



Candidate positioning in Britain

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ABSTRACT

Policy positioning has received a great deal of attention from scholars of British politics. While numerous studies emphasize the positions taken by the Labour and Conservative parties, and how the positions of these parties have shaped citizens' electoral behavior, few studies explore policy positioning at the candidate-level. We conduct the first quantitative study that examines the relative policy positions of British candidates during a general election. Building on findings from the study of American elections, we argue that two factors explain variation in candidate positioning in Britain: constituency-level electoral competition and a disparity in candidate quality. Using data from the 2001 British Representation Study, we find evidence that both factors are associated with a decrease in the policy contrast between candidates. Our findings suggest that, despite the differences in party control, similar factors affect candidate positioning in both Great Britain and the United States.

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1. Introduction

Over the past twenty years, British politics has witnessed dramatic policy convergence between the elites of the two dominant political parties, Labour and the Conservatives. The striking change in the relative policy positions of the two parties has motivated extensive scholarly research analyzing both the causes and consequences of policy positioning in Britain. While numerous studies emphasize the positions taken by the Labour and Conservative parties (e.g., Heath et al., 1985; Budge, 1999; Norris, 1999; Webb and Farrell, 1999; Evans, 2001, 2002; Clarke et al., 2004; Bara, 2006; Benoit and Laver, 2006), and how changes in the relative positions of these two parties have shaped citizens' electoral behavior (Evans, 1998; Heath et al., 2001; Evans and Butt, 2007; Green, 2007; Adams et al., Forthcoming), few studies explore the policy positions of British candidates.¹ Candidate positioning is frequently studied by

American politics scholars (e.g., Deckard, 1976; Calvert, 1985; Sullivan and Uslaner, 1978; Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Groseclose, 2001; Burden, 2004; Moon, 2004; Fowler, 2005; Griffin, 2006; Stone and Simas, 2010), but British candidates lack the freedom of their American counterparts because the absence of primaries in Britain allows parties to enforce a high degree of discipline during the campaign and the legislative process.² Thus, the positions of leaders and party elites are often given priority over those expressed by the individual candidates.

However, if the policy positions of British candidates primarily reflect those of their national party delegations, then the policy distance between candidates should be relatively consistent across constituencies. Fig. 1 presents a histogram of the policy contrast between the Labour and Conservative candidates (measured as the absolute difference between the self-placements of the candidates on the

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¹ Notable exceptions include Robertson (1976), Bochel and Denver (1983), and Shephard (2007).

² However, the idea of primaries has been considered by British parties. Prior to the 2010 general election, the Conservative party used an open primary to select the candidate for Totnes after the incumbent resigned in the wake of an expenses scandal.

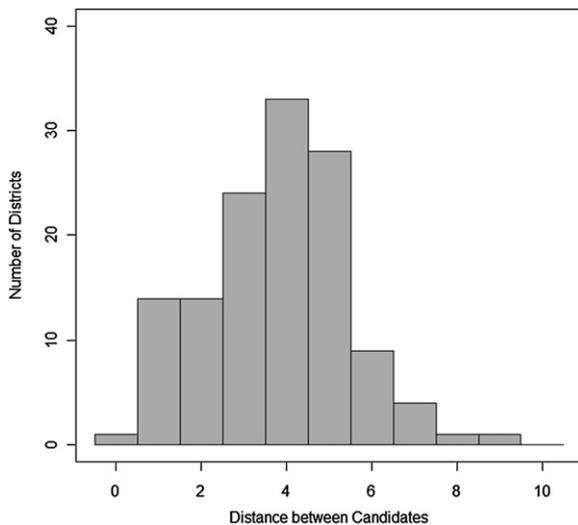


Fig. 1. Policy contrast between Labour and Conservative candidates. Note: Fig. 1 displays a histogram of the policy contrast between the candidates from the Labour and Conservative parties for all the constituencies for which we have data. We calculate the contrast by taking the absolute value of the difference between the self-placement of the Conservative candidate in the constituency minus the self-placement of the Labour candidate in the constituency.

Left–Right scale) in 129 constituencies prior to the 2001 election.³ Note that there is considerable variation in the policy contrast between candidates, in spite of the strong ties between candidates and their party. Put differently, the policy positions of the Labour and Conservative parties at the national-level cannot completely account for all the variation in the *relative* positions of British candidates.

Here, we conduct the first quantitative study that examines the relative placement of British candidates during a general election. Building on findings from the study of American elections, we suggest that two factors may explain variation in candidate positioning in Britain. First, we argue that constituency-level electoral competition encourages British parties to select candidates with an eye toward the policy preferences of the constituency's median voter, resulting in reduced policy contrast in electorally marginal constituencies.⁴ Furthermore, we assert that differences in the prior office-holding experience of the candidates running may reduce the policy contrast between candidates because a quality disadvantage provides incentives for local party organizations to nominate less partisan candidates.⁵

³ Although the 2001 British Representation Study (BRS) contains data on 582 constituencies, we use only the constituencies where we have data on the Left–Right self-placement of both the Labour and the Conservative candidates.

