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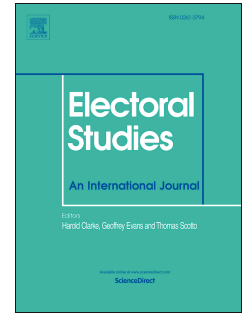
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Feelings about party leaders as a voter's heuristic – what happens when the leaders change? A note

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ABSTRACT
Recent analyses of voting at British general elections deploy a valence theory according to which electors evaluate each party's performance and policies and vote accordingly. Many voters, however, avoid at least some of the effort involved in assembling and assessing information about parties' policies and instead use heuristics such as their feelings about the party leaders as major determinants of their decisions. When party leaders are changed, therefore, differences in voters' feelings about predecessor and successor could lead to changes in party choice. That argument is tested for the 2015 and 2017 British general elections in England, between which all three largest parties changed their leader, with results entirely consistent with the argument. In addition, there were significant changes in feelings about the new party leaders during the six weeks of the 2017 campaign, and these too were linked to final voting choices in the expected directions.

KEYWORDS   Voting, England, Heuristics, Party Leaders, Feelings

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ABSTRACT

Recent analyses of voting at British general elections deploy a valence theory according to which electors evaluate each party's performance and policies and vote accordingly. Many voters, however, avoid at least some of the effort involved in assembling and assessing information about parties' policies and instead use heuristics such as their feelings about the party leaders as major determinants of their decisions. When party leaders are changed, therefore, differences in voters' feelings about predecessor and successor could lead to changes in party choice. That argument is tested for the 2015 and 2017 British general elections in England, between which all three largest parties changed their leader, with results entirely consistent with the argument. In addition, there were significant changes in feelings about the new party leaders during the six weeks of the 2017 campaign, and these too were linked to final voting choices in the expected directions.

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1.   Introduction

Several recent studies of British elections have deployed a valence theory of voting in which electors assess each party's performance and policies on what to them are the most important contemporary issues, and make their decisions accordingly (Clarke et al., 2004, 2009; Whiteley et al., 2013). Such decision-making procedures are demanding on voters' time and information-gathering-and-evaluation abilities, however. Many are either unwilling or unable to make substantial investments in such calculations, Achen and Bartels (2016, 277) stressing (largely in the context of American voting behaviour) 'the sheer magnitude of most people's ignorance about politics' and their 'mistaken beliefs' when they make voting decisions.

To reduce or circumvent the effort associated with acquiring and assessing information, analysts have suggested that (some) voters deploy cognitive shortcuts called heuristics to make their evaluations. For instance, they may use their feelings about the party leaders as shortcuts in their decisions on which party to support.[1] According to Clarke et al. (2009, 18), most voters are 'cognitive misers' who use leadership cues 'to avoid the costs of gathering and processing large amounts of complicated and often contradictory information'; elsewhere they argue that '...the use of "fast and frugal" heuristics... allows people to make effective decisions while at the same time greatly reducing the costs and extent of information processing. ... Fast and frugal information processing greatly minimizes decision-making costs' (Clarke et al., 2013, 5).[2] In such situations voters ask themselves whether they like or dislike each party leader – and by how much – and vote accordingly (Brady and Sniderman, 1985). In short, voters may simply be 'looking for 'a safe pair of hands' to steer the ship of state' to ease the cognitive burden of processing complex political information (Clarke et al., 2009, 49).

Analyses of UK surveys of general election voting sustain this argument. In 2001, for example, the largest positive predictor of voting for the Labour Party was feelings about Tony Blair, the incumbent

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[1] On heuristics generally see Kahneman et al. (1982); Popkin (1991); Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock (1991).
[2] The phrase 'fast and frugal' is taken from Gigerenzer's classic work on heuristics (Gigerenzer and Todd, 1999; Gigerenzer et al., 2011).

Prime Minister. It was the same with the other two major parties: the largest significant predictor of voting for each was survey respondents' feelings about their respective leaders (Clarke et al, 2004, 113-116). This general finding also held at the 2005 (Clarke et al., 2009, 172-172), 2010 (Whiteley et al., 2013) and 2015 general elections (Clarke et al., 2016), as well as at the 2011 referendum on reform of the voting system (Whiteley et al., 2013, Chapter 7).

Given those strong findings it should follow that if a party changes its leader, differences in feelings regarding the predecessor and successor could be important influences on subsequent voting behaviour. The pair of UK general elections held only two years apart in 2015 and 2017 – separated by the 2016 referendum at which the country voted by a small majority to leave the European Union – provides an excellent case study to evaluate that suggestion, given that each of the three parties which contested all of the British constituencies at each contest changed their leader between the two polls. The Labour and Liberal Democrat leaders – Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg – resigned immediately after their defeats at the 2015 election, being replaced by Jeremy Corbyn and Tim Farron respectively. David Cameron resigned as Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative party immediately after the announcement of the 2016 referendum result, having pressed for the UK to remain within the EU; he was replaced by Theresa May.

