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Evaluating British Prime Ministerial Performance: David Cameron's Premiership in Political Time

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Abstract

This article contributes to the developing literature on prime ministerial performance in the UK by applying a critical reading of Stephen Skowronek's account of leadership in 'political time' to evaluate David Cameron's premiership. This, we propose, better understands the inter-relationship of structure and agency in prime ministerial performance than existing frameworks, particularly those based on Greenstein's and Bulpitt's approaches. We identify Cameron as a disjunctive prime minister but find it necessary to significantly develop the model of disjunctive leadership beyond that offered by Skowronek. We identify the warrants to authority, strategies and dilemmas associated with disjunctive leadership in the UK. We argue that Cameron was relatively skilful in meeting many of the challenges confronting an affiliated leader of a vulnerable regime. However, his second term exposed deep fractures in the regime which proved beyond Cameron's skills as a disjunctive leader.

Research highlights

This article:

- Contributes to the debate about the best theoretical frameworks for evaluating prime ministerial performance in the UK.
- Argues that an historical institutionalist framework is able to address the major shortcoming of existing frameworks, namely evaluating prime ministerial performance in the structural context of the political environment in which holders of that office act.
- Adapts Stephen Skowronek's account of the performance of US presidents to the constitutional, institutional and political circumstances of the UK polity and significantly develops Skowronek's account of regime vulnerability and the characteristics and constraints of disjunctive leadership
- Applies this adapted model for the purposes of a systematic evaluation of David Cameron's premiership. This identifies that although Cameron was relatively successful in negotiating the challenges and constraints of disjunctive prime ministerial leadership in his first term he made commitments which, in his second term, exposed key fault lines in the regime and proved beyond Cameron's skills as a disjunctive leader to manage.

Introduction

Assessments of prime ministerial performance are ubiquitous in contemporary UK politics. Print, broadcast and social media provide running commentaries (see, for example, Blair 2007). Opinion polls collect popular assessments of prime ministers while valence politics renders such attitudes increasingly electorally salient (Whiteley, Clarke, Sanders, and Stewart 2013). Biographers find evaluation of prime ministerial performance an irresistible enterprise (Marquand 2011). But such assessments of performance are frequently idiosyncratic. Where evaluation employs any criteria, these are typically implicit and adrift of a theoretical framework. Comparisons, where offered, tend toward the casual rather than the systematic.

This paper makes an early contribution to what will doubtless become a substantial literature evaluating David Cameron's premiership between 2010 and 2016. Its broader contribution is towards the development of theoretically informed but empirically grounded assessments of performance which are explicitly attentive to the structural conditions in which UK prime ministers exercise agency. The paper begins by reviewing existing models for evaluating UK prime ministerial performance, principally those based on Greenstein's (2001) and Bulpitt's (1986) approaches. The case is then made for an alternative framework which applies to the UK a critical reading of Stephen Skowronek's historical institutionalist analysis of the US presidency. After outlining the modifications necessary to Skowronek's approach, Cameron is identified as a disjunctive prime minister. We identify the warrants to authority, the strategies, and dilemmas associated with disjunctive leadership in the UK. This allows us to undertake a systematic evaluation of Cameron's premiership. We argue that although

Cameron enjoyed a relatively successful first term, his repertoire of disjunctive leadership led him into commitments which exposed deep fractures within the British polity in his second.

Models of prime ministerial performance

It is easier to ask than to answer the question, what makes for prime ministerial success or failure. Beyond the rankings of expert surveys (for example, Theakston and Gill, 2006), the existing literature offers two main options to conceptualise, interpret and evaluate British prime ministers' performance. Derived from Greenstein's (2001) assessments of US presidents, the leadership style/skills model focuses on prime ministerial performance in relation to: public communication; organisational capacity; political skills; policy vision; cognitive style (how they process advice and take decisions); and emotional intelligence (see Theakston, 2007; 2011; 2012). In contrast, the statecraft model focuses on how British leaders secure office and power through party management, winning the battle of ideas, developing a successful electoral strategy, and demonstrating 'governing competence' (Bulpitt, 1986; Buller and James, 2012; Clarke *et al*, 2015).

In analysing how prime ministers understand and conduct leadership roles, and assess how effectively they perform them, both models advance the debate from recurrent questions about prime ministerial power (or 'predominance' in contemporary formulations) and arguments about systemic labels or trends (e.g. 'presidentialisation'). The difficulty both models share is accounting for the environment in which leaders operate, and the opportunities, challenges and constraints they face. The nexus between leaders' personal qualities and the demands of the times is central to their effectiveness, as Greenstein has

conceded:

> The capacity of the president to make a difference is a function not only of his personal attributes, but also the political environment in which they are brought to bear. A president who is well suited to serve in one setting may be ill suited for another (Greenstein 2005 quoted in Theakston 2007, 60).

But Greenstein does not develop this aspect of the model in any detailed or extended way.

The statecraft model goes further in incorporating several aspects of structural context into leadership evaluation (Buller and James, 2012), including electoral constraints, public attitudes towards policies, the international situation and the relationship between foreign and domestic policy, and pre-eminently economic factors. Buller and James (2015) have valuably strengthened the statecraft model's engagement with this structural context. In their account the complementarity of prime ministerial objectives with structural conditions is an important determinant of prime ministerial performance. In addition, they acknowledge the dynamic character of the structural context. A prime minister will find a stable and predictable structural context easier to govern within than one that changes unexpectedly or dramatically. But Buller and James have yet to provide a framework that can be used systematically to understand and compare the relationship between leaders and their contexts, or explain patterns of change over time (Buller and James 2015, 80-83).

This paper argues that an historical institutionalist account, based on a critical and extended reading of Skowronek's (1993) theory of US presidential leadership permits incorporation of 'the changing universe of political action' (Skowronek 2011, 77) in a fashion that these other

models do not presently allow. In contrast to Greenstein, Skowronek (1993, 19) rejects a focus on the leaders' characteristics and political skills, arguing they have almost nothing to do with success or failure in office, and reveal little about the political impact of presidential leadership. Equally, he conceives of the leadership 'test' in a broader and more demanding way than the statecraft model's primary focus on 'how many elections [leaders] win' (Buller and James 2015, 79).