⁴ We use the words “competitiveness” and “marginality” interchangeably.

⁵ “Quality” candidates are those who possess non-policy advantages, such as incumbency, greater campaign funds, better name recognition, charisma, or intelligence (Groseclose, 2001, 862). We use prior office-holding experience as an indicator of these characteristics.

Using data from the 2001 British Representation Study, we find evidence that both factors – constituency-level electoral competition and a disparity in candidate quality – are associated with a decrease in the policy contrast between candidates. While our findings may contradict the conventional wisdom regarding candidate positioning in Britain, they contribute to a growing body of empirical literature that documents variation in the campaign strategies (e.g., Agasøster, 2001; Dorling et al., 2002; Shephard, 2007), voting behavior (Norton, 1975, 1980; Hibbing and Marsh, 1987; Cowley and Stuart, 1997, 2003, 2004; Cowley and Norton, 1999; Baughman, 2004), constituency service (Cain et al., 1987; Wood and Norton, 1992; Pattie et al., 1994; Gaines, 1998; Johnston et al., 2002), and personal characteristics (Shephard and Johns, 2008) of British elites. Thus, we provide further evidence that there is a merit in considering more than the candidate's (or MP's) party, even in the most party-centered of systems.

2. Explaining candidate positioning in Great Britain

The literature on candidate positioning in United States politics offers an excellent starting point for research on Great Britain, given the similarity in electoral rules and the fact that both countries feature two dominant parties.⁶ However, to adapt the American-based literature to the British context, we must account for differences in the process of candidate selection. Though candidates in both systems are elected using a single member district plurality system, differences in party control are stark. In the candidate-centered U.S., the decision to enter the electoral arena rest primarily with the candidate.⁷ In contrast, British parties, both national and local, act as gate-keepers to the candidate selection process, leading to a high degree of centralization and more disciplined parliamentary delegations.

Though the candidate selection processes of the three main parties – i.e., Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats – are to some extent a function of internal party procedures, certain similarities exist. The processes of all three parties are characterized by two key stages: the first involves the drafting of a national list of centrally-approved candidates, and the second, the selection of the party's candidate by local constituency parties or local party members.⁸ Compared to American parties, the national party organizations in Britain retain considerable control over the candidate selection process by

⁶ It is not, however, our intention to make the argument that Britain is a two-party system. In addition to the Labour and Conservative parties, there are also a number of the other parties that win a significant percentage of the vote and a number of seats in the House of Commons. In particular, the Liberal Democrats play an important role in the political competition in Britain, including forming a coalition government with the Conservative party following the 2010 general election.

⁷ The rules governing the candidate selection process in the U.S. are decided at the state-level. The use of primaries has decentralized the selection process, such that voters, rather than parties, select candidates. Candidates self-nominate, raise their own money, and develop their own campaign strategies, and therefore, national party organizations have little to no control over the selection process (see e.g., Ware, 2002).

⁸ For a more nuanced discussion of the candidate selection process, see e.g., Denver (1988), Norris and Lovenduski (1995), Riddell (2003).

determining the national list of candidates and requiring confirmation of the locally-selected candidates (Denver, 1988; Norris and Lovenduski, 1995).

While the central party organizations often have the ability to exercise veto power, selection is, in most cases, a local affair. Denver (1988) writes:

Although British parties have the reputation of being highly centralized and the rules governing selection are in all cases centrally determined, the process is itself decentralized. In theory and in practice all British parliamentary candidates are selected by relatively small groups of party members in each parliamentary constituency” (47–48).

Members of the local parties process the applications of the nationally-approved candidates who wish to be considered for the seat. These same members then narrow the field of candidates to a short list, who are then interviewed by the members in more depth. The final decision is made at a general meeting of the local party members. Therefore, even though the pool of selectors making the final decision may be larger than the selection committee, it is nonetheless a relatively small subset of the constituency’s population. And, because the final selection process is dominated by local party members, the ideological positions of nominated candidates reflect the preferences of these selectors and the strategic choices they face. In the next two sections, we incorporate these aspects of party control to adapt the American-based explanations for candidate positioning to the British context.

