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2010 British General Election Leader Evaluations: Replicating Electoral Focus Group Research

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Abstract

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Keywords

Focus Groups, Leader Evaluations, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, British Elections

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This research replicates and expands upon the qualitative electoral research of Winters and Campbell by using data from focus groups conducted in Essex, England to coincide with three leadership debates during the 2010 British general election. The Qualitative Election Study of Britain (QES Britain) broadly replicated Winters and Campbell's research design but includes innovations in data collection to more accurately capture assessments. This innovation means the data coding are based entirely on the evaluations of the participants. In our analysis we innovate in the way we display each leader's unique evaluation structure. To capture the salience and direction of leadership assessments, we convey the dimensionality of popular perceptions for Brown, Cameron and Clegg using colour and scaling. Our results produce qualitatively informed evaluation structures for each party leader that contextualize quantitative survey findings. Although this case study is limited to a geographically specific group of participants, our results mirror the quantitative BES results. Such similarity in the qualitative and quantitative results increases our confidence that our results provide useful insights into the associations and evaluations ordinary people used in their assessments of the main political party leaders. Keywords: Focus Groups, Leader Evaluations, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, British Elections

Introduction

In Britain, a national election survey has been conducted during each general election since 1964. These datasets provide an invaluable resource for quantitative researchers interested in voting behaviour and vote choice. Survey data allow statistical analyses to identify the driving factors in electoral outcomes. However, a similar source of data does not exist for qualitative researchers since qualitative data has not been produced alongside each British Election Study (BES).¹ Election data for qualitative researchers would have been limited to a single pre-election open textbox question in the Internet version of the survey where participants wrote responses in their own words.² This is not an adequate data source for qualitative researchers who wish to analyse the language and reasoning of participants.

The Qualitative Election Study of Britain (QES Britain) addresses this lack of appropriate qualitative data and establishes a protocol for the inclusion of a qualitative research component into national election studies (Winters, 2011). This paper reports on the

¹ The exception was a 1997 post-general election study. Forty-five respondents from the campaign study had in-depth interviews to investigate the question why voters had changed their political allegiances and voting behaviour (White, Ritchie, & Devine, 1999).

² The only question with an open-ended response option was q3: "As far as you're concerned, what is the single most important issue facing the country at the present time? Please type your answer in the box below." The remaining open text boxes were for elaboration if the respondent selected "Other."

result of a QES data analysis of our participants' perceptions of British party leaders. It contributes to the qualitative analysis literature in two ways: (a) it adds to the short list of published British studies using qualitative electoral data, and (b) it is the first example of replicated qualitative electoral research in Britain. This paper makes a contribution to the use of grounded theory by adding a new dimension for analysis: concept salience. Below we will present the frequency of our axial categories, thereby illustrating which qualities were most prevalent in our participants' evaluations.

The leader evaluation component of the QES Britain broadly replicates a 2005 focus group study on British party leader evaluations but includes some modifications (Winters & Campbell, 2007). We asked participants to code their assessments for each man as positive, negative and neutral (instead of the researchers) and using participant-led coding, we visually represent the key leadership dimensions for each. This provides a unique evaluation structure grounded in the dimensions of participants' evaluations. Our data were generated during focus groups that were conducted before and after three televised leaders' debates between them. Based on our analysis we conclude that former Prime Minister Gordon Brown was primarily defined by his failings as a political leader and a lack of people skills. Conservative party leader (and now Prime Minister) David Cameron's leadership qualities received positive ratings; however they were balanced by perceptions of his being smug and untrustworthy. Nick Clegg, the recently-elected Liberal Democrat leader was seen as honest and "normal" but that was balanced against concerns over his inexperience.

The Qualitative Election Study of Britain³

The aim of the QES Britain was to record and analyse the views and concerns of British citizens before and after the 2010 general election.⁴ It was the first systematic attempt to gather focus group data in England, Scotland and Wales for the needs of qualitative researchers. The QES Britain data allows us to contextualize the findings from the quantitative national election study and provides a contemporary account of people's concerns in the form of video / audio recordings and anonymised transcripts for future researchers.

The QES Britain transcripts provide data where quantitative research is deficient, namely that surveys do not provide high-quality data in the form of language to analyse "how people use language in their everyday interactions, their "discourses" with each other, and how they...put their linguistic skills to use in building specific accounts of events" (Burr, 2003, p. 17). The goal of the QES Britain was to generate thick, rich qualitative data for analysis of citizens' opinions of politicians, party leaders, political issues, civic duty, political alienation, and the partisan campaigns both before and after the general election. It also aimed to facilitate the analysis of language-in-use and uncover the meaning of terms when participants articulated their assessments (Gee, 2008). Such analysis can identify normative values, make explicit the tacit assumptions participants use to reach their judgements, and possibly identify new research themes.

One of the strengths of qualitative research is its ability to provide insights into the specific contexts within which phenomena occur, unlike quantitative research which must word survey questions identically regardless of the circumstances. The context of the 2010 election was not directly comparable to the 2005 general election. First, all of the candidates were men who had spent a significant amount of time in government: Tony Blair had been Prime Minister since 1997, Michael Howard's political career stretched back to the 1980s

³ Information on the QES Britain, the anonymised transcripts and supporting documents are available on the project's blog at <http://www.wintersresearch.wordpress.com>

⁴ This research was generously funded by the British Academy, grant number SG090860.

under Margaret Thatcher and Charles Kennedy had been leader of the Liberal Democrats nearly 6 years at the time of the election. Next, the 2005 election took place in the aftermath of Britain's participation in the invasion of Iraq and focus group participants wrote phrases connecting the unpopular Iraq war and Tony Blair (Winters & Campbell, 2007). Finally, there were no leader debates in 2005 whereas three debates were broadcast in 2010. The benefit of replicating qualitative research is that it helps reveal how people's values or concepts remain static or change given the electoral circumstances.

The three broad categories of leadership assessment used by focus group participants in the 2005 study, namely likeability, competence, and trustworthiness, were still relevant, in both similar and different ways, to people's assessments of political leaders in 2010. These concepts are also broadly reflected in the 2010 BES survey data. The BES pre-election Internet questionnaire asked participants to rate the three main leaders on aspects of likeability, competence, and truthfulness using zero (lowest/most negative) to ten (highest/most positive) scales (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2010a).⁵ As displayed in Figure 1 below, Clegg barely comes out as the most highly rated leader on questions of likeability (5.0), having people's best interests in mind (4.9), and telling the truth (5.6). Cameron edges Clegg by a narrow margin on questions of competence (5.2 to 5.0 respectively) and knowing what he is talking about (5.3 to 5.2 respectively). These differences are quite small which could lead to the conclusion that participants did not have vastly dissimilar assessments of these two men. Brown comes last on every scale; however his ratings are best on the question related to knowing what he was talking about – he rates 5.0 to Cameron's 5.3 and Clegg's 5.2 – and does worst on the issue of likeability at 3.3 to Clegg's 5.0, a difference of 1.7 points. Given his poorer showing, one could conclude that British participants did not think very well of Gordon Brown in comparison to Cameron or Clegg.

Yet these numbers in and of themselves do not reveal the bases upon which people made their assessments. They also lack the ability to provide insights into the positive, negative, or neutral evaluations people may have had for each candidate or how those assessments may have been inter-related. Qualitative analysis using QES Britain data addresses this gap and gives us a deeper perspective into the participants' leader evaluations. Although this case study is limited to a geographically specific group of participants, our results compare well with the BES means presented in Figure 1. Such overlap in the qualitative and quantitative results increases our confidence that our results provide useful insights into the associations and evaluations ordinary people used in their assessments of Brown, Cameron and Clegg.

