Where the public sits on a left-right spectrum is of particular interest as we approach a General Election. Using all the available survey data, including the latest findings from NatCen’s British Social Attitudes this short report establishes where the “political centre” currently lies in British politics. It shows that the British has oscillated left and right over the past 50 years but has shifted to the left since 2010 and asks what the political implications of these changing attitudes might be.
The policy mood and the moving centre

The outcome of general elections depends on a variety of factors. Broadly speaking, these can be divided into one of the five p’s: partisanship, policy, performance, personalities and the plurality electoral system.

The first factor – partisanship – introduces an element of predictability to the election outcome. The major parties have significant reservoirs of support that – other things being equal – secure them a significant share of the vote even if all other factors are equal. According to the most recent BSA survey for 2014, for example, 22 per cent of voters usually think of themselves as Conservative, 25 per cent as Labour and 4 per cent as Liberal Democrats. It is difficult – if not impossible – to imagine support for those parties falling below these levels in a general election. Partisanship provides “all-weather” support even in the bleakest of times. Yet, since around one-third of the electorate have no party attachments, the parties must also appeal to those without any loyalties.

The fifth factor on the list – the plurality electoral system – introduces an element of unpredictability, since it makes it very difficult to translate vote shares into seat shares until we know exactly where the votes are cast. To be sure, parties can try to maximise their seats to votes return by targeting marginal seats, but such campaign activity will be partially or wholly offset by campaign activity on the other side. Party campaigners can man the switchboards, pound the streets and hope for the best. Ultimately, however, the outcome in each seat depends on local context and idiosyncratic factors. It is not for nothing that the British electoral system has been labelled “the other national lottery”.

Between partisanship and the plurality electoral system are the other three factors that can – at least in principle – be changed and, if they are changed, may alter the election outcome. Perceptions of the governing party can, for example, be altered by the release of new unemployment figures or a failure to manage a crisis. Similarly, evaluations of the party leaders may be altered by a good performance in debates and this in turn may have a small influence on their party’s vote shares.

In principle, policy preferences – like perceptions of performance and personality – are also changeable and produce another degree of unpredictability. In practice, however, policy is more predictable for two reasons. First, parties find it hard to change policy because they are constrained by ideology, institutional conservatism and the need for coherence. “Joining-up-policy” to produce coherent programmes for office takes time and policies that are not properly joined up are likely to be exposed and unravel during the heat of the campaign. Second, although individual voter’s policy preferences on specific issues are changeable, the electorate’s aggregate policy preferences are very stable. Thus, while one might lose a great deal of money predicting the policy preferences of an individual even given knowledge of their preferences at some time in the past, one could make a great deal of money by forecasting the electorate’s...
future preferences given knowledge of past aggregate preferences. This is not to suggest, of course, that aggregate preferences do not change. They do. But, in general, policy preferences on specific issues evolve over time. And, when they do change, preferences over diverse issues change in similar ways.

The reason why diverse policy preferences change in similar ways is related to the activities of the government. Governing parties tend to pursue coherent policy programmes. Labour governments, for example, identify social or economic problems and then spend public money in order to solve these problems. Like their Democratic counterparts in the US, Labour politicians see “government as the solution”. Conservative governments, on the other hand, believe that government activity is bureaucratic, reduces self-reliance and encourages dependency. They are more likely to advocate market solutions to problems and advocate cuts in government spending. In the words of Ronald Reagan, the Republican President, “Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem”.

To be sure, there are many issues that are not directly related to this basic disagreement about stat activity. Yet, since the parties adopt positions on these issues too, we can label positions “left” (if endorsed by Labour) or “right” (if endorsed by the Conservatives).

The individual elector is more ambivalent about policy than the parties. The typical voter – if we can imagine such a creature – has a mixture of “left”, “right” and “centrist” positions, depending on the issue that is under consideration. Nevertheless, if we were to average positions over all the issues that are the subject of debate, each individual would be found to have an average position at some point on this dimension. For most individuals, this position would be stable over time. We can, therefore, aggregate preferences across both individuals and issues (views on equality, welfare, public ownership, Europe and abortion). The product of this double summation is called “the policy mood” or “the political centre”.

The policy mood represents the average position on the average issue. Preferences on specific issues change overtime. Leftwards movements on some issues are sometimes offset by rightwards movements on others. If the changes were equal and opposite signed these movements would offset each other and the policy mood would be not move. In practice, however, preferences over a wide range of issues tend to move together and this common movement results in a shift in the policy mood and political centre.