Skowronek's (1993) account of leadership in the context of political time and regime cycles provides a way of understanding the dynamic inter-relationship of structure and agency in analysing, comparing and explaining leadership performance. The challenges and opportunities presidents face, and the authority they have, according to Skowronek, essentially depend on whether they are opposed to or are affiliated with the prevailing 'regime' (understood as a set of ideas, values, policy paradigms and programmes, and the associated pattern of political interests and institutional supports), and the extent to which that 'regime' is itself resilient or vulnerable (table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

Put briefly, political time involves cycles of regime maintenance, decay and challenge, crisis, replacement and rebuilding as problems emerge and are confronted, policies evolve, and political support and authority accumulates or dissipates. Different challenges are posed for leaders depending on their stance towards the regime and their place in political time. Leaders supporting an existing regime which is working well and is widely supported (leaders of articulation), can be expected to operate within and manage the existing policy framework. At most they are 'orthodox innovators' rather than attempting fundamental

reforms. The ambitions of pre-emptive leaders – who repudiate an existing regime and seek to replace it – are, however, ultimately frustrated and blocked by the continuing strength of a resilient political order. Disjunctive leaders are challenged to prop up a failing regime, keeping the show on the road in the face of mounting problems and diminishing support and authority. Exploiting the opportunities created by the breakdown of vulnerable regimes, reconstructive leaders are able to develop and implement new policy frameworks, and assemble new coalitions of support around a new political order.

Such a model, applied to the UK premiership, shares much in common with James' (2016) account of neo-statecraft theory as historical institutionalism. Both present macro, polity-wide perspectives cognisant of historical context, critical junctures and context dependent regularities. The critical reading and application of Skowronek developed below also acknowledges the dynamic character of the governing context stressed by Buller and James (2015). However, it differs and 'adds value' beyond recent statecraft approaches (Buller and James, 2015; Clarke *et al*, 2015; James, 2016). Firstly, where statecraft theory identifies electoral incentives as the primary motivation for actors, we focus upon the motivations (and constraints and opportunities) associated with stances toward the political regime. Secondly, we argue that Skowronek's approach – centred on the three 'orderings' of presidential power in terms of the constraining effects of the constitution, institutions and political regimes – compensates for the lack of systematicity in Buller & James' considerations of the 'layering' of structural constraints on political leaders. Thirdly, and partly as a result of the above, whereas statecraft theory regards 'decisions about how much to 'compensate' leaders governing in difficult contexts' as 'nigh-on impossible' (Buller and James 2015: 82), Skowronek's approach permits broad comparisons based on prime ministerial attitudes towards the regime and its resilience/vulnerability.

Applying Skowronek to British prime ministers

Skowronek's model has been applied to Australia and has potential applications elsewhere (Laing and McCaffrie 2013). However, it needs adaptation to the constitutional, institutional and political characteristics of a Westminster system (Laing and McCaffrie 2013, 84-89; Heffernan 2005). These differences are well understood and do not need detailing extensively here. Firstly, Cabinet government deprives even dominant prime ministers of the authority a US president can assert. Prime ministers can sometimes lead from the front, but also have to routinely consult, bargain, and compromise within the executive. Consequently, Westminster systems may provide 'less pure examples of prime ministers standing in opposition to the political orthodoxy as either reconstructors or pre-emptors' (Laing and McCaffrie 2013, 85). Conversely, a fusion of powers and relatively disciplined parties can grant prime ministers a legislative dominance that presidents envy. Even disjunctive prime ministers facing backbench dissent will still get most of their major legislation through parliament (Laing and McCaffrie 2013, 87).

Secondly, Prime ministers confront an organised and institutionalised Opposition possessing more authority and legitimacy than the forces opposing a US president. The behaviour of Opposition parties can constrain or facilitate prime ministerial success. For example, Opposition parties can contribute to the success of reconstructive prime ministers (McCaffrie, 2013), whether strengthening the government by their own ineptitude, internal divisions and ineffectiveness, or by accepting the government's agenda and consolidating reconstruction when they return to office. Furthermore, Opposition leaders are themselves positioned in political time. For example, an orthodox innovator prime minister is likely to face a different

challenge to their authority from a pre-emptive Opposition leader than an opponent in the same orthodox innovator mode. A disjunctive prime minister facing an effective insurgent opponent with a reconstructive agenda will find their room for manoeuvre curtailed. For those who become prime minister after a period leading the Opposition, the transition experience, and the commitments made and pressures faced during it, may affect or constrain their premiership in ways that a president may not encounter, particularly if circumstances change radically during that period.

Thirdly, compared to the presidential system, political parties are more important to prime ministerial authority (Heppell, 2013b). In particular, prime ministers enjoy less security of tenure than a president. Failing prime ministers are vulnerable to removal by parties nervous about electoral defeat. The security of tenure of presidents, even during 'prolonged and dramatic failures', may mean therefore that the US provides 'clearer examples of disjunctive leadership' (Laing and McCaffrie 2013, 88). Able to serve without term limits as long as their parties and voters will support them, long-serving prime ministers may also find political time changing around them. As new circumstances affect the regime's viability, the leadership challenge they face may alter, so that they move from one of Skowronek's leadership types to another (Laing and McCaffrie 2013, 88-89, 98).

Classifying David Cameron in Political Time

Having established that Skowronek's model can be employed in the British context, we now turn to identifying Cameron's position in political time. To do so, we need to answer two questions. Firstly, was Cameron an opponent or affiliate of the established regime? Secondly, did Cameron encounter a vulnerable or resilient regime?

Cameron: opponent or affiliate of the regime?

The concept of regime has been variously employed in British politics. For Bulpitt, for example, regimes are simply 'structures persisting over time' (2008, 61). Drawing upon the regulation school, Jessop (see, for example, 2007) understands regimes as the prevailing relationship between production, distribution and consumption. Following Banaszak et al (2003) however, we characterize the political regime of early twenty-first century UK politics as centred firstly upon a particular configuration of state responsibilities. The primary responsibility of the political regime Cameron inherited was to respond to globalisation by seeking to entice (or retain) internationally mobile capital. This involved the privatisation of nationalised industries, reorienting monetary policy towards stability, creating a 'light touch' regulatory environment, maintaining tax competitiveness, and creating a flexible labour market with an adequate skills base. However, crucially, it also involved *uploading* responsibilities to supranational organisations, most controversially in the case of the EU, *downloading* responsibilities, most notably to sub-state institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the *lateral loading* of responsibilities to non-elected bodies including quangos and executive agencies, while a process of *offloading* has reoriented state-society relations towards communities, families and charities and to market mechanisms and business interests in particular. These responsibilities and relations have also been situated within, and justified by, a dominant neoliberal discourse. In an increasingly dealigned electorate, valence issues of competence and performance have driven electoral success. The electoral coalition underpinning the regime has accordingly been broad but centred upon coalitions of the aspirational and entrepreneurial in both the skilled working class and middle classes. As turnout has fallen, so electoral attention has shifted toward high-turnout groups,

particularly affluent and older voters.

