

# Critical Dialogue

**Affluence, Austerity, and Electoral Change in Britain.** By Paul Whiteley, Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders, and Marianne C. Stewart. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 332p. \$95.00 cloth, \$36.99 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592715003862

— Timothy Hellwig, *Indiana University, Bloomington*

This is the third and last book (at least for now) of a series of studies on British elections authored by the principal investigators of the much-admired British Election Study (BES). In many respects, it builds on its predecessors, *Political Choice in Britain* (2004) and *Performance Politics and the British Voter* (2009). In these studies of the 2001 and 2005 elections, respectively, Harold Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne Stewart, and Paul Whiteley consistently argued that valence factors go the furthest in explaining voter decisions in Britain. Unlike more traditional sociological accounts of British elections, which associated political choice with class and demographic factors, or Downsian emphases on parties' policy offerings, the valence politics model maintains that the most important determinants of voter choice are the nonpositional, nonideological attributes that voters assign to candidates and political parties. These include attributes like leader images, party performance evaluations, and flexible partisan attachments. In attaching an argument to the analyses of data, *Political Choice* and *Performance Politics* were more than "election studies" typically construed; rather, these studies contributed to a growing literature in electoral behavior and party politics on the waning effects of social cleavages and growing importance of valence attributes in shaping election outcomes.

The valence politics model is once again prominently featured in this third installment, albeit augmented slightly with a focus on political sophistication and heuristics. Apart from a modest shift in theoretical focus, *Affluence, Austerity, and Electoral Change in Britain* is set apart from its predecessors in some notable ways. Chief among them is the sheer amount of individual-level data the authors bring to bear. The book draws on different components of the 2010 BES. This includes remove its Continuous Monitoring Survey (CMS), a monthly cross-sectional survey that draws on YouGov's online panel. With this resource, the authors are able to examine the effects of critical events on political attitudes not only at

discrete points in time (as in a three-wave panel) but "in real time" as they occur. This innovation of moving from static cross-sectional analyses to dynamic assessments proves especially fortuitous, given the economic—and political—volatility brought to the fore by the collapse of Northern Rock in September 2007 and the fall of Lehman Brothers one year later. With the CMS data, the authors are able to demonstrate how the financial crisis and ensuing recession shaped a wide range of attitudes. These include not only party vote intentions (which have been tracked at high-frequency intervals in the UK for decades) but attitudes thought to drive the vote itself, such as party leader images, expectations about the future of the financial crisis, and even life satisfaction.

These data make possible several novel analyses. For instance, in Chapter 5 Whiteley and his colleagues perform cross-level analyses of the joint effects of their valence factors (leader images, partisan attachments, and economic perceptions) on party choice and show how these factors vary over time and according to fluctuations in macroeconomic mood. Error correction models of the effects of bank failures and bailouts tell us about the memory of these crisis events on political support and of views on party economic management. And in what I believe to be a first in an election study book, the authors perform a vector autoregression analysis on data from 2004 to 2012 to show that objective economic indicators not only cause but are indirectly caused by subjective economic perceptions. By moving from cross-sectional analyses to modeling the dynamics of public opinion, this study will likely prove to be a pioneer in the evolution of national election studies.

The capacity to draw on high-frequency survey data gives the authors license to be more eclectic in the topics they examine. Election study books are typically organized to explore the voter's decision in the election, with chapters ranging from campaign involvement, the decision to participate, and the competing determinants driving party choice. *Affluence* takes care of these obligatory tasks, but they are relegated to two chapters, 4 and 5. Preceding these "core" chapters are chapters on political choices from 1997 through Gordon Brown's time at Number 10 Downing Street. Chapter 2 offers a fast overview of the 1997, 2001, and 2005 elections, where the authors recount their earlier claims linking the success of Tony

Blair's New Labour to the party's capacity to oversee prosperous times, rather than to social/demographic factors or to specific policy positions taken. Chapter 3 provides an account of the Brown years. In the absence of an election, the authors deftly employ panel and aggregate time-series analysis, from a variety of sources, to model the dynamics of Labour Party choice, party support, and economic management competence. The big picture here is that despite differences in their ideologies, the factors that brought down Brown were similar to those that kept Blair in the public's favor for those many years.