Both Corbyn and, to a lesser extent, May represented a substantial shift of opinion within their respective party. Corbyn was situated on the left of the Labour party, had never held government office, and was renowned as a serial rebel against the party's policies, which led many voters to question his credibility as a potential Prime Minister. The anti-austerity policies he promoted when campaigning for the leadership in 2015 and again, facing a challenge, in 2016 differed substantially from his predecessor's on a number of major issues, and in presenting them to the country at the 2017 general election he gained considerable support, especially among younger voters. May, a supporter, like Cameron, of the UK remaining within the EU, interpreted the referendum result as requiring what became known as a relatively 'hard Brexit' and also presented herself as more interventionist in economic and social policies than her predecessor – seeking support among those she identified as the 'just about managing'. Farron largely continued with Clegg's policies – notably strong support for remaining in the European Union – but was more conservative on a number of social issues such as abortion and gay marriage (Farron is a born-again Evangelical Christian: Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018, 100; Curtice, 2018, 60).

These major changes between the 2015 and 2017 general elections provide a valuable test-bed for evaluating a working hypothesis that voters' relative opinions of a party's previous and current leaders would be significantly related to any changes in their voting behaviour between the two elections. In addition, the nature of the six-week campaign in 2017 and changes in the relative popularity of both May and Corbyn as they promoted their policies and manifestos to the electorate suggest that feelings about them may have altered considerably over that short period and been reflected in voters' final decisions on which party to support. These arguments are tested here using data from the 2015 and 2017 British Election Study panel survey which enables us to track changes in both respondents' feelings about party leaders and their voting behaviour at the two general elections.

2. Liking and disliking

The data used in these tests are taken from the immediate post-election surveys of the BES's internet panel study[3] in which respondents were asked how they had voted at the election that had

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[3] On the BES surveys go to http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/news-category/2017-general-election/.

just taken place and their feelings about each of the party leaders then, the latter on an 11-point scale.[4] The questions asked, following Brady and Sniderman, were:

How much do you like or dislike each of the following party leaders?

These used a 0-10 scale (where 0 represented dislike and 10 represented like); they were re-coded to a 1-11 scale, to avoid dividing by zero when computing change ratio variables. Because of the different party systems in the three countries of Great Britain, and in particular because neither Plaid Cymru nor the Scottish National Party changed their leader between the two elections, we analyse voters in England only: data indicating their feelings about all six leaders (three at each election) were available for 13,765 respondents.[5] Because of the major change in the party's support between 2015 and 2017, when it contested many fewer seats than at the previous contest so that not all voters had the opportunity of voting UKIP then, we analyse UKIP's experience separately.

Table 1 shows the percentage distributions of the feelings variables for each of the six English leaders immediately after the relevant general election (i.e. for Cameron, Miliband and Clegg immediately after the 2015 contest and for May, Corbyn and Farron immediately after the 2017 election). All six of the distributions are non-normal with between one-fifth and two-thirds of survey respondents giving them the lowest rating, indicating dislike (i.e. a rating of 1), but the six leaders differed substantially in the percentages giving them high scores (hence measures of central tendency and dispersion obscure the patterns). Comparing the two Conservative leaders, for example, Cameron was in general slightly more liked than May; both had a modal score (above those giving only 1 on the revised 1-11 scale) of 8, but whereas 24.4 per cent of all respondents gave Cameron an even higher rating only 17.6 per cent did so for May. Views about Corbyn were more polarised than for Miliband: Corbyn obtained the largest percentage of all six leaders getting the highest rating, but he also obtained the largest percentage getting the lowest rating.[6] Of the two Liberal Democrat leaders, Clegg was more popular than Farron, but few – no doubt reflecting the widespread antipathy to his party in 2015 after it had spent five years in government coalition with the Conservatives – gave either very high ratings.

Of more interest with regard to voting behaviour in 2017, after the leadership changes, are the separate feelings of those who voted for each of the parties in 2015. These percentages are in Table 2. Among those who voted Conservative in 2015, feelings towards Cameron then were in general substantially more positive than those towards May two years later: whereas over half gave Cameron a rating of 9 or greater, only just over one-third did so for May. If May performed badly relative to her predecessor, on the other hand, almost the reverse was the case for the two Labour

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[4] The data are taken from a panel study with the respondents interviewed in 2017: (1) immediately after the (unexpected) election was called; (2) once (as part of a sub-sample) during the campaign; and then (3) immediately after the election: respondents were asked their feelings about the party leaders in all three surveys. The post-election rather than the pre-campaign feelings variables are analysed here because they reflected the respondents' views of the leaders within only a few days at most after they had voted. It may be that some respondents' feelings about the leaders changed after the election result was known but – especially given, as discussed below, changes in feelings about the leaders during the campaign – they provide a better appreciation of voters' views about them at the time they voted than do their pre-campaign feelings.