2.1. Electoral competition and candidate positioning

Differences in the policy contrast between American candidates are often attributed to the competitiveness of the race. Because minor vote shifts in competitive races can alter the outcome of the election, candidates should be particularly attentive to the median voters’ policy preferences in competitive districts. As a result, candidates in these districts should hold more similar policy positions than their counterparts in safe districts. Recent empirical work supports this interpretation; competition exerts a centripetal force at the district-level, decreasing the policy contrast between candidates (Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Burden, 2004).

While we expect competition to exert the same centripetal force on British constituencies, it is the local parties, rather than the candidates, that are the driving force behind the relationship between electoral competition and the degree of policy contrast at the constituency-level. In many uncompetitive constituencies voter support is skewed such that parties know they will either win or lose by a large margin before the election even begins. The exact policy positions of candidates matter little in these constituencies, meaning that local parties have the freedom to select candidates who hold positions similar to their own (Denver, 1988). Since political activists and members of local political organizations tend to hold more partisan opinions than the constituency at large (e.g., Aldrich, 1983; Adams, 2001a, 2001b; Adams et al., 2005; Schofield, 2005), we expect candidates in safe constituencies to hold more

partisan positions. In other words, “the safer they are, the more extreme they will be” (Robertson, 1976: 141).⁹

Marginal constituencies, on the other hand, are those where party support is divided relatively evenly, or where there is a group of undecided voters large enough to alter the outcome of the election (Robertson, 1976). Because the pressure to attract support is particularly important when there is uncertainty surrounding the electoral outcome, local parties should pay more attention to the preferences of the constituency’s median voter. In other words, local party elites should be more willing to select less partisan candidates in competitive constituencies if doing so allows them attract undecided voters. Moreover, selectors are less likely to oppose candidates whose policy positions deviate from their own if they believe the candidate has a strong chance of winning a competitive seat (Robertson, 1976; Bochel and Denver, 1983). Because these incentives are not necessarily restricted to a single party, then all competitive parties should be more likely to select less partisan candidates, decreasing the policy contrast between candidates in competitive constituencies:

H1: *As the constituency becomes more competitive, the policy contrast between candidates will decline.*

2.2. Candidate quality and positioning

American politics scholars also attribute variation in the policy contrast between candidates to differences in the non-policy characteristics of the candidates competing for office.

Candidates differ substantially in terms of their name recognition, electoral experience, and reputations as public servants. Terms like “quality” and “valence” are often used interchangeably to identify characteristics of candidates, other than their issue positions, that make one candidate more attractive to voters (Stokes, 1963, 1992; Groseclose, 2001) and campaign contributors/activists (Stone and Maisel, 2003).

There is, however, little consensus regarding the nature of relationship between candidates’ quality and their issue positions. Some research suggests that advantaged candidates, such as incumbents or candidates with previous electoral experience, move toward the center to increase the importance of their quality advantage, while disadvantaged candidates move to the extreme to distinguish themselves on policy or appeal to party activists and donors (Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2000; Groseclose, 2001; Aragonés and Palfrey, 2004; Stone and Simas, 2010).¹⁰ In American elections, most non-incumbents must compete

⁹ While there is considerable variation in the policy positions of American candidates, within-party differences in Britain are a matter of emphasis, rather than sharp contrast (Robertson, 1976; Shephard, 2007). Thus, in the British context, we can think of an ‘extreme candidate’ as one who holds more *partisan* policy positions – i.e., positions that are consistent with the traditional values of the party.

¹⁰ Measures of candidate quality are difficult to obtain and since candidates’ skills as campaigners and legislators should increase with experience, the concept is often measured using incumbency and the prior office-holding experience of challengers (Jacobson and Kernell, 1983; Jacobson, 2009).

in a primary election to earn their party's nomination. In doing so, candidates may be forced to publically adopt relatively extreme positions to appeal to primary voters. Winning candidates may moderate during the general election, but their freedom to do so is limited. American scholars point to this process and candidates' need to solicit donations from party activists as the mechanisms causing experience-disadvantaged candidates to take more extreme positions. However, because the electoral process in Britain does not leave candidates beholden to primary voters, this mechanism is unlikely to hold within the context of British politics.

In contrast, other U.S.-based work indicates that candidates with a quality advantage, such as incumbents or candidates with previous electoral experience, have the freedom to take more extreme policy positions and that candidates with a disadvantage are forced to moderate in order to be competitive (Fenno, 1978; Cain et al., 1987; Burden, 2004; Bernhardt et al., 2011).

We argue that this literature is more applicable to the British context. When local parties can choose a current MP to run, their decision is often relatively simple. Experienced candidates, particularly incumbents, possess additional knowledge and connections that may increase their ability to provide services and assistance to their constituents. Because British citizens value such services (e.g., Cain et al., 1987; Wood and Norton, 1992; Heitshusen et al., 2005), incumbent MPs have the freedom to adopt more partisan policy positions, while at the same time retaining the support of their constituents with the services they provide.