⁵ From the BES Campaign Internet Panel Survey pre-election wave data: q52 - q54: Using a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how to you feel about Gordon Brown? q81 - q83: Using a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means a very incompetent leader and 10 means a very competent leader, how would you describe Gordon Brown? Q189-Q191: "When you listen to what Gordon Brown/David Cameron/Nick Clegg has to say, do you think that in general he knows what he is talking about, or that he doesn't know? q192toq194: When you listen to what Gordon Brown has to say, do you think he has your best interests in mind, or that he does not think about your best interests? q195toq197: When you listen to what Gordon Brown has to say, do you think generally that he tells the truth, or that he does not tell the truth?"

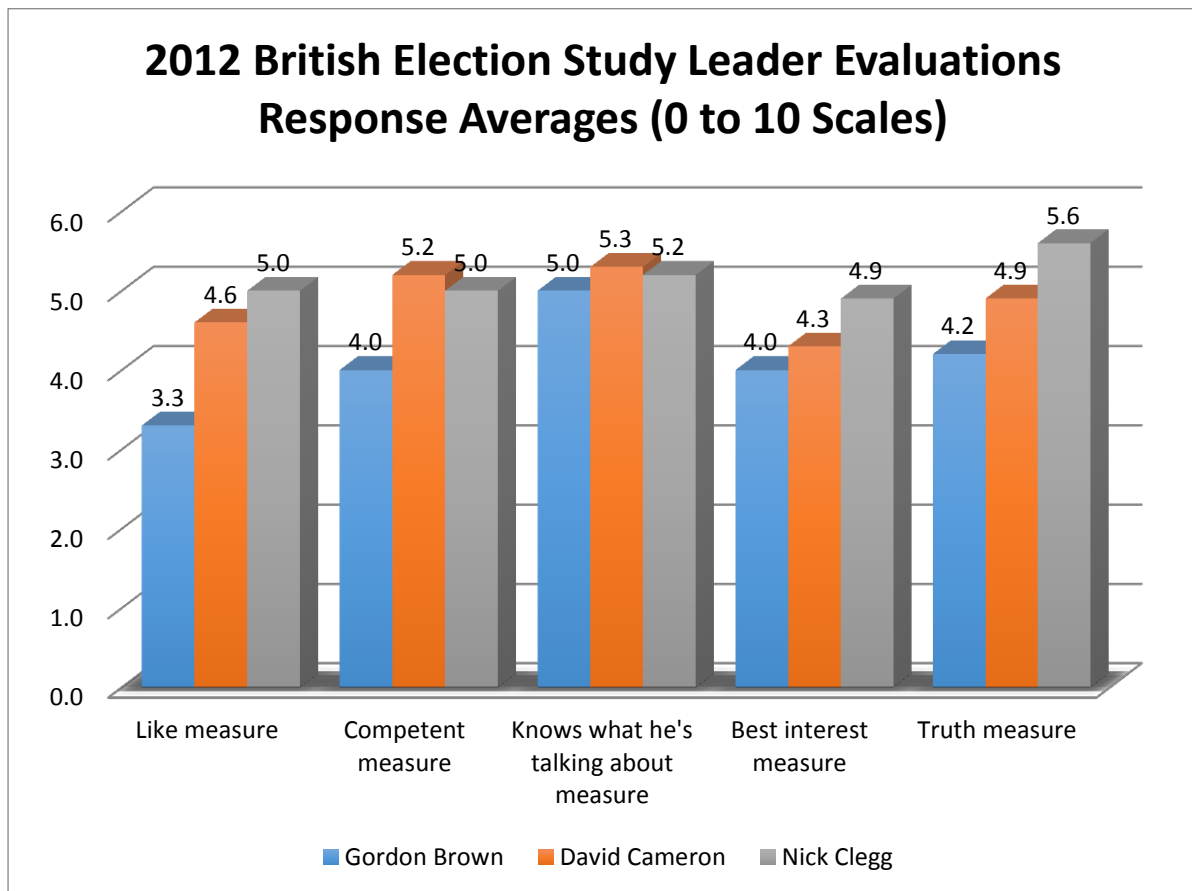


Figure 1: 2012 BES Leader Evaluations Response Averages. Source: 2010 British Election Study Pre-election dataset (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whiteley, 2010b). All data weighted with variable w8.

The 2005 Focus Group Study and Its Results

As noted above, the research design of the 2010 QES Britain makes an important contribution by broadly replicating qualitative electoral research on the same topic, thus investigating its external reliability, namely whether the 2005 qualitative findings can be generalised to another setting or context (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). In the weeks before the 2005 British general election Winters and Campbell (2007) conducted six focus groups in Essex and London. To determine whether there was evidence to support the idea that there were sex-differences in leader evaluations, they presented participants with photos of each of the three main leaders. Participants were encouraged to write down silently the words or phrases that came to mind when looking at the photos. Then they were asked to indicate the most important words or phrases in their assessments of the leaders. A discussion of the comments of each of the leaders followed. The results of the brainstorming session as well as the structured discussion and the spontaneous mentions of each of the three main leaders were analysed. The 2005 analysis was informed by previous research that organised leader evaluations into the categories of “personal,” “issue,” and “party” given by Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960) and King’s (2002) four attributes of party leaders: physical appearance, native intelligence, character (temperament) and political style (see also Rahn, Aldrich, Sullivan, & Borgida, 1990; Funk cited in Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1994). Using the open coding method of grounded theory, Winters and Campbell identified

four main categories into which most comments could be classified: (a) Linking a leader to a policy (e.g., Tony Blair and the unpopular invasion of Iraq); (b) Personality (positive or negative assessments); (c) Competence (positive or negative assessments); and (d) Trust (positive or negative assessments).

Although most of the comments made about Tony Blair (Prime Minister and the Labour Party leader) were negative assessments of his personality and his trustworthiness, participants rated his competence as a leader in a more positive light. By comparison, Michael Howard (the Conservative Party leader) received a similar number of negative assessments of his personality and trustworthiness but he did not receive nearly as many positive assessments of his leadership qualities. Men and women were most likely to differ on their assessments of the Liberal Democrat leader, Charles Kennedy: women rated his personality and trustworthiness higher than men while men were more likely to rate his competence negatively. These results, together with analysis of the discussion transcripts, led Winters and Campbell (2007) to conclude there was no evidence to support the idea that men and women had systematic sex-specific frameworks for evaluating political party leaders. The QES Britain builds on this research and its methodology to contextualise assessments of the main party leaders during the 2010 general election campaign.

The 2010 QES Britain Research and Study Designs – The Leaders’ Debates Focus Groups

The late announcement of the leaders’ debates presented a challenge to the QES Britain project as the original research had not included debate focus groups.⁶ However, when the debate rules were announced on March 1, 2010 the research design was modified to conduct three additional focus groups on April 15, April 22, and April 29.⁷ This article uses the data generated from these debate night discussions to contextualise the 2010 general election and to analyse the language and assessments of the participants. The leaders’ debates were a novel introduction to the election campaign and directed a fixed and unrelenting gaze at the leaders of the three parties for the duration of the campaign. Consequently, they provide a unique setting to assess participants’ perceptions and views about party leaders.

Participants for the leaders’ debates focus groups were recruited through e-mail invitations using the University of Essex’s internal e-mail advertising service and through snowballing referrals by offering accepted participants a £10 incentive to refer someone from outside the university setting.⁸ They lived either in the constituency of Colchester, held by Liberal Democrat Bob Russell since 1997, or Harwich and North Essex, a Conservative seat held by Bernard Jenkins since 1992. Participants were asked to indicate their intention to vote and whether or not they had made up their minds as to how they would vote. We asked people to indicate their vote intention knowing a focus group of all decided voters would

⁶ We use the term “research design” to mean the entire QESB design: planning, scheduling, data collection, ethical compliance, budgeting, transcription, data analysis and data archiving. We use the term “study design” to refer to the individual research questions investigated using focus groups. In this article “study design” refers to the component designed to capture political party leader evaluations: the question phrasing, where to locate it in the interview schedule, what stimuli to include, etc.