Chapter 6 turns to look at the first years of the Conservative—Liberal Democrat coalition government, showing that subjective economic factors played a crucial intermediating role between economic shocks and mass attitudes. Chapter 7 parts ways with the dynamics of support for parties and leaders and examines public sentiment toward the May 2011 referendum on the Alternative Vote. Whiteley and colleagues show that support for the new voting rules—which were soundly rejected—were strongly shaped by individuals' images of party leaders David Cameron, Nick Clegg, and Ed Miliband, with party attachments having only weak effects. The final two chapters diverge most abruptly from the “tried and true” election study tome: Chapter 8 presents an analysis of subjective well-being, and Chapter 9 places Britain in comparative perspective by reporting cross-national analyses of satisfaction with government and with democracy in 21 European countries.

The wide-ranging nature of *Affluence, Austerity, and Electoral Change in Britain* means that readers coming from different subfields in political science and sociology will find something of interest. This book is not just for students of British electoral behavior. Its great strength—apart from the richness of the data it brings to bear—is the range of topics in public opinion and electoral behavior on which it has new insights to offer. However, some readers may find that this impressive breadth leaves little room for more in-depth coverage of the voter's calculus with respect to the 2010 election itself. Compared to recent elections, the 2010 vote was unique, both in terms of the context of financial market crisis and the presence of a credible third choice in Nick Clegg's Liberal Democratic Party. Regarding the former, it would have been interesting to see whether the effects of the crisis on opinions and choices varied on the basis of the individual's relationship to the economy. For example, did the crisis in financial markets mean that property owners were less supportive of Labour than they otherwise would have been? Or, conversely, did the economic downturn mean that Labour's traditional supporters had become increasingly jaded with their party's moderate stance on fiscal policy and punished Miliband accordingly? Regarding the Liberal Democrat effect, I would have liked to learn more about how this credible third option augured or weakened the attraction

of the valence politics model. What are the expectations, regarding the relative importance of valence and position effects, when the contest for government leadership shifts from two competitors to three?

Before closing, I have two other reactions. The first is the observation that Chapter 8 on subjective well-being sits rather uncomfortably with the rest of the book. Before reading this chapter, I expected it to compare the effects of valence and positional factors on an individual's sense of well-being. This approach would have grounded the chapter theoretically in the valence politics oeuvre. Instead, however, the focus is on how sociotropic and egotropic political factors contribute to life satisfaction, above and beyond the influence of nonpolitical determinants.

A final comment is a request to tell us more about the staying power of the valence politics model. The authors argue that the shift from New Labour to Cameron and his austerity did not push voters to evaluate politicians more by position than by valence. But what about the big over-time picture? *Affluence* marshals data on British political behavior from 1997 to 2012. Is the importance of factors like economic management competence, leader images, and party attachments constant across these 15 years? Or is it the case, as some have argued, that valence has increasingly supplanted positional, or ideological, factors over time? And if this is the case, then how are we to make sense of recent developments in British party politics? In Jeremy Corbyn, Labour Party members appear to have chosen “position” over “performance.” And while the Tories are in the driver's seat, intraparty divides on Europe and other issues stand to grow in the near future.

These considerations aside, there is much in *Affluence* to admire. There is something here for students of electoral behavior, those interested in electoral system reform, and researchers looking into the political effects of economic crisis. More than perhaps any other election studies team, Whiteley and his coauthors have raised the bar, both in terms of their theoretical approach and in terms of the empirical evidence they bring to the table.

**Response to Timothy Hellwig's review of *Affluence, Austerity and Electoral Change in Britain***

doi:10.1017/S1537592715003874

— Paul Whiteley

Tim Hellwig makes some thoughtful comments on our book and raises wider issues about the study of electoral behavior in the future. The valence politics research program we have developed over time has implications for electoral studies in all democracies, not just in Britain. In this brief response, we would like to draw attention to two issues that are particularly important. The first is that in theoretical and empirical research on elections and in

comparative politics, the spatial model generally dominates the picture in comparison with the valence model. This is despite the fact that the evidence from Britain, the United States, and elsewhere shows that the valence model has considerably more explanatory power than its spatial rival when it comes to explaining electoral choice. Spatial issues are, of course, important in explaining why people vote, but they play a secondary role in comparison with the big valence issues of security, economic performance, and public service delivery, where there is a widespread consensus about the goals to be achieved. The fact that electoral politics is primarily about delivery and competence and only secondarily about disagreements and promises needs to be recognized if we are to make progress.