[5] Analyses of Scotland would have been especially difficult because three parties there changed not only their leader in Westminster but also their leader in Scotland: only the SNP did not change its leader. The Scottish leaders were important in the 2017 campaign there – notably Ruth Davidson for the Conservatives – but there were no questions in the BES regarding like-dislike of those local leaders. In addition, because the questions about the PC and SNP leaders were only asked of Welsh and Scottish respondents respectively, there would have been a major missing values issue if we had included them in the analyses alongside those from England.

[6] Corbyn's ratings increased considerably during his successful 2017 campaign: before that began he was widely considered unsatisfactory as a potential Prime Minister.

leaders, with Corbyn again scoring the largest percentage giving any leader a maximum rating. Finally, Clegg was much more popular in 2015 among Liberal Democrat supporters then than Farron was two years later among the same voters.

Each voter's relative opinion of each party's pair of leaders was assessed by calculating the ratio between the rating given to the 2017 leader to that for the 2015 leader: a ratio greater than 1.0 indicated a more positive feeling about the former; a ratio less than 1.0 indicated a relative preference for the previous leader. Table 3 shows the distribution of those ratios, both for all respondents and for those who voted for the relevant party in 2015. Both the mean and the median of the distribution for Conservative supporters at the first contest are less than 1.0, indicating that on average May was less popular than Cameron. Corbyn was much more popular than Miliband among Labour supporters, although the skewness of the distribution (a mean of 1.28 but a median of 1.11) suggests considerable polarisation in relative views about the two (the standard deviation for Labour supporters' relative feelings is more than twice that for their Conservative contemporaries). Finally, on average Liberal Democrat 2015 supporters rated Clegg and Farron about the same, though again with a relatively large standard deviation.[7]

3. Changing leaders, changing likes-dislikes, and voting heuristics

If the general argument advanced here regarding the use of feelings about party leaders as a voting heuristic – extending that introduced by Clarke and his colleagues – is viable, then survey respondents' changes in feelings about a party's two leaders should be related to their voting behaviour in 2017 compared to 2015. The expectation is that among those who voted for a party in 2015, the higher their rating of the 2017 leader relative to her/his 2015 predecessor, the greater the probability that they would vote for the party again; if they rated the 2017 leader of one of the other parties more favourably than her/his predecessor, however, the greater the probability of them switching their support to the latter party. More formally:

> The probability of a voter who supported party *X* at election 1 voting for party *X* again at election 2 should be positively related to the ratio of feelings for party *X*'s leader at election 2 to feelings for its leader at election 1, and negatively related to the ratios of feelings for the other two party leader pairs; and

> The probability of a voter who supported party *X* at election 1 voting for party *Y* at election 2 should be negatively related to the ratio of feelings for party *X*'s leader at election 2 to feelings for the leader at election 1, and positively related to the ratio of feelings for party *Y*'s two leaders.

These two hypotheses are tested here using binary logistic regression: the dependent variable is coded 1 if the respondent voted for the named party at the 2017 election and the three independent variables are the three leader feelings ratios. Analyses are undertaken separately for those who voted Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat in 2015 (i.e. omitting those who abstained then or who voted for UKIP – see below – and other parties). This modelling strategy allows full exploration of differences between supporters of the three parties in the relative importance of the feelings ratios as influences on their 2017 voting decisions which a single model – such as a multinomial logistic regression – would not.[8]

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[7] Although in each case the mean feeling is larger among all voters than among those who supported the relevant party in 2015 that is not the case with the median: Corbyn:Miliband ratios suggest that Corbyn was less well-liked among non-Labour voters than he was by those who voted for Miliband in 2015.

[8] Such a model has been run, and is successful overall in predicting the 2017 outcome from the 2015 voting pattern plus the three ratio variables (the Nagelkerke pseudo-R^2 is 0.72); however, this is unsurprising since

In those analyses no 'control variables' were included, such as the standard socio-demographic characteristics included in many British voting studies. Such controls are, in effect, already included in the models because they underlie the pattern of voting in 2015, which is held constant in the regressions; since most voters supported the same party in 2017 as 2015, their inclusion in the models would have involved an element of 'double-counting' and, through collinearity, potentially confounded the relationships that characterise the hypotheses being tested (Johnston et al., 2017). One possible influence on voting in 2017, however, might have been how respondents voted in the referendum on whether the UK should leave the European Union, which was held in 2016 half-way between the two general elections (on which see Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Johnston et al., 2018). Those who voted to Leave might have been more inclined to vote for the Conservative party, a substantial number of whose MPs did so (several Conservatives – including Cabinet Ministers and ex-Cabinet Ministers – were prominent pro-Leave campaigners) than for either the Liberal Democrats (who strongly favoured the Remain option) or Labour (almost all of whose MPs did); further, the Conservatives' 2017 campaign pledge reiterated May's 'Brexit means Brexit' catchphrase. Including a dummy variable representing whether the respondent voted Leave rather than Remain in 2016 (obtained from the relevant wave of the BES panel survey) did prove statistically significant in all of the models – those who voted Leave were significantly more likely to vote Conservative in 2017 however they voted in 2015; those who voted Remain were significantly more likely to vote either Labour or Liberal Democrat – but the inclusion of this extra variable only slightly increased the models' goodness-of-fit and the coefficients for the feelings ratios altered at most only very slightly (indicating no collinearity and confounding effects). Those results are not reported here, where the focus is on the independent variables specified in the hypotheses.