⁷ Fourteen focus groups were conducted just before and after the 2010 general election (pre-election: three in Essex, two in London, two in Wales and two in Scotland; and post-election: two groups in Essex, and one each in London, Wales, and Scotland) with a total of 76 participants. All the groups were recorded using audio and video recording equipment. The post-election groups contained as many of the pre-election participants as possible (with top-ups as necessary). Participants were screened by age and sex in order to obtain an equal number of men and women and a range of ages.

⁸ The focus group ran for 3 hours (90 minutes of focus groups and 90 minutes of debate) and participants were paid £50 for their time.

produce different data to that of all undecided voters. Since all of our research questions investigated the thoughts of people who intended to vote (even if they did not vote in the end), any participant who indicated s/he might vote was considered; only those who were certain they would not vote were excluded.⁹ The majority of people who applied to participate in the Leader Debates groups indicated they intended to vote but did not know how they would vote.¹⁰ Of the 23 participants, 17 planned to vote but were undecided, 3 people knew for whom they were going to vote, 2 were undecided about voting, and one response is missing.

Before we could collect data we needed to disclose to our participants information on the study, obtain their consent to participate, and establish an open discussion space. At the start of the focus groups the moderator explained the purpose of the study, provided each person with a copy of the consent form to sign, and verbally reviewed the various elements of the consent form with the group.¹¹ To establish that all opinions were important the moderator specified that the aim of the research was to get the full range of views.¹² Icebreakers are necessary to establishing connections between the participants but we framed the question to also provide us with politically relevant data for analysis. The ice-breaker question asked what they could recall about the campaign since it had begun and to which issues they were paying attention. Once each participant made a contribution and had started to think about the campaign the data collection for this study began.

A modified version of the 2005 Winters and Campbell leaders-based brainstorming session was conducted.¹³ For this research, photos of the party leaders were taken from the parties' own websites (a modification from the 2005 study); this was to ensure that participants reacted not only to the leader but also to how he was portrayed by his party. Participants were given written and oral instructions to brainstorm and write down all the words or phrases that came to mind for each, and then to mark whether their association was positive, negative, or neutral. This proved an invaluable modification to the 2005 study since some words one might assume would be a negative assessment were thought of by the participant as positive.¹⁴ The discussion moved through each leader in turn so that the

⁹ In our view, research into the attitudes and behaviour of non-voting citizens requires theoretical frameworks specific to non-voting and therefore requires separate investigation.

¹⁰ The Essex group had a range of voters. Of the 17 postelection participants, 16 reported that they voted. Eight voted Liberal Democrat, five Conservative, and three for the Labour party. Vote choice information is included in later footnotes. The distribution by sex was 12 women and 11 men. The age cohorts (counts in parentheses) were: 18-25 year old cohort (1 person), 26-33 (5), 34-41 (8), 42-48 (3), 49-56 (4) and 57-64 (1). Anonymised participant characteristic data are available as an Excel spreadsheet at <http://wintersresearch.wordpress.com/qes-britain/>

¹¹ Each focus group transcript includes the consent discussion between the moderator and the participants. The consent form is available for review on the QES Britain project blog.

¹² By way of example, here is an extract from the moderator's comments in the third Leaders Debate focus group: "... don't feel like you shouldn't say anything because by giving your view you're not really contradicting what anyone else is saying. So people are going on saying they would really like to see a reduction in taxes and a reduction in public spending, you should say "Well that's it, I know that you guys feel like that but you know, but I would actually like to see an increase in taxes and an increase in public spending" because you don't have to, we're not here to debate. Nobody has to leave agreeing with anybody but I want to make sure that you know that there's this very open space. And if you just don't know too, you can say "Look, I'm really torn," that's alright as well." (Winters, 2011, pp. 5-6)

¹³ In the 2005 study the participants wrote down words and phrases for the three party leaders and then indicated the most important to their evaluation. The analysts had to classify the comments as positive or negative assessments.

¹⁴ For example, the participant Shirley listed "afraid" as a positive association with Gordon Brown. See below for full exchange.

transcripts could be analysed systematically and the brainstorming was contextualised. Participants then discussed other relevant topics until five minutes before the debate.¹⁵

Methods: Grounded Theory and Discourse Analysis

This analysis is a case study on the language used by British citizens when thinking about and discussing party leaders. As noted by Merriam (2009, p. x) a qualitative case study is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, institution, a process or a social unit.” The aim is to provide a precise description of the case (Flick, 2009, p. 134). To generate data for analysis, the brainstorming data were entered into tabular form in Microsoft Word and the focus groups recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriber; we used the audio and video recordings to verify and contextualise the participants’ transcribed comments (e.g., ironic tones of voice, laughter) for better interpretation of the material.

These data were analysed with NVivo software and coding was generated using grounded theory method (GTM) and discourse analysis. Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), a GTM approach starts by engaging with the data and allows the concepts and theories developed to emerge from the analysis; thus the theories that emerge are “grounded” in the data. In particular we used “open coding” on the brainstorming text, identifying the various concepts that connected participants’ associations. As noted by Boeije, open coding “encourages a thematic approach” to the data (2010, p. 96). Next, axial coding was employed. Strauss and Corbin describe axial coding as “a set a procedures whereby data are put back together after open coding, by making connections between categories” (2007, p. 96). Finally, the data were synthesized to identify the various dimensions of the concepts and categories expressed by our participants. This allowed us to capture the unique personal dimensions of each leader as described by the participants. Bryant and Charmaz note “[a] key strength, and one still central to GMT, is that it offers a foundation for rendering the processes and procedures of qualitative investigation visible, comprehensible and replicable” (2010, p. 33). As Winters and Campbell (2007) used the grounded theory method to organise and analyse their data, we replicated this method of data analysis for comparability.

Our analysis was also informed by Gee’s review of discourse analysis. We analysed the ways our participants used “language [to] make certain things *significant* or not, and in what ways,” including what was *not* said that may have been significant (2008, p. 11). We examined the transcripts to see how our participants used language to connect or disconnect ideas, values or individuals with or from each other, and how they made them relevant or irrelevant to each other (Gee, 2008, p. 13). In particular we wanted to make visible how participants connected language or concepts to each leader and evaluate whether these connections were similar or dissimilar across leader evaluations. Grounded theory method and discourse analysis also informed our analysis of the discussion transcripts as participants described their reactions to the leaders and their justifications for the comments they had written.

Finally, we wanted to bring attention to the emergent themes for each leader. Traditional methods of visually modelling concepts and concept structures did not convey the importance of certain leadership traits over others so we created our own using Microsoft Word. Inspired by the “cloud tag” feature in NVivo we represent the importance of a leader’s category by scaling those traits mentioned most frequently in the largest font with a decreasing font size to represent fewer mentions. We visually represent the effect by color-

¹⁵ Participants watched the leaders’ debate live and discussed it and additional topics after the debate. See the project blog for the full transcripts.

coding our model to further visually contextualize the data. In this way we try to visually represent the concept's "salience," the importance of a concept to people, in the evaluation structure to add more information. We consider this a valuable innovation in contextualising leader evaluations.¹⁶

Results

Gordon Brown – "It's coming across that he's human."