The result of this common movement over time is illustrated in the Figure, which displays the estimated policy mood, starting in 1964 and finishing in December 2014. These estimates are based on responses to controversial issues posed by the commercial pollsters such as Gallup, YouGov and Ipsos Mori and also academic studies such as British Social Attitudes, the British Election Study and Eurobarometer. Higher scores indicate a more left-wing electorate.
The estimates suggest that the political centre tracked rightwards during most of the 1970s, leftwards during the 1980s and most of the 1990s, rightwards from the late 1990s to 2010 and then leftwards since 2010.

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After four a half years of austerity, the electorate has shifted left on a range of issues.

The series in the 1960s is based on comparatively little data. Accordingly, we must be cautious about interpreting it too much. Nevertheless, as we enter the 1970s, we have a much larger set of data and our confidence in the estimates increases and the patterns become clearer. The estimates suggest that the political centre tracked rightwards during most of the 1970s, leftwards during the 1980s and most of the 1990s, rightwards from the late 1990s to 2010 and then leftwards since 2010. The coincidence of these movements with changes of government in turn suggests that the electorate tended to move in the opposite direction to government policy. It is as if the policy mood was a thermostat: signalling the need to cool things when they get ‘too hot’ under Labour by supporting less government activity – less spending, less welfare and less regulation.

The mood falls to the right. Equally, when things get ‘too cold’ under the Conservatives, the electorate signal their preference for warmer policy -- more spending, more generous welfare and more regulation. The mood increases to the left.

The figure shows that the policy mood has continued to shift under the coalition. After four a half years of austerity, the electorate has shifted left on a range of issues including spending, welfare, business power, industrial relations, redistribution of income, the death penalty, marriage, Europe and even left-right self-locations. None of these shifts was dramatic and they were partially offset by other shifts to the right on a smaller number of issues. Nevertheless, the net effect was to shift the electorate significantly to the left. Indeed, by 2014 the policy mood was at the same level it had been some ten years earlier, just before Labour obtained 35 per cent of the vote and a comfortable working majority.

This shift in the mood has implications for the sort of arguments that will sway votes in 2015. Compared with 2010, Labour’s basic political message – that the government should not retreat too much or too quickly – should have more traction. Conservatives arguments about the need to shrink the state should have correspondingly
less traction. Much now depends on the position staked out by the parties and the “tone” of their campaigns. The Coalition government’s Autumn Statement – essentially the first draft of the Conservative election manifesto – advocated a massive reduction in state activity, returning public spending to levels not seen since the 1930s. If Labour now stakes out a position at the centre, many centrist voters -- particularly former Liberal Democrats – may be pushed back to Labour.

No one of course would be foolish enough to claim that these movements in the policy mood determined election outcomes. The policy mood in 1974, for example, was broadly similar to that in 1979 but the two election produced different results: a Labour government with a small majority and a Conservative government with a comfortable working majority. Similarly, the mood was similar in 1992 and 1997. The first election, however, produced a Conservative government with a small working majority, while the second produced a Labour landslide. The difference between the two was probably the result of New Labour’s movement to the centre and/or the Conservative Party’s reputation for incompetence in the wake of the ERM crisis of 1992. The shift in the political mood predated both these developments.

These examples suggest that there is no single factor that is responsible for the election outcome – partisanship, performance, personalities and the plurality electoral system will all play a role. Yet no one would be so foolish to ignore the movement in the policy mood displayed in Figure 1.

Five months before the election, the major parties have much to play for.
The policy mood

The “policy mood” is a score created by collating responses to hundreds of different survey questions that have been asked in at least two different years over the last 50 years. A score of 50 means that the nation is dead centre in its political attitudes; higher scores mean that Britain is to the left of the political centre; and lower scores mean that it is to the right. The trend over time is obtained by looking at the change in ratio of left:right scores over time.

Technical details

The model is based on a macro-analytical approach, taking into account hundreds of questions from a range of different surveys and methods. This reduces dependence on a single method, questioning technique or survey organisation; and ensures that the results of a wide range of issues are incorporated. Aggregation over such a diverse range of sources reduces bias. The largest source is British Social Attitudes, by virtue of its commitment to asking repeat questions over three decades. Researchers have coded answers to every question as either on the left or right. Neutral answers are set aside, and the score is created by the ratio of left:right scores. The decision as to whether answers are left/right are decided by discussion between academic researchers, taking note of the perspectives from the two main political parties. Of course, this is not always an obvious decision, but in practice, most decisions were uncontroversial, and taking such a large number of questions reduces the dependence on a small number of debatable issues. The trend for previous years is obtained by considering all the available information for questions where at least two time points are in existence – and looking at the change in the ratio of left to right responses over time. The model weights according to the number of observations for each question over time; and also incorporates a degree of smoothing. The model uses 5300 different readings from 800 different questions.