Table 4 reports the regression coefficients plus (in brackets) their standard errors and exponents, with those that are statistically significant at the 0.05 level or better indicated in bold. In general the goodness-of-fit is relatively small, probably indicative of both the impact of likely measurement error in the provision of ratings on an eleven-point scale, which will inflate the standard errors (Blackwell et al., 2017). The focus of these analyses is solely on the impact of differences in leader evaluations, however, and the results are in line with expectations.

Table 4's first block of regressions refers to those who voted Conservative in 2015. There was a substantial positive coefficient for the May:Cameron ratio and voting Conservative again in 2017 – the stronger the approval of May relative to Cameron the greater the probability of voting Conservative again in 2017; indeed the exponent of 22.2 indicates that for every one-point increase in the May:Cameron feeling ratio there was a 0.222 increase in the probability of the respondent voting Conservative again in 2017. There were also significant negative coefficients for the rating ratios for the leaders of the other two parties: the stronger the feelings for Corbyn relative to Miliband, and for Farron relative to Clegg, the smaller the probability that those who voted Conservative in 2015 do so again in 2017 would do so again in 2017 (holding relative feelings regarding May and Cameron constant). Those patterns of vote-switching are confirmed by the regressions for voting either Labour or Liberal Democrat in 2017. For example, a negative coefficient of -3.0 (with an exponent of 0.5) for the May:Cameron ratio and a positive coefficient of 0.34 for the Corbyn:Miliband ratio indicate that the smaller the ratio of feelings for May relative to Cameron plus the warmer the feelings towards Corbyn relative to Miliband the greater the probability of a 2015 Conservative voter switching to Labour. (Those who disliked May more than they disliked Cameron

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the majority of voters supported the same party at both elections – for example, a respondent who voted for the Conservatives rather than the Liberal Democrats in 2015 was 67 times more likely to vote Conservative rather than Liberal Democrat in 2017. But such modelling of the general pattern does not uncover differences in, for example, the relative substantial impact and statistical significance of the Farron:Clegg ratio to the decisions of those who voted for each of the three parties in 2015 – differences that the separate analyses reported in Table 4 very clearly reveal.

were more likely than others to switch their support away from the Conservatives, especially if they liked Corbyn relative to Miliband.) Similarly the negative coefficient for the May:Cameron ratio and the positive coefficient for Farron:Clegg indicates the probability of a switch to the Liberal Democrats at the second contest was greater the cooler the feelings for May relative to Cameron and the warmer the feelings for Farron relative to Clegg.

Very similar patterns, again entirely in line with the hypotheses, characterise the 2017 choices of those who voted Labour and Liberal Democrat in 2015. Among former Labour supporters, the stronger their feelings for Corbyn relative to Miliband the greater the probability of them voting Labour again (a significant positive coefficient of 1.13 with an exponent of 3.09) and the smaller the probabilities of them voting either Conservative (a significant negative coefficient for the Crobyn:Miliband ratio of -2.25; an exponent of just 0.11) or Liberal Democrat (a coefficient of -0.82). Those who switched from Labour to the Conservatives had relatively more positive feelings about May compared to Cameron and those who switched to the Liberal Democrats had relatively strong feelings about Farron compared to Clegg. Finally among those who voted Liberal Democrat in 2015, those who felt relatively warm to Farron compared to Clegg were more likely to remain loyal to the party in 2017; those who felt relatively warm towards May compared to Cameron but not towards Farron compared to Clegg were significantly more likely to switch to the Conservatives in 2017, with those feeling relatively warm to Corbyn compared to Miliband more likely to shift to Labour.

These regressions reported in Table 4 are entirely in line with the hypotheses, therefore. Among those who voted for each of the three main parties in England in 2015, the warmer respondents felt towards its new leader compared to her/his predecessor the greater the probability – very substantially so in some cases – that they supported the party again in 2015. The less warm they felt towards the new leader relative to the old, however, the more likely they were to switch to one of the other parties, especially if they felt relatively warm towards its new leader.

