in the case of Margaret Thatcher in 1982 following the Falklands War. Leaders also appear to adopt more extreme positions after elections, regardless of whether their party won or lost. For winning parties, these extreme shifts could be due to the leader seeing their electoral win as an affirmation of the party's ideological perspective and choosing to emphasise it. Meanwhile, leaders of parties who have lost an election might become more extreme as they strategically choose to emphasise their party's owned issues or appeal to their core support base rather than courting the median voter (Green 2011).

Collectively, the results support Hypothesis 5.4[rival]. In general, new leaders do not show a greater likelihood of moderating than established leaders. However, there is some evidence that, where party performance under the predecessor was declining, new leaders are more likely to adopt more moderate ideological positions. Due to data limitations, this finding must be considered with caution, though it should provide motivation for future scholarship.

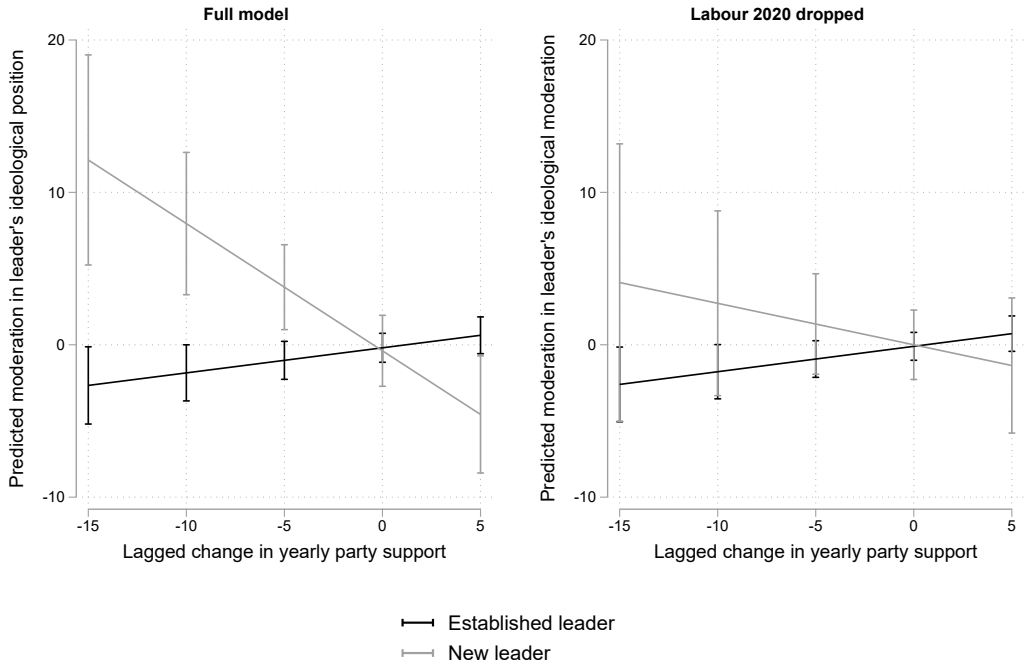

Figure 5.3: The predicted effect of earlier changes in party support percentage on subsequent moderation of new versus established leaders

NOTE: These visualisations are derived from the combined model in Table 5.2 and an additional model with the same specification but without the observation occurring after Labour's Jeremy Corbyn to Keir Starmer leader change (to save space, this model has not been presented in full). The x-axes indicate change in the party's support percentage observed at the previous time point (a year earlier). On the y-axes, positive values indicate the extent to which the leader has become more ideologically moderate on the Left-Right scale since the previous year, while negative values represent shifts towards more extreme ideological positions (zero denotes no change in ideological position). Ideological data is derived from the Wordscores estimates discussed in Chapter 2 and is measured on a comparable scale to the Manifesto Project RILE index (which technically ranges from -100/extreme left to 100/extreme right).

5.5 Discussion

Theory suggests that adopting a more moderate ideological position could be an effective strategy for gaining voter support (Downs 1957), but voter scepticism and inattentiveness could mean that leaders are often unable to take advantage of this strategy (Adams et al. 2011, Adams & Somer-Topcu 2009, Fernandez-Vazquez 2019, Somer-Topcu 2009). However, by attracting public attention and introducing a leader with a comparatively clean ideological record, it is possible that new leaders could reap rewards from ideological moderation in a way that is not possible for established leaders. Finding empirical support for this theory, this chapter suggests that new leaders have a special opportunity to deviate from the ideological positioning of their predecessors in a way that could have a lasting impact on their party's support. Therefore, the potential advantages of ideological moderation observed for new leaders in Chapter 4 are not generalisable to all leaders; the status of being new to the leadership endows leaders with extra ideological latitude that does not remain available indefinitely. This effect is particularly pronounced in the case of the Labour party, while evidence is weaker for the Conservatives.

However, party change runs clear risks of aggravating internal party disputes and disappointing the party's core supporters (Harmel & Janda 1994). With this in mind, a second analysis explored leader behaviour, finding that while new leaders are generally more likely to deviate from their predecessor's position than established leaders are likely to deviate from their own, they do not do so consistently or move reliably in a more moderate (rather than extreme) direction. This could be indicative of the additional pressures new leaders face as they consolidate their leadership, including from within their own parties and core support base. Ideological change might make sense in terms of appealing to the median voter, but new leaders must also consider the implications of such actions on their party's cohesion. Ideological moderation may be attractive, but an internally divided party is not likely to win over voters (Greene & Haber 2015) and leaders personally face greater risk of removal if they fail to maintain support within their parties (Ennser-Jedenastik & Müller 2015).

Some evidence was found to suggest that leaders taking over from predecessors who had experienced a decline in party support are more likely to express ideological moderation, reflecting long-standing theory on conditions where parties are more likely to tolerate fundamental change in order to improve their electoral appeal. This theory suggests that when parties are given cause to question their effectiveness at achieving their core goal (which, in the case of the British Conservatives and Labour, is electoral success), they are more likely to embrace wider-reaching change (Harmel et al. 1995, Harmel & Janda 1994). In the words of Harmel & Janda (1994, p.265): 'externally induced "shocks" to the party's internal system can catalyze a process of change that reaches more broadly and cuts more deeply than can occur as the result of internal changes (such as changes in leadership and/or the dominant faction) alone'. Although evidence for this effect is only tentative in this analysis due to a shortage of data, it is clear that this theory of party change remains worthy of continued empirical investigation. The findings of this analysis also resonate with research suggesting that strong predecessors harm the success rate of successors, leading the party to grant the successor less room to manoeuvre since the party was already performing well under the previous leader (Alexiadou & O'Malley 2022).

5.6 Concluding remarks

Overall, this chapter has found that new leaders can be beneficiaries of greater public acceptance of ideological moderation, but are often likely to be constrained from taking advantage of this increased room to manoeuvre by internal party pressures. Future research could build on this work by investigating whether the ministerial backgrounds of new leaders impacts their ability to ideologically reposition. The foregoing argument assumes that new leaders are granted ideological flexibility because they do not hold past records that clash with their new pledges, but what about new leaders who have already held prominent cabinet or shadow cabinet positions? Can they moderate if they are already known for a more extreme position in a previous role? For example, Gordon Brown had served as chancellor for 10 years when he became Labour leader in 2007, so voters would already associate him with a particular ideology at the start of

his leadership. A larger dataset of leader changes and leader ideological positions, with a greater sample of leaders both with and without prominent ministerial backgrounds, would enable exploration of the extent to which this kind of high-profile history inhibits the opportunities that a new leadership can create.

It should be noted that the theoretical expectation that new leaders will generally be incentivised to offer more moderate positions is subject to important exceptions, particularly with regards to leaders who are not purely motivated by the goal of vote-seeking or office-attainment. Alternative goals to electoral success, such as issue representation or even consolidation of power through ideological assertiveness, can also play a role in motivating the ideological strategy of new leaders (Harmel et al. 1995, Harmel & Janda 1994). This clearly applies to non-mainstream parties whose leaders might prioritise the goal of highlighting certain issues (issue representation) over pure electoral success, such as green parties which are likely to emphasise environmental concerns regardless of the median voter's preferences. However, exceptions can also occur in mainstream parties, as Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn demonstrated by foregrounding his own ideological convictions and those of the socialist contingent of Labour's support base over pure vote-winning strategy (Dorey & Denham 2016). Equally, whether new leaders will see ideological reconfiguration as an important task may vary between different party traditions. Throughout this chapter, weaker effects were observed for the Conservatives, possibly because the British conservative tradition places greater emphasis on pragmatism and preserving tradition than ideological contestation (Seawright 2010, Vincent 1994).

Prior research into the implications of leader change has suggested that its impact on party support is more muted than might be expected (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stark 1996, Stewart & Carty 1993). This chapter has shown how leader change has capacity to indirectly effect a party's ability to attract voters by increasing the leader's freedom to ideologically reposition the leadership, creating an opportunity to shift into more electorally appealing territory. However, the results also suggest that new leaders do not reliably make use of this opportunity, which could be an important part of the puzzle of why leader change is not generally observed

to have a lasting impact on party support. New leaders enjoy unique opportunities, but they are also subject to constraints which will often prevent instances of leader change from reaching their full potential. A key political implication of this study is that leader change could be particularly beneficial for parties whose leader is associated with an unappealing ideological position but is unable to convince voters that any ideological repositioning is genuine. Providing the party is willing to get behind a more moderate leader, leader change could be an effective tool for helping such parties navigate their way out of these ideological cul-de-sacs.

Chapter 6

Different leader, same opinion? The effect of attitudinal predispositions on how voters respond to party leader change

Among the factors that influence how voters perceive parties, the party leader has perhaps the most tangible foundation. Most of the criteria voters use to evaluate parties, including the party's competence or issue positions, lack material underpinning. The basis of the party leader evaluation, on the other hand, is embodied by a single person who can be completely swapped for another. Given that voter evaluations of the party leader are based on a single reference point which is fundamentally uprooted when leadership transitions occur, it seems plausible that leader change should cause major upheaval to voter perceptions of parties, yet empirical evidence suggests that its impact is often limited (Brown 1992, Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stark 1996, Stewart & Carty 1993). This chapter therefore asks: How far-reaching are the potential consequences of electing a different leader on the way individual voters perceive a party and what factors inhibit these consequences?

For a change of leader to meaningfully impact a voter's perceptions of a party, two key hurdles must be overcome. The voter must, firstly, update their opinion of the leader by viewing the new leader differently to the predecessor and, secondly, allow this change in opinion towards the leader to translate into a change in their attitude towards the party. However, there are perceptual barriers that could stand in the way of voters achieving one or both of these outcomes. This chapter explores the extent to which voters overcome these hurdles and examines the role of voter characteristics in conditioning how individuals process changes of party leader. The underlying theory is that voters utilise motivated reasoning in their responses to political developments and their individual characteristics moderate the extent to which motivated reasoning filters responses to leader change.

An expanded understanding of how leader change affects individual voters differently is valuable in shedding light on how voter reactions to political developments and new information are shaped by their personal characteristics and associated cognitive biases. Whereas the previous chapters of this thesis investigated the overall effects of leader change and identified how leader changes occurring under different circumstances or introducing different types of leader can have distinctive effects on party support, the focus on aggregate data within these chapters precluded more granular analysis of how voter-level variation filters the way in which leader change is experienced. This is an important dimension to incorporate, because differences in how individual voters process leader change could also go towards explaining some of the puzzles found in the extant literature, where the effect of leader change on party support appears to be of more limited magnitude or shorter longevity than might be expected (Brown 1992, Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stark 1996, Stewart & Carty 1993). When analysing leader change with aggregated polling data, the observed magnitude of its effect will be dragged down by pockets of the electorate who do not respond to leader change as expected. It is therefore important to identify the types of voter who occupy these subsets of the wider populace. Use of panel data enables the analysis to pick up on such individual-level variation. Leader changes also provide an opportunity to develop knowledge on how party leaders

factor into voter decision-making more broadly, as they provide an 'exogenous shock' that creates an opportunity to disentangle the causal flow between the role of leader evaluations and other individual-level predictors of vote choice, including partisanship (Garzia 2017).

Utilising data from the British Election Study (BES) internet panel survey (Fieldhouse et al. 2023), the analysis presented in this chapter explores how voters convert changes in their evaluations of party leaders into changes in their attitude towards the party following leader change. It relies on BES waves occurring before and after two recent Conservative leader changes (David Cameron to Theresa May in 2016 and Theresa May to Boris Johnson in 2019) and two recent Labour changes (Ed Miliband to Jeremy Corbyn in 2015 and Jeremy Corbyn to Keir Starmer in 2020). It is argued that, as well as being expedient in terms of data availability, these cases are beneficial as there were clear points of contrast between the two leaders in each case, helping to reduce the possibility of voters failing to react simply because the leaders were too similar. As well as exploring the general nature of the relationship between changes in leader and party evaluation following leader change, the analysis also accounts for voters who subvert the overall trend or fail to update their leader evaluations at all, as such voters play an important role in suppressing the aggregate impact of leader change. To this end, a second analysis groups the BES respondents into a set of pathways, each configured to capture the different ways that voters might respond to a new leader (including non-reaction) and analyses this categorical dependent variable through multinomial logistic regression.

The chapter begins by setting out theoretical expectations for how different voters will translate (or fail to translate) changes in their evaluation of leaders into their party evaluations following leader change. It then proceeds to empirically test these expectations using the panel data. It finds a positive relationship between voters liking a new leader more (or less) and liking that leader's party more (or less). It further detects a positivity bias, whereby voters reward parties for a more likeable new leader more than they punish parties when they like the new leader less. The second part of the analysis finds, however, that a fairly large contingent of voters do not conform to this general

positive relationship and many (around 15-20%) do not update their perceptions of a party's leader at all, even after leader change has introduced a substantially different leader. Those who identify with an opposing party, pay less attention to politics or are more politically extreme show reduced likelihood of updating their perceptions of leaders following leader change. Higher levels of education also seem to be associated with a weaker link between changes in leader and party evaluations. Overall, this chapter highlights the importance of considering the role of individual characteristics in conditioning the way voters convert changes in their evaluations of leaders into their perceptions of parties. It further demonstrates the utility of configuring empirical analysis so that it can address not only the general relationship but also the additional possibility that some voters will fail to react to leader change at all.

6.1 The linkage between voters' leader and party evaluations

The personalisation of politics literature argues that the way voters feel about parties is inextricably linked to how they feel about that party's leader (Aarts et al. 2011, Bean & Mughan 1989, Bittner 2011, Costa & da Silva 2015, Garzia 2014, Garzia et al. 2022, Karvonen 2010, Lobo & Curtice 2015*b*, McAllister 2007, Mughan 2000). Accordingly, the image of the leader has emerged as a consistent and powerful predictor of vote choice. Explanations for this phenomenon tend to centre around heuristics. While the political domain can be complex and cognitively demanding, presenting the average citizen with an unreasonable array of variables to keep track of, voters are accustomed to judging other human beings. This means that voters can readily form judgements about party leaders and use these impressions as a cue when forming an overall assessment of that leader's party (Bittner 2011, Whiteley et al. 2016). In line with this, recent research has highlighted the inherent link between voter evaluations of parties and their evaluation of party leaders (Daoust et al. 2021), although it has been suggested that this link is initially weaker for new leaders but increases as the leader becomes more established over time (Bridgewater 2023).