The Results section is organised by party leader and presents the words and phrases generated by our participants during the brainstorming exercise. We present a summary of the brainstorming session word-association in tables and illustrate them with discussion excerpts afterwards. Another unique aspect of the 2010 QES Britain was the inclusion of post-election focus groups that allows us to evaluate people's comments in light of their later vote choice.¹⁷ We include a participant's declared vote intention during the pre-election group discussion, and, when available their reported vote choice in the footnotes.¹⁸

Tables 6, 7, and 8 report the brainstorming data. First, we determined that single mentions of a word were insufficient to meet a reasonable criterion for consideration. At least two participants needed to independently express the same basic idea for it to be its own concept. Further, participants wrote down descriptive words rather than an evaluative for example, "Scottish" or "Christian." These were also excluded from the analysis but are reported in the footnotes for fullness. We report all the excluded terms in the footnotes for transparency and replication. The words were coded as they were by the participants (positive, negative, neutral or left uncoded). This is our primary innovation in comparison with the Winters and Campbell study; rather than the analyst interpreting and assessing what is positive, negative, or neutral the evaluation is based on the coding of the participants. When nearly identical words (e.g., cares and caring) were used more than once, the number in parentheses denotes the number of participants who used the term (e.g., Brown was described as "caring" by three different participants). The data were then organised thematically into "*concept*" using the open coding method. Next, axial coding was used to assign each concept to one "*category*:" leadership, personality, or trustworthiness.

Table 6: Participant-led coding for Gordon Brown

+ *Brainstorming words coded as Brown positives by focus group participants*¹⁹

Concept	Brainstorming words			
<i>Approachable (6)</i>	Caring (3)	Loveable	Cheerful	Cuddly
<i>Effort (4)</i>	Hard worker	Hard working	Tries hard	Trying too hard
<i>Experienced (3)</i>	Ex-chancellor	Experience	Experienced	
<i>Humanity (2)</i>	Family	Human		

¹⁶ We recognize that the structure of concept salience may differ depending upon whose responses are analysed. The Essex groups had Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democratic supporters. One could also choose to extract only Labour supporter data from across the study or data on participants over the age of 45. Each of these permutations may produce slightly different results; yet each would also reflect the common values and views of the criteria on which the qualitative data was selected. As noted, this data is not intended to be generalizable; it is intended to provide context.

¹⁷ Special thanks go to Julia Eisner of Ispos Mori for this invaluable suggestion.

¹⁸ With post-election vote choice information a researcher can analyse a participant's use of language in the pre-election sessions in light of their reported vote choice, or highlight comments in the pre-election discussion that seem to contradict their vote choice.

¹⁹ Two descriptive terms were removed from the analysis: "Working class" and "Christian."

<i>Leader qualities (7)</i>	Assured Intelligent	Autocrat Leader	Calculating Strong	Clever
<i>Stressed (2)</i>	Afraid	Stressed		

- *Brainstorming words coded as Brown negatives by focus group participants*

Concept	Brainstorming words				
<i>Arrogance (5)</i>	Arrogant	Jaded	Patronising	Pompous	Smug
<i>Boring (4)</i>	Boring (2)	Dull	Staid		
<i>Lacks people skills (6)</i>	Clumsy	Lack of people skills		Blunt	
	Uncomfortable	Not as charismatic as Blair		Unable to smile	
<i>Poor leader (12)</i>	Autocrat	Failure	Most unlikely PM	Non-elected	
	Poor leader	Under pressure	Out of ideas	Out of touch	
	Old	Tired	Uninspired	Warlike	
<i>Self-advancement (2)</i>	Ambitious for self		Power hungry		
<i>Smarmy/PR construct (11)</i>	False	Deceitful	Insincere	Liar (2)	
	Smarmy (2)	Claims to be shy!		Constructed photo	
	Glossy façade Image				
<i>Tragic (2)</i>	Lonely	Wants to be liked			
<i>Weak (4)</i>	Cowardly	Indecisive	Not confident	Soft	

* *Brainstorming words coded as Brown neutrals or words left uncoded by focus group participants*²⁰

Concept	Brainstorming words				
<i>Experience (2)</i>	Experienced	Managed the economy for a long time			
<i>Lacks people skills (8)</i>	Aspergers	Difficult	Dour	Grumpy	Rude
	Morose	Not good with others		Socially uncomfortable	
<i>Leader qualities (3)</i>	Smart	Solid	Unwavering		
<i>Poor leader (7)</i>	Said stuff and didn't do it		Trying too hard	No	
	personality	Single-minded	Old	Older	
	Better as a * chancellor rather than a * prime minister				
<i>Self-advancement (2)</i>	Just in it for him and not other people			Power hungry	
<i>Smarmy/PR construct (5)</i>	Always play acting		Fake	Liar	Good picture
	Touched up photo				
<i>Tragic (2)</i>	Feel a little sorry for him		Sad		

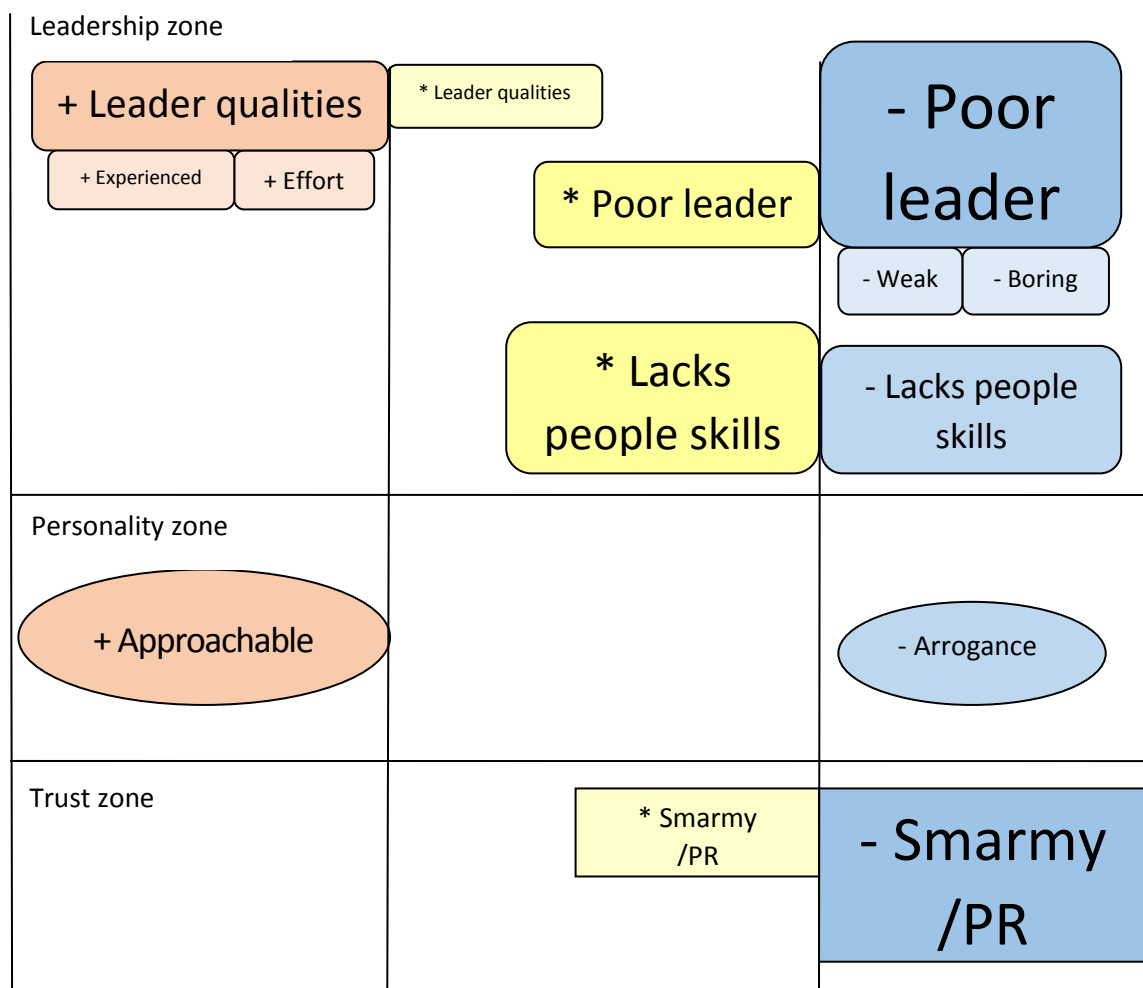
Source for all tables: 2010 QES Britain dataset.