3.1 UKIP's decline

One feature of the 2017 election in England compared to 2015 was the substantial decline in support for UKIP, whose vote share fell – as a consequence of both the outcome of the Brexit referendum in 2016 (the voters' decision to leave the EU was being implemented by May's Conservative government) plus leadership battles and failings within UKIP – from 14.2 per cent in 2015 to just 2.1 per cent two years later, when it contested 378 of the 650 constituencies compared to 624 in 2017. UKIP's leader at the time of the 2015 election, Nigel Farage, had a median feeling value of 9.0 among UKIP voters at that contest. He resigned as leader after the 2016 referendum – withdrawal from the EU was the party's major policy so he claimed his goal had been attained – and his successor by the time of the 2017 election, Paul Nuttall, was much less popular among former UKIP voters with a median feeling value of only 5.0. The median ratio of feelings for the two (Nuttall:Farage) was only 0.55 and only one-tenth of all 2015 UKIP voters rated Nuttall higher than Farage.

To test whether leader ratings influenced which party 2015 UKIP supporters voted for in 2017 a further set of regressions was estimated. Table 5 shows a general pattern in line with the hypotheses and the other results. A significant positive coefficient, with a large exponent (1.98), indicates that those with relatively high ratings of Nuttall compared to Farage were more likely to remain loyal to UKIP, and significant positive coefficients for each of the other ratios indicate that those who switched from UKIP to one of the other three parties had relatively strong feelings about their new leaders when compared to those who led the parties in 2015.[9]

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[9] An extension of the model to include how the respondents voted in the 2016 referendum showed a significant positive link between those who voted Leave in 2016 and those who voted UKIP again in 2017, but

4. Change during the campaign

Few British general election campaigns see much change in the relative popularity of the parties, but 2017 was an exception. When the election was called opinion polls showed that the Conservatives had about a 20-point lead over Labour, but that gap closed substantially, especially after each party published its manifesto, and it was only 2.4 points in the election result (Allen, 2018; Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018; Denver, 2018). May presented herself as a 'safe pair of hands' delivering the Brexit that a majority of voters had supported in the 2016 referendum, but came across badly in her campaign appearances and with some of her domestic policy proposals (Bale and Webb, 2018; Bartle, 2018; Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018; Shipman, 2017). Corbyn, meanwhile, campaigned strongly on a suite of anti-austerity policies significantly to the left of those promoted by his predecessor, which proved popular to not only the young voters who were mobilised to support Labour to a significantly greater extent than previously (Harrison, 2018) but also among many of those 'just about managing' who had voted for Brexit in 2016 (and some for UKIP in 2015) and whom some commentators thought might vote for the Conservatives in 2017 (Goes, 2018). Although among voters polled May remained the preferred best candidate for Prime Minister throughout the campaign, Corbyn closed the gap on her from more than 40 points in mid-April to around 15 at the time of the election (Allen, 2018; Denver, 2018).

These changes in the leaders' popularity over the campaign are clearly illustrated by the mean feeling values for each (on the 11-point scale) from the BES's pre-campaign survey, from the five sub-sample surveys conducted during each week of the campaign, and then the post-election survey (Figure 1). At the start of the campaign May's mean was on average 1.5 points larger than Corbyn's, but he rapidly closed the gap and by week 5 he was more liked than his Conservative opponent. Feelings about Farron hardly changed over the six weeks.

Were those changes in feelings about the leaders linked to voters' final choices? To find out, we calculated the ratio of each respondent's pre-election and post-election evaluations of each leader: a ratio greater than 1.0 indicated that the leader was more liked when the election was held than when it was called. Table 6 shows the mean ratios according to how the respondents stated that they intended to vote in the pre-campaign survey (i.e. at *t-1*) and then how they reported having voted in the post-election survey (i.e. at *t*). Among those who intended to vote Conservative when the election was called – the first row in the first block of data – the mean ratio for May was 0.86 among those who eventually voted for the Conservatives but only 0.70 among those who defected to Labour. Those defectors' feelings for Corbyn substantially increased over the campaign, as the first row in the second block shows: a mean of 2.63 (on the 11-point scale he was more than twice as popular when the election was held among those former Conservative voters as he was when it was called six weeks earlier) compared to 1.31 among those who remained loyal to the Conservatives. Similarly those who 'defected' to the Liberal Democrats from the Conservatives increased the 'warmth' of their feelings about Farron very substantially over the campaign (a mean ratio of 3.21) substantially more than those who voted Conservative in 2017 as they had in 2015 (a mean of 2.10).

As a final test of the argument that changes in feelings towards the leaders influenced those who switched support between the parties between their original voting intention and their final decision, Table 7 reports regressions (similar to those reported in Table 5) in which the dependent variable, for each set of voters according to their pre-campaign voting intention as reported in that wave of the panel survey, is the party voted for in 2017. The independent variables are the feelings ratios for each party leader reported in Table 6. Thus among those who intended to vote

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this made virtually no difference to either the model's goodness-of-fit or the other four regression coefficients, unsurprisingly since over 96 per cent of those who voted UKIP in 2015 voted Leave in 2016.