Connecting this body of work to leader change, it is intuitive to expect that introducing a new leader who differs from their predecessor should have a considerable impact on a voter's perception of the party. Past work has shown that voters' evaluations of party leaders are dynamic (Berz 2020) and that voters tend to change their views on a party's leader more when leader change has occurred (Andersen 2020). Voters are also motivated to adapt their opinions towards parties in light of new leaders as a means of resolving cognitive dissonance (Sorace & Hobolt 2021). To avoid creating a tension between how they perceive the party leader and the party itself, voters might simply avoid this logical inconsistency and allow the change in their perception of the leader to translate into a commensurate change in their perception of the party. Put simply, voters who like the new leader more will like the party more, while voters who like the new leader less will like the party less.

Hypothesis 6.1 Changes in voters' perception of a party's leader following leader change will translate into commensurate changes in their evaluation of the party itself

6.2 Barriers to voters updating party evaluations in response to leader change

In their seminal book, *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), the Michigan scholars invite readers to think about the process through which voters make their electoral decisions as a metaphorical 'funnel of causality' (see also Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, Miller & Merrill Shanks 1996). This funnel metaphor places emphasis on how determinants of the vote are temporally ordered, with long-term factors occurring at the wide opening of the funnel and short-term factors situated towards the narrower end, where they have most influence to the funnel's output: the vote decision. Long-term factors can include a voter's demographic characteristics or psychological predispositions (like party identification or ideological preferences) while short-term factors encompass how the voter feels about contemporary contextual matters, such as the candidates and issues. Voter attitudes towards leaders are also considered to be among the short-term factors situated towards the exit point of the funnel (Miller & Merrill Shanks 1996). The anal-

ogy illustrates that while long-term factors are not as directly relevant to the final vote choice, it is important to recognise that these factors play a role in conditioning the voter's response to the short-term factors that arise further down the funnel.

The assumption that a change of leader will impact voter perceptions of parties hinges on two preconditions. Voters must, firstly, regard the new leader differently to the preceding leader and, secondly, allow this change to translate into their attitude towards the party. For the purposes of this study, the crucial takeaway of the funnel metaphor is that voters do not process contemporary political developments in a vacuum. One of the Michigan scholars, Philip Converse, asserts this point further in his work on attitude strength. The crux of Converse's thinking is that attitudes can be held with different degrees of intensity, and that attitudes which are felt more strongly are more durable and impact on other attitudes and behaviour (Converse 1995).

Bringing these theoretical insights to bear on the question of voter reactions to leader change, the possibility is raised that the way in which voters react to party leadership transitions will in part be shaped by that voter's psychological predispositions. This leads to two possibilities that could hamper the potential for leader change to impact the reputation of a party. The first possibility is that some voters will amend their view of the leader, but will transfer this change in attitude towards the leader into a change in attitude towards the party to a lesser extent. This could range from voters exhibiting a weaker positive relationship between shifts in their leader and party evaluations through to voters allowing the two evaluations to move entirely independently. These voters go against the general direction expected by Hypothesis 6.1. The second possibility is that voters' predispositions may prevent them from amending their view of the leader to begin with, regarding the new leader in the same light as the previous leader. In the latter case, the capacity for leader change to affect the voter's attitude is entirely impeded. Below, each of these possibilities, and characteristics that could predispose voters to react in one of these two ways, are discussed in turn.

6.2.1 Weaker linkage between leader and party evaluations

For many voters, having diverging feelings towards a party and its leader is likely to feel rationally inconsistent, so that changes in one attitude but not the other would bring about cognitive dissonance. However, some voters might find it more feasible to allow for some slack between how they feel about parties and the leaders of those parties, enabling them to amend their view of leaders independently of their party evaluations without experiencing the same level of cognitive dissonance as other voters. These will be voters whose prior conceptions of politics are more robust to the influence of recent political developments. As Lupu (2013, p.52) writes: 'individuals with weaker prior beliefs should update their beliefs more quickly than individuals with stronger prior beliefs'.

Earlier work has suggested that education has potential to make individuals more politically knowledgeable and engaged both through its instructive function but also because education serves as a proxy for political sophistication through other channels, mostly relating to pre-adult conditions (including socio-economic status, cognitive capacity and political socialisation) that tend to be associated with subsequent educational attainment (Highton 2009, Persson 2015). Research suggests that higher levels of education and political sophistication lead to more stable attitudes and reduced susceptibility to the influence of shifting contextual circumstances, indicating that those who have received a higher level of education are likely to have a more comprehensive reserve of political assessments which will inhibit the extent to which they revise their impression of the party in response to leader change (Dassonneville et al. 2023, Zaller 1989). The new information provided by the leader change is diluted within a larger pool of prior political perceptions. As a result, these voters will be more likely to allow their leader and party evaluations to evolve independently. This is not to suggest that leader evaluations play no part in the decision-making of politically sophisticated voters; existing evidence to the contrary already challenges such a sweeping conclusion (Aaldering 2018, Bittner 2011, Gidengil 2013, Rico 2015). It does, however, propose that the effect of leader change will be lesser among such voters because the leader evaluation has to compete with a more extensive cache of other evaluative criteria.

Hypothesis 6.2 Voters with higher levels of education will be more likely to allow changes in party and leader evaluation to move independently

The age of a voter might also affect the linkage between changes in their attitude towards party and leader. The personalisation of politics is generally regarded as a newer phenomenon, arising from political dealignment, growing media attention on leaders, and leaders attaining greater political agency (Garzia et al. 2022, Poguntke & Webb 2005). As such, older voters were politically socialised in a period before leaders were regarded as so fundamentally bound up with their parties, while younger voters are acclimatised to a more individualised mode of politics (Quinlan & McAllister 2022). The criteria older voters use when evaluating parties will therefore be less reliant on how they regard the leader. Additionally, senior voters are likely to hold more established impressions of parties through longer exposure to politics, giving them a wealth of political experience that reduces their susceptibility to the influence of recent changes in a party's composition (Lupu 2013). To summarise, changes in feeling towards the party's leader following leader change should be less bound up with attitudes towards the party amongst more senior voters.

Hypothesis 6.3 More senior voters will be more likely to allow changes in party and leader evaluation to move independently

An additional factor that could be relevant in determining the conversion of changes in leader evaluation into party evaluation is the level of attention the voter pays to politics. Voters who pay considerable attention to politics are likely to possess more information about parties. As with education, higher political attention is therefore likely to mean that voters possess more general information about parties when they are exposed to the new leadership, whereas those who pay less attention to politics are more likely to be swayed by their impression of the new leader and update their party evaluation more readily (Dassonneville et al. 2023, Lupu 2013, Zaller 1989).

Hypothesis 6.4 Voters who pay greater attention to politics will be more likely to allow changes in party and leader evaluation to move independently

6.2.2 Failure to update leader evaluation despite leader change

In response to a shift in their evaluation of a party's leader as a result of leader change, voters can choose between tolerating cognitive dissonance (by keeping their party evaluation the same) or updating their evaluation of the party to align with the new leader evaluation. However, another option for voters is to simply avoid changing how they feel about the leader in the first place, even though the party leadership is now occupied by a different person. In circumstances where the new and preceding leaders are highly similar, this might seem rational. For example, it might be expected that many voters would regard Labour leader Gordon Brown in a similar light to his predecessor Tony Blair, as they were close collaborators in the development and, once in government, implementation of the New Labour project. However, this sort of situation is of less interest for the present purposes. What is more interesting is the potential for voters to fail to update their leader evaluation even when leader change has introduced somebody markedly different into the role. Such a situation could arise when factors higher up the funnel of causality exert a strong influence on the voter's response to a new leader, prompting them to apply motivated reasoning and fail to update their perceptions at all.

The crux of Converse's thinking is that attitudes can be held with different degrees of intensity, and that strong attitudes 'will resist attempts at persuasion in contrary directions' (Converse 1995, p.xi). Accordingly, while a change of leader might be assumed to 'persuade' voters to reconsider a party by fundamentally altering its image, this will be less effective among voters who hold strong attitudes. Partisanship, or a sense of attachment towards a particular party, could be a source of this kind of attitude. The Michigan scholars viewed partisanship as a crucial long-term influence on voter perceptions, appearing early in the funnel of causality. They saw partisanship as a component of a voter's identity that emerges from political socialisation, whereby the party preferences of community networks during the voter's formative years become inculcated into their own political psychology (Campbell et al. 1960). These community networks would generally be rooted in the sociocultural group, or 'traditional cleavage', the voter belonged to (Lipset & Rokkan 1967). In Britain, these groups tended to be defined by

class cleavages (Butler & Stokes 1969). As such, partisan identity would function as a long-term filter through which voters experience political events that skews their evaluation in favour of 'their' party. An alternative to this social-psychological perspective is the idea that partisanship is the product of a 'running tally' of party performance that voters continually update, allocating partisan loyalty to the party they regard as having performed the best overall (Fiorina 1981, Whiteley et al. 2016). The latter conception of partisanship is more accommodating of the fact that partisan identities are not always stable (Dalton 2000), though there remains evidence that a more enduring form of partisanship still has a part to play in electoral decision-making (Bartels 2002). The underlying argument that partisanship, defined as a durable inclination towards a particular party that is robust to shorter-term influences, retains explanatory power over voter choice (Bartels 2002, Bartle & Bellucci 2009). Past experience of a party and previous voting decisions could cumulate into a favourable bias towards a party that, while not as rigid as classical conceptions of partisan identity, is nonetheless resilient to short-term stimulus (Converse & Pierce 1985).

Bringing partisanship to bear on the matter of leader change, it might be expected that partisan voters will be biased towards leaders belonging to 'their' party (Daoust et al. 2021, Gidengil 2013), meaning that, after leader change, they will like the new leader just as they much as they liked the previous leader. Equally, voters who are committed to a different party will dislike the new leader simply because that leader belongs to the rival party, discounting any other qualities the leader might possess. Research into partisan schema has suggested that those who rely on knowledge of partisanship tend to show a 'consistency bias', dismissing information that does not conform with their expectations for that party (Lodge & Hamill 1986). Similarly, voters have been shown to disregard evidence that the government has performed poorly if they identify with the governing party (Tilley & Hobolt 2011).

In the same vein, voters might discount unappealing attributes of a new leader if they identify with that leader's party, or discount likeable attributes of a new leader if they identify with another party. Within the literature on leader effects, there is evidence that partisanship matters. It has been found that voters apply partisan stereo-

typing to leaders, whereby they allow the party label of the leader to influence their opinions (Bittner 2011, 2015). This could suggest a tendency among voters to judge new leaders on the same terms as their predecessor because both leaders belong to the same party. Lobo (2015) shows that non-partisan voters are more susceptible to leader-based voting than partisan voters, suggesting that partisans stay loyal to their party, while other work has found that the influence of leaders on voter decision-making has grown in line with declining mass partisanship (Garzia et al. 2022). The implication is that those who feel attached to a particular party are less likely to be influenced by how they feel about the party leaders. Extrapolating from this point, it seems possible that such voters apply a filter when updating their perceptions of party leaders, whereby their partisan identity prevents them from changing their opinion so much that it would call into question their partisan loyalty. Given that partisanship is not generally malleable, the path of least resistance for partisan voters would be to view the new leader through the same perceptual filter as the preceding one.

Hypothesis 6.5 Partisans (and opposition partisans) will be less likely to change their evaluation of a party's leader after leader change

Among studies investigating the drivers of partisanship, it has been suggested that the long-term values held by voters may be more likely to shape, rather than be shaped by, their party identification (Evans & Neundorf 2020). This implies that attitudinal predispositions should also have a bearing on how responsive individual voters are to leader change. Research into politically extreme attitudes suggests that voters who hold extreme opinions tend to show higher levels of dogmatism, which causes more inflexible belief systems (Toner et al. 2013). This has been found to apply to extreme conservatives (Toner et al. 2013), but more recent research suggests that extreme liberals also tend towards dogmatism (Harris & Van Bavel 2021). The effects of extremism also seem to extend to how voters perceive party leaders, which is evident from the finding that more ideologically extreme individuals are less likely to favour a party whose leader is not their favourite (Daoust et al. 2021). These findings motivate the hypothesis that voters who possess more extreme political attitudes will be resistant to change their evaluation of either leader or party as a result of leader change.

Hypothesis 6.6 Voters with more extreme attitudes will be less likely to change their evaluation of a party's leader after leader change

6.3 Analysing individual responses to leader change

6.3.1 Data and case selection

To investigate how voters react to leader change on an individual level, the British Election Study (BES) internet panel survey is analysed (Fieldhouse et al. 2023). This is a valuable data source for this research because it surveys a considerable sample of individual British voters across multiple waves, allowing for longitudinal analysis of a range of political and personal variables. Given that this analysis is interested in the impact of leader change on individuals, the longitudinal dimension is critical in providing data on within-person attitudes pre- and post-leader change. Data that repeatedly resamples cross-sections of the population at successive periods does not share this advantage. The BES data is also particularly well suited to the analysis of leader change because the timing of its data collection waves are not exclusively centred around elections, allowing observation of respondents at time points more closely before and after the occurrences of leader change than would be possible in surveys that revolve strictly around elections.

The analysis in this chapter focuses on four recent leader changes in British politics. Two occurred within the Labour party – Ed Miliband to Jeremy Corbyn in 2015 and Jeremy Corbyn to Keir Starmer in 2020 – and two within the Conservative party – David Cameron to Theresa May in 2016 and Theresa May to Boris Johnson in 2019. The analysis does not consider how voter attitudes towards leaders and parties evolve between waves where no leader change has occurred, although previous research has indicated that voter evaluations of a party's leader are less stable when the party has changed its leader (Andersen 2020).

The choice of leader change cases in this study is important because the analysis aims to explore how individual factors might suppress the extent to which voters react to leader change at all. This would be difficult to assess by looking at leader changes

where the two leaders are highly similar, as the results could be influenced by voters failing to update their perceptions simply because they recognise that the new leader is much the same as the predecessor. However, the leader changes selected for this study provide something of a natural experiment because they expose voters to leader changes that defy consistency of opinion.