However, a regime does not reorder previous relationships wholesale, but undertakes ‘‘layering’ [of] a new set of institutions on a mass of others that are already in existence’ (Nichols and Myers, 2010: 817). As such there are also a set of ‘deep’ sedimented imperatives underpinning this and prior regimes. These are embodied in a territorial politics prioritising the preservation of the political union between the nations of the UK, a political economy prioritising international trade and the interests of finance capital and a foreign policy which has sought British influence by maintaining a balance of power in Europe and, in the post-war period, commitment to the Anglo-American relationship.

To identify Cameron’s stance towards this regime we systematically reviewed all his speeches as Leader of the Opposition. These reveal an equivocal stance towards previous governments. Cameron criticised Labour under Blair for ‘dumbing down’ the education system, demoralising NHS workers, transferring powers to the EU without sufficient democratic warrant and disengaging voters by ‘spin’. But there was also praise for Labour’s commitments to improve public service standards, the minimum wage and the Bank of England’s operational independence. Furthermore, Cameron sought to distance himself from his Thatcherite inheritance stating that ‘there is such a thing as society, it’s just not the same thing as the state’ and fashioning himself as the ‘heir to Blair’. Indeed, Cameron borrowed heavily from Blairite conceptions of a globalised world – a vision of a transforming world economy, driven by technological advance, demanding a modernisation process capable of re-synchronising politics, society and economy – but also an insistence upon a concerted international response to impending environmental disaster and the spread of radical Islam.

Cameron's primary innovation was the notion of the 'post-bureaucratic age' (Finalyson 2011). This highlighted the transformative potential of technology to democratise access to information previously monopolised by bureaucracies, and to create informed and engaged citizens capable of 'co-producing' policy and holding government to account more effectively. Such notions informed the policy most prominent in Cameron's speeches throughout this period: the Big Society. This sought 'much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility… where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities' (Conservative Party 2010, 37). However, such rhetorical commitment to offloading produced few substantial proposals. 'Social Action Zones' – a Big Society take on Thatcher's Enterprise Zones – and the National Citizens Service – a programme to encourage social action among 16 and 17-year-olds – were the only noteworthy developments linked to the Big Society during this period. Plans to introduce a married couples tax break, stage a referendum on the EU Constitution, withdraw from the social chapter and, following the financial crisis, restore the Bank of England's regulation of financial markets and rein in public spending to address the mounting budget deficit received greater fanfare. But none of these commitments departed significantly from the existing political and institutional configuration of British politics. Indeed, many of Cameron's policy commitments in opposition were 'negative' commitments to scrap policies which Labour had, or planned to introduce, such as promises to abolish the Human Rights Act and ID cards.

Following Blair's resignation, Cameron's rhetoric became more antagonistic towards his successor. Brown was held responsible for 'sowing the seeds' of the financial crisis by restructuring financial market regulation and, compounding this error, abandoning Conservative spending plans after 1999. Accordingly, Treasury coffers were empty when the

financial crisis struck (Cameron 2008). Furthermore, by 2009 Cameron was discursively articulating the financial crisis as 'Labour's debt crisis'. This allowed him, for the first time since becoming leader, to establish a clear dividing line between Labour's profligacy, symbolised by 'spendaholic' Brown, and a reinvigorated and trustworthy Conservative Party. A determined effort followed to undermine Brown's leadership credentials on the grounds that his experience as Chancellor accounted for naught given a financial catastrophe of his own making.

However, the significance of Cameron's hardening rhetoric towards Labour after 2007 should not be overestimated. This is to be expected as an election nears and, more importantly, even at the height of the financial crisis Cameron made clear his objective was to rescue the political and institutional settlement that New Labour had imperilled. Cameron would defend the regime against statist solutions and leftist narratives which framed the financial crisis as a consequence of the withdrawal of the state from management of the economy. Furthermore, in office Cameron would not seek radical departures from the commitments of his Labour predecessors. The lineage of his government's economic, education and welfare policies, for example, could be traced back to New Labour. Cameron pursued what might be understood as 'Blairism after the crash'; policies which a New Labour government could have easily found itself pursuing in a climate of straitened public finances.

Regime vulnerability or resilience?

The question of regime vulnerability or resilience is a more difficult one to resolve. Firstly, Skowronek delivers retrospective verdicts. Contemporaneous assessments pose a greater challenge. Regime difficulties which appear clear after the event are often ambiguous at the

time (Hindmoor and McConnell 2013). Secondly, Skowronek's notion of regime vulnerability is poorly operationalised ('t Hart 2014a, 219; Hoekstra 1999; Nichols and Myers 2010; Polsky 2012). Regime vulnerability is a relatively undifferentiated phenomenon in Skowronek's account. Yet, it may manifest itself in various ways. For example, deep vulnerabilities may be evident across a narrow range of commitments. Alternatively, regime vulnerability may be shallower but present across many governing commitments. Indeed, Skowronek fails to provide clear criteria to identify the symptoms of regime vulnerability. Overall, it is hard to escape the conclusion that in Skowronek's account regime vulnerability is a residual and expansive condition.

If we reconceive Skowronek's two-by-two table as a graph on two axes (figure 1) we can begin to visualise that regime resilience or vulnerability is not a binary state but a matter of degree. This proposition is endorsed by Nichols and Myers (2010) who argue political regimes may enter an 'enervated' state of high entropy marked by growing incapacity to resolve political problems. Such conditions typically increase in intensity, igniting political crisis and opening up the potential for reconstructive change. However, such opportunities for reconstruction are not always taken or successfully realised. In such circumstances enervation increases and the resolution of regime vulnerability becomes a protracted process.

[Figure 1 about here]

A number of indicators signal an enervated regime. These include completion of the substantive programme upon which the regime is founded, decreasing cohesion within the coalition supporting the regime, the emergence of new issues and problems, an assertive opposition and a crisis atmosphere which calls into question the regime's philosophy and

competence and, finally, the increased salience of corruption scandals.