Conservative at the onset of the campaign, for example, the warmer their feeling towards May after the election relative to in the pre-campaign wave, the more likely they were to vote Conservative, whereas the warmer their feelings towards Corbyn in the pre-post campaign ratio the less likely they were to vote Conservative and the more likely they were to vote Labour.

Overall, the pattern of findings in Table 7 is consistent with the hypotheses. Whichever party respondents intended to support when the election as called, they were more likely to vote for that party the warmer their feelings towards its leader at the end of the campaign compared to at its outset (i.e. the regression coefficients are positive, with substantial odds ratios: 2.61 for intending Conservative voters, 2.31 for intending Labour voters, and 1.33 for intending Liberal Democrat voters). Similarly, those who switched from their vote intention during the campaign had significantly large and positive coefficients for the party they actually voted for indicating warmer feelings towards its leader after than before the campaign (e.g. of those who switched from Conservative to either Labour or Liberal Democrat there were significant regression coefficients of 0.50 and 0.19 for their changed feelings regarding Corbyn and Fallon respectively). Those positive coefficients were matched by negative ones for changed feelings about May (-1.82 and -0.76 for switchers to Labour and Liberal Democrat respectively), although that for switching to Liberal Democrat just failed to reach the 0.05 threshold for statistical significance.

The campaign mattered therefore in that, as Table 6 shows, not only did some voters change their feelings about the parties' leaders but those changes were influential on their final voting decisions. Those who switched their support to a party as well as those who remained loyal to it were much more likely to have increased the warmth of their feeling towards its leader than those who did not. Those who switched away from the party they initially intended to vote for had, on average, less warm feelings about its leader at the campaign's end than they did when it started.

5. Conclusions

Recent research has shown that British voters not only calculate the relative probable costs and benefits of the various electoral choices available to them but also that, when making those calculations, many rely on cues provided by the relevant party leaders and other important information providers (Clarke et al., 2018). Such heuristics as feelings about a party leader are apparently strong determinants – indeed often the strongest determinant – of whether to vote for that party.[10] It may be, however, that this incorporates some endogeneity, that some voters' evaluations of a party's programmes influence their feelings about its leader. A change of leaders thus offers a test of whether relative feelings about them independently influence an election outcome, although of course, as was the case in 2017 with some of the parties at least, feelings about a change of leader could be associated with feelings about a change in policies.

That was the situation at the 2017 UK general election: the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour's leader after the 2015 election was widely interpreted as the party moving to the left and the anti-austerity programme in its 2017 election manifesto reflected that; Theresa May's acceptance of and proposed means of implementing the 2016 referendum outcome plus the social policies she adumbrated in 2017 clearly distinguished her manifesto from David Cameron's in 2010 and 2015. Only with the Liberal Democrats was the change of leadership in 2015 not associated with

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[10] The strength of those relationships is illustrated by three binomial regressions of voting in 2017. For voting Conservative, feelings towards May (on the 1-11 scale) had a Nagelkerke R^2 of 0.71, whereas adding feelings towards the other two main party leaders increased it to 0.84. For voting Labour, feelings about Corbyn alone had a Nagelkerke R^2 of 0.68 and adding feelings regarding the other two increased it to 0.75. And for voting Liberal Democrat the respective Nagelkerke R^2 values were 0.26 for feelings about Farron and 0.34 for feelings about all three leaders then.

substantial policy changes. Endogeneity may remain an issue in 2017, therefore: the changes in leadership of the two main parties were linked to policy changes in the minds of the electorate.

That caveat being entered, nevertheless the findings reported here provide a clear endorsement of the argument that changes in voters' feelings towards a party's leaders were related to changes in how they voted between general elections held only two years apart. The more favourably they evaluated the new leader relative to her/his predecessor the more likely they were to remain loyal to the party; the more favourably they rated the new leader of another party relative to her/his predecessor the more likely they were to switch to that party. Vote switching between those two general elections was clearly influenced by views of the new party leaders. In addition, there was support-switching during the six-week election campaign during which feelings about the leaders of the two main parties changed considerably: as one's popularity waned and the other's waxed, so their respective party's standing in the polls changed. Importantly, evidence for the leadership heuristic appears strong over both the medium- and the short-term.