Visual representations of the concepts were then generated (see Figure 2 on the conceptions related to Gordon Brown). Each category was assigned a shape: rounded rectangles for leadership qualities, circles for personality and rectangles for trustworthiness. Categories were assigned a zone where its concepts are displayed. We assess the importance of a concept by the number of participant mentions (as listed in Tables 6, 7 and 8); this is represented by the size of the font and the colour assigned to it. The range runs from the 26 point font for the most frequent response to an 8 point font for the least frequent. Symbols indicate whether the category is positive (+), negative (-), or neutral/not-coded (*). The use of colour helps capture and illustrate the nexus of the direction of the assessment and its

²⁰ Descriptors excluded were: "Scottish" (mentioned three times) and the phrases "Step outside posh boy" and "nice smile." "Step outside posh boy" was a reference to a spoof campaign ad that had been in the news (Priol, 2010).

frequency such that dark red colouring indicates many people rated a leader positively (warm to cold) on that concept.

Figure 2: Evaluation structure for Gordon Brown



Gordon Brown's evaluation structure is intuitively plausible for those who lived through the election, but not at all discoverable through the use of quantitative data alone. Moving from left to right, the associations move from positive through neutral to negative. On the positive side, there are Brown's leadership qualities: his experience and effort. Although these participants describe his leadership using the concepts of "experienced" and "trying hard," they do not contain words characteristic of an effective leader. There are no categories for successful, effective leadership qualities of the type reported for Tony Blair in Winters and Campbell's focus groups ("statesman-like," "persuasive," "Britain's most able politician," and "capable and serious leader") (2007, p. 191). The absence of terms related to effectiveness or success suggests these participants thought of Gordon Brown as a man who, although hardworking, had not been successful in leading the country. The centre categories, the neutral or non-coded categories, are more often linked to the negative categories for Gordon Brown. The perception that he lacked people skills and was a poor leader was more commonly found in people's neutral and negative associations. Finally, Gordon Brown was perceived as false; participants mention his style and the photo attached to their brainstorming sheet as being the result of campaign professionals. In assessing the frequency of the axial coding categories, moving from top to bottom, most assessments of Gordon Brown were related to his leadership ability (rounded rectangle) rather than his personality or

trustworthiness, a reflection of his role as Prime Minister since 2007. His positive leadership qualities are associated with experience and effort, but these are overshadowed by the frequent negative assessments of his leadership and people skills.

This view – that Brown was trying but ultimately not succeeding as a leader – is also found in the focus group extracts. Participants discussed their impressions that Brown is trying hard, but they question the effectiveness of his efforts. Other participants also express empathy with him as a person while distinguishing between his accomplishments and failures as a leader.²¹ We include sample extracts from the transcripts we drew up in our analysis to better interpret people’s perception of the leaders in conjunction with their brainstorming word data.

*Extract from discussion on Gordon Brown, Group 1:*²²

Cathy: “Trying too hard.”

Sarah: I put “tries hard,” not “try-*ing* too hard,” “tries hard,” {laughter} like he’s doing his best, but {laughs}...

(Later)

Sarah: I thought he was quite cuddly and lovable {laughter}. I’m not so sure that’s a good thing for a politician but I think he’d be quite a nice bloke to know actually.

Keith: I put that he’s “caring” in certain things. I think he does care. Whether he does it in the right way or not, I don’t know.

Jane: I mean he wants to do the right thing, he’s really trying hard.

Patricia: I put “single minded” with an asterisk because I couldn’t decide whether it was good to be single-minded but I meant it in “certainly didn’t listen” terms.

In the next excerpt participants describe Brown as “afraid,” and “unlucky” (this comment was made on the day of the “bigoted woman” gaffe).²³ Participants seem to empathise with Brown on a personal level, and in some cases, take his failures as positive signs of human frailty. This excerpt is particularly important as it highlights the difference in perception between our participants and the British print media which portrayed Brown’s gaffe as a “disaster” and a “crisis” for the Labour party (Greenslade, 2010).²⁴

²¹ Conventions used in the transcription of the focus group discussions: ** indicates words, phrases or sentences we could not hear. *Italic* font indicates we have taken a guess at a word/name, etc. Curly brackets {} indicate what cannot be clearly articulated. Parentheses () are used to indicate breaks in time between excerpts. Participants are anonymised.

²² Vote intention and vote choice: Cathy-Undecided/ Conservative; Sarah-Undecided/ Did not vote; Keith-Undecided/ Lib Dem; Jane-Undecided/ Unknown; Patricia-Undecided/ Conservative.

²³ On April 28, Gordon Brown committed what was, arguably, the most publicised gaffe of his campaign. After a meet-and-greet with voters, Mr. Brown was met by Gillian Duffy, a citizen who began to discuss, in addition to other issues, her concerns about Eastern European immigration. After the exchange, the Prime Minister got into his car and expressed anger at having to deal with such a voter. Unaware his lapel mic was still live, he characterised her as a “sort of bigoted woman who says she used to be Labour” (Prince, 2010). The incident resulted in public humiliation for the Prime Minister as his words were played back to him live on air at BBC’s Radio 2 later that day. This was followed by a hastily arranged visit to Mrs. Duffy’s home to apologise. All this occurred just hours before the final Leaders’ debate.

²⁴ See the third leaders’ debate transcripts for a full account of reactions to the Brown gaffe (Winters, 2011)

*Extract from discussion on Gordon Brown, Group 3:*²⁵

Shirley: I think he's afraid.

Moderator: And why did you mark it the way you did? (*As a positive*)

Shirley: 'Cause I thought that it's coming across that he's human so he's showing he's afraid but I did put that as a positive which is a bit weird with a negative word but I think he is afraid.

Moderator: And you think that's good, he's sensing there's something worrying?

Shirley: Yeah.

Moderator: Okay.

Geoff: Well he's a bit "unlucky" as well, as a person.

Gordon Brown faced many challenges in his bid to get the Labour party its fourth working majority in Parliament. Even those who would eventually vote Labour, although sympathetic to Brown due to their common partisan affiliation, recognised his failings. However, these were not considered to be serious enough to weaken their partisan loyalties or shift in support to either of the other candidates. Instead, for some participants, including some who later voted Conservative, these weaknesses enabled them to connect with Mr. Brown on a personal level and put a "human face" on the party policy. These results provide context for the BES statistical results in which Brown comes last on every measure of leadership.

David Cameron - "Confident" or "Arrogant"?

Discussion and assessment of our participants' perceptions of David Cameron can be summarized by the word "ambivalence." Cameron's leader evaluations dynamics are similar to the data from then-Prime Minister Tony Blair's 2005 brainstorming results: participants chose words that had strong positive and negative associations. Unlike Gordon Brown, Cameron was not perceived as trying hard yet failing. Cameron was positively characterised as charismatic, dynamic, energetic, and confident – traits associated with positive leadership qualities (see Table 7). His negatives are similar to Brown's, including terms such as "smarmy," "untrustworthy," and "smug." Many participants noted his lack of experience compared to Brown and considered him ill-prepared for the role of Prime Minister. Interestingly it is Cameron, rather than Brown, who was associated with Tony Blair and New Labour by two participants; for one participant it was a negative aspect and for the other it was coded as a neutral. Although participants report mixed perceptions, Cameron's leadership associations are the most positive of the three party leaders (similar to Tony Blair in the 2005 focus groups).