[Figure 2 about here]

Our assessment is that Cameron encountered a governing regime more vulnerable than any time since the early 1980s. Central to this vulnerability were the effects of the 2007-8 financial crisis. The recession proved longer than any since the Great Depression. Living standards only slowly recovered and coincided with an ongoing European sovereign debt crisis. Continuing misconduct, including Libor rate manipulation and assisting tax evasion, diminished faith in financial institutions. Tax avoidance by multi-nationals generated public dismay and political controversy. These political-economic regime vulnerabilities ran in parallel with institutional malaise elsewhere. A perception of disconnection between elites and the public was abroad. Surveys demonstrated continued distrust of politicians (Phillips and Simpson 2015). Parties hostile to the existing regime won unprecedented support and further compromised the regime. The SNP's rise and the 2014 independence referendum challenged the UK's territorial integrity. UKIP's success testified to a constituency of disaffected voters 'left behind' by recent governments and mobilised disaffection against the EU and immigration policy. Commitments beyond Britain's borders were also under question. Defence cuts and the legacies of Afghanistan and Iraq raised doubts about Britain's ability and willingness to intervene internationally. Faith in institutions mediating state-society relations also diminished (figure 1). Phone-hacking and the Leveson Inquiry laid bare the absence of ethical and political constraint upon the print media. This, and other episodes, also cast doubt on police ethics and competence.

That this represented an enervated regime is confirmed by Hay's characterisation of this

period as one of pathology without crisis (2013) and by the presence of several of Nichols and Myer's indicators. As noted above, Cameron's stance did not contemplate a new direction of political development; it defended a mature regime. The regime's political economic pathologies questioned the wisdom of offloading responsibilities to market mechanisms and diminished the legitimacy of the business interests associated with the regime. This also challenged the supporting discourse of neo-liberalism. Hostility toward the EU challenged the wisdom of uploading state responsibilities. This, and the increasing salience of other position issues such as immigration and sub-national identities, presented first order questions which the regime appeared ill-equipped to address. Moreover, the questions concerning the EU and territorial governance placed 'deep' regime commitments under question. In such circumstances, the coalition associated with the regime showed signs of fragmentation which were exploited by the SNP and UKIP.

So, we conclude, Cameron was an affiliate of an enervated regime. However, Crockett's (2012) work suggests that Cameron could be classified as a 'restoration' prime minister. For Crockett, 'restoration' presidents are 'late regime' affiliates, entering office a generation or more after the regime's foundation and a substantial interregnum of opposition party control. They task themselves with restoring the political regime to that envisaged by its founders. Superficially, Cameron might appear to fit this template. He entered office 31 years after Thatcher and after a thirteen-year period of Labour rule. However, as noted above, Cameron did not seek the restoration of the Thatcherite project. Rather, he distanced himself from significant aspects of his Thatcherite inheritance and accepted the greater part of New Labour's adaptations to that regime. Accordingly, we argue that Cameron is best classified as a disjunctive prime minister.

Characterising and evaluating the disjunctive premiership

Skowronek's account of disjunctive leadership is considerably less developed than those of the politics of articulation, reconstruction or pre-emption. He is nevertheless emphatic; it represents 'the very definition of the impossible leadership situation' (1993, 39) because, as regime affiliates, disjunctive presidents cannot repudiate existing governmental commitments. But equally, given the regime's vulnerability, they cannot convincingly affirm those same commitments either. They become 'consumed by a problem that is really prerequisite to leadership, that of establishing any credibility at all.' (1993, 39) They also possess fewer and weaker options to establish their authority. For Skowronek, 'Authority takes the form of a timely set of warrants addressed to the circumstances that brought the president to power, warrants that promise to justify and sustain the exercise of presidential power.' (2011, 84) For Skowronek only technocratic warrants are available to disjunctive presidents. They reify technique, claim a privileged insight into national problems and a special personal dedication to their resolution. Ultimately,

> Anything short of a miraculous solution will pass to the opposition effective control over the political definition of the situation… these affiliates stigmatize the current situation as wholly untenable... they become the foils for reconstructive leadership, the indispensable premise upon which traditional regime opponents generate the authority to repudiate the establishment wholesale. (1993, 40)

Yet, we should be cautious in assuming this dismal and deterministic trajectory applies to disjunctive British prime ministers. Firstly, the prime minister's greater authority makes it likely that 'disjunctive prime ministers will be less obvious failures than disjunctive presidents are.' (Laing and McCaffrie 2013, 87) Secondly, a disjunctive prime minister may

not automatically cede authority to opponents as Skowronek expects. British opposition parties determine their own positioning in political time. They will not inevitably pursue reconstructive politics and the regime will be less vulnerable if they affiliate to it. Thirdly, UK political regimes have tended to greater resilience than those in the US (see, for example, Gamble 2014, 31) and may persist for some considerable time before they are repudiated. Finally, it is possible that disjunctive prime ministers can command a wider range of warrants for authority than their presidential counterparts.

Identification of the characteristics and constraints of disjunctive leadership in Britain is therefore necessary. Like disjunctive presidents, we would expect disjunctive prime ministers to stake claims to governing authority on the basis of their personal expertise and governing approach. However, a wider range of warrants beyond those proposed by Skowronek should theoretically be available. Firstly, given regime vulnerability, we might expect disjunctive prime ministers to lower expectations by conveying the scale of national difficulties and the absence of straightforward solutions. Secondly, we might expect them to supplement their technocratic warrants with calls for national unity and reconciliation as the regime comes under strain.

Similarly, we anticipate several strategies to manage the vulnerable regime. One option is to buy time and wait out events in the hope that conditions will change. If such an option is not available then disjunctive prime ministers may pursue adaptive strategies to attempt to forestall crisis and reduce enervation, particularly policy u-turns and 'inter-paradigm borrowing' (Hay 2013, 23). Such strategies, however, invite dilemmas. U-turns erode claims to governing competence. Accusations of ideological inconsistency accompany inter-paradigm borrowing. Both may magnify the problems of party management confronting disjunctive prime ministers. Indeed, disjunctive prime ministers are likely to be viewed by

partisans as pragmatists adrift of ideological anchors. In such circumstances populist and maverick figures may emerge to focus disaffection with the established regime. Likewise, growing disillusion with the governing parties affiliated to the regime is likely to find expression in increased support for insurgent parties, generating further pressure upon the regime.

Evaluating Cameron's premiership

To evaluate Cameron's premiership we need to identify criteria to distinguish degrees of success among disjunctive prime ministers. In Skowronek's account disjunctive presidents clearly have scope to exercise individual agency. Carter is portrayed as more successful than Franklin Pierce in navigating the constraints of the disjunctive presidency, for example. However, it has been left to Laing and McCaffrie (2015) to develop a framework for more systematic evaluation of disjunctive presidents. Firstly, their personal success in attaining policy goals, personal popularity and, re-election can be assessed. Their ability to prepare for regime collapse and minimise electoral damage (partisan regime success) can also be gauged. Finally, disjunctive presidents can be distinguished by their normative success - upholding the Constitution and maintaining trust in government while engaging in policy experimentation that will benefit their successors.