Ed Miliband and Jeremy Corbyn provide a clear point of contrast because, although Miliband had attempted to shift Labour away from the moderate trappings of New Labour, he had struggled to fully disassociate from it whereas Corbyn provided an unambiguous commitment to socialist values (Edwards & Beech 2016). Miliband's communication style was also regarded as technical and unengaging (Dorey & Denham 2016), while Corbyn was able to convey greater accessibility and energy in public appearances (Dorey 2017). Following Corbyn, Keir Starmer changed course from much of what had defined Corbyn's leadership, advancing a more moderate perspective and competing on managerial competence over bold policy positioning (Goes 2021). For the Conservatives, polling evidence suggests that voters regarded Theresa May as less charismatic and less of a 'natural leader' than predecessor David Cameron (Smith 2016). The Cameron-to-May handover also presents a rare (in mainstream British parties) instance of a switch from a male to a female leader. Given that voters have been observed to perceive leaders differently on the basis of gender (Hayes & McAllister 1997, Kosiara-Pedersen & Hansen 2015), this leader change is less likely to be regarded as a transition between two similar leaders by a significant portion of the electorate. The subsequent transition from Theresa May to Boris Johnson then presented voters with a switch from a leader who had supported Remain in the EU referendum to a prominent Leave campaigner. Johnson's leadership style was also more overtly populist than May's (Alexandre-Collier 2022). Overall, focussing on the impact of these leader transitions should restrict the potential that observed failure by voters to update their perceptions of leaders results from the similarity of the leaders rather than the personal characteristics of the voters themselves.

6.3.2 The conversion of changes in leader evaluation to party evaluation

The first step in the analysis is to assess how changes in voters' feelings towards leaders following leader change translate into changes in their rating of the party. To do this, the analysis focuses on the change in BES participant responses between survey waves 4 and 7 for Miliband to Corbyn, 7 and 10 for Cameron to May, 16 and 17 for May to Johnson, and 17 and 20 for Corbyn to Starmer. These waves were selected because they were the closest pre and post waves to each leader change, once election-centred waves (those occurring during campaigns or in the immediate aftermath of elections) were discounted. Election waves are dropped because they are less likely to reflect the 'day-to-day' impressions of voters, which could be skewed by campaign effects or election outcomes. The resulting data can viewed as a series of two-wave panels enveloping each leader change. Because the topic of interest is how respondent attitudes change in reaction to leader change, the variables are first-differenced, which means that each respondent only appears as one record per panel (the first observation is dropped as a result of the differencing). These panels are then stacked into a single dataset, meaning that the same respondent can technically appear in the analysis up to four times, once for each leader change, providing they responded to the relevant questions in all the necessary waves.

The basic relationship between change in leader and party evaluation is plotted in Figure 6.1. Jitter has been applied to the data points to prevent complete overlap and a cubic spline has been fitted to the data, which allows the visualised relationship to follow a non-linear path. The results appear confirmatory of Hypothesis 6.1, but more so among voters who increase their evaluation of the leader and less among those who prefer the previous leader. The plot suggests that, among voters who positively change their evaluation of the leader, their party evaluation rises in a broadly linear fashion such that if a voter awards an additional 10 points to a new leader they tend to award the party approximately five more points. This suggests a conversion rate of around 50%, meaning voters award parties half a point when they like the new leader a whole point more than the predecessor. However, negative changes in voter evaluation of

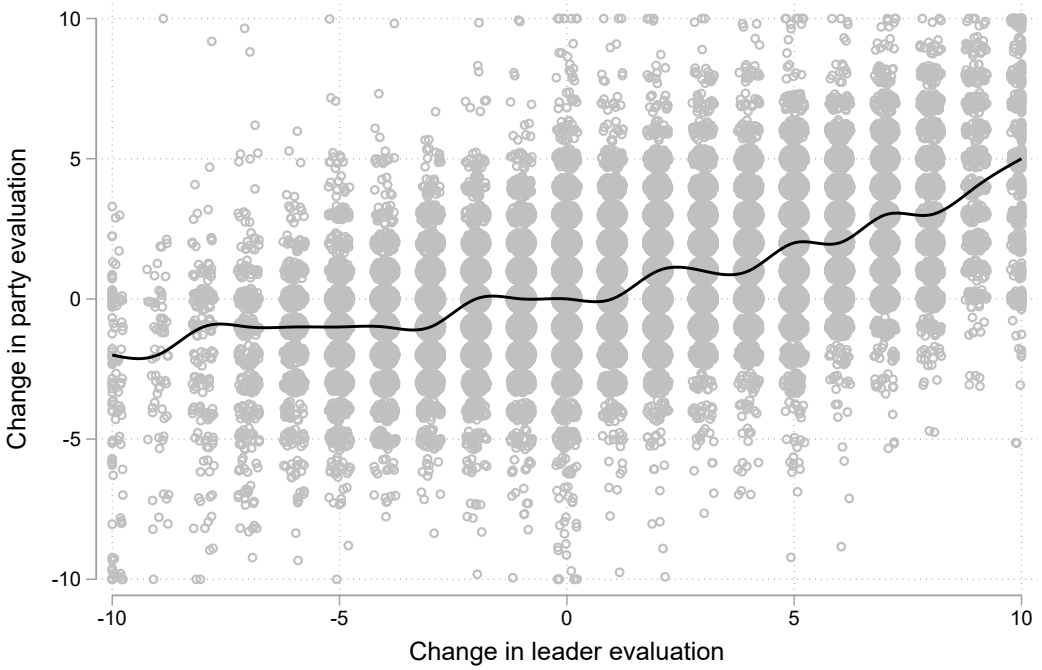

Figure 6.1: The relationship between changes in voters' leader evaluation scores on their evaluation of the party following leader change.

NOTE: To measure evaluations of both the parties and their leaders, the British Election Study asked respondents to rate each party/leader on a scale of 0-10. As a result, the measures of change plotted here range from from -10 (where a respondent goes from highly liking to highly disliking a leader/party) to 10 (where a respondent goes from highly disliking to highly liking a leader/party).

leaders seem less impactful on party scores. The line is flatter for cases where the voter likes the new leader less than their predecessor, indicating a positivity bias.

This positivity bias presents an intriguing theoretical question. Evidence of a positivity bias in voter reasoning was also identified by Aarts & Blais (2011), who found that positive evaluations of parties and party leaders have a greater impact on vote choice than negative evaluations (see also Aaldering 2018, Aaldering et al. 2018). They attribute this finding to the fact that elections are configured to select preferred candidates or parties rather than punish disliked candidates or parties (Aarts & Blais 2011). As such, there could be political reasons why positive information carries more weight for voters when updating their perceptions of parties. However, there is another potential explanation that could be considered when looking at reactions to leader change.

It is possible that voters who dislike a new leader will tend to regard that leader as less competent or electorally appealing than the predecessor and will therefore assume the new leader's leadership career will be short-lived. These voters will therefore maintain their previous view of the party because they regard the new leader as a temporary nuisance. When voters have a more favourable view of a new leader, on the other hand, they are more likely to assume that the leader is primed to do a better job and will therefore occupy the role for a long time. Accordingly, these voters will associate that leader with the party more readily. It has been suggested that the linkage between party and leader evaluations is weakest at the beginning of a leadership but strengthens over time (Bridgewater 2023). However, a possibility raised by this analysis is that the initial link could be weaker when the new leader is more disliked but stronger for new leaders who are more highly regarded.

To further investigate the linkage between voter shifts in leader and party evaluation following leader change, Table 6.1 presents an OLS model where change in party evaluation is the dependent variable and change in leader evaluation is the main independent variable (the fact that these variables represent change since the previous wave is denoted by Δ). This first-difference estimation technique means that unobserved heterogeneity at the respondent level is controlled for (Andreß et al. 2013). To approximate the non-linear relationship seen in Figure 6.1, the regression incorporates a quadratic term for the change in leader evaluation. Other predictors of the dependent variable are also included in the regression. These are whether the party has gained or lost ownership of that voter's most important issue since the previous wave, in order to reflect changes in the voter's perception of the party's competence (Clarke et al. 2004). Changes in the size of the gap between the voter's Left-Right positioning of themselves and their assessment of the party's Left-Right positioning (both measured on a scale of 0-10) are also included, to account for the spatial dimension of voter choice. In addition, a dummy variable representing each case of leader change under analysis (omitting the Labour change from Jeremy Corbyn to Keir Starmer as the reference category) are included, along with an interaction of each of these cases with the leader evaluation variable. These variables are included to control for potential case-level differences in

how voters adjusted their party evaluations following leader change and the interactions account for the possibility that voters converted changes in their leader evaluations into their party evaluations to a different extent for specific leader change instances.

The results presented in Table 6.1 suggest that, as expected, there is a positive relationship between change in leader evaluation and party evaluation with a coefficient of 0.26, which the significant quadratic term suggests is nonlinear. This broadly conforms with Figure 6.1. Moreover, if voters perceive that the ideological distance between themselves and the party has grown or if they regard the party as no longer the most capable of handling the issue they regard as most important, they reduce the score allocated to that party. If the voter thinks the party is most capable of handling their most important issue, having not thought so previously, then they tend to like the party more. The coefficients measuring the effect of the different leader change cases suggest that respondents were more likely to increase support for the Conservatives following the switch from David Cameron to Theresa May and Theresa May to Boris Johnson than they were to increase support for Labour following either of their leader changes. This could be suggestive of the possibility that voters are more active in updating their perceptions of governing parties. The interaction effects imply only minor (based on the small coefficient sizes) differences between the cases in terms of the slope in the relationship between changes in leader evaluation and party evaluation.

6.3.3 Leader change response pathways

Having observed the degree to which voters tend to translate changes in their perception of leaders into their party evaluations following leader change, this analysis turns to those within the electorate who might subvert this trend. These voters represent an important pocket of the electorate, as their reactions will undermine the impact of leader change and studying them has potential to yield important insights into how perceptual filters influence voter responsiveness to new political developments like leader change. To identify these voters, the BES respondents were categorised into six mutually exclusive groups, designed to reflect the cognitive pathways voters might have pursued in their response to the four leader changes under analysis.

Table 6.1: OLS regression model of change in British Election Study respondents' party evaluations following leader change

	Dependent variable:
	ΔVoter's party evaluation
ΔLeader evaluation	0.261***
	(0.005)
ΔLeader evaluation^2	0.008***
	(0.001)
ΔIdeological gap	-0.115***
	(0.005)
Lost most important issue	-0.429***
	(0.044)
Gained most important issue	0.412***
	(0.025)
Cameron to May	0.061***
(ref = Corbyn to Starmer)	(0.019)
May to Johnson	0.358***
(ref = Corbyn to Starmer)	(0.017)
Miliband to Corbyn	-0.105***
(ref = Corbyn to Starmer)	(0.021)
ΔLeader evaluation * C to M	0.034***
(ref = ΔLeader evaluation * C to S)	(0.008)
ΔLeader evaluation * M to J	0.015**
(ref = ΔLeader evaluation * C to S)	(0.006)
ΔLeader evaluation * M to C	0.038***
(ref = ΔLeader evaluation * C to S)	(0.009)
N (observations)	34,948
N (respondents)	23,030
R^2	0.384
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

The response pathways are as follows:

- **Leader-led reaction:** Voters who update their opinion of the party leader following leader change and update their evaluation of the party in the same direction. The change in opinion towards the leader must be either greater than or equal to the change in opinion towards the party. These voters are consistent with the general positive relationship between change in leader and party evaluation identified in the earlier analysis.

- **Party-led reaction:** Voters who update their opinion of both the party and its leader in the same direction following leader change, however the change in party evaluation is larger than the change in leader evaluation. It is less plausible that the opinion of these voters was directly influenced by leader change, considering their view of the party experienced a greater impact.

- **No reaction (complete):** Voters who do not update their opinion of either the leader or the leader's party following leader change. Their evaluation scores for the party are the same as they were in the previous wave, prior to the leader change. For these voters, there is no evidence of leader change having any impact on their perceptions

- **No reaction (partial):** Voters who do not update their opinion of the leader following leader change but do change their evaluation of the party. These voters regard the new leader in the same terms as the predecessor, but something else seems to have caused them to amend their view of the party. For these voters, there is no evidence of leader change having any impact on their perceptions.

- **Disconnected reaction:** Voters who update their opinion of the leader, but do not update their opinion of the party in the same direction. This could be because they do not update their opinion of the party at all, or because the change in their evaluation of the party goes in the opposite direction to the change in their evaluation of the leader. These voters go against the general relationship identified in the earlier analysis.

Figure 6.2 reveals the proportion of respondents who pursued each pathway for each of the leader changes under analysis. Unsurprisingly, a sizeable contingent of voters converted changes in their leader evaluation into commensurate changes in party evaluation across all four cases. The prevalence of such respondents ranges from 31.3 to 44.5%. A small share of the respondents also shifted both their party and leader scores in the same direction, but their party perceptions moved to a greater extent. Given that the party perception seems to exert a greater effect than the leader evaluation for

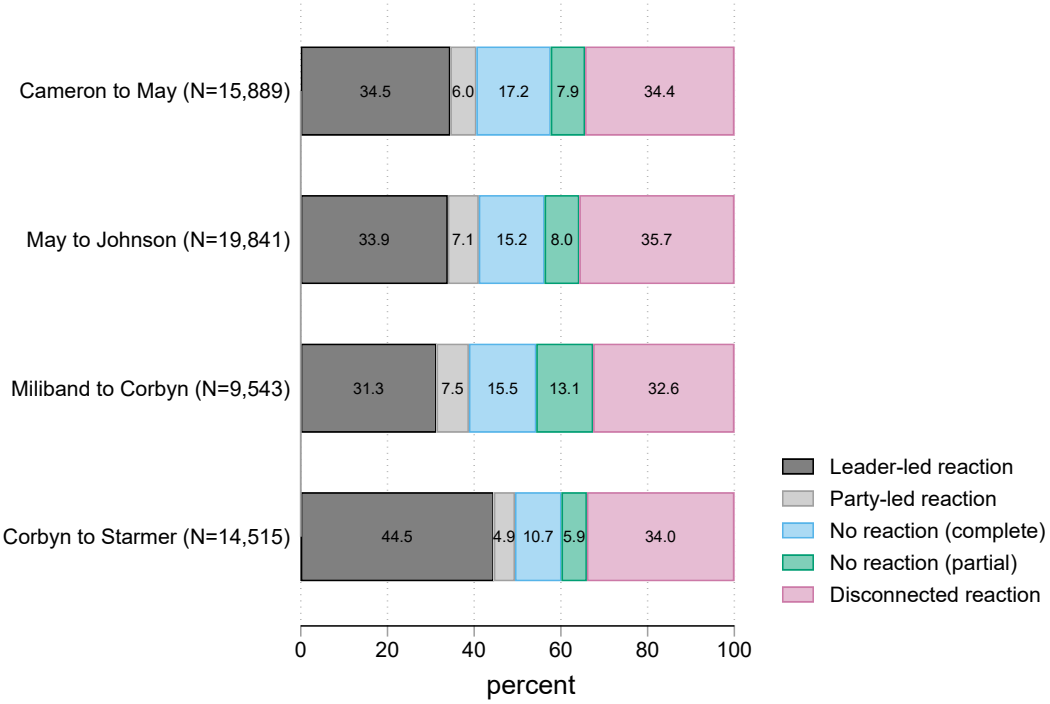

Figure 6.2: The proportion of respondents allocated to each leader change response pathway

NOTE: The criteria for allocating respondents to each response pathway are set out on pages 140-141.

these voters, it is less clear that the shift in attitude can be attributed to the leader change in this minority of cases.