When current MPs are unavailable, the pool of potential candidates may include those who served in Parliament previously, those with a background in local politics, and those with no prior political experience. Just as local parties may be strategic in selecting less partisan candidates to run in competitive constituencies, they may also choose to balance the tradeoffs between policy and quality in an effort to maximize votes amongst undecided voters. And, while experience at the national-level may be more valuable than experience in local government, any strategic advantages a candidate's experience confers allows local parties to select a candidate with more partisan policy positions. By this logic, inexperienced candidates should be least likely to profess partisan policy positions. Such candidates are unable to compete on the quality dimension, and therefore, selecting a candidate with an eye to the preference of the median voter may be best strategy for attracting additional votes.¹¹

Because we are primarily concerned with constituency-level policy contrast between candidates and not the positions of individual candidates, we focus on the experience disparity, or contrast, between candidates. If, as we argue, inexperienced candidates are less likely to hold

partisan positions than current MPs and other experienced candidates, the policy contrast between candidates will be greatest when two experienced candidates compete – that is when the disparity in experience is low.¹² As the disparity in experience increases, the policy contrast should decrease such that the smallest policy contrast between candidates should be observed in districts with a current or previous MP competes with a candidate who has no prior office-holding experience.

H2: *As the experience contrast between the candidates increases, the policy contrast will decrease.*

3. Relative policy positions of British candidates: the 2001 general election

Testing the arguments we discuss above requires data on the ideological positions and personal characteristics of British candidates. The British Representation Studies are, to our knowledge, the only data available containing information on the policy positions and political experience of both current and prospective members of Parliament. The analyses we present in this paper are based on data from the 2001 wave of the British Representation Study.¹³ The data are compiled using surveys sent to all prospective parliamentary candidates (PPCs) from the major British parties prior to the 2001 general election.¹⁴ A total of 1085 candidates completed the survey, which represents a response rate of 58.4%.¹⁵

While similar candidate studies were also conducted in 1992, 1997, and 2005, we are unable to test our arguments using these data. First, the policy scales in the 1992 wave have different end-points and, in some cases, have dramatically different question wordings, so that they are not directly comparable to later versions of the study. Second, the 1997 wave lacks sufficient information to determine competitiveness of the candidate's constituency. Finally, the response rate for the 2005 wave was lower than previously iterations of the study. The number of constituencies for which there are data on multiple candidates is sufficiently low that it is not possible to estimate a model of candidate positioning.¹⁶ Moreover, it is not possible to verify that the sample of

¹¹ This logic is consistent with the Britain-based arguments of Robertson (1976), who argues that British candidates without previous campaign experience may choose to moderate in hopes of capturing additional votes. Doing so allows the candidate to demonstrate to her party that she has the skills necessary to win votes.

¹² Because the local parties that are competitive in a given constituency rarely nominate multiple inexperienced candidates, the absence of an experience contrast indicates that two experienced candidates are competing.

¹³ The 2001 British Representation Study was developed and executed by Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski.

¹⁴ Candidates representing the Green Party, British Nationalist Party, the UK Independence Party, and other minor parties or independent candidates without parliamentary representation were excluded from the survey.

¹⁵ The response rate is higher amongst PPCs than MPs. However, the study includes data on approximately one-third of the MPs elected in the 2001 general election (Norris and Lovenduski, 2004).

¹⁶ Due to missing data, we were able to determine the relative policy positions of candidates in only 43 constituencies. However, in supplementary analyses we estimated our models using data from both the 2001 and 2005 BRS and these estimates supported similar substantive conclusions. (These supplementary analyses are available on our website).

constituencies in the 2005 BRS that contained information on multiple candidates constitutes a representative sample of the population of either candidates or constituencies.

The 2001 British Representation Study is ideal for our purposes because it contains data that allow us to match candidates within constituencies,¹⁷ and the response rate is such that we are able to acquire data on a sufficient number of constituencies where multiple candidates chose to complete the survey. In total, we have data on 192 candidates in 96 constituencies. Moreover, the candidates and constituencies in our sample are quite representative of the population of both candidates and constituencies. We conducted difference of means tests using a number of variables capturing both candidate and constituency-level characteristics to determine whether our sample differed from those constituencies for which we lacked data.¹⁸ More detail is provided in the appendix but, in short, we found that the constituencies in our sample were similar to those left out. Thus, we can be relatively confident that our sample is representative, and therefore, generalizable to larger population of constituencies in 2001.

3.1. Measurement

Following Burden (2004), we emphasize the *relative* policy positions of the candidates. Candidates do not compete in a vacuum; constituency-level elections represent a contest between candidates. Not only are parties taking into account their competition (or lack thereof) when selecting candidates, but voters evaluate candidates relative to the available alternatives. Thus, the positions of the candidates in a constituency (relative to each other) affects the alternatives presented to voters on the ballot.