This framework represents a significant advance on Skowronek's implication that the 'impossible leadership situation' inevitably begets failure. The distinction between personal and partisan regime success is particularly useful. For example, a personally popular disjunctive prime minister may dilute the toxic effects of disjunctive leadership on their party, secure re-election and forestall regime reconstruction. However, Laing and McCaffrie appear to share Skowronek's assumption that the emergence of a reconstructive alternative is

an inevitable outcome of a disjunctive presidency. As Nichols and Myers (2010) note, enervation may persist under a sequence of disjunctive leaders. It is also unclear why a disjunctive leader would attempt policy experiments to prepare for later regime change or why they would prioritise electoral damage limitation over efforts to rescue the existing regime.

Accordingly, here we advance our own criteria drawing upon our analysis of the disjunctive premiership. Our starting point is that disjunctive leaders will seek, wherever possible, to address their chief governing dilemma: to preserve the regime they are affiliated to. We do not expect a disjunctive prime minister to resolve the fundamental problems facing the regime. However, they should use what agency is available to them to maintain that regime and, if at all possible, stabilise it. Indeed, a particularly skilful exponent of disjunctive leadership may be able maintain a dysfunctional regime if not indefinitely, then at least for a prolonged period. Policy experimentation may be one tactic which profits disjunctive leaders, but it will be motivated by regime stabilisation rather than as an act of conscious grace for a reconstructive successor. They should seek to prevent enervation escalating into crisis but stand ready to deploy their crisis management skills to preserve the status quo. They should use their agency to frustrate reconstructive appeals emerging from their own, or opposition parties. Indeed, they should attempt to preserve the unity of the coalition of interests supporting the regime and resist attempts to shift the main axis of partisan cleavage. Such efforts are most likely to succeed if the prime minister can convincingly deploy the warrants for authority that they construct. A successful disjunctive prime minister would find their claims to authority accepted by their party, the electorate, the commentariat and perhaps even by opposition parties. In addition, their success will increase if they can avoid or manage the dilemmas characteristic to the disjunctive premiership identified above. Effective setting of

expectations, projection of a clear policy vision, effective party management and the marginalisation of maverick and populist critics are challenges which a successful disjunctive prime minister will meet.

Cameron's warrants to governing authority

Although Cameron possessed considerable political experience (Barber 2013) he doubtless recognised advising John Major, Norman Lamont and Michael Howard did not represent the best warrant for authority. Instead, Cameron stressed his personal determination to take tough decisions without hesitation. This particularly applied to addressing Britain's debt 'crisis' (see, for example, Cameron 2010b; 2010e) but also grasping the nettle of relations with Europe (Cameron 2013) and confronting demands for Scottish independence (Cameron 2014a). Secondly, he emphasised how his personal values equipped him to take these tough decisions. For Cameron stabilisation and rehabilitation of the regime above all demanded promotion of responsibility. Deficit reduction demanded financial responsibility. Stabilisation of financial institutions required responsible behaviour by bankers. Only responsible action by communities, families and individuals would address social problems. A claim to personal competence only became plausible after some time in office. Here, opinion polls demonstrated that Cameron succeeded in convincing a majority of voters that he was a capable leader, particularly relative to his Labour counterparts. This formed a key component of the warrant Cameron advanced as his claim for a second term. He was a competent prime minister possessing a long-term economic plan (see, for example, Cameron 2014a).

Cameron also successfully deployed narratives embedded during the financial crisis. He entered office at 'a grave moment in the modern history of Britain' (Cameron 2012), facing

'the worst inheritance of any incoming government for at least sixty years' (Cameron 2010b) with 'public finances that can only be described as catastrophic' (Cameron 2010c). These narratives served several purposes. They lowered expectations and disassociated Cameron from responsibility for causing the nation's economic difficulties. They provided political cover when growth and deficit reduction targets were missed. They also hampered Labour's efforts to restore its economic credibility. Cameron and Osborne consequently enjoyed a significant opinion poll lead on economic matters throughout the 2010-15 parliament with voters assigning primary responsibility for the UK's economic difficulties to Labour.

Cameron accompanied warnings of national peril with claims to act in the national rather than partisan or sectional interest. This served as the public rationale for coalition until 2015. He and Clegg were 'political leaders who want to put aside party differences and work hard for the common good and for the national interest' (Cameron 2010d) particularly to secure the stability demanded by financial markets. Cameron also presented his austerity measures as national rather than sectional. He would claim in June 2010, 'We are not driven by some theory or some ideology. We are doing this as a government because we have to, driven by the urgent truth that unless we do so, people will suffer and our national interest will suffer too.' (Cameron 2010e)

However, several of Cameron's warrants appeared less compelling after five years in office. His claim to serve national rather than partisan or sectional interests was eroded. Abolition of the 50p top rate of tax was presented as benefitting Conservative ministers, donors and core voters (see HC Deb (2012-13) 560 cols. 948-949). Criticism grew that austerity measures disproportionately affected the most vulnerable. Indeed, Labour gained some traction with its ambitions to create a fairer Britain and robustly challenge sectional interests (see, for

example, Miliband 2012). By the 2015 election, the public grew sceptical of Cameron's claim to serve the national interest: 65% believed Cameron was out of touch with ordinary people by April 2015.

Cameron and the dilemmas of disjunctive leadership

As noted above, disjunctive prime ministers often struggle to establish a clear policy vision. Constant reiteration of the parlous conditions in which he governed carried the risk that audiences grew deaf to Cameron's other objectives; 'Too often we've given the impression that we're just about fixing problems rather than changing things for a purpose.' (Cameron 2014b) If Cameron succeeded in establishing deficit reduction as his duty, he failed to convey a more positive vision. Enthusiasm for the 'Big Society' faded quickly and Cameron switched to a vision of British success in 'the global race' (see Cameron 2012). Neither gained traction with the commentariat, the public, or Conservative MPs.