A noteworthy contingent of voters did not react to leader change by updating their perception of the party leader at all. If the two categories reflecting voters who did not react to leader change are combined, these respondents make up between 16.6% and 28.6%. Moreover, the majority of these respondents occupy the 'No reaction (complete)' category, meaning not only did they fail to update their perception of the party leader but they maintained the same attitude towards the party itself as well. This is particularly interesting considering that the responses reflect attitudes before and after leader changes that were likely to inspire different reactions by introducing distinctive new leaders.

Another implication of Figure 6.2 is that many voters who updated their view of

the leader did not translate this into their party evaluation at all. They either kept their party evaluation the same or shifted it in the opposite direction. In some cases, these voters outnumber those who exhibited a leader-led reaction following the leader change. This implies that many voters are comfortable adapting their attitudes to the leader without converting these shifts into their party appraisals. This indicates the limitations of leader change as a means to impact voter perceptions of parties: some voters will not convert their perceptions of the leader into their party evaluations, while others will fail to update their perceptions altogether.

To attain insight into what might explain which pathway voters choose when processing leader change, it is useful to look at the role played by individual characteristics in determining a voter's reaction. To this end, the pathways are modelled as the dependent variable in a multinomial logistic regression. To test how different voter characteristics influence their response to leader change, the respondents' personal characteristics are modelled as independent variables. The respondent characteristics included are strength of partisanship (including non-partisanship and partisanship towards an opposing party), education level, extremism, political attentiveness, age and gender (coding of these variables can be reviewed in Appendix E). Education level, gender and age are taken from the post-leader change wave (t), whereas the other variables are taken from the pre-leader change wave (t–1). This is to ensure that these variables reflect the attitudes of the respondent when they experienced the leader change and cannot be stymied by the possibility that the leader change itself led to changes in the respondents' answers (via reverse causation).

Multinomial regression is similar to common logistic regression where the dependent variable is binary, except that it allows for more than two nominal outcomes. To aid interpretation, marginal predictions are estimated from the model and plotted in Figure 6.3. Interpretation of multinomial regression in tabular form can be misleading because the coefficients are dependent on an outcome category selected as a baseline (Paolino 2021).

Hypothesis 6.2 anticipated that voters with higher levels of education would be more likely to update their party leader evaluation without translating this into a

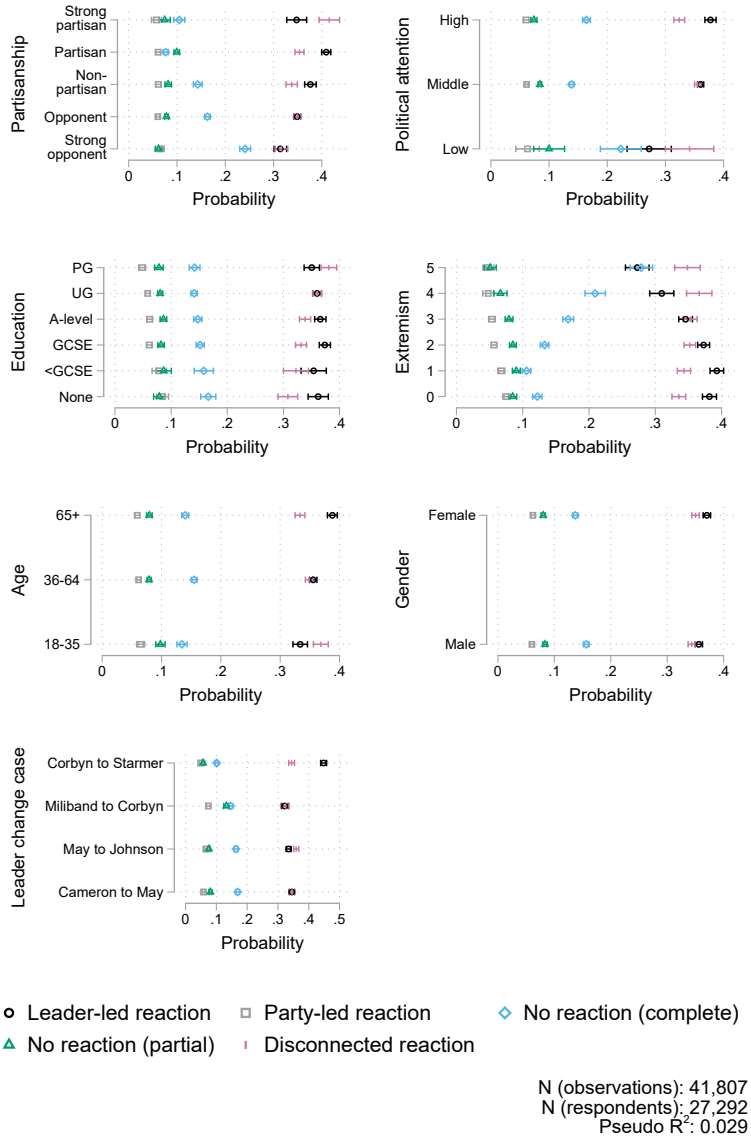

Figure 6.3: Marginal effects from multinomial logistic regression predicting the response pathways pursued by survey respondents following leader change depending on voter characteristics and leader change case

NOTE: The criteria for allocating respondents to each response pathway are set out on pages 140-141.

Political attention - The British Election Study measures political attention on a scale of 0-10. In this analysis, this variable is coded into three categories: low attention (0-1), middle attention (2-8) and high attention (9-10).

Extremism - The measure of extremism is based on responses to a British Election Study question where respondents are asked to position themselves ideologically on a scale of 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). For this analysis, those who responded with five are coded as zero (not extreme), then the variable increases by one with each step above or below zero so that those who originally responded with 0 or 10 are assigned a value of five (highly extreme).

commensurate change in their party evaluation. Figure 6.3 offers moderate support for this hypothesis, showing that higher levels of education are associated with a subtle increase in the probability of following the disconnected reaction pathway.

More senior voters appear slightly more likely than younger voters to translate change in their attitudes towards leaders into their party evaluation, which is the reverse of Hypothesis 6.3. This echoes other research which unexpectedly finds that more senior voters are more likely to be leader-inclined when choosing which party to vote for than younger generations (Quinlan & McAllister 2022). Meanwhile, younger voters seem to show greater independence in their attitudes towards parties and their leaders. The effect here is small in scale, but questions the received wisdom that younger voters interpret politics through a more individualised lens than more senior voters, since these voters seem more comfortable holding differing views of leaders and parties.

Hypothesis 6.4 is not supported by the results of the multinomial regression. Those who pay higher attention to politics are actually more likely to exhibit a leader-led reaction to leader change, whereas those with lower attention to politics appear more likely to exhibit a disconnected reaction or fail to react to the leader change in terms of updating either their leader or party evaluation. This is likely an outcome of a lack of information gathering and processing by low attention voters, causing them to accrue insufficient new information about the leader change to meaningfully update their perceptions (Bartels 1993). As a result, these voters instead rely on their prior assumptions about what a leader of that party will be like and fail to update their opinion despite the change in party leadership. High attention voters, on the other hand, might be more fully aware of the proposed direction that the new leader intends to take the party and therefore update their perception of the party in response to leader change more readily.

For the effects of partisanship, the results suggest that the probability of failing to change evaluation of either leader or party is higher amongst non-partisans and, particularly, those who strongly identify with an opposing party. Evidence for Hypothesis 6.5 is therefore mixed. Partisanship does appear to bias voters' reaction to leader change, but only among voters who do not associate with the party that has undergone leader

change. It appears that rival partisans dismiss new leaders of parties they are opposed to, thereby keeping their attitude towards both that party and its leader consistent. For example, a Labour loyalist might conclude that 'all Conservative leaders are the same' and preserve their existing opinions. However, those who identify with the party undergoing leader change do allow their attitudes towards the new leader to adapt and to influence their feelings towards the party. This could be because these voters are invested in the party and therefore are inclined to react when the composition of that party is altered through leader change. Non-partisans sit roughly between partisans and anti-partisans in their readiness to update their attitudes in reaction to leader change. It is notable that, for strong partisans, a disconnected reaction is the most probable outcome. There are two possible explanations for this. Strong partisans will generally have feelings towards the party that approach the upper bounds of the party evaluation scale, leaving less room for a more likeable new leader to positively impact these voters' perceptions of the party. Equally, it could be that strongly partisan voters are so stable in their party preference that they feel able to evaluate short-term factors like leaders flexibly without this disturbing their underlying devotion to the party.

Extremism also appears to influence how likely a voter is to change their attitudes following leader change. As a voter's level of ideological extremism increases, so too does the probability that they will fail to change their opinion of either leader or party. This supports the theory, posited by Hypothesis 6.6, that more extreme political values lead to less attitudinal flexibility and a greater reluctance to update opinions in light of new information. By contrast, more moderately inclined voters show a greater probability of both updating their perceptions of a leader and translating this into their perceptions of the party.*

*In addition to the variables discussed here, the four cases of leader change were included in the multinomial model as dummy variables. Voters appear especially likely to link shifts in the leader evaluation to their party evaluation in the case of the Labour transition from Jeremy Corbyn to Keir Starmer, and more likely to change their evaluation of the party but not its leader - following the 'No reaction (partial)' pathway - for the Labour transition from Ed Miliband to Jeremy Corbyn. As a final observation arising from the results of Figure 6.3, there is no strong evidence that gender has a meaningful impact on the way in which a voter amends their views in response to leader change.

6.4 Discussion and concluding remarks

Overall, this analysis has revealed that voters do convert changes in how they feel about leaders following leader change into how they regard parties. Moreover, it has found evidence of a positivity bias, whereby warmer feelings towards the new leader are translated more readily into a positive shift in party evaluation than colder feelings. However, it finds that this relationship is contingent on various individual voter characteristics. Level of education appears to affect the likelihood that changes in leader evaluation are converted into party evaluation, with higher levels of education reducing this linkage. Younger voters also convert changes in their leader evaluations less readily into their party evaluations. Importantly, a noteworthy contingent of voters are less likely to amend their attitudes towards leaders to begin with, even after a new and distinctive leader has been installed. This is particularly likely among those who strongly identify with a rival party, pay little attention to politics or harbour more extreme attitudes. These results have clear implications for the study of leader change and understandings of how voters cognitively process new political developments. They reveal the information lost by focussing exclusively on aggregated party support data, which obscures the extent to which leader change might be more or less impactful among different pockets of the electorate.

The findings discussed here have clear implications for debates surrounding the endogeneity of two key predictors of voter choice: partisanship and leader evaluation. The question of how factors like party preference and leader evaluation are causally interlinked hangs over much of the research seeking to draw a connection between voter perceptions of leaders and their electoral choices (Evans & Chzhen 2016, Lobo & Curtice 2015*a*, Whiteley et al. 2016). The evidence presented in this chapter leverages the 'exogenous shock' (Garzia 2017) created by leader change to get a clearer sense of how prior partisan ties can shape subsequent leader evaluations. While there is evidence that, in the age of personalised politics, leaders may in fact function as drivers of partisanship (Garzia 2013), the findings of this chapter preserve an important role for partisanship as a filter to how voters perceive leaders. However, rather than party

identifiers failing to alter their attitudes towards new leaders of 'their' party, it is those who identify with an opposing party that seem to apply this kind of motivated reasoning in their reaction to leader change. These rival partisans are less likely to judge a new leader from the opposing party afresh, instead showing greater likelihood of hanging on to their (presumably negative) feelings towards the previous leader. This finding suggests that if a voter feels closer to an opposing party at the point of leader change, this attitude will condition their reaction to the new leader, in line with Converse's ideas about the influence of 'strong attitudes' reducing the extent to which people update their opinions (Converse 1995). The results also highlight the importance of considering interrelationships between two of the key independent variables – partisanship and leader evaluation – that form the basis of some valence models of voter choice (Clarke et al. 2004, 2009, Whiteley et al. 2013).

The findings of this chapter also have implications for political strategy. It may be worthwhile for parties to switch to a more likeable leader as this will encourage voters to increase their evaluation of the party. Even more encouragingly, the positivity bias exhibited by voters suggests that even if some voters like the new leader less, the popularity of party will be partially insulated from this downturn as these voters are less likely to translate their negative feelings towards the leader into their perceptions of the party. However, deploying leader change as a means of winning the affection of voters who are opposed to the party will be less effective, as they are more likely to ignore the gesture altogether. Moreover, partisan identity is only one of many factors identified in this chapter as characteristics which undermine the overall efficacy of leader change as a means of securing an electoral advantage.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The proposition that leaders play an important role in how voters perceive political parties is practically a truism. Aside from the intuitive appeal of this claim, ample evidence has amassed to suggest that leaders directly impact how voters regard political parties and, even if this is cast in doubt, the act of leading a party means that leaders at least play a part in shaping their parties' image indirectly (Aarts et al. 2011, Bean & Mughan 1989, Bittner 2011, Costa & da Silva 2015, Garzia 2014, Garzia et al. 2022, Karvonen 2010, King 2002, Lobo & Curtice 2015*b*, McAllister 2007, Mughan 2000). Despite the clear importance of leaders and a robust body of research investigating their effects on voter choice in general, relatively little work has explored how voters react when party leader change occurs. Addressing this gap has been the core goal of this thesis.

To bring the thesis to a close, this chapter provides an overview of the preceding chapters before highlighting the key implications of their findings. It then considers how the findings of this work could be built on by future research.

7.1 Summary of chapters

The thesis began in Chapter 2 by identifying the need for data that would provide across-time information about party leaders with as much frequency as possible. Such data would facilitate study into leader change by illuminating how variation from one

leader to the next impacts voter perceptions. Identifying ideological positioning on the traditional Left-Right scale as a key source of variation between leaders, the chapter described the implementation of a quantitative text analysis modelling strategy (Wordscores) to produce yearly ideological estimates of UK Conservative and Labour party leaders from 1971-2023. This data generation was made possible by the ideologically-loaded textual data derived from leader speeches delivered annually at UK party conferences (Atkins & Finlayson n.d.). The text analysis was configured to scale these speeches on the Left-Right spectrum by anchoring the estimation to party manifestos sourced from the Manifesto Project, whose RILE indicator served as the foundation for the newly generated scores (Volkens et al. 2020). The chapter went on to discuss validation checks performed on this data and, while acknowledging limitations (particularly with regards to the questionable estimate for the position of Liz Truss, whose leadership of the Conservative party in 2022 was generally unconventional), argued that the data was appropriate for the needs of this research topic.