There is an “end of ideology” argument to which Tim Hellwig alludes to that suggests that ideological divisions may have dominated electoral politics in the past, but now this may have given way to valence politics. In fact, the evidence from past election studies in Britain, which go back to the early 1960s, suggests that valence politics has always been more important than the ideology/class politics analysis originally introduced by David Butler and Donald Stokes in *Political Choice in Britain* (1969). Indeed the evidence from their own panel surveys conducted in the 1960s supports that conclusion, despite the fact that their analysis did not recognize it. There is a parallel here with current debates about the polarization of electoral politics in America. Divisions in U.S. electoral politics over cultural issues and domestic and foreign policy concerns should not detract attention from the fact that the delivery of outcomes, particularly in relation to the big valence issue of the economy, is the key driver of American voting behavior.

The second, wider lesson is that electoral choice can no longer be studied with low-response-rate, face-to-face probability surveys that take months to collect and cost a great deal of money. Electoral choice is dynamic, and therefore sociological variables such as class, race, and gender play a relatively minor role in explaining behavior in comparison with “choice” variables, such as partisanship, economic evaluations, and judgments about the effectiveness of political leaders. What is needed is high-frequency survey data such as the Continuous Monitoring Survey of the British Election Study, preferably with a panel element to identify effects. There are clear methodological problems associated with modeling such dynamics, notably the ubiquitous problem of endogeneity, but this makes it all the more necessary to abandon the slow and highly restricted face-to-face surveys. Methodological tools should reflect the theoretical needs, and electoral analysis now requires data and modeling strategies for understanding these dynamics.

So we thank Tim Hellwig for his thought-provoking remarks on our work and agree wholeheartedly with

his desire to bring individual actors into the task of understanding the big issues of globalization and policymaking in contemporary democracies.

**Globalization and Mass Politics: Retaining the Room to Maneuver.** By Timothy Hellwig. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 232p. \$85.00.

doi:10.1017/S1537592715003886

— Paul Whiteley, *University of Essex*

The constraints on democratic governments imposed by globalization have been an important issue in international political economy for some years. The essence of the debate is whether globalization constrains or facilitates democratic politics and policymaking more generally. Pessimists suggest that to attract capital investment, national policies must converge on a neoliberal mixture of policies in which restrictions are placed on public spending and welfare, eventually producing a race to the bottom in social protections. Optimists argue that national policies, particularly in relation to welfare, are not overly constrained by globalization and provide considerable scope for national governments to pursue divergent courses of action.

These debates are dominated by analyses of macroeconomic, social, and institutional variables and neglect the role of individual citizens, even though they are the ultimate arbiters of policymaking in the advanced democracies. In *Globalization and Mass Politics*, Timothy Hellwig introduces mass politics into this discussion by focusing on the preferences and behavior of citizens and their elected representatives. He convincingly argues that these actors have an important role to play and that issues relating to democratic accountability and representative democracy have been glossed over in this literature. His approach amounts to “bringing the citizen back in” to debates about globalization and its consequences.

Hellwig’s key argument is that globalization reshapes the incentives of citizens and elected representatives by weakening the ability of governments to manage the economy and therefore restricting their “room to maneuver.” As he puts it: “[G]lobalization narrows the range of what is possible” (p. 14). In this situation, political leaders are faced with the prospect that their representative role is weakened and that electorates are likely to become discontented with them if they are increasingly unable to respond to voter concerns. Hellwig suggests that this does not happen in practice since “voters respond to signals from the world economy by demanding less in areas where constrained governments can no longer deliver but more where they still can” (p. 17). Thus, the cognitive dissonance created by the narrowing of domestic freedom of action on the economy is solved by voters lowering their expectations of what can be done. They do not demand

less of their governments, but they do demand less in relation to the economy, which is subject to these constraints, and more in relation to other policies such as health and welfare, which are not constrained in the same way.