We limit our analysis to the top two vote-receiving candidates in each constituency. Johnston and Pattie (2011) show that even though the Great Britain is classified as a three-party system nationally, the majority of constituency races are two-party contests (i.e., Labour vs. Conservative, Conservative vs. Liberal Democrat, and Labour vs. Liberal Democrat). Almost 90% of the constituencies in the current sample involve a race between a Conservative and Labour candidate. The remaining 10% involve races where a Liberal Democrat competed against a member of either the Conservative or Labour parties.

The *Policy Contrast* between candidates is calculated by taking the absolute value of the difference between the self-placement of the first place and second place vote-receiving candidates in each constituency on the Left–

Right scale. Consider the example of a constituency contested primarily by candidates of the Labour and Conservative parties. If the Labour candidate places him- or herself at a 3 on a 10-point scale and the Conservative candidate at a 7, the policy contrast between candidates is 4 points. The average policy contrast between all the candidates finishing first and second in our dataset is 3.6, with a standard deviation of 1.7.

The electoral competitiveness (or marginality) of the constituency is based on the margin of victory, or the difference between the percent of votes received by the top two candidates in the previous election. The margin of victory is inversely related to marginality; as the first place candidate increases her margin of victory, the constituency race becomes less competitive.¹⁹ For ease of interpretation, we rescale the margin of victory, such that lower numbers indicate a less competitive constituency and higher numbers a highly competitive constituency. We expect a negative coefficient estimate on the *Constituency Competitiveness* variable: in competitive constituencies the incentive to nominate less partisan candidates is greatest, leading to less policy contrast between candidates.

Our measure of the experience gap between candidates is based on a number of questions related to candidates' local and national office-holding experience. To reflect the fact that experience at the national-level is probably more valuable than the local-level, we code candidates' experience as 0 if they were never elected to office, as 1 if they were elected at the local-level, and as 2 if they served at the national-level. The *Experience Contrast* between candidates is calculated by taking the absolute difference between the experience of the first and second place candidates (see also Burden, 2004).²⁰ The resulting variable takes on a value of 2 in constituencies where a candidate with national experience competed with a candidate with no experience (39% of constituencies), a 1 when one candidate has national experience and the other has local experience or one candidate has local experience and the other has no experience (46%), and a 0 when both candidates have similar levels of experience (14%). We expect the policy contrast between candidates to decrease as the experience contrast increases.

Beyond these key variables, we also control for a number of other factors that may affect the policy contrast between candidates within a given constituency. Because British candidates are *selected* to run, it is important that we control for the ideological positions of the selectors. Unfortunately, no data exists that would allow us to obtain an exogenous measure of the local parties' ideological positions. However, the BRS asks candidates to place

¹⁷ While we were able to match candidates with their constituencies, we did not attempt to determine the specific identity of the candidates in an effort to preserve the anonymity of the survey respondents.

¹⁸ Constituency and candidates data comes from Pippa Norris' British Parliamentary Constituency database, 1992–2001. The database, available at (<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm>), contains information on the demographic attributes of candidates from the three major parties, as well as the social characteristics of the constituencies, derived from the 2001 census.

¹⁹ The average margin of victory in our sample of constituencies is about 20% and the standard deviation is 15%.

²⁰ In spite of the fact there is no local residence requirement for candidature in Britain, candidates with local connections have non-policy advantages that may help them garner additional votes (Denver, 1988; Ranney, 1965; Rush 1969). Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to determine which candidates have local connections and which do not; therefore, we are unable to incorporate local connections in to our measure of candidate quality.

their local party organization on the Left–Right scale. Though an imperfect measure, at the very minimum it allows us to gain some traction of the extremity of the activists in each party in a given constituency.²¹ Therefore, we include *Local Party Policy Contrast*, which is the absolute value of the difference between the local affiliates of the top two parties based on the perceptions of each party's candidate in that constituency. We expect a positive estimate on this variable, indicating that the policy contrast between candidates is greatest when the contrast between local parties is high.

We also control for the possibility that differences in candidate characteristics may affect the degree to which there is policy convergence (or divergence) between candidates. Because the unit of analyses is the candidate pair, rather than the individual candidate, we must identify the extent to which candidates share certain characteristics. Thus, we introduce three demographic controls. First, we introduce a variable called *Age Contrast*, which is the absolute value of the difference in the self-reported age of the two candidates. Second, we control for gender differences using a variable called *Gender Contrast*, which is coded 1 if the two candidates were not of the same gender and 0 if both candidates were of the same gender. We include *Race Contrast*, which is coded 1 if the two candidates were not of the same race and 0 if both candidates were of the same race. Finally, because our candidate-pairs include members of the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat parties, we need to control for the party makeup of the candidates in each constituency.