Cameron also fell victim to avoidable errors, policy failures and noticeable u-turns. A sequence of errors and retreats in the government's first year led to complaints about a lack of 'grip' and competence by No.10. However, a strengthened centre, including a u-turn on the self-imposed limit on the numbers of special advisers, failed to halt the sequence of mis-steps. In economic policy, the 2012 Budget descended into an 'omnishambles'. The 2012 Autumn Statement acknowledged the deficit would not be cleared before the end of the parliament. By 2013 the AAA credit rating that Cameron had pledged to defend had been surrendered. Targets to reduce immigration to 'tens of thousands' were predictably (Bale and Hampshire 2012) missed. Universal Credit, the centrepiece of welfare reform, was serially delayed. Yet, such difficulties did not significantly damage Cameron's personal reputation

during his first term for several reasons. Firstly, Cameron possessed accomplished presentational skills exceeding those of many of his disjunctive predecessors (see, for example, Hurd 1979, 81). Secondly, he did not confront a more dynamic, resolute or capable Leader of the Opposition with the instinct to capitalise on such incompetence (Bale 2015, 262). Thirdly, the print media remained broadly sympathetic. If some Conservative supporting newspapers were hostile to Cameron, they reserved greater vitriol for Ed Miliband.

With 35% of all divisions witnessing rebellions by coalition MPs, the 2010-15 parliament was the most rebellious since 1945 (Cowley 2015). Many of these rebellions had little lasting significance. However, several demonstrated fundamental divisions within Conservative ranks. Large scale rebellions on an EU referendum and the EU budget signalled the hardening of Eurosceptic opinion. Defeat on military intervention in Syria undermined Cameron's authority on foreign policy. Many Conservative parliamentarians were furious that the Liberal Democrats secured a referendum on AV and 91 rebelled against House of Lords reform. The majority of Conservative MPs refused to support same-sex marriage revealing a conflict between Cameron's social liberalism and the social conservative plurality in his parliamentary party (Heppell 2013a). Indeed, for many in his party, Cameron seemed an inauthentic voice of conservatism. Yet, without a consensus on a replacement and the failure of a well-organised faction to gain ascendancy (Norton 2015) Cameron escaped a leadership challenge.

Cameron also confronted maverick, populist politicians who secured considerable support. Both Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage developed iconoclastic appeals, projecting an authenticity and conviction which eluded the political class, Cameron included. Public

disagreements between Johnson and Cameron emerged on immigration, the 'bedroom tax' and transport policy. But beyond serving his own ambitions and the interests of London there was little evidence of a coherent alternative prospectus. While confined to City Hall he represented a distraction rather than a menace to Cameron. In contrast, Cameron struggled to find an effective strategy to counter UKIP. Nigel Farage staked a claim to reconstructive leadership as a tribune for those alienated from mainstream parties and the existing regime. While Farage threatened other parties, Conservative voters (Ford, Goodwin, and Cutts 2012), members (Webb and Bale 2014) and parliamentarians were all potentially drawn towards UKIP. Here Farage outbid Cameron with a demand for an immediate EU referendum and was well positioned to attack missed immigration targets. Together these issues provided Farage with a platform to question Cameron's capacity to deliver his warrant to serve the national interest. However, given the alienation from mainstream politics felt by many UKIP supporters it wasn't clear that a more viable alternative to Cameron's strategy of appeasing UKIP was available, or that another Conservative leader could discover it (Ford and Goodwin 2014, 283-4).

Cameron and regime vulnerability

Harold Wilson bemoaned that 'Crises are not in the habit of forming queues.' (Wilson 1979, 20) Cameron proved more fortunate. The regime vulnerability he encountered was characterised by 'a domino effect' (Richards and Smith 2014, 3). The various institutional and political calamities of 2010-15 largely followed a sequence. The emergence of a 'hybrid media system' assisted Cameron here. Critical stories gained traction more quickly but also tended to burn out much faster (see Chadwick 2013, 64). But most significantly, Cameron's mainstream political opponents did not fashion these episodes into a compelling

reconstructive narrative. Miliband capitalised upon some of Cameron's strategic dilemmas and errors and set the political agenda on some issues, particularly energy prices. However, Labour's positioning in political time assisted Cameron in managing an enervated regime. Although Labour's growth strategy appeared to promise a radical transition from Anglo-American capitalism the party ultimately made a more cautious appeal to the electorate (Bale 2015). Labour consequently did not make a consistent or compelling case for political reconstruction.

In exercising his own agency in regime management, Cameron's 'essay crisis' mode of leadership quickly became a cliché. On this account Cameron rose to the occasion when crisis loomed but quickly returned to 'stand-by mode' (Behr 2011). But what was perceived as detachment was actually part of the strategic repertoire of a disjunctive prime minister: a desire to stabilise the situation in the short-term in the hope that conditions will change in the future. Such a strategy nevertheless had mixed success. Cameron failed to ride out the phone-hacking scandal and save Andy Coulson but he succeeded in consigning the Leveson Inquiry's less welcome recommendations to limbo.

Despite initial success in minimising centre-periphery conflict (Convery 2014), the Union became significantly more vulnerable by 2015. In the absence of a counter-factual it is impossible to assess whether denying the SNP a two-question referendum and agreeing to a two-year timescale for the referendum was a strategic error. Moreover, Cameron's responsibility for the pro-Union referendum campaign was limited. With the exception of the last minute intervention to 'vow' additional powers, Conservative toxicity in Scotland relegated Cameron to a bystander. Nevertheless, the Yes victory was much less emphatic than had been anticipated and, in spite of their defeat, the SNP's membership and support

continued to grow. In this context, the 'wicked problems' of the Barnett Formula and the West Lothian Question could not remain quarantined, nor could a second independence referendum be foreclosed.

Cameron's greatest success was buying time on the economy. He effectively magnified the regime's economic difficulties on entering office. These did not justify the apocalyptic billing they received. For example, the coalition inherited a deficit that was the smallest in the G7 as a proportion of GDP. Most UK debt was long-term and held domestically meaning that a replay of the Greek, Spanish, Portuguese or Irish crises was always unlikely. Nevertheless, economic growth slumped after Cameron took office. It took until 2014 for the economy to surpass its pre-crisis peak and the timetable for deficit reduction was amended. But economic growth had strengthened and unemployment had fallen significantly in time for the 2015 election. Cameron's ambitions to rebalance the economy away from reliance on debt and personal consumption nevertheless made little progress (Berry and Hay 2014). A long-term solution to the underpinning vulnerabilities of the UK's political economy remained to be discovered.

The downfall of a disjunctive prime minister

That Cameron secured a second term at the 2015 general election was a marker of how successfully, overall, he had performed as a disjunctive prime minister during his first term. Following the 2015 election it was not impossible to imagine he might escape the constraints of disjunctive politics and become a second term orthodox innovator or reconstructive leader. For a prime minister, political time can change during their tenure. Regime vulnerability may change whether as a result of prime ministerial agency or changing structural conditions.

Prime ministers may revise or advance new warrants for authority. Prime ministers may move within and possibly between the quadrants of Figure 1 over time.