Chapter 3 then began to explore the impacts of leader change on party support. The aim of this chapter was to clarify whether leader change is generally beneficial to parties and, if so, assess the magnitude of this impact. Analysing the immediate impact of leader change using monthly party support data (Bailey et al. 2021, YouGov 2023), it was found that leader change does generally have a positive impact. Having identified the need for an objective yardstick against which to measure the impact of leader change, this analysis incorporated other qualitative events generally regarded as party support boosters to offer points of comparison. As a result, it was possible to conclude that the instant impact of leader change is indeed comparable with other qualitative sources of poll bounces, including electoral honeymoons and rally effects (although rally effects following major international crises were found to exceed the impact of leader change). Given that leader change shifts party support, this can be taken as evidence that party leaders exert, to at least some degree, an exogenous and direct effect on how voters perceive parties. This analysis was followed by a descriptive study of monthly party support data converted into an event history format, examining how much time tends to elapse after leader change before a party spends two consecutive

months polling lower than its average over the predecessor's final year. This analysis indicated that the benefits of leader change are often short-lived. This was taken to suggest that while leader change is initially beneficial to parties, new leaders are likely to lose their automatic advantage as the realities of leadership and the 'costs of governing' (Green & Jennings 2017) accumulate.

Building on these findings, Chapter 4 sought to explore factors that moderate the impact of leader change, both in terms of its initial magnitude of impact and longevity. This involved bringing together ideas about the factors that could moderate the effect of leader change from disparate sources, including older literature (Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994, Stewart & Carty 1993) alongside newer work on the influence of involving party members in the leader selection procedure (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015). In analysing moderating factors, this chapter also sought to shed some light on the mechanisms through which leader change tends to boost party support. The chapter found that the benefits of leader change are likely to be in part due to the removal of predecessors and their associated failings (the predecessor-removal mechanism), drawing parallels with the theoretical insights of the 'costs of governing' literature (Green & Jennings 2012, 2017). The evidence supported this conclusion by suggesting that leader change is more impactful when the predecessor had presided over a greater party support deficit and when they had served for a particularly lengthy or brief tenure.

As well as considering the role of predecessor removal in driving the effects of leader change, Chapter 4 also proposed that the process of leader change might serve to actively enhance the appeal of parties (the active appeal enhancement mechanism). The results suggested that new leaders who express more moderate ideological positions tend to instil bigger boosts in party support. The chapter further found evidence that the benefits of leader change seem to last longer when the new leader expresses a more moderate position suggesting that, when leader change brings about a deeper change in the party, it is more likely to have sustained benefits. Surprisingly, no evidence was found to suggest that incorporation of party members into the leader selection procedure increases the benefits of leader change. Given that prior work finds that

this does tend to have a short-term impact on the effects of leader change (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015), it was suggested that this might be the result of idiosyncrasies of the British case, although this is not the first study to reach null findings with regards to the benefits of inclusive leader selection (Wauters & Kern 2021).

A key limitation of Chapter 4 was that, while it found evidence that the rise of more moderate new leaders can enhance the impact of leader change, it left open the question of whether established leaders could reap the same rewards by moderating their own positions during the course of their leadership. Motivated by this question, Chapter 5 examined whether voters react differently to ideological shifts depending on whether the leader is new or established. To do this, the full annual leader ideology dataset discussed in Chapter 2 was studied in conjunction with party support data observed at yearly intervals. The results suggested that established leaders are unable to benefit from ideological moderation in the same way as new leaders, likely because voters already associate them with their previous positions and therefore receive attempts at ideological repositioning with either ignorance or scepticism. Therefore, greater capacity to enhance appeal through ideological repositioning emerges as a key indirect and time-limited benefit of leader change. However, Chapter 5 further analysed the ideological data to examine leader behaviour, testing whether new leaders behave substantively differently to established leaders. The analysis suggested that new leaders do tend to make bigger ideological shifts than established leaders, but that this is not consistent and that they are not more likely to shift towards more moderate, as opposed to more extreme, positions. This likely stems from the constraints that even new leaders face in terms of keeping their parties and core supporters satisfied and avoiding internal party ruptures.

The final empirical chapter presented in this thesis (Chapter 6) shifted emphasis from aggregate voter behaviour to how voters react to the occurrence of leader change on an individual level. It sought to identify how attitudinal predispositions, arising out of voters' personal characteristics, can inhibit the extent to which shifts in perceptions of leaders are converted into party evaluations following leader change. Analysis of

pre- and post-leader change waves of the British Election Study internet panel survey (Fieldhouse et al. 2023) found that there is a positive relationship between changes in party and leader evaluation on an individual level following leader change. Moreover, there was evidence of a positivity bias, whereby individuals who like the new leader less do not punish the party as much as those who like the new leader more reward the party. It was, however, found that more highly educated voters are less likely to link shifts in their attitudes towards leaders with their party evaluations and, further, that those who identify with a rival party or hold more ideologically extreme values are less likely to respond to leader change at all, neither by updating their view of the party nor its leader. The same applied amongst those who pay little attention to politics. These results imply that, despite the general connection between leader and party evaluations, not all voters respond to leader change in the same way, which has clear implications for the capacity of leader change to impact how voters feel about parties.

7.2 How does leader change impact voter perceptions of parties?

The overriding question driving this project concerned how leader change impacts voter perception of parties in Britain. This was partly motivated by the fact that, while leaders are generally regarded as significant influencers of party support, many studies that have previously addressed the topic of leader change often find its impact somewhat muted (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stewart & Carty 1993). Even some of the long-standing work arguing that leader change does have a verifiable positive impact on public opinion presents inconsistent results, often indicating that leader change affects voter perceptions of a party's leader but not so much the party itself (Stark 1996). In theory, leader change should attract public interest and media attention, prompting voters to reconsider their political preferences (Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Stark 1996), and there are compelling reasons to believe that new leaders will be more generally likeable than

their predecessors, since they represent 'fresh faces' who have not yet succumbed to failure in the eyes of the electorate (Brown 1992, Cowley 2022, Heppell & McMeeking 2021, Nadeau & Mendelsohn 1994, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024, Stark 1996, Stewart & Carty 1993, Wells 2016). The costs of governing literature suggests that time in office involves a constant accumulation of blame, whereas new governments enjoy a comparatively clean slate (Green & Jennings 2012, 2017). Extending this logic to party leaders gives rise to the expectation that a party should enjoy a honeymoon period after changing its leader, so why do the effects of leader change often seem so limited?

The first stage of this research project found that leader change does tend to have an immediate positive impact on party support, further arguing that this impact can be regarded in broadly the same terms as other qualitative events generally associated with boosts in party support (Chapter 3). However, further analysis indicated myriad ways in which this effect is conditional on the favourability of moderating factors. A key implication of the findings of Chapter 4 is that the impact of leader change will be suppressed if party support is already at a healthy level or if the predecessor served for an average length tenure, since these circumstances will hamper the benefits of predecessor removal. In addition, leader change will be less beneficial if economic conditions promote loyalty to an opposing party or if the party is in opposition. Since active appeal enhancement is another means by which parties can benefit from leader change, leader change is also less impactful if the new leader fails to stand for a more moderate position than the outgoing leader. It is therefore clear that leader change is no panacea for a party seeking a poll bounce. Furthermore, event history analysis identified that parties often revert to their previous popularity levels relatively quickly, which could explain why leader change has not been found to have a reliably positive influence on election results within past research (Cozza & Somer-Topcu 2021, Pedersen & Schumacher 2015, Somer-Topcu & Weitzel 2024).

Leader change seems to have a particularly robust chance of boosting party support, and sustaining this advantage long-term, if the new leader expresses a more moderate ideological position than their predecessor. This suggests that while superficial advan-

tages arising from leader change, including removal of the previous leader, eventually wear off as the party reverts to business-as-usual, leaders who give voters a more substantive reason to maintain their support for the party will reap more enduring rewards. This ties in with literature suggesting that the influence of leaders could stem from their indirect effect on the image of their parties (King 2002). Because leaders who offer more moderate positions are more likely to reshape the ideological appeal of the wider party, they unlock benefits that are not accessible for continuity leaders who offer only a surface-level change. That said, it is equally possible that moderation makes leaders more appealing on a personal level, as moderate positions are associated with greater likeability and competence (Huber 2015, Johns & Kölln 2020).

In Chapter 5, the ability to undertake ideological moderation without running up against voter ignorance or scepticism was further found to be a unique opportunity only available to leaders at the beginning of their leadership. However, the study found that leaders often fail to take advantage of this opportunity, likely in response to factors relating to the risks of ideological repositioning in terms of intraparty stability. Therefore, leader change seems to have the indirect benefit of giving leaders more latitude in public opinion to increase their appeal through ideological repositioning, but this is not an opportunity that is willingly embraced by all new leaders. This suggests that, while leader change has the capacity to alter voters' perceptions of parties indirectly by facilitating ideological repositioning, this capacity often remains dormant because it requires the new leader to take risky action, which provides further explanation for why leader change in itself may often be limited in its impact.

A final reason why the impact of leader change on party support might be undermined concerns how voters react to leader change on an individual level, which was the focus of Chapter 6. While voters generally convert more positive appraisals of new leaders into their perceptions of the party, it was found that those who have higher education are less likely to do so. Taking education as a proxy for political sophistication, this result indicates that the more comprehensive criteria used by politically sophisticated voters when making political judgements might dilute the effect of leader change. Furthermore, some voters fail to react to leader change at all, even though the

leader has been fundamentally replaced. This is particularly likely among voters who identify with a rival party or are more politically extreme, as well as those who pay less attention to politics. The presence of such voters in the electorate means that the aggregate impact of leader change party support will be suppressed.

To sum up, this thesis attests that leader change shifts voters' perceptions of parties and indirectly alters how they respond to the actions taken by leaders in terms of ideological repositioning. By replacing the old leader, along with their accumulated 'costs of governing', and drawing public and media attention towards the party, a change of leader causes an initial lift in party support. However, any party considering leader change as a reliable trigger for a support boost must contend with the likelihood that its effect will be dependent on favourable contextual factors and on the new leader adopting a position that is more moderate than the predecessor's. Moreover, the support boost is subject to depletion over time as the new leader loses their novelty and accumulates their own governing costs, and only ideological moderation seems to slow this decline. However, ideological moderation risks stoking intraparty disputes, meaning that leader change frequently fails to yield these additional benefits because new leaders opt against rocking the boat. Equally, leader change will not impact the perceptions of all voters equally and, perhaps most pertinently, those who already hold partisan ties to a rival party are less likely to be won over by leader change. This knowledge of the manifold headwinds working against the impact of leader change illuminates why the past literature has frequently found leader change to be an underwhelming stimulant of shifts in party support, while revealing that voters are not universally unresponsive to the occurrence of leader change under the right conditions.

7.3 Additional implications

7.3.1 Theories of party change

In their influential theory of party change, Harmel & Janda (1994) suggested that a change of leader can be an instigator of wider party change, which is otherwise suppressed by a general aversion to change within party organisations. Their conception of

party change included amendments to the party's issue orientation, which bears upon the ideological positioning of leaders discussed within this thesis. Chapter 5 found that many leaders choose to avoid shifting from the ideological position of their predecessors and are no more likely to moderate the party's position than established leaders are likely to moderate their own position. This suggests that leader change on its own is not likely to be a reliable trigger for party change in terms of ideological moderation, which suggests that the characterisation of parties as change-averse organisations is valid (Harmel & Janda 1994, Panebianco 1988). However, additional evidence in Chapter 5 suggested that leaders are more likely to ideologically moderate when there are signs that the party was in decline under the predecessor. Such a result is very much consistent with Harmel and Janda's theory, since they align with Panebianco (1988) in highlighting the importance of an external performance shock occurring before parties will accept deeper changes, even in the aftermath of leader change (Harmel & Janda 1994). Data scarcity means that this finding must be qualified by acknowledgement that it was not significant when one influential case of leader change within the Labour party (from Jeremy Corbyn to Keir Starmer) was discounted. Nonetheless, given that it has such theoretical resonance, there is clearly cause to continue exploring the possibility that, when paired with a party performance shock, leader change could be a likely instigator of wider party change.

7.3.2 Partisanship and other perceptual filters

The research presented in Chapter 6 provided interesting insights into how voter characteristics can influence the way in which leader change is processed by voters. Political science research has long suggested that holding strong prior attitudes, including the partisan tendency to favour a specific party, can filter the way in which voters react to new political information (Bartle & Bellucci 2009, Campbell et al. 1960, Converse 1995, Converse & Pierce 1985). The finding that education level, ideological extremism and partisanship all increase the likelihood of voters failing to react to the stimulus of leader change suggests that enduring theories of cognitive rationalisation, whereby voters interpret new information in a way that accords with their prior views, are applicable in

the context of leader change.

Scholars have suggested that partisanship has a diminished role in influencing how voters perceive parties in the modern political landscape. Party leaders may even have a hand in shaping partisan ties, rather than partisan ties shaping how voters perceive parties (Garzia 2013, Garzia et al. 2022). Nonetheless, the findings of Chapter 6 indicate that partisanship still to some extent maintains an exogenous role in shaping how voters perceive leaders, at least amongst rival partisans at the start of a new leadership. This finding also highlights the importance of maintaining an awareness of potential endogeneity between independent variables when estimating models of party support. For example, the former BES team's valence model identified leader evaluations and partisanship as key predictors of party support (Clarke et al. 2004, 2009, Whiteley et al. 2013), but these two factors are likely to be interlinked.

7.3.3 The normative implications of political personalisation

The idea that party leaders might hold sway over the electoral decision-making of voters raises some concerning questions about the quality of modern democracy. If elections are being reduced to mere 'beauty contests' (Curtice & Hunjan 2011), the implication is that parties are no longer being evaluated on more worthy criteria like fitness to govern or proposed policy. The findings of this thesis go some way to assuaging any such fears. While leader change does appear to influence how voters regard parties to an extent, the ideological positioning of leaders seems to play a part in this calculation. Evidence that ideological orientation matters in how voters perceive leaders provides reassurance that voters are not wholly swayed by personality alone. Moreover, Chapter 6 suggested that a sizeable contingent of voters do not immediately connect changes in how they feel about party leaders with their evaluation of that party. Clearly, voters continue to apply a more varied range of criteria when evaluating parties, and are not straightforwardly manipulated by short-term shifts in a party's leadership composition. This thesis therefore aligns with prior research in attesting that the influence of leaders in voter choice does not inherently present a hazard to the functioning of democratic decision-making (Aaldering 2018, Berz 2020, Bittner 2011, Lobo & Curtice 2015*b*).