Our remaining variables control for differences in constituency characteristics that could affect candidate positions. Using data from the 2001 census, we conduct a principal factors factor analysis of the total proportion of residents who are non-white, migrants, unemployed, use public transport to work, rent property, own a car or van, and live in one-person households. All seven items have high loadings on a single dimension, which we label *Constituency Urbanization* (the factor loadings and Eigen values are show in Table A2). The use of principal factors factor analysis allows us to create a single variable, which preserves degrees of freedom and reduces

²¹ There is a clear issue with the *Local Party Policy Contrast* measure since candidates place both themselves and their local party. If candidates place their local party close to themselves because of some projection effect, there may be a strong correlation between the two measures even in the unlikely scenario that local parties have no effect on candidates. However, the benefits of including this measure outweigh the risks for a number of reasons. First, the correlation between the two measures is only 0.45, suggesting that the projection effect is not strong. Second, policy scales are subject to measurement error since their interpretation varies across individuals (Green, 1988). In simple terms, the meaning of a 4 on a 10-point policy scale is not the same for everyone. By including a second rating on the same scale from each candidate, it controls for some of the variation in scale interpretation. Finally, the coefficient estimate on the *Local Party Policy Contrast* variable does not necessarily represent the effect of local parties. Instead, it simply controls for candidates' perceptions of where their local party is located, and noise in their interpretation of the policy scale. In any event, the results hold when the *Local Party Policy Contrast* measure is removed from the analysis. These analyses are available on our website.

Table 1

Distance between top two candidates on left/right scale.

	Unstandardized coefficients (SE)	Standardized coefficients
Constituency Competitiveness	−0.03** (0.01)	−0.29
Experience Contrast	−0.69** (0.25)	−0.27
Local Party Policy Contrast	0.28** (0.09)	0.29
Age Contrast	0.01 (0.03)	0.05
Race Contrast	−0.55 (0.71)	−0.05
Gender Contrast	−0.18 (0.31)	−0.05
Con/Lib Dem Battleground	2.11** (0.74)	0.30
Con/Lab Battleground	2.84** (0.67)	0.51
Percent Christian	−0.08** (0.02)	−0.41
Constituency's Urbanization	−0.52* (0.27)	−0.31
Constant	5.12** (1.78)	
Observations	96	
R-squared	0.35	

Note: OLS coefficient estimates and robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$.

the measurement error associated with any one social characteristic and the overall urbanization of the constituency. We also include the variable *Percent Christian*, which measures the percentage of the constituency who self-identify as Christian according to the 2001 census.

3.2. Analysis

Table 1 presents the results of the OLS regression (including both unstandardized and standardized coefficients) where the policy contrast between candidates is the dependent variable. The results offer strong evidence in favor of our arguments. The coefficient estimate on *Constituency Competitiveness* is negative and significant, indicating that an increase in competition is associated with a decrease in policy contrast between candidates. In other words, there are clear policy differences between candidates when races are uncompetitive, but in constituencies where both candidates have an opportunity to win, they present themselves as quite similar.

To illustrate the substantive effect of competition, we calculate the expected contrast between candidates at varying levels of competitiveness. Fig. 2(a) graphs these values.²² The solid black line represents the effect of competition. Notice first that its slope is negative. In a constituency where one candidate is expected to win by a large margin (i.e., competition is set to its minimum value), the expected distance between the Labour and Conservative candidates is 5.03 on a 10-point scale. If there is parity in competition (i.e., competition is set to its maximum value), the expected distance is 3.17.

The results shown in Table 1 also suggest that an experience contrast between candidates also reduces the policy differences between candidates. Fig. 2(b) presents the expected policy contrast between candidates as the experience contrast between them grows. Candidates with

²² For all predicted values, we use the estimates from Table 1 and set variables to their median.