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Table 1.
Percentage distribution of like-dislike feelings about each party leader on an eleven-point scale (1 = dislike; 11 = like), all voters

	Cameron	May	Miliband	Corbyn	Clegg	Farron
1	25.3	23.8	25.8	28.1	21.2	22.6
2	6.4	7.1	9.1	6.3	8.1	8.8
3	5.9	7.1	9.3	6.1	8.4	10.3
4	5.3	6.5	8.1	5.7	9.1	11.1
5	4.9	5.9	7.3	5.2	8.4	9.9
6	7.9	11.0	10.9	7.8	13.2	16.5
7	8.1	9.1	8.3	5.8	9.7	8.5
8	11.8	11.8	8.8	9.0	10.2	6.6
9	11.5	8.8	6.2	9.0	6.4	3.4
10	6.4	4.0	2.7	6.3	3.0	1.3
11	6.5	4.8	3.7	10.8	2.2	1.0

Table 2.
Percentage distribution of like-dislike feelings about each party leader on an eleven-point scale (1 = dislike; 11 = like), voted for the leader's party in 2015

2015 Vote	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
	Cameron	May	Miliband	Corbyn	Clegg	Farron
1	0.5	3.3	2.3	5.8	2.8	6.5
2	0.3	1.5	1.8	1.8	1.5	3.8
3	0.7	3.0	3.0	2.4	2.9	5.0
4	0.8	4.0	4.3	2.7	3.0	8.0
5	1.9	5.7	6.6	3.5	5.7	9.6
6	5.7	12.7	13.9	7.8	10.9	18.7
7	10.1	13.9	14.8	7.4	11.7	16.1
8	21.1	22.4	19.2	13.7	21.6	15.2
9	25.8	18.5	15.7	16.7	17.7	8.8
10	15.7	7.7	7.6	13.2	12.1	4.6
11	17.3	9.3	10.8	24.8	10.2	3.7

Table 3.
Frequency distribution parameters for the like-dislike ratios for each leadership pair, for all voters and for those who voted for their parties in 2015

Ratios	May: Cameron		Corbyn:Miliband		Farron:Clegg	
	All	Con	All	Lab	All	LD
Minimum	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09
10th Percentile	0.50	0.55	0.50	0.55	0.33	0.37
Lower Quartile	0.75	0.73	0.89	0.90	0.60	0.60
Median	1.00	0.89	1.00	1.11	1.00	0.86
Higher Quartile	1.13	1.00	1.50	1.38	1.33	1.00
90th Percentile	2.00	1.13	2.75	1.83	3.00	1.42
Maximum	11.00	10.00	11.00	11.00	11.00	9.00
Mean	1.31	0.88	1.51	1.28	1.34	0.98
Standard Deviation	1.47	0.44	1.58	1.09	1.46	0.96
IQR	0.38	0.27	0.61	0.48	0.73	0.40

Table 4.
Binomial logistic regressions of effects of leadership evaluations on voting in 2017 among different groups of voters in 2015

Vote in 2017	Conservative	Labour	LibDem
Conservative Voters 2015 (N=4,177)			
Constant	-0.03 (0.15: 0.97)	**-1.28** (0.21: 0.28)	**-1.00** (0.22: 0.37)
May:Cameron	**3.10** (0.18: 22.2)	**-3.00** (0.25: 0.50)	**-2.93** (0.26: 0.05)
Corbyn:Miliband	**-0.27** (0.03: 0.76)	**0.34** (0.03: 1.41)	-0.01 (0.04: 0.99)
Farron:Clegg	**-0.27** (0.04: 0.26)	0.07 (0.06: 1.08)	**0.27** (0.05: 1.31)
Nagelkerke R^2	0.23	0.25	0.12
Labour Voters 2015 (N=4,106)			
Constant	**-0.32** (0.17: 0.72)	**0.32** (0.12: 1.37)	**-1.75** (0.19: 0.17)
May:Cameron	**0.31** (0.03: 1.36)	**-0.23** (0.02: 0.20)	**-0.24** (0.06: 0.79)
Corbyn:Miliband	**-2.25** (0.15: 0.11)	**1.13** (0.09: 3.09)	**-0.82** (0.14: 0.44)
Farron:Clegg	**-0.32** (0.05: 0.73)	0.06 (0.03: 1.06)	**0.15** (0.03: 1.16)
Nagelkerke R^2	0.32	0.15	0.05
Liberal Democrat Voters 2015 (N=1151)			
Constant	**-0.83** (0.20: 0.44)	**-1.48** (0.15: 0.23)	0.05 (0.13: 1.05)
May:Cameron	**0.29** (0.06: 1.34)	-0.06 (0.07: 0.94)	**-0.20** (0.06: 0.82)
Corbyn:Miliband	-0.09 (0.06: 0.92)	**0.15** (0.04: 1.17)	-0.04 (0.04: 0.96)
Farron:Clegg	**-1.03** (0.20: 0.36)	-0.14 (0.09: 0.87)	**0.42** (0.09: 1.52)
Nagelkerke R^2	0.17	0.02	0.05

Notes: Cell entries are estimates from binary logistic regression models with standard errors and exponents in parentheses; coefficients significantly different from 1.0 at the 0.05 level are in bold.