7.4 Avenues for future study

7.4.1 Beyond the major parties

The competition between the Conservative and Labour parties forms the fulcrum of politics in Britain, which is traditionally regarded as a two-party system. However, though smaller parties are not as central to British politics as they are in multiparty systems, factors like the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and the prevalence of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the House of Commons between 2015 and 2024 reveal that smaller parties are far from irrelevant. The absence of these parties in the preceding chapters is by no means intended to imply that leader change within these parties is not worthy of study, but there are reasons to regard it as an adjacent field of enquiry worthy of independent investigation.

One reason for deferring smaller parties to future research is that the theories surrounding the influence of ideological moderation explored by this thesis do not directly translate in the case of smaller parties. The largest (or 'third') party in the UK for most of the period studied by this thesis are the Liberal Democrats (known as the Liberal party until 1988). While liberal democratic values form the cornerstone of their ideology, the question of where this party sits within the wider ideological contest between Labour and the Conservatives is obscured because aspects of their values have appeared within ideological strains advanced by both the other two parties at different points (Clark 2012). The Liberal Democrats are generally regarded as occupants of a 'centrist' space somewhere between Labour and the Conservatives, usually erring towards the former until the coalition era brought them more fully to the middle ground (Dommett 2013, Meadowcroft 2000). Determining what direction (left or right) would constitute ideological moderation for the Liberal Democrats is therefore less clearcut than it is for Labour and the Conservatives. And, as with centrist parties in other democracies, the Liberal Democrats stand to gain less from ideological moderation than the major parties because they already tend to be situated nearer the median position, which means they differ in terms of the strategic options available to them when seeking to attract new support (Zur 2021). It might be that prudent ideological repositioning in

either direction could, under different contextual circumstances, be beneficial to party leaders operating outside the distinct Left-Right competition that exists between the mainstream parties.

Meanwhile, the case of the SNP serves to illustrate how different party goals could have implications for the effects of leader change. The predominant goal of Labour and the Conservatives tends to centre on winning votes and office (essentially the same goal in majoritarian electoral systems). Ideological positioning is one field in which such parties compete to achieve these aims. But parties can also be motivated by other goals, including issue representation (Harmel & Janda 1994, Strøm 1990). As a nationalist party, the primary goal of the SNP is to advocate for Scottish autonomy, which means ideology is of secondary importance (Lynch 2009). Other parties who likewise prioritise issue representation include parties like the Green party, who stress environmental values and are therefore less likely to be as ideologically adaptive as the mainstream parties.* On this point, Ferland (2020) shows that the policy-oriented nature of niche parties means that they do not adjust their position when the median voter moves away from them despite the electoral incentive to do so. Clearly, ideological trajectory following leader change cannot be expected to hold the same influence within these parties as it does for the Conservatives and Labour, meaning a different theoretical perspective would be required when formulating hypotheses concerning leader change within these parties.

Another reason why leader changes occurring outside of the major parties are likely to have different implications stems from the reduced extent to which the British public are exposed to the smaller parties. Put simply, leader change within these parties has a greater risk of going unacknowledged by voters. To illustrate this, Figure 7.1 plots the proportion of BES internet panel respondents who responded "Don't know" when asked how much they like the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat leader (Fieldhouse et al. 2023). The plot starts with Wave 1 (February-March 2014), then each subsequent

*Since 2016, the Green Party of England and Wales has been led by two people. Dual (and multi) leadership is not uncommon for smaller European parties, but its adoption by parties like the German Social Democrats suggests it could become increasingly mainstream (Campus et al. 2021, Weise 2020). Given that two leaders can possess different qualities to each other, how the findings of this thesis translate into contexts where there is dual leadership could itself be an area for future research.

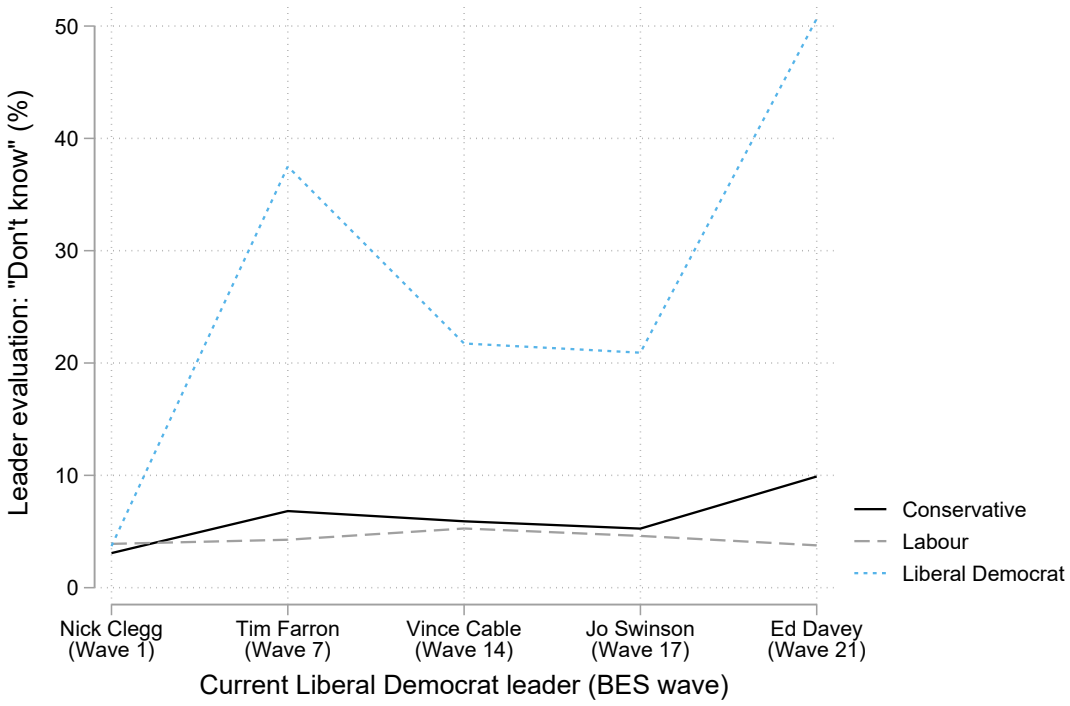

Figure 7.1: The proportion of British Election Study panel survey respondents stating they "Don't know" how much they like leader of the Liberal Democrats, Conservatives and Labour at different times

NOTE: The survey waves shown were chosen because they were the first wave in which each Liberal Democrat leader was asked about. Respondents were asked to score the leaders on a scale of 0-10, but also had the option of responding with "Don't know".

wave plotted represents the first survey fielded after the Liberal Democrats had installed a new leader. The current leader of the party is Ed Davey, who was officially elected in August 2020, making the last observation on the plot Wave 21 (May 2021).

The plot shows that when Nick Clegg was leading the party in 2014, the percentage of respondents who expressed no opinion about the Liberal Democrat leader was 3.7%, similar to the proportion who declined to evaluate the Labour or Conservative leaders (Ed Miliband and David Cameron respectively). This low figure is unsurprising, since Nick Clegg was actively serving as deputy prime minister in coalition with the Conservatives and therefore represented a key figure in British politics. What follows, however, is a sharp increase in voter apathy towards the Liberal Democrat leaders since the coalition government ended in 2015, to the point that half the respondents asked

to express an opinion about Ed Davey declined to do so. This response could possibly be because voters feel genuine inner conflict over the likeability of a leader, but what is more likely in the case of the Liberal Democrats is that a large contingent of voters are simply indifferent or unaware of who is leading the party. Evidently, smaller parties in Britain can face an uphill battle getting voters to take much note of their leaders at all, which is likely to be reflected in responses to leader changes that occur within these parties.* If a voter does not really know (or care) about the person leading a party, it is unlikely that leader change will carry the same significance as it does for mainstream parties in terms of voter perceptions. Indeed, how smaller parties might conduct a leader change in such a way that it breaks more fully into public awareness could be an area for future research.

7.4.2 Beyond Britain

Limiting the scope of this project to focus on the British case facilitated various aspects of this study. Generating the annual ideological data discussed in Chapter 2 was achievable due to the regular and consistent textual data against which to estimate leader positions. Future work on leader change would do well to incorporate other countries and parties, following the lead of works such as Cozza & Somer-Topcu (2021), Pedersen & Schumacher (2015), and Somer-Topcu & Weitzel (2024). However, constructing frequent measures for leader-specific variables, such as predecessor and successor ideological positioning, will present further challenges when the data encompasses multiple countries, as well as numerous parties and individual leaders. Focussing on the British case also enabled the use of very long-term time series polling data as well as the British Election Study panel survey. The latter is particularly valuable for the study of leader change because of its panel structure and wave timings, which are not exclusively centred around elections.

It was also possible to take account of contextual factors surrounding individual leader changes when modelling and interpreting the data in ways that would be less

*As the governing party in Scotland's devolved parliament and the party who represented the majority of Scottish seats in the House of Commons from 2015-2024, this issue is less likely to apply to the SNP (particularly among Scottish voters).

tenable when working with a cross-national dataset. Indeed, a by-product of this study has been to reveal the extent to which leader changes are idiosyncratic events, making the identification of general trends fraught. This can be seen with the cases such as Margaret Thatcher to John Major, where the immediate poll boost was exceptionally acute, or the exceptional Conservative leader changes of 2022. While the idiosyncratic nature of leader change events should not deter political scientists from research in this area (as the analyses have shown, there are clear trends to be observed) it serves to highlight the importance of context-sensitivity in both research design and interpretation.

Unavoidably, the emphasis on Britain also presented drawbacks. One of these was that it resulted in relatively few leader changes being available for analysis. This was partly addressed by encompassing a wide timespan, but the drawback had particular bite in Chapter 4, where testing for moderating factors of leader change was difficult due to a lack of leader change observations. Nonetheless, while homing in on just the UK Labour and Conservative parties has presented challenges, it has provided a valuable laboratory for theoretical development and hypothesis-generation surrounding leader change. The British case offers valuable data for research in this field while the narrow spatial focus also enables levels of context-sensitivity and internal validity that are difficult to attain in cross-national studies. In these regards, the focus on Britain offered similar advantages to those identified for qualitative case studies (George & Bennett 2005) and it is expected that the insights here could motivate future, internationally comparative work on the topic of leader change.

Looking at specific instances of leader change in other countries, there is certainly reason to suspect that the conclusions drawn here could be generalisable to other parliamentary democracies where mainstream parties compete along clear ideological lines. The 2022 leader change within the Spanish People's party (PP) provides a good example. This leader change occurred after years of tumult for the PP, which had been experiencing extreme intraparty unrest under the leadership of Pablo Casado. In 2022, the selection of Alberto Núñez Feijóo as Casado's replacement established a successor who was distinctly more moderate, since Casado had responded to pressure from the

ascendant far-right Vox party by shifting rightwards (Dombey 2022, Jones 2022, 2023). Although the PP did not attain government status following Spain's 2023 general election, they nonetheless won the plurality of seats and had performed well in earlier local and regional elections (Jones 2023, Jopson 2023), suggesting that leader change helped to remedy the PP's malaise by way of the mechanisms identified in Chapter 4: predecessor-removal and active appeal enhancement.

The 2017 transition from Andrew Little to Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand's Labour party provides further evidence of the international applicability of the findings of this thesis. Given that Labour was suffering a clear support deficit under Little in the runup to the 2017 New Zealand general election, much of its subsequent electoral success could be attributed to Little's decision to stand down (NZ Herald 2017). Again, this hints at the cross-national salience of the predecessor-removal mechanism. The party's improved popularity also likely had a lot to do with the active personal appeal of Jacinda Ardern as successor (Barrett 2018). The case of the New Zealand Labour Party also invites parallels with the Liberal Party of Canada's leader change in 2013, which occurred during a party popularity crisis under Michael Ignatieff and introduced, in Justin Trudeau, a leader whose active personal appeal reversed the party's downward trajectory (Clarke et al. 2017).

The ideological tensions over whether new leaders should moderate, as explored in Chapter 5, are also likely to have pertinence beyond the British context. The case study work of Helms (2024) offers a clear illustration of how the competing imperative to distinguish from the predecessor, while also ceding to the constraints imposed by that predecessor's legacy, defined three major changes in German chancellor since 1961 (Konrad Adenauer to Ludwig Erhard in 1961, Helmut Kohl to Gerhard Schröder in 1998 and Angela Merkel to Olaf Scholz in 2021). Overall, it is expected that the insights of this thesis, despite its limited geographic scope, are likely to be generalisable and could provide a springboard for fruitful future research adopting an internationally comparative perspective.

7.4.3 Beyond the Left-Right dimension

Much of the knowledge contributed by this thesis is based on findings that were facilitated by the Left-Right ideological data generated through quantitative text analysis (discussed in Chapter 2). However, measuring ideology on a single dimension incurs costs, as ideology can be understood on more than a unidimensional spectrum. This point was acknowledged in Chapter 2, but is it worth reasserting that moving beyond the simple Left-Right conception of ideology, for example by considering the socio-cultural GAL-TAN dimension, would be a worthwhile step in increasing our understanding of how leaders present themselves to voters and, in turn, how this affects voter reactions to leader change.

In addition to modelling the ideological positioning of leaders as a single point estimate, a fruitful endeavour for future research could also be to consider the effect of leaders who deliberately adopt a more ambiguous position in order to appeal to more broadly across the ideological spectrum. Work by Somer-Topcu (2015) has indicated that parties employing such broad appeal strategies can reap electoral rewards, and so looking at how the use of ideological ambiguity by leaders affects voter perceptions could be an important next step in this field of study. It may be that, within the Left-Right data used by this thesis, there are leaders who seem to implement moderation when actually they have both moved towards the median voter in some regards while maintaining their previous position (or that of their predecessor) in other regards, affecting a vaguer ideological profile in order to capitalise on a wider cross-section of public ideology.

Naturally, a challenge confronted by any study seeking to explore the effects of leaders' ideological ambiguity will be the generation of data measuring the extent to which a given leader has adopted a broad appeal strategy. However, Bräuninger & Giger (2018) have made headway in this area by proposing an unconventional use of the Wordscores model for modelling party manifesto ambiguity. The first step of standard Wordscores estimation involves allocating a numeric score to each individual word from the pre-coded reference texts. These assigned word scores are taken to be suggestive of where any given text that uses that word is likely to sit on the ideological spectrum,

meaning these word scores can then be used to calculate a single ideological score for the uncoded texts based on the prevalence of those words within that text (Laver et al. 2003). Bräuninger & Giger (2018) innovate by proposing a measure of ambiguity achieved through calculating the standard deviation of the word scores allocated to the words contained in the uncoded texts. This standard deviation figure is then regarded as an indicator of the ideological ambiguity of that text, as it expresses the extent to which the text deploys terms from across a wider spread of points on the ideological spectrum. If applied to textual data such as party leader speeches, this approach could open the door to studying the effects of broad appeal strategies by party leaders in future research.