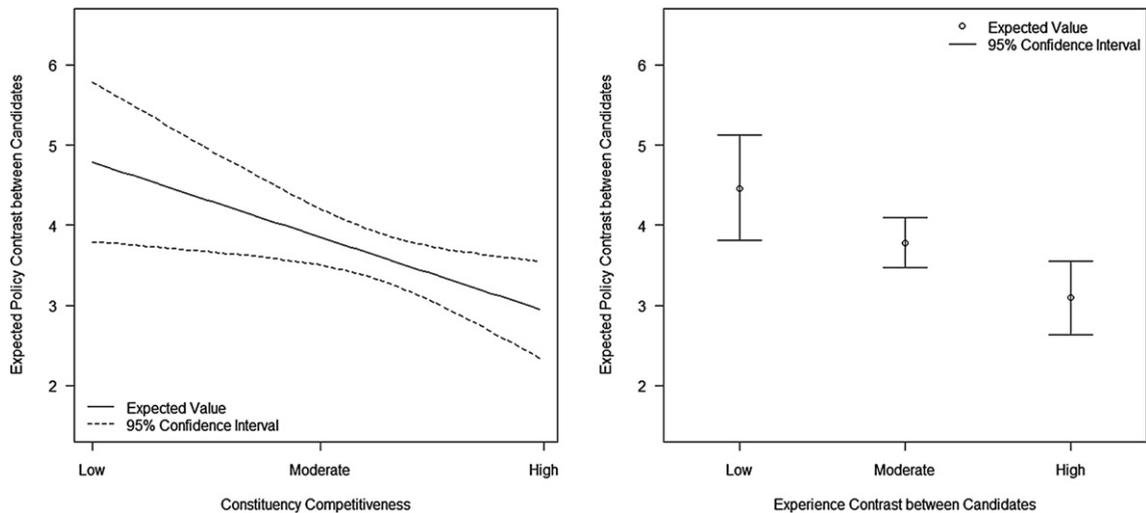


Fig. 2. Effect of competitiveness and experience on the policy contrast between candidates. Note: Expected values are calculated using estimates from Table 1.

similar office-holding experience (i.e., both candidates have experience at the national-level) tend to distinguish themselves by diverging on the issues, leading to an expected policy contrast of about 4.5. As the experience disparity grows and one candidate has national experience while the opponent has not held previous office, the policy contrast decreases to 3.05. Again, when local party organizations nominate inexperienced candidates, they can only compete on ideological or policy grounds. The best way to accomplish this is to select a less partisan candidate that may appeal to undecided voters, effectively decreasing the policy contrast between candidates. The opposite is true of candidates with a quality advantage. In these cases, local parties can afford to nominate someone with preferences more comparable to their own, since the nominated candidate can compete and win along the quality or valence dimension.

The results for the control variables indicate that several additional factors influence the policy contrast between candidates. First, greater perceived policy contrast between the local party organizations is associated with greater policy contrast between the candidates of those parties. Second, we find no evidence that the personal characteristics of the candidates influence the policy distance between them as the estimates for the age, gender, and race contrasts are all insignificant.²³ The party of the candidates, not surprisingly, has a significant effect on the policy contrast between candidates; differences between candidates were greatest whenever a Conservative candidate was competitive because the Labour and Liberal Democratic parties share a relatively similar set of policy

positions when compared to the Conservative party. Finally, there is evidence that suggests that social characteristics of the constituency influence the degree of policy contrast between candidates. Candidates appear to close the policy gap between them when running in urban constituencies and constituencies where a higher percentage of the population self-identifies as Christian.

4. Conclusion

British politics scholars frequently emphasize changes in the policy positions of the major British parties, and how these changes have affected citizens' electoral behavior. By contrast, candidate positioning has received far less attention, a fact that is unsurprising given the strong party discipline that typically characterizes British politics. However, while parties at the both the national and constituency-levels certainly exert a strong influence on the positions of their candidates, there is considerable variation in candidate positioning across constituencies. We attribute this variation to two factors: constituency electoral competition and a disparity in candidate quality. Using data from the 2001 British Representation Study, we find evidence that both factors are associated with a decrease the policy contrast between candidates.

Our findings suggest that candidate positioning in Great Britain resembles the United States, despite the differences in party control. The centripetal effect of competition is consistent with patterns documented by American politics scholars – i.e., candidates tend to express more similar policy positions when the race is competitive. Moreover, our findings provide addition support for those American scholars who argue that a quality advantage allows candidates the freedom to adopt more partisan policy positions. While our findings suggest that the two countries may share certain similarities related to candidate positioning,

²³ We tried alternative specifications of the candidate controls where we emphasized the combined age of both candidates and the total number of female and non-white candidates. Our results remained unchanged.

we stress that it is not our intention to argue that British candidates share the independence of their American counterparts. Many of the behavioral patterns observed in the American context are the result of candidates' strategic decisions – i.e., the candidates themselves determine whether to enter a race (or not) – and therefore, variation in candidate behavior in the United States is often a function of this individual-level decision process. In contrast, the decision to enter a constituency race in Britain is largely determined by national and local party organizations. Moreover, differences in candidate positioning amongst members of the same party are more of a matter of emphasis (Robertson, 1976; Shephard, 2007), rather than the sharp contrasts that are often apparent in the U.S. Nonetheless, even though different actors make the strategic decision, similar forces affect the relative positioning of the candidates in both systems.