However, for Cameron to have become an orthodox innovator would demand a degree of regime resilience that he failed to engineer in his first term. Cameron failed to resolve the pathologies of an enervated regime. He also failed to construct a new electoral coalition. While a triumph over expectations, 36.8% of the vote and a majority of twelve did not compare with the electoral authority secured by reconstructive prime ministers like Attlee and Thatcher. Cameron was the least-worst alternative for many voters and his success rested upon his opponent's misfortunes - his coalition partners' electoral collapse (providing 27 of 37 Conservative gains) and Labour's disintegration in Scotland. Secondly, Cameron did not construct new warrants for authority that would support reconstruction. He appealed to 'safety first', stressing competence and exploiting concerns about Labour's economic management and the threat of instability posed by the SNP.

Indeed, Cameron had limited authority to pursue reconstructive ambitions should he have possessed them. Many of the constraints encountered in his first term persisted. Party management remained a challenge; his second term government possessed a smaller Commons majority than that of the coalition. Defeats followed on the 'purdah' rules for the 2016 EU referendum and the relaxation of Sunday trading laws. Elsewhere, a series of u-turns and concessions followed on issues including tax credits, personal independence payments, pension tax relief, child refugees, academisation of schools, and the provision of a training programme for Saudi Arabian prisons.

However, the chief problem of Cameron's second term was Europe. Eurosceptic sentiment in

the UK had grown to new levels in the wake of the financial and Eurozone crises. In 2013 Cameron succeeded in buying time, finding a commitment to a referendum on renegotiated terms of membership served as a short-term basis for uniting most shades of opinion within his party. However, Cameron was also boxed in by this commitment. Consequently, renegotiation and the referendum came to dominate the political agenda after May 2015. This inhibited Cameron from developing any broader policy vision for his second term while the ensuing uncertainty threatened his warrant to deliver stability and reassurance to the markets.

Cameron's fundamental difficulty was that there was no guarantee that he could secure 'fundamental, far-reaching change' (Cameron, 2013) satisfactory to his party or the electorate. Reform proposals unveiled in November 2015 represented far less than this stated ambition to Eurosceptics (see, HC Deb (2015-16) 602 col. 232, 236). The settlement that followed in February 2016 in turn fell short of even these proposals, particularly in regard to free movement and access to benefits. The EU referendum campaign accordingly exposed divisions within Conservative ranks. A fifth of the Cabinet and two-fifths of Conservative MPs rejected Cameron's renegotiation. The referendum also provided a platform for populist, anti-establishment politics. Cameron now not only had to counter the populist appeal of Nigel Farage and UKIP, but also that of Boris Johnson who, having returned to Westminster at the 2015 election, took on a leading role in the 'leave' campaign.

Whereas Cameron emerged victorious in the 2011 AV referendum and, less convincingly, the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the electorate rejected his renegotiated EU deal by a margin of 52% to 48%. Cameron bore responsibility for initiating the referendum, for failing to manage expectations regarding the renegotiation, for agreeing a deal which failed to satisfactorily address key Eurosceptic concerns and, at least in part, for a lacklustre remain

campaign. However, once set in train, Cameron's decisions also unleashed longer-run and structural forces beyond both his control and the capacity of the political regime to address – namely the growing salience of immigration as a political concern and the alienation of those 'left behind' by the economic and social changes associated with this political regime.

The result, inevitably, meant the end of Cameron's premiership. At the moment of his resignation the political regime which he had affiliated to was left in a position of profound vulnerability. A degree of political uncertainty and division followed which had been unknown in British politics since the 1970s, perhaps even since the 1930s. Beyond the immediate market volatility lay the uncertainty and political challenges associated with years of withdrawal negotiations which would reverse the uploading of state responsibilities to the EU undertaken over forty-three years. Questions now surfaced which placed many regime commitments, some long sedimented, under question. With Scotland having voted to remain, the prospect of a second independence referendum grew. Significant implications also followed for Northern Ireland given the centrality of European integration to the Good Friday Agreement and the prospect of a hard border with the Republic of Ireland. The referendum also generated a profound dilemma of reconciling the desire of Britain's financial services industry to maintain its access to the EU single market with the desires for control of immigration and repatriation of sovereignty expressed by supporters of the 'leave' campaign.

Conclusion: David Cameron in political time

Cameron and his acolytes held an undisguised admiration for Tony Blair and Labour's modernisers. Yet, his standing within his own party was also often assessed by reference to Margaret Thatcher (Evans 2010). Our argument is that both represent ill-judged comparisons

to evaluate Cameron's premiership. British prime ministers find their leadership qualities tested in different circumstances and Thatcher and Blair were situated in different points in political time to Cameron, with different options available to them in terms of the management of the political regime. Viewed through the lens of Skowronek's political time model, Cameron was a disjunctive prime minister between 2010 and 2016, best evaluated alongside others, like Heath (1970-74), Wilson (1974-76) and Callaghan (1976-79), who were affiliated to a vulnerable regime.

Cameron inherited an enervated regime. During his first term, he negotiated the constraints and challenges of disjunctive leadership relatively successfully. He effectively deployed many of the warrants to authority he constructed. He fostered an image of competence relative to his rivals. He disassociated himself from responsibility for many regime failings and lowered expectations effectively. He was able to claim credit for strengthening economic growth and forestalled potentially regime changing reforms including electoral reform and statutory regulation of the press. However, his claim to prioritise national above sectional and partisan interests did not survive untarnished. Cameron also failed to escape many of the dilemmas of disjunctive leadership. His party was divided and his government committed a series of policy mistakes and u-turns. In his second term Cameron faced the challenge of meeting the expectations he had generated on the issue of renegotiation on EU membership. This was to prove a challenge beyond the skills of disjunctive leadership he demonstrated between 2010 and 2015, particularly because it placed stresses on the fault lines running below the political regime. The result was a political earthquake. His successor, Theresa May, inherited a regime at best in a heightened state of enervation, at worst tipped into a state of political crisis.