7.4.4 Incorporating leader competence and charisma

In the literature on leader effects, there is considerable evidence that the personal attributes of leaders, often distilled to two core dimensions (competence and charisma), shape how voters perceive parties (Bittner 2011, Costa & da Silva 2015, Lobo & Curtice 2015*b*). This aspect of the literature has been relatively unexplored by this thesis, but there is clear scope for future leader change research to explore how differences in these personal qualities from one leader to the next could influence how voters respond to leader change. Alternatively, research might explore how the relative importance of these characteristics vary over time. For example, do voters rely more on the charisma of leaders in the immediate aftermath of leader change, assigning greater importance to competence as more information about the leader's performance becomes available?

Despite these interesting questions for potential research, this study has been limited to examining ideological differences between leaders because, whereas it is possible to attain an objective measure of ideological positioning, factors like competence and charisma are more intrinsically subjective and therefore difficult to model with aggregated public opinion data. Moreover, the questions asked by the current British Election Study internet panel do not distinguish between how respondents perceive leaders on different trait dimensions. It should, however, be noted that, as suggested in Chapter 4, ideological moderation is often seen by voters as a signal of appealing

personal qualities in leaders (Huber 2015) and competence in parties (Johns & Kölln 2020), suggesting that ideological differences can also be informative about perceived personality contrasts. In this way, the findings of this thesis concerning the impact of leader ideology could contain clues as to the importance of personality differences between predecessors and successors in voter reactions to leader change. Nonetheless, more direct analysis of how differing characteristics between leaders influence the consequences of leader change would be a helpful step in furthering knowledge in this field.

7.5 Final thoughts

There are undoubtedly numerous ways in which the effects of leader change on public opinion can be researched further, and it is hoped that this thesis will help to broaden the horizons of this research. Among other things, this work has sought to clarify the mechanisms through which leader change increases party support, explore the factors that moderate its effect, identify circumstances where the benefits of leader change can have longer lasting effects, detect indirect effects of leader change in terms of how voters perceive the ideological manoeuvring of leaders, and investigate the differential impact of leader change depending on individual voter characteristics. This research has been facilitated by incorporation of both aggregate and panel survey data as well as newly generated time series data on leader ideological positioning. The latter data enabled detection of how differences between individual leaders serve to affect the ways in which voters react to leader change, allowing for new theoretical insights regarding the role of ideological repositioning in the outcomes of leader change on public opinion.

Across the project, an emphasis has also been maintained on accounting for why leader change is not consistently as impactful as might be expected, and this has unearthed a number of factors which serve to undermine its effect. These findings demonstrate that, although leader change as a political phenomenon does not have a consistently large effect, understanding the factors suppressing its impact can still yield valuable insights about the nature of political opinion formation and the challenges

parties face in taking active strategic steps towards increasing their support.

Future studies of leader change are advised to maintain both a sensitivity to the ways in which predecessors and successors can vary individually, while maintaining awareness of the myriad factors working to undermine the impacts of leader change, in order to develop further knowledge about the scope for leader change to function as a qualitative stimulus of shifting voter perceptions of parties.

Appendix A

Texts analysed in each Wordscores implementation

In order to create the leader ideology time series as discussed in Chapter 2, four separate implementations of the Wordscores model were performed. This consisted of two models per party, where one created estimates for leader conference speeches occurring between 1971 and 1992 while the second created estimates for speeches occurring between 1993 and 2023. Each implementation was anchored by a different set of party manifestos so that the estimation would be orientated to pick up on the Left-Right ideological dimension during the relevant period for each party.

Table A.1 sets out which leader conference speeches were estimated by each implementation of Wordscores, as well as detailing the set of party manifestos that were used as reference texts for that implementation. The RILE scores refer to the Left-Right score assigned to each manifesto by the Manifesto Project; these indicators form the basis of the scores assigned to the speeches by the Wordscores estimation.

Table A.1: The sets of party leader speeches and the manifestos used to estimate their positions for each Wordscores implementation

Wordscores model	**Leader speeches**	**Manifesto reference texts**
Early Labour (1971-1992)	1971 Labour leader speech (Harold Wilson) 1972 Labour leader speech (Harold Wilson)	1964 Labour (RILE: -23.8) 1966 Labour (RILE: -14.8)

Continuation of Table A.1

	1973 Labour leader speech (Harold Wilson)	1970 Labour (RILE: -10.3)
	1974 Labour leader speech (Harold Wilson)	1974 (Feb) Labour (RILE: -48.5)
	1975 Labour leader speech (Harold Wilson)	1974 (Oct) Labour (RILE: -27.5)
	1976 Labour leader speech (James Callaghan)	1979 Labour (RILE: -26.6)
	1977 Labour leader speech (James Callaghan)	1983 Labour (RILE: -39.2)
	1978 Labour leader speech (James Callaghan)	1987 Labour (RILE: -13.547)
	1979 Labour leader speech (James Callaghan)	1992 Labour (RILE: -30.4)
	1980 Labour leader speech (James Callaghan)	
	1981 Labour leader speech (Michael Foot)	
	1982 Labour leader speech (Michael Foot)	
	1983 Labour leader speech (Michael Foot)	
	1984 Labour leader speech (Neil Kinnock)	
	1985 Labour leader speech (Neil Kinnock)	
	1986 Labour leader speech (Neil Kinnock)	
	1987 Labour leader speech (Neil Kinnock)	
	1988 Labour leader speech (Neil Kinnock)	
	1989 Labour leader speech (Neil Kinnock)	
	1990 Labour leader speech (Neil Kinnock)	
	1991 Labour leader speech (Neil Kinnock)	
	1992 Labour leader speech (John Smith)	
Late Labour (1993-2023)	1993 Labour leader speech (John Smith)	1983 Labour (RILE: -39.2)
	1994 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	1987 Labour (RILE: -13.547)

Continuation of Table A.1

1995 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	1992 Labour (RILE: -30.4)
1996 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	1997 Labour (RILE: 8.072)
1997 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	2001 Labour (RILE: 1.473)
1998 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	2005 Labour (RILE: -3.09)
1999 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	2015 Labour (RILE: -18.137)
2000 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	2017 Labour (RILE: -27.56)
2001 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	2019 Labour (RILE: -16.438)
2002 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	
2003 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	
2004 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	
2005 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	
2006 Labour leader speech (Tony Blair)	
2007 Labour leader speech (Gordon Brown)	
2008 Labour leader speech (Gordon Brown)	
2009 Labour leader speech (Gordon Brown)	
2010 Labour leader speech (Ed Miliband)	
2011 Labour leader speech (Ed Miliband)	
2012 Labour leader speech (Ed Miliband)	
2013 Labour leader speech (Ed Miliband)	
2014 Labour leader speech (Ed Miliband)	
2015 Labour leader speech (Jeremy Corbyn)	
2016 Labour leader speech (Jeremy Corbyn)	

Continuation of Table A.1		
	2017 Labour leader speech (Jeremy Corbyn) 2018 Labour leader speech (Jeremy Corbyn) 2019 Labour leader speech (Jeremy Corbyn) 2020 Labour leader speech (Keir Starmer) 2021 Labour leader speech (Keir Starmer) 2022 Labour leader speech (Keir Starmer) 2023 Labour leader speech (Keir Starmer)	
Early Conservative (1971-1992)	1971 Conservative leader speech (Edward Heath) 1972 Conservative leader speech (Edward Heath) 1973 Conservative leader speech (Edward Heath) 1975 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1976 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1977 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1978 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1979 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1980 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1981 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1982 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1983 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1984 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1985 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1986 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher)	1964 Conservative (RILE: -7.8) 1966 Conservative (RILE: 9.3) 1970 Conservative (RILE: 8.2) 1974 (Feb) Conservative (RILE: 0) 1974 (Oct) Conservative (RILE: 11.4) 1979 Conservative (RILE: 24.4) 1983 Conservative (RILE: 29) 1987 Conservative (RILE: 30.468) 1992 Conservative (RILE: 27.9)

Continuation of Table A.1		
	1987 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1988 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1989 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1990 Conservative leader speech (Margaret Thatcher) 1991 Conservative leader speech (John Major) 1992 Conservative leader speech (John Major)	
Late Conservative (1993-2023)	1993 Conservative leader speech (John Major) 1994 Conservative leader speech (John Major) 1995 Conservative leader speech (John Major) 1996 Conservative leader speech (John Major) 1997 Conservative leader speech (William Hague) 1998 Conservative leader speech (William Hague) 1999 Conservative leader speech (William Hague) 2000 Conservative leader speech (William Hague) 2001 Conservative leader speech (Iain Duncan Smith) 2002 Conservative leader speech (Iain Duncan Smith) 2003 Conservative leader speech (Iain Duncan Smith) 2004 Conservative leader speech (Michael Howard) 2005 Conservative leader speech (Michael Howard) 2006 Conservative leader speech (David Cameron) 2007 Conservative leader speech (David Cameron) 2008 Conservative leader speech (David Cameron)	1983 Conservative (RILE: 29) 1987 Conservative (RILE: 30.468) 1992 Conservative (RILE: 27.9) 1997 Conservative (RILE: 25.738) 2001 Conservative (RILE: 14.917) 2005 Conservative (RILE: 14.535) 2015 Conservative (RILE: -1.574) 2017 Conservative (RILE: -2.607) 2019 Conservative (RILE: 6.214)

Continuation of Table A.1
2009 Conservative leader speech (David Cameron)
2010 Conservative leader speech (David Cameron)
2011 Conservative leader speech (David Cameron)
2012 Conservative leader speech (David Cameron)
2013 Conservative leader speech (David Cameron)
2014 Conservative leader speech (David Cameron)
2015 Conservative leader speech (David Cameron)
2016 Conservative leader speech (Theresa May)
2017 Conservative leader speech (Theresa May)
2018 Conservative leader speech (Theresa May)
2019 Conservative leader speech (Boris Johnson)
2020 Conservative leader speech (Boris Johnson)
2021 Conservative leader speech (Boris Johnson)
2022 Conservative leader speech (Liz Truss)
2023 Conservative leader speech (Rishi Sunak)

Appendix B

Processing monthly time series variables with ARIMA models

Observations in time series data can be dependent on their own past values through autocorrelation, which poses a risk to inferences when modelling such data (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2014). A common approach to dealing with this issue is to include a lag of the dependent variable as an independent variable in regression models (Keele & Kelly 2006). However, more complex autocorrelation structures identified for the monthly time series variables modelled in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 meant that, to prevent autocorrelated residuals in the regression analyses, more comprehensive time series pre-processing was advisable. The approach pursued is sometimes referred to as 'pre-whitening', as it involves processing each variable individually in order to filter out observed temporal patterns, resulting in a variable that is reduced to only substantively interesting variation ('white noise') that is not time dependent (Grant & Lebo 2016, Lebo & Grant 2016).

When analysing a time series variable, the first step is to check whether the variable is stationary. Using a combination of visual inspection of the time series variables and common unit root tests, it was concluded that the three monthly time series were non-stationary. To achieve stationarity, each variable was therefore differenced. This means that each observation was transformed to reflect the change in the value of that variable since the previous time point. In the case of the unemployment series, second-order

differencing was necessary to achieve stationarity (meaning the differencing procedure was performed on the variable twice).

Political time series can often exhibit fractional integration, which is best addressed through fractional differencing (Box-Steffensmeier & Smith 1998, Lebo & Grant 2016). The two dependent variables (Conservative and Labour party support) were therefore modelled using Stata's ARFIMA (AutoRegressive Fractionally Integrated Moving Average) functionality to check whether fully differencing these variables amounted to overdifferencing (StataCorp 2023). The results suggested that the differenced time series were not overdifferenced, so the question of fractional integration was set aside.

Inspection of the time series variables using Autocorrelation Function (ACF) and Partial Autocorrelation Function (PACF) plots indicated that, even after differencing, some autocorrelation remained in the data. These significant autocorrelation spikes tended to be of higher orders (occurring at greater than one lag), which would not be adequately addressed by the inclusion of a lagged dependent variable in a regression model (Clarke et al. 1990). For this reason, each variable was further processed by fitting an ARIMA (AutoRegressive Integrated Moving Average) model to the data. The ARIMA approach models the autoregressive (AR) and moving average (MA) components of a time series (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2014). The question of integration (I) is also an important part of ARIMA modelling. The question of integration has already been addressed through the differencing procedures discussed above. When appropriately specified, ARIMA models yield white noise residuals (Box & Jenkins 1970).

To fit the ARIMA models, the ACF and PACF plots of each series were consulted to guide in the selection of appropriate AR and MA terms. While the optimal ARIMA models for each of these time series were not always immediately apparent, and an element of analyst discretion in reaching the final ARIMA specifications was inevitable, the ACF and PACF plots guided in the specification of baseline ARIMA models which were then fine-tuned so that white noise residuals were attained while aiming to maintain parsimony.

For the Conservative series, it was determined that MA components at 4 and 6

lags were suitable, while Labour was modelled with MA components at 2, 6 and 11 lags. The auto-ARIMA function that comes with the forecast package in R helped to determine the optimal ARIMA specification for the unemployment series (Hyndman & Athanasopoulos 2021, Hyndman & Khandakar 2008). Auto-ARIMA suggested moving average components at 1-3 lags and supported the earlier decision to difference this unemployment variable twice.

The main outcomes of the ARIMA models are presented in Table B.1. The statistically insignificant (at the 0.05 level) Ljung-Box Q statistics suggest that the residuals of these ARIMA models can be regarded as white noise (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2014). In every analysis of these three time series variables within Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 of this thesis, it is the residuals of these ARIMA models that are being analysed. This helps to safeguard the validity of the results in view of the additional challenges posed by time series data.

Table B.1: ARIMA models for the monthly time series variables (Conservative support, Labour support and unemployment rate)

	Time series variable:		
	Unemployment	Conservative support	Labour support
MA1	-0.729***		
	(0.036)		
MA2	0.111**		-0.197***
	(0.046)		(0.037)
MA3	-0.079**		
	(0.036)		
MA4		-0.144***	
		(0.038)	
MA6		-0.112***	-0.151***
		(0.036)	(0.038)
MA11			-0.156***
			(0.040)
I	2	1	1
Q test	50.931	48.161	52.872
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix C

Values assigned to each leader change for the moderating variables in Chapter 4

Chapter 4 considered how the effect of leader change on party support might be moderated by a range of factors. To empirically explore this, a range of variables were proposed and analysed. Table C.1 sets out the values of these variables for each of the leader changes covered by this thesis. Details on how these variables are measured is provided in Table 4.1. Some variables were later modified prior to regression analysis - this process is set out in Section 4.4.1.