The author's analysis traces the causal chain of electoral accountability by examining both the "demand-side," that is, what voters want, along with the "supply-side"—what parties and political leaders offer to the electorate. The book looks at public demands for government action, the electoral sanctioning of politicians, channels of influence between the mass and the elites, and the behavior of political parties. So it is a comprehensive approach to this issue. His extensive empirical analysis is based on data from the International Social Survey Programme from 1986 to 2006, the European Election Study of 2009, and his own datasets, which are derived from opinion surveys in 10 countries.

Hellwig's findings suggest that "signals from the world economy reduce voter tendencies to credit or blame their governments for the economy—a finding which raises questions about the applicability of economic voting in a globalized setting" (p. 17). Needless to say, this is the most controversial claim in the book, since it implies that economic voting models are unstable both across countries and over time. If the analysis is correct, then coefficients in vote models should be weak to begin with in very open economies, and should decline in strength over time as globalization becomes more important.

There has been a lively debate on this question in the economic voting literature, with one group of researchers claiming that economic voting models are unstable, partly because economic judgments are endogenous to partisanship (Anderson 2007; Evans and Anderson, 2006), and another group arguing that this is not the case. Paolo Bellucci and Mike Lewis-Beck (2011), in particular, have shown that improvements in model specification, sample sizes, and measurement demonstrate that the economy has strong and stable effects on voting in six countries over time, including the United States and Britain (see also Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, and Elias, 2008; Lewis-Beck, Nadeau, and Foucault, 2012).

More recently, time-series modeling in Britain over the entire New Labour period from 1997 to 2010 shows that economic evaluations interact with partisanship to influence vote intentions, but this does not reduce their impact on the vote, which remained strong over this 13-year period (Whiteley et al., 2015). Britain is a much more open economy than the United States, and yet there is no evidence to suggest that economic voting is weak or is declining in importance over time. Indeed, the surprise Conservative victory in the 2015 general election can be attributed almost entirely to the country's economy recovering from the Great Recession (Clarke et al. 2015).

Given these observations, why does Hellwig find that voters and governments reorient their preferences away from the economy and toward what he calls "non-economic issues" in open economies? There are both theoretical and methodological problems with his analysis that call into question these results. The theoretical question is: Why should losers from globalization accept it when the policy analysis literature suggests that intense losers are much more likely to mobilize against policies they dislike than diffuse winners are to support such policies? An alternative strategy for voters is to challenge globalization as a policy, rather than to just accept it. In fact, the rise of Euroscepticism and increased support for radical-right parties in Europe is one illustration of an electoral backlash against globalization.

The methodological issues relate to the measurement of the concepts in the analysis. Hellwig points out that "a *Washington Post* poll found that 43 per cent of Americans admitted that they did not understand the meaning of 'globalization of the world economy'" (p. 21). Yet much of the analysis, which focuses on the attributions of responsibility for economic conditions, uses the question asked in 10 countries: "Which do you feel is most responsible for economic conditions in [country] in the past few years?" Response categories differed among countries—a result that itself creates framing biases—but they all included the category "the ups and downs in the world economy" (p. 70) as a response. This is used to determine changing attributions of responsibility at the global level. This question may be easier to understand than the one about globalization, but it is no easier to answer for the average citizen. We might expect it to pick up a lot of "non-attitudes" among respondents.

A second problem relates to the distinction between economic and noneconomic issues. This is investigated with data from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) Role of Government survey conducted in a large number of countries in 2008. A battery of questions asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they thought that government should be responsible for delivering policies in 10 different areas, including reducing unemployment, controlling inflation, providing income support for the elderly, and public housing. The problem is that the principal components analysis designed to separate these items shows significant overlap, with housing provision and student aid making a significant contribution to both factors. Since they both involve public spending, it is rather misleading to describe them simultaneously as "economic" and "non-economic." Similarly, healthcare is the most salient issue in the non-economic scale, but this is largely about governments providing resources in most countries. If economic room for maneuver is constrained by globalization, so is spending on health, housing, and income support for the elderly. The distinction between these two is blurred and therefore difficult to model.