We believe our findings are significant for several reasons. For scholars of British politics, we shed light on systematic variation in candidate behavior. Our findings indicate that the positions of British candidates are, to some degree, a function of their constituency-level political environment. The existence of these patterns indicates that study of the candidate behavior may yield important insights into the electoral process in Great Britain. In addition to affecting the choices presented to voters, research on 'free votes'²⁴ suggests that British MPs do consider constituency preferences when their party frees them from the constraints of party discipline (Hibbing and Marsh, 1987; Cowley and Stuart, 1997, 2003, 2004; Cowley and Norton, 1999; Baughman, 2004). Thus, there is merit in studying the forces that affect candidate positioning because it may give us further insight into how candidates may behave when they are free to vote as they wish.

For scholars of American and comparative politics, our findings suggest that the patterns of candidate behavior observed within the American context may be generalizable outside the United States: the forces that affect candidate positioning in the United States, like competition and experience, appear to have an effect even in countries where parties, rather than candidates, dominate the political system. Moreover, our findings suggest that we need to take the political environment and candidate characteristics into account in order understand how candidates behave in party-centered systems. Thus, our paper provides a starting point for a cross-national investigation of candidate positioning in party-centered systems.

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Appendix.

Table A1

Sample representative – 2001 BRS.

	Nonsample mean	Sample mean	t-test p-value
<i>Candidate Characteristics</i>			
Labour MP	0.59	0.59	0.87
Labour Candidate's Gender	0.23	0.25	0.74
Labour Candidate's Race	0.02	0.01	0.30
Labour Candidate's Age	44.68	47.39	0.03
Labour Candidate's Education	3.67	3.75	0.35
Conservative MP	0.22	0.23	0.91
Conservative Candidate's Gender	0.14	0.15	0.87
Conservative Candidate's Race	0.02	0.02	0.85
Conservative Candidate's Age	40.25	44.28	0.00
Conservative Candidate's Education	3.67	3.64	0.80
Liberal Democrat MP	0.07	0.02	0.06
Liberal Democrat Candidate's Gender	0.22	0.23	0.79
Liberal Democrat Candidate's Race	0.04	0.02	0.40
Liberal Democrat Candidate's Age	45.8	44.88	0.54
Liberal Democrat Candidate's Education	3.66	3.70	0.66
<i>Constituency Characteristics</i>			
Percent Vote – Labour	43.06	45.67	0.15
Percent Vote – Conservative	30.87	34.40	0.01
Percent Vote – Liberal Democrat	18.86	15.81	0.01
Margin of Victory – 2001	23.03	20.77	0.14
Margin of Victory – 1997	24.58	21.06	0.06
Percentage Christian	72.61	71.00	0.12
Percentage Retired	18.73	18.32	0.28
Percentage Non-white	7.01	8.94	0.11
Percentage Migrant	6.05	6.68	0.04
Proportion of Households Renting Property	31.39	31.23	0.90
Percentage Employed in Manufacturing	15.10	15.29	0.18
Percentage Unemployed	3.42	3.30	0.40
Percentage of Single Person Households	30.07	30.59	0.31

We use difference of means tests to assess whether the sample of constituencies for which we have data differs from those constituencies where we lack data on the policy positions of the top two vote-receiving candidates. Table A1 presents the mean for each group, as well as the *p*-value associated with the difference between groups. A *p*-value below 0.05 suggests that the two groups are significantly different from each other on that characteristic. Our sample differs from the constituencies in several respects. First, on average, the Labour and Conservative in our sample are younger than the candidates in the omitted constituencies. Second, the percentage of the vote received by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats was lower in the constituencies in our sample. Finally, the constituencies in our sample have a lower percentage of migrants, than the constituencies for which we have no data.

²⁴ Free votes are those where MPs are freed from voting party line and given the opportunity to vote their conscience. These votes often deal with controversial social issues, where the party has more to gain by allowing MPs to vote in manner than is consistent with their own preferences or the preferences of their constituency.

Table A2

Factor analysis results – Constituency urbanization.

Variables	Factor loading
Proportion Non-white Residents	0.64
Percentage of Migrants	0.54
Percentage of Working Age Pop Unemployed	0.78
Percentage Using Public Transport to Work	0.78
Proportion of Households Renting Property	0.90
Proportion of Households With Car or Van	−0.92
Proportion of One-person Households	0.80

Eigen values = 4.26, 0.87, 0.48, 0.03, −0.05, −0.10, −0.13.

Table A2 presents the results of a factor analysis we use to construct a variable that measures the degree of urbanization in constituencies. One clear factor emerges and all of the variables of interest load at levels greater than 0.5. We use the predicted values of this first factor to measure urbanization.

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