Some points are worthy of note. Firstly, the resignation of Labour leader James Callaghan (leading to Michael Foot's leadership) is not classified as a post-election defeat, even though Callaghan's resignation occurred following Labour's loss of power during the 1979 general election. This is because it was decided that only leaders who confirm their resignation in the immediate aftermath of an election would qualify for this designation, and Callaghan remained leader for over a year after the election. Secondly, it is notable that the moderation variable has a positive value for Conservative leader Liz Truss, implying that Truss was more moderate than Boris Johnson. This does not conform with general understandings of Truss's politics and has a knock-on effect on the estimate for Truss's successor, Rishi Sunak, by making him seem more extreme.

As discussed during the thesis (particularly in Section 2.4), this is an area where the ideological modelling did not meet validity standards and is an issue that is addressed in each analysis to ensure results are not unduly undermined by this limitation.

Table C.1: Values assigned to moderating variables for each leader change

Leader change (year)	**Support deficit**	**Predecessor longevity (years & category)**	**Member vote**	**Ideological moderation**	**Economic favourability**	**Departure cause: post-election**	**Departure cause: Intraparty unrest**	**Incumbent**
				Conservatives				
Heath to Thatcher (1975)	2.7	9(long)	No	-6.8	-0.1	No	Yes	No
Thatcher to Major (1990)	3.8	15(long)	No	-3.8	0.8	No	Yes	Yes
Major to Hague (1997)	0	6	No	-2.8	-1.5	Yes	No	No
Hague to Duncan Smith (2001)	1.4	4	Yes	-7.2	-0.7	Yes	No	No
Duncan Smith to Howard (2003)	-2.5	2(short)	No	-6.4	-0.2	No	Yes	No
Howard to Cameron (2005)	-0.5	2(short)	Yes	3.9	0.2	Yes	No	No
Cameron to May (2016)	1.1	10(long)	No	0.8	1.0	Yes	No	Yes

Continuation of Table C.1								
May to Johnson (2019)	13.7	2(short)	Yes	4.9	0.5	No	Yes	Yes
Johnson to Truss (2022)	6.9	3(short)	Yes	12	1.5	No	Yes	Yes
Truss to Sunak (2022)	10.5	0(short)	No	-9.4	1.4	No	Yes	Yes
Labour								
Wilson to Callaghan (1976)	4.7	13(long)	No	4.2	-1.6	No	No	Yes
Callaghan to Foot (1980)	-6.2	4	No	-4.8	2	No	No	No
Foot to Kinnock (1983)	12.1	2(short)	No	6.3	1.4	Yes	No	No
Kinnock to Smith (1992)	2.7	8(long)	No	-4.5	2.8	Yes	No	No
Smith to Blair (1994)	-4.6	1(short)	Yes	10.2	-0.2	No	No	No
Blair to Brown (2007)	3.1	12(long)	No	0.6	-0.7	No	Yes	Yes

Continuation of Table C.1								
Brown to Miliband (2010)	-0.5	2(short)	Yes	1.7	1.8	Yes	No	No
Miliband to Corbyn (2015)	1.8	4	Yes	-8.6	-1.9	Yes	No	No
Corbyn to Starmer (2020)	3.2	4	Yes	14.4	-0.1	Yes	No	No

Appendix D

Robustness checks for Chapter 5

Chapter 5 presented an analysis investigating whether shifts in the ideological positioning of the party leader affected aggregate voter support for the party, testing the hypothesis that voters would reward steps towards ideological moderation implemented by new Conservative and Labour leaders but not necessarily established leaders. The dependent variable was annual change in the party's support recorded the day after each leader's conference speech while leader ideological positioning was included as an independent variable, making use of the data generated through Wordscores. However, a notable drawback of this analysis was that it did not control for changes in the ideological positioning of the electorate itself. In this sense, it accounted for the supply-side of ideology without factoring in the demand-side, risking omitted variable bias that could confound the results.

The first challenge in addressing this shortcoming was to find data that measures the ideological position of the UK public. The standard Eurobarometer (2024) survey plugs this gap since it regularly asks its respondents to place themselves on an ideological scale from 1 (extreme left-wing) to 10 (extreme right-wing) and, in most cases, includes a contingent of approximately 1000 voters from the UK. However, a disadvantage of the Eurobarometer for this purpose is that it did not start consistently asking voters about their ideological self-placement until 1976. As all variables need to be differenced in order to be incorporated into the models in Table 5.1, adding this Eurobarometer variable precludes any observations before 1977, which means the first observations for

Labour James Callaghan and Margaret Thatcher must be dropped. For this reason, the variable is not included in the analysis presented in Chapter 5.

To ensure the conclusions drawn in Chapter 5 are not wholly dependent on the omission of public ideology, the analysis is repeated below with a new variable measuring yearly change in the mean UK ideological positions observed by select modules of the standard Eurobarometer. While it would be preferable to measure voter ideology using the median rather than the mean response (due to the susceptibility of means to be skewed by extreme observations), the median position of UK respondents in the data collected was found to range between the integers five and six, and had not deviated from five since the 1980s. This leaves insufficient variation with which to model voter ideology. While variation in the mean value is also small (ranging from 4.74 to 5.97), the ability of this measure to take non-integer values grants the analysis sensitivity to gradations in the ideological positioning that the median cannot capture. In the analysis, the variable is coded so that positive values always reflect public shifts towards the assumed position of the relevant party in each observation (rightwards shifts in the case of the Conservatives and leftwards shifts in the case of Labour), while negative values indicate the electorate has moved away from the party's position.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, the Labour leader changes resulting in the selection of Tony Blair and Keir Starmer were both influential cases in the analysis. This is because both leaders moderated considerably from their predecessors' positions and, after their election, party support increased considerably in both instances. This raises the question of whether the overall finding that new leaders who moderate from their predecessor's position achieve higher support for their parties applies more generally, or whether the result in Chapter 5 is solely driven by these two influential observations. To address this concern, the analysis is conducted again but the first observations of Tony Blair and Keir Starmer are dropped.

Table D.1 presents three models. The first is identical to Model 3 from Table 5.1 in Chapter 5, which combined observations of both Conservative and Labour support. The second model in Table D.1 drops the observations of Labour in 1994 and 2020 (the first observations of Tony Blair and Keir Starmer). The third model reinstates

those dropped observations but incorporates the change in the mean positioning of UK Eurobarometer respondents.

Reassuringly, the overriding findings of Chapter 5 are not falsified by the additional robustness checks. In all models, the estimates confirm the general conclusion that ideological moderation from party leaders results in a reduction in party support (of around 0.25 points), but that this trend is reversed for new leaders (as seen by the interaction between the moderation and leader change variables). This conclusion must be qualified by acknowledging that the interaction between leader moderation and leader change loses statistical significance when Blair and Starmer's first observations are dropped. Unsurprisingly, the magnitude of the interaction effect is also reduced in absence of Blair and Starmer, suggesting that the benefits of new leader moderation might generally be smaller except in exceptional cases such as these. Also, statistical significance for the moderation variable (without interaction) is lost when mean voter ideology is controlled for, although the coefficient size remains much the same. It is worthwhile to note that the additional variable added to Model 3, mean voter ideology, is statistically significant (at the 0.10 level). The coefficient suggests that, if the mean position of the electorate moved one (out of ten) places towards the party, the party's support would increase by a substantial 7.5 points.

Despite losses in effect size and statistical significance, the overall thrust of Chapter 5's findings hold. This is made clear in Figure D.1, which repeats the plot shown in Figure 5.1 from Chapter 5 but adds new plots of the same marginal predictions derived from the additional models estimated for this appendix. While standard errors are undeniably inflated in the estimates where the added robustness measures have been implemented, the evidence still points towards the same differential outcome of leader moderation when implemented by new leaders compared with established leaders identified in Chapter 5. Future analyses building on this study are advised to further stress test these findings by incorporating additional control variables and making more sophisticated use of public ideology data. For example, as well as the controlling for the ideological position of the electorate at large, it would be worthwhile to also control for shifts in the position of each party's own specific voter base, since ideological shifts by

Table D.1: OLS regression models of annual change in Conservative and Labour party support percentage with added robustness checks

	Dependent variable: ΔParty support (yearly)		
	Model 1 Original	Model 2 Blair & Starmer dropped	Model 3 Public ideology control
Party support$_{t-1}$	-0.398***	-0.409***	-0.390***
	(0.092)	(0.094)	(0.096)
New leader	0.694	-0.092	0.032
	(1.634)	(1.727)	(1.712)
Leader moderation	-0.250*	-0.256*	-0.255
	(0.150)	(0.151)	(0.161)
New leader * Leader moderation	0.720***	0.459	0.787***
	(0.261)	(0.338)	(0.272)
Violent international crisis (incumbent)	5.288	4.945	4.146
	(3.433)	(3.448)	(3.520)
Violent international crisis (opposition)	-3.146	-3.206	-1.141
	(3.358)	(3.367)	(3.385)
Other international crisis (incumbent)	-1.115	-0.886	-0.797
	(1.919)	(1.926)	(2.104)
Other international crisis (opposition)	-0.346	0.034	-0.289
	(1.916)	(1.945)	(2.070)
Election win	2.722	2.565	2.617
	(1.940)	(1.947)	(2.070)
Election loss	0.102	-0.026	0.166
	(2.001)	(2.075)	(2.016)
Government	-2.109	-1.781	-1.291
	(1.514)	(1.533)	(1.595)
ΔUnemployment	1.051	1.193	0.317
	(0.889)	(0.934)	(0.911)
Government * ΔUnemployment	-2.827**	-2.963**	-1.882
	(1.260)	(1.295)	(1.298)
Johnson to Truss	-21.890***	-18.018**	-23.280***
	(6.139)	(6.869)	(6.092)
Truss to Sunak	0.910	-1.121	2.788
	(6.185)	(6.420)	(6.163)
Party	0.393	0.446	0.394
	(1.246)	(1.247)	(1.314)
Mean voter ideology			7.465*
			(4.005)
Constant	15.867***	16.090***	15.084***
	(3.787)	(3.859)	(3.933)
N	103	101	94
R^2	0.416	0.367	0.455
Note:			*p≤0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

leaders are likely to have a distinct impact on the vote intentions of these voters since their preference for the party means they might not welcome ideological moderation from their leader in the same way as the general voter.

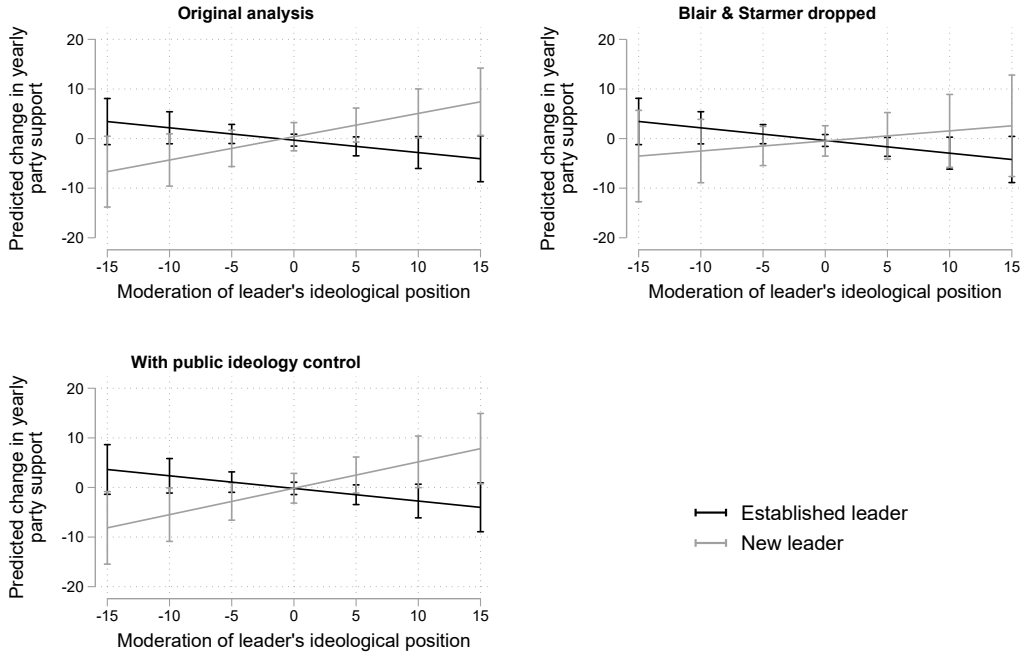

Figure D.1: The predicted effect of leader ideological moderation on yearly changes in party support percentage for new versus established leaders with added robustness checks

NOTE: These visualisations are derived from the models in Table D.1. On the x-axes, positive values indicate the extent to which the leader has become more ideologically moderate on the Left-Right scale, while negative values represent shifts towards more extreme ideological positions (zero denotes no change in ideological position). Ideological data is derived from the Wordscores estimates discussed in Chapter 2 and is measured on a comparable scale to the Manifesto Project RILE index (which technically ranges from -100/extreme left to 100/extreme right).

Appendix E

Voter characteristic variable coding for Chapter 6

The multinomial regression presented in Figure 6.3 explored how partisanship, political attention, education level, political extremism, age and gender influenced the response pathway taken by voters in reacting to leader change. This appendix sets out how questions from the British Election Study (BES) panel survey were coded for this analysis.

The measure of partisanship used for this analysis was derived from a question within the BES survey (Fieldhouse et al. 2023) asking voters which party they generally feel closer to. Those who state that they are not close to any party are considered non-partisans, those who name the party under observation are considered partisans, and those who name another party are considered opposition partisans. To create the variable, this information is combined with a follow-up question where respondents are asked how strongly attached they feel to the party. Those whose say their closeness to the party is 'very strong' (as opposed to 'fairly strong' or 'not very strong') are regarded as strongly partisan (or strongly opposition partisan, depending on which party they previously stated as the one they feel closest to). The resulting variable has five ordinal categories, ranging from 'Strong opponent' to 'Strong partisan' with 'Non-partisan' as the middle value.

Political attention, originally measured on a scale of 0-10 by BES, was recoded for

this analysis so that those who provide responses above eight are regarded as paying high attention while those who respond below two are considered as paying low attention to politics. Education level then reflects the highest qualification level received, ranging from no education up to a postgraduate qualification.

The measure of political extremism used by this analysis is constructed from a BES question which asks respondents to place themselves on an ideological scale from left (0) to right (10). Those who respond with five are considered the least extreme (an extremism score of zero), then the value attached to that respondent increases with each successive step on the scale above or below five (so that those who responded 0 or 10 are coded as five in the extremism variable). This strategy for coding extremism on a scale of 0-5 is based on Daoust et al. (2021).

The age variable is provided as a continuous measure by BES but was clustered into three categories for this study. Younger voters are considered to be below 35 years old while senior voters are considered to be over 65. Finally, the BES survey provides gender as a male/female binary variable based on information collected by YouGov (who administer the survey). Gender is therefore analysed in these terms in the multinomial model.

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