The third problem concerns respondent attributions of responsibility, which is an important part of the “reward—punishment” model of economic voting. Hellwig points out that the German economy was in the doldrums in 2009, yet the incumbent coalition government led by Chancellor Angela Merkel was nonetheless reelected, even though a simple reward-punishment model would predict otherwise. However, the reward—punishment model is more nuanced than his interpretation suggests. It argues that voters will reward an incumbent for a good performance and punish it for a weak performance, *conditional on the alternatives available*. In the 2009 German elections, the main rival party, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), had been in a grand coalition with the governing parties immediately prior to the election. For that reason, it did not benefit from the economic downturn, because it was seen as part of the problem rather than the solution. In contrast, as is well known, Barack Obama’s victory in the U.S. presidential election of 2008 was greatly assisted by the economic crash that occurred under George W. Bush.

Overall, *Globalization and Mass Politics* makes an interesting contribution to debates on globalization, and is welcome because it focuses on actors rather than aggregates when trying to explain its consequences. However, I remain unconvinced that economic voting is fading away and that electorates are meekly accepting that governments are unable to do much about economic policies in an ever-more-interdependent world.

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## Response to Paul Whiteley’s review of *Globalization and Mass Politics: Retaining the Room to Maneuver*

doi:10.1017/S1537592715003898

— Timothy Hellwig

Paul Whiteley correctly identifies a chief motivation of *Globalization and Mass Politics* as the introduction of mass politics into debates on how globalization matters for democratic governments. As he notes, the book examines how economic globalization has reshaped citizen policy demands, voting behavior, representational linkages between masses and elites, and party behavior. Through all of these settings, I argue that globalization transforms politics in advanced democracies by weakening the effects of economic concerns and bolstering the salience of non-economic considerations. A strength of the book, I submit, is its ability to evaluate the argument across the settings that constitute mass politics.

In his review, however, Whiteley focuses on but one implication of my general argument: its implications for economic voting. It is true that a good deal of work has examined the instability of economic voting effects across national contexts. And for this reason, it is worth considering if globalization accounts for some of this instability. Whiteley is not convinced that this is the case, maintaining that the economy matters. Yet to defend this position he references recent elections in two of the countries with the largest national markets: the United States and the United Kingdom. In smaller, more open economies, economic conditions matter less for elections. And globalization appears as one reason why.

To his credit, Whiteley does raise two concerns with respect to economic voting that, if correct, have implications for the book’s general argument. The first is something any study on the effects of a multifaceted phenomenon (like globalization) on individual attitudes must confront, namely: Do the masses fully appreciate the concept in question? I acknowledge that readers may be skeptical. However, the book reports several analyses that point to a decent correlation between popular assessments and reality. For example, citizens in globalized economies are more likely to see the world economy as responsible for national conditions. Perceptions of economic openness are similar in nature to what we know about perceptions of economic performance: While citizens may not be able to recite national balance-of-trade figures or current joblessness figures, their general assessments tend to align with objective conditions.

The second concern raised by Whiteley is the distinction between economic and noneconomic issues. Since

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the book reasons that citizens' response to interdependence varies according to issue type, it is important to critique how issue types are classified. He is critical of my use of items from ISSP surveys, noting that certain items show significant overlap across dimensions in the principal components analysis. Yet I address this very issue, asserting that it makes sense on face-validity grounds that housing provision and student aid be thought of in both economic and noneconomic terms. I further note that the labels "economic" and "noneconomic" are not

hermetically sealed categories but "pertain to the general ways individuals view these two sets of issues" (p. 47). Moreover, the review reads as though the classification of ISSP items in Chapter 3 is the only way in which the study separates out two sets of issues. Subsequent chapters marshal diverse sets of data, on both masses and elites, to advance alternative ways of classifying performance and positional issues. In each case, this distinction is shown to matter for the way in which mass politics works in open economies.