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Table 5.
Effects of leadership evaluations on voting in 2017 by those who voted for UKIP in 2015

Vote in 2017	Conservative	Labour	LibDem	UKIP
Constant	**0.93** (0.12: 2.52)	**-2.27** (0.17: 0.10)	**-3.36** (0.36: 0.04)	**-1.89** (0.16: 0.15)
May:Cameron	**0.08** (0.03: 1.08)	**-0.17** (0.05: 0.84)	-0.03 (0.08: 0.97)	-0.01 (0.03: 0.99)
Corbyn:Miliband	**-0.26** (0.03: 0.77)	**0.29** (0.03: 1.33)	0.00 (0.08: 1.00)	-0.05 (0.04: 0.95)
Farron:Clegg	**-0.15** (0.04: 0.86)	**0.18** (0.05: 1.20)	**0.19** (0.07: 1.21)	-0.02 (0.05: 0.98)
Nuttall:Farage	**-0.37** (0.14: 0.69)	-0.08 (0.18: 0.92)	-0.77 (0.51: 0.46)	**0.68** (0.17: 1.98)
Nagelkerke R^2	0.10	0.10	0.03	0.02

Notes: Cell entries are estimates from binary logistic regression models with standard errors and exponents in parentheses; coefficients significantly different from 1.0 at the 0.05 level are in bold. *N = 1589.*

Table 6.

The mean ratios for feelings towards each leader in the post-election and pre-campaign surveys, according to vote intention in the pre-campaign survey and actual vote at the election.

Vote (Actual)	Con $_t$	Lab $_t$	LibDem $_t$
May Ratio (Post:Pre)			
Con $_{t-1}$	0.86	0.70	0.81
Lab $_{t-1}$	1.31	0.91	0.96
LibDem $_{t-1}$	1.20	0.93	0.92
All Voters $_{t-1}$	0.88	0.88	0.90
Corbyn Ratio (Post:Pre)			
Con $_{t-1}$	1.31	2.63	1.88
Lab $_{t-1}$	1.11	2.19	1.87
LibDem $_{t-1}$	1.63	2.19	1.87
All Voters $_{t-1}$	1.31	1.66	1.82
Farron Ratio (Post:Pre)			
Con $_{t-1}$	2.10	1.73	3.21
Lab $_{t-1}$	1.56	0.77	1.22
LibDem $_{t-1}$	3.36	1.97	2.89
All Voters $_{t-1}$	2.07	1.06	2.78

Notes: Cell entries are mean ratios for feelings towards each leader in the post-election and pre-campaign surveys, according to vote intention in the 2017 pre-campaign survey (*t*-1) and actual vote at the 2017 election (*t*). A value greater than 1 indicates that the leader was rated more positively when the election was held than when it was called. *N* = 11,103.

Table 7

Binomial logistic regressions of effects of changing leadership evaluations on voting in 2017 according to pre-campaign voting intentions

Pre-Campaign Vote Intention 2017

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
Voted Conservative 2017			
Constant	**1.32** (0.17: 3.73)	**-3.52** (0.62: 0.03)	**-2.90** (0.30: 0.06)
Post:Pre Feelings			
May	**0.96** (0.20: 2.61)	**0.49** (0.19: 1.63)	0.12 (0.18: 1.13)
Corbyn	**-0.34** (0.03: 0.71)	**-1.99** (0.53: 0.14)	**-0.42** (0.14: 0.65)
Fallon	**0.13** (0.03: 1.14)	**0.90** (0.14: 2.53)	**0.18** (0.05: 1.20)
Nagelkerke R^2	0.07	0.18	0.04
Voted Labour 2017			
Constant	**-1.70** (0.24: 0.18)	**2.22** (0.22: 9.17)	**-0.72** (0.14: 0.49)
Post:Pre Feelings			
May	**-1.82** (0.29: 0.16)	-0.13 (0.12: 0.88)	-0.05 (0.10: 0.96)
Corbyn	**0.50** (0.14: 1.64)	**0.84** (0.18: 2.31)	**0.57** (0.07: 1.77)
Fallon	**-0.35** (0.05: 0.71)	**-0.63** (0.10: 0.53)	**-0.53** (0.07: 0.59)
Nagelkerke R^2	0.16	0.03	0.14
Vote Liberal Democrat 2017			
Constant	**-3.57** (0.37: 0.03)	**-3.64** (0.34: 0.03)	**0.29** (0.13: 1.34)
Post:Pre Feelings			
May	-0.76 (0.41: 0.47)	0.15 (0.19: 1.16)	-0.06 (0.09: 0.94)
Corbyn	**0.11** (0.05: 1.12)	**-0.56** (0.23: 0.57)	**-0.30** (0.05: 0.74)
Fallon	**0.19** (0.04: 1.21)	**0.51** (0.11: 1.66)	**0.28** (0.04: 1.33)
Nagelkerke R^2	0.04	0.03	0.07
N	4,478	2,610	1,206

Notes: Cell entries are estimates from binary logistic regression models with standard errors and exponents in parentheses; coefficients significantly different from 1.0 at the 0.05 level are in bold.

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Figure 1.
Mean feelings about each party leader at seven stages of the 2017 election.