Table 7: Participant-led coding for David Cameron

+ *Brainstorming words coded as Cameron positives by focus group participants*²⁶

Concept	Brainstorming words				
<i>Leader qualities (12)</i>	Dynamic Personality	Calm Positive	Charismatic Popular	Clever Measured	Confident (2) Leader Trying hard
<i>Humanity (7)</i>	Approachable	Cheerful (2)	Father	Family man (3)	

²⁵ Vote intention and vote choice of participants: Shirley-Undecided/ Conservative; Geoff-Labour/ Labour.

²⁶ One single-mention term was excluded from the positive analysis: "honest."

<i>Fresh (4)</i>	Youthful	Healthy	Fresh and energetic	Change
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- *Brainstorming words coded as Cameron negatives by focus group participants*

Concept	Brainstorming words
<i>Arrogant (10)</i>	Arrogant (2) Bully Confident Over-confident Pompous Smug (4)
<i>Untrustworthy (8)</i>	Devious Duplicitous Underhanded Untrustworthy (3) Sly Not one of us but trying to be
<i>Ill-prepared (10)</i>	Bland Ill-prepared Naïve No substance Novice Not backed by a strong team Poor leader Poor realisation Unsure in himself Too young
<i>Slick/PR (7)</i>	Slick (2) Smarmy Smooth “God like” sun behind Sun shining creates a “godly” feel to picture Good PR
<i>Conservative (2)</i>	Conservative Tory
<i>Personal background (3)</i>	Bullingdon club Public schoolboy Good upbringing (education)
<i>Tony Blair (2)</i>	New Labour Tony Blair

* *Brainstorming words coded as Cameron neutral or left uncoded by focus group participants*²⁷

Concept	Brainstorming words
<i>Leader qualities (3)</i>	Good intentions Man of the people Smart
<i>Fresh (3)</i>	Mid age Young Fresh faced Nice face
<i>Negative leadership (2)</i>	Excitable Tries too hard
<i>Untrustworthy (2)</i>	Opportunistic Trying to pull one over on us
<i>Privileged background (4)</i>	Class-oriented Public schoolboy Public school Wealthy Privileged
<i>Smarmy (5)</i>	Sleazy Smarmy (2) – needs a wife to help his politics New wrapper on a hairy toffee Pleasey and cheesey
<i>Arrogant (2)</i>	Smug Thinks he knows better

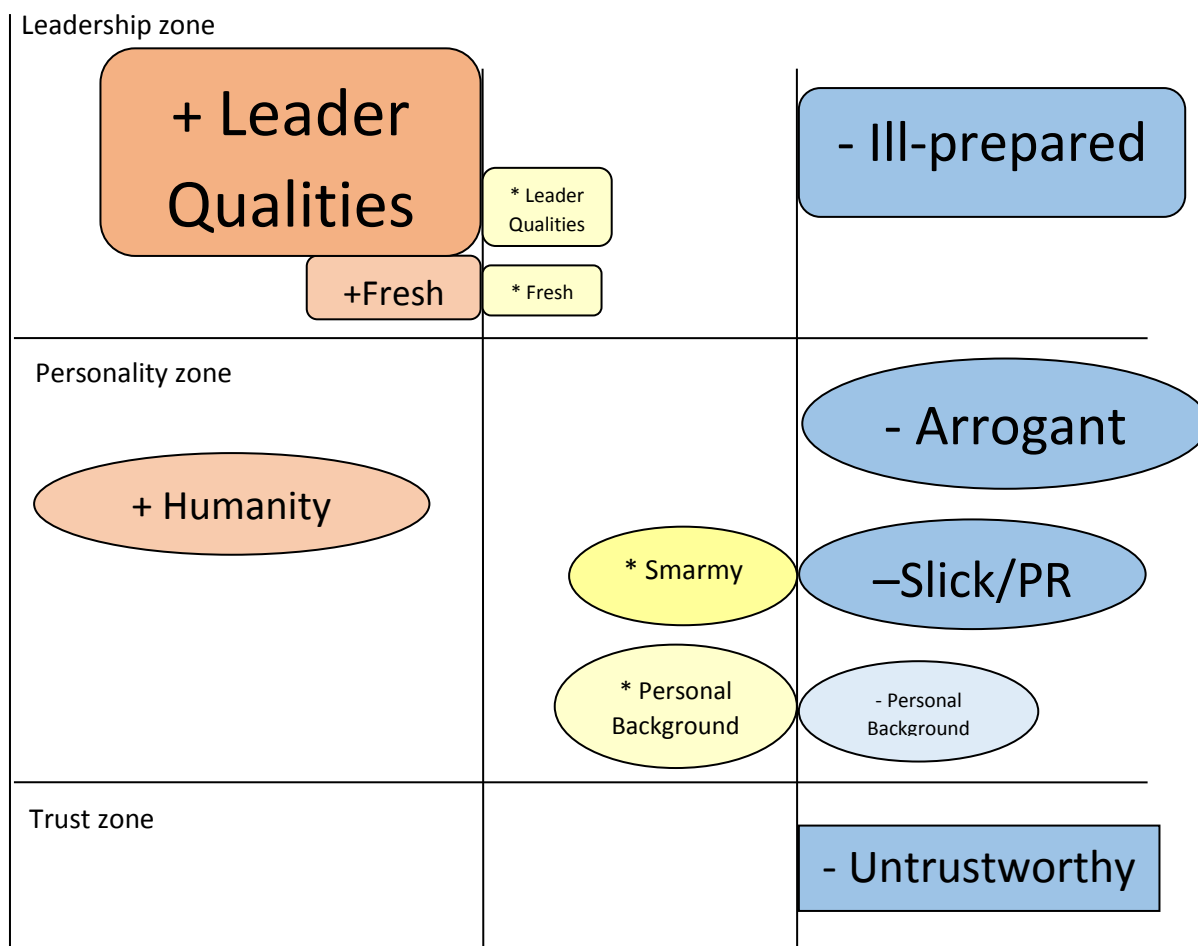
Compared with the other two leaders, the participants’ associations for David Cameron were more evenly balanced across the positive and negative spectrum (see Figure 3). Participants questioned whether he was ready to be Prime Minister and take on the problems that the country was facing or felt that he was “naïve,” a “novice,” and “too young.” His privileged background was also raised; some discussants rated it as a negative trait while others coded it as a neutral. Mirroring the results of the brainstorming sessions, the focus group discussions of Cameron reflect both the positive and negative perceptions of his leadership and personality. Participants provided a wide range of associations, although the conversations focused more on the negative attributes than the positive.²⁸ Analysis of the axial coding shows that participants’ evaluations contained more personal evaluations with

²⁷ Three single-mention terms were excluded from analysis: “trustworthy,” “family tragedy last year,” and “Tony 2.”

²⁸ We found, similar to Winters and Campbell’s conclusions, that our focus group discussions were more focussed on the negative qualities of the leader than the brainstorming word associations (Winters & Campbell, 2007, p. 191). This may come down to social norms in the way participants discuss politics or some group interaction effect. Future researchers should note that analysing discussions transcripts alone may result in a skewed perception of how/what people think about politics and political leaders.

fewer comments on his leadership ability than Brown; this is understandable given that Cameron was a long-time leader of the Conservatives, not Prime Minister. However, overall, Cameron comes out with more positive leadership evaluations than either of his two rivals.

Figure 3: Evaluation structure for David Cameron



We have included an extended excerpt from a participant named Deborah who was responding to a question that asked participants to rank the leaders by ability. Deborah's remarks seem to reflect the general mood found in the brainstorming sessions of all three groups. She expresses the view that Brown has failed to lead, that she does not know whether Nick Clegg could lead and that Cameron has been successful as a leader of his party. The next excerpt is the discussion of the assessments of David Cameron. The negative and neutral words participants volunteered are similar to those associated with Brown, such as "smarmy" and "over-confident."

Extract from discussion on David Cameron, Group 2:²⁹

Moderator: Good, so moving on to Cameron. Deborah?