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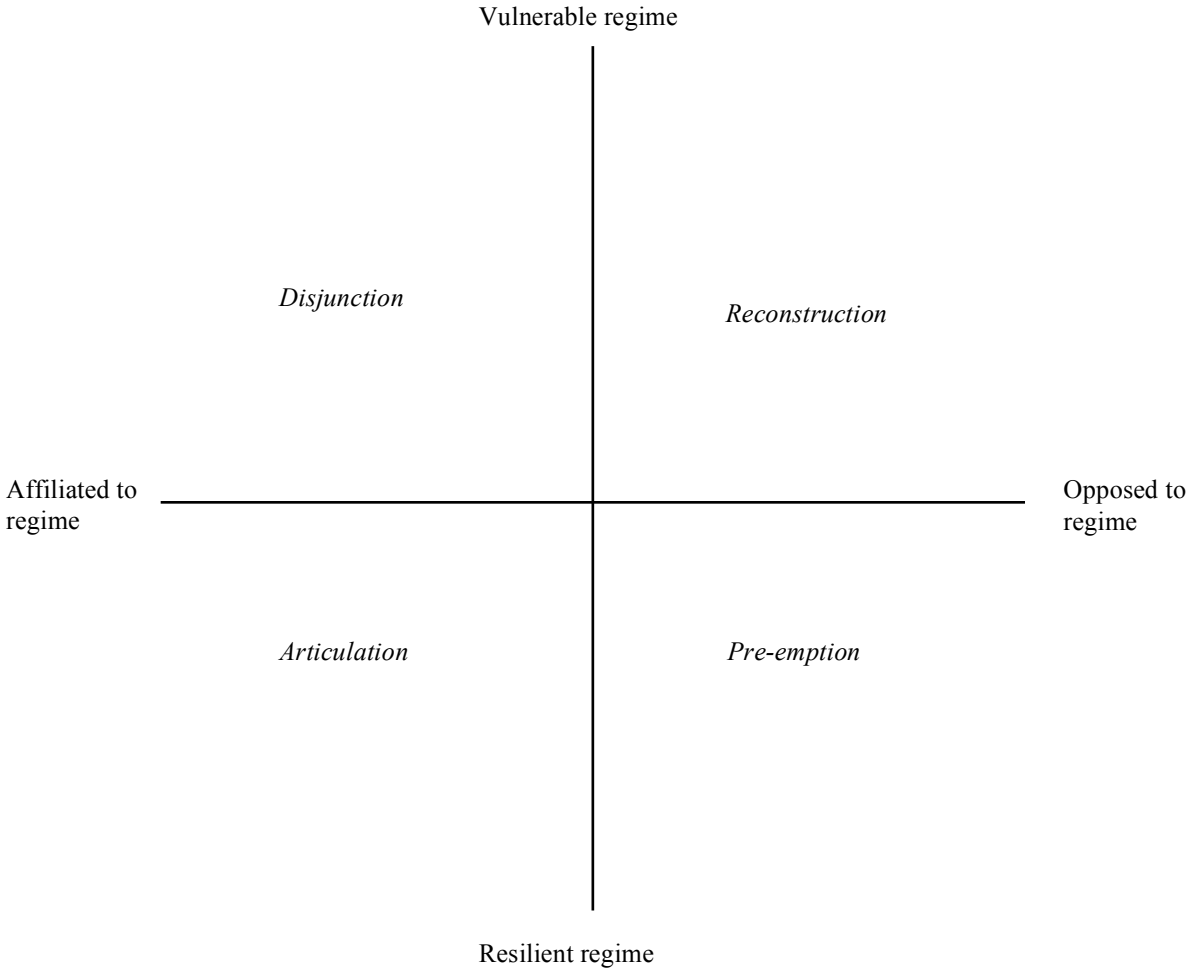
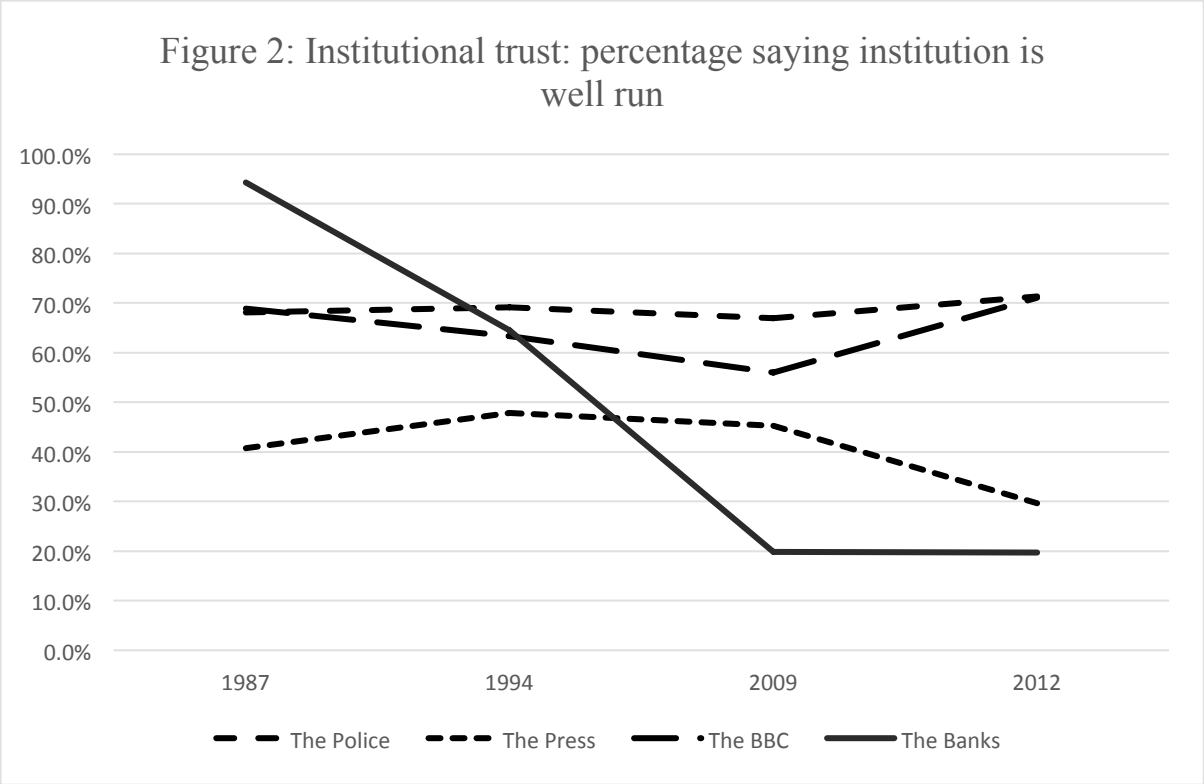
Table 1. Skowronek's typology of leaders, regimes and patterns of politics

	Affiliated leader	**Opposed leader**
Resilient regime	Articulation	Pre-emption
Vulnerable regime	Disjunction	Reconstruction

Figure 1: Regime Vulnerability and Affiliation in Political Time





Source: British Social Attitudes Surveys