Deborah: {laughs} I put lot of things but one thing I was interested that came to my mind was the Bullington Club. That really bothers me and when I look

²⁹ Vote intention and vote choice of participants: Kevin-Unsure will vote/ Lib Dem; Deborah-Undecided/; Unknown; Gareth-Undecided / Unknown; John-Labour/ Labour.

at him I see these, that part of British and specifically English society, I suppose that I don't really.

John: It's this "not one of us but trying to be" **.

Kevin: Mine's the same, "smug," "duplicitous," "bland," "untrustworthy."

Moderator: Gareth, any thoughts?

Gareth: Yeah, I put "change" which is more a reflection of his party rather than him as a person which to be honest you know could be a positive thing but I don't know for him as a person, I wouldn't trust him {laughter}.

(Later)

Deborah: yeah, oh, {laughter}, I hate to say it but I think, I'm sort of ** mine from the bottom, Gordon Brown's fail to lead his own government and his own party so I put him at the bottom but actually I think that I would put David Cameron at the top and Nick Clegg below which is not, which is contrary to my personal political beliefs but I think that he seems to be more the leader of his party bearing in mind that particularly Nick Clegg has Vince Cable and sometimes I think that, I guess that maybe I don't know enough about his handle over the Liberal-Democrats whereas David Cameron's come in and really seems to have taken control in quite a strong way.

Extract from discussion on David Cameron, Group 3:³⁰

Moderator: David Cameron, positives?

Nicole: "Good personality."

Moderator: Maureen did you?

Maureen: Sorry, I said "confident."

Liz: He's a family man **.

Robert: I just had, well I put positive as "confident" and "family man," the two.

Jody: "Leader."

Vicki: I put "measured," "measured and thoughtful."

Maureen: "Very calm," he seems to be calm.

Shirley: He seems to be calm.

Moderator: Neutral assessments?

Nicole: He is "excitable," he's a bit excitable, like a puppy {laughter}.

(Later)

Moderator: What about negatives?

Vicki: "Slick."

Robert: Good PR.

Liz: "Smarmy."

(Later)

Nicole: I put "smooth" and "over confident," too smooth.

Moderator: And those were negatives, too smooth?

Nicole: Yeah.

The qualitative data for David Cameron provide a complicated image. On the positive side he is perceived as a young, charismatic family man, and one with leadership

³⁰ Vote intention and vote choice of participants: Nicole-Undecided/ Lib Dem; Maureen-Undecided/ Unknown; Liz-Undecided/ Conservative; Robert-Undecided/ Labour; Jody-Undecided/ Conservative; Vicki-Undecided/ Unknown; Shirley-Undecided/ Conservative.

qualities. On the negative side there is uncertainty about his leadership. Participants, including those who later voted Conservative, perceived him as arrogant, the product of professional public relations advisers and untrustworthy. Yet, as with Tony Blair in 2005, lack of trustworthiness and negative personal assessments are less damaging than perceptions of a failure to lead. Looking to what is and is not said for all three men; Cameron comes out as the best reviewed party leader because he is not perceived as either a failure or as ineffectual.

Nick Clegg – “I think nobody knows a lot about him.”

The concepts and distribution of categories that structure Nick Clegg’s evaluations are very different from the other two leaders. In both 2005 and 2010, the focus group participants were more likely to associate trustworthiness with the Liberal Democrat leader (Winters & Campbell, 2007). Gordon Brown had no concept listed for honesty within the three groups; David Cameron received one mention that was excluded on the single mention criterion we described above. In contrast, seven people used terms associated with Clegg’s trustworthiness in their brainstorming exercise, including “honest” (five times), “trust,” “trustworthy,” “sincere,” and “genuine demeanour” (as a neutral). Other associations included “normal” “down to earth,” and “good speaker.” Another interesting feature of the associations with Clegg is a lack of any terms associated with arrogance. Whereas both Brown and Cameron are described by some participants with terms such as “pompous,” “arrogant,” “smug,” and “smarmy,” not one of these terms emerges from the Clegg brainstorming exercises. These associations provide insight as to why Clegg might have been rated higher than Cameron or Brown on the quantitative BES measures of “likeability,” “has your best interests in mind,” and “tells the truth.”

The comments and discussion also reveal participants’ lack of familiarity with Nick Clegg as a politician and the perception of his lack of experience. Three participants wrote the word “who” in association with Clegg during the brainstorming session. People described him as “bland,” an “unknown quality” and “vague.” His lack of experience counted against him in people’s evaluation of his leadership qualities, with participants writing down “amateur,” “weak,” “not a strong personality,” and “talks sense but not a credible leader.” Although these terms could be expected for the first debate, the tone of the words did not change noticeably over the course of the campaign. People saw qualities in Nick Clegg that they liked, but they also saw him as untested. Clegg’s lack of experience dominated all other axial categorisations in which participants evaluated him (see Figure 4).

Table 8: Participant-led coding for Nick Clegg

+ *Brainstorming words coded as Clegg positives by focus group participants*³¹

Concept	Brainstorming words			
<i>Honest (8)</i>	Honest (5)	Sincere	Trust	Trustworthy
<i>Underdog (2)</i>	Underdog	New		
<i>Approachable (3)</i>	Does not take support for granted		Looks like he empathises	
	Open-minded			
<i>Leader qualities (4)</i>	Confident	Common sense	Has good team members Thoughtful	
<i>Calm (3)</i>	Calm (2)	Peaceful		

- *Brainstorming words coded as Clegg negatives by focus group participants*³²

³¹ Two single-mention terms were excluded from the analysis: “idealist” and “greener.”

Concept	Brainstorming words
<i>Bland</i> (6)	Bland Dull (2) Half-asleep Slightly bland Repetitive
<i>Inexperienced</i> (9)	Amateur Inexperienced Honeymoon to end? Vague Very much the 3 rd leader Weak (2) Wishy washy Young
<i>Who?</i> (3)	Nobody Who? Can never remember his name! Who?
<i>Unwelcoming</i> (2)	Not smiling Unwelcoming
<i>Ambitious</i> (3)	Ambitious Chancer Dirty politics

* *Brainstorming words coded as Clegg neutrals and non-coded by focus group participants*³³

Concept	Brainstorming words
<i>Normal</i> (6)	Down to earth Genuine demeanor Normal Presentable Sensible Serious
<i>Who?</i> (5)	No impressions Unknown Unknown quality Untested Who!
<i>Gung-ho</i> (2)	Excitable Gung-ho
<i>Underdog</i> (3)	Dark horse Underdog (2)
<i>Not a credible leader</i> (5)	Change, but realistic? Not a strong personality Nothing Pleading Talks sense but not a credible leader

These perceptions were reiterated in the focus group discussions. The first extract is from the first leaders' debate and highlights participants' unfamiliarity with Nick Clegg and the perception of him as trustworthy and sincere. There are no discussions of his positive leadership attributes. Participants did not consider it a serious possibility that Clegg would be Prime Minister. The second extract is from the third and final leaders' debate and showcases participants' continued unfamiliarity with Nick Clegg despite intense media coverage and scrutiny of him during the campaign. Participants evaluated him positively on personality attributes but note his lack of leadership skills and experience. This result provides a framework for understanding the BES results where Cameron performs better on questions of "knowing what he is talking about" and "competence." Although the "Cleggmania" that occurred following the first debate may have resulted in an initial boost in support for the Liberal-Democrats, it did not fundamentally alter our participants' perceptions of Clegg by the last debate.

*Extract from discussion on Nick Clegg, Group 1:*³⁴

Moderator: So Nick Clegg. This should be the last one before. Phrases or words come to mind?

Sarah: "Bland."

Keith: "Honest," I think he's honest you know, and he's not smiling as cheesy as the other two, is it? That's his...

Peter: It does make him look a bit half asleep doesn't it though in this photo?

David: I think he's very articulate but very dull.

Moderator: Okay.

³² Two single-mention terms were excluded from the analysis: "Europhile" and "the centre-left's Cameron?"

³³ Several terms were excluded as they were only mentioned once: "trustworthy," "good speaker," "bland," "attitude," "different," "liberal," "middle of the road," and "young."

³⁴ Vote intention and vote choice of participants: Cathy-Undecided/ Conservative; Keith-Undecided/ Lib Dem; Peter-Unsure will vote/ Lib Dem; Sarah-Undecided/ Did not vote; Patricia-Undecided/ Conservative; Jane-Undecided/ Unknown; Matthew-Undecided/ Lib Dem; David-Undecided/ Lib Dem.

Jane: Presentable, that's what I said.

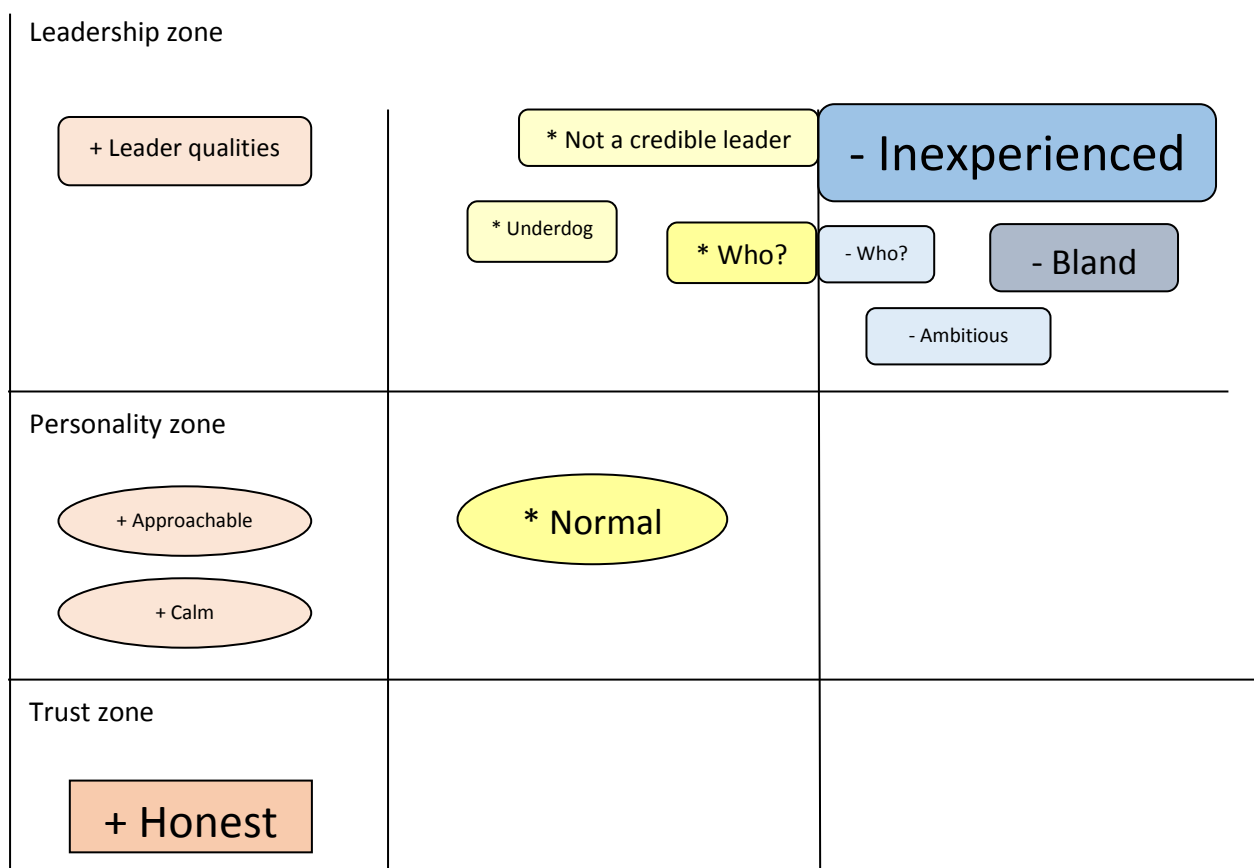
Patricia: I put "idealist," "amateur," and "greener," {laughter}. I thought that he might be greener than the others.

Cathy: I put "genuine demeanour" for some reason, he looked a bit more genuine in that picture.

Matthew: I put "who" not because I didn't know who he was but because he's very much the third you know, maybe someone ITV might mention at the end of the news.

Sarah: I've got that as well, "who."

Figure 4: Evaluation structure for Nick Clegg



Extract from discussion on Nick Clegg, Group 3:³⁵

Moderator: So was that, kind of covered I think positive, neutral and negative, so speaking of Nick Clegg in his red tie, the positives, did you guys have positive associations with Mr. Clegg? Vicki, no, shaking your head, they are all neutral or?

Vicki: Just one neutral {laughs}, I couldn't think of anything else.

Geoff: Unknown, isn't he? Very unknown, I think nobody knows a lot about him.

Liz: Perhaps "serious."

Shirley: I think he comes across as confident.

³⁵ Vote intention and vote choice of participants: Liz-Undecided/ Conservative; Robert-Undecided/ Labour; Jody-Undecided/Conservative; Vicki-Undecided/ Unknown; Shirley-Undecided/ Conservative; Geoff – Labour/Labour.

(Later)

Robert: I actually think he talks, talks a lot of common sense. I don't know if he will follow through on that.

Moderator: Yeah, okay. Neutral assessments?

Vicki: "Young."

Geoff: Yeah, too young, inexperienced.

Jody: "Bland."

(Later)

Moderator: And what negatives? So some positives, some neutral, but not many?

Geoff: No.

Jody: I wrote "chancer." I don't think he's got the depth.

Conclusions

This paper reports on the result of a QES Britain data analysis on our participants' perceptions of British party leaders. In this paper we have contributed new findings to the qualitative electoral literature, outlined our methods of replicating and modifying prior British qualitative electoral research, and presented our results. We feel that using the QES Britain data provides necessary context for the quantitative BES data on British leader evaluations. We also introduced a methodological innovation both in terms of the study's design, analysis, and method of displaying results generated through the grounded theory method. By applying the idea of concept salience and identifying the concepts most frequently cited by participants, we ascertain those qualities that were most common in evaluating party leaders.

Our findings complement and provide missing context to the BES statistical data. The triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative election data increases our confidence that our focus group participants had similar perceptions of the three main leaders as the survey participants indicating our data are trustworthy, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Our conclusions provide information on leader assessment that is unavailable using only quantitative data. The QES Britain data allow us to construct the following unique pictures of the three main party leaders using the words and conversations of ordinary people: (a) While citing his failure as a leader, many participants also viewed Gordon Brown with empathy; (b) David Cameron's leadership qualities were also offset by perceptions of his being untrustworthy, arrogant and slick although on balance he came out ahead of his two rivals on the all-important leadership category; and (c) although Nick Clegg was consistently rated as most likeable, he did not receive comparable scores on leadership and perceptions of his viability did not change despite a bounce in Liberal Democrat support following the first leaders' debate.

While the quantitative analysis produced using the BES datasets here give us findings that are similar to those of the qualitative analysis of the QES Britain data, quantitative results are unable to provide the all-important context for those findings or address the nuances that accompany the general perceptions of the leaders. Future national election studies should include qualitative components in order to provide similar added value and context to quantitative electoral findings. Arguments about the irrelevance of qualitative electoral analysis might prove inaccurate against the backdrop of a remodelled two-plus party system, considering such nuanced perceptions could provide essential insight to understanding the formation of vote intention and vote choice. In addition to evaluating leaders qualitative analysis can be used to understand vote choice (Carvalho & Winters, 2012), political socialisation, media effects, and other relevant questions in political science.

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