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POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND VALUE CHANGE:
REAGAN, THATCHER AND THE CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTION? (*)

In the early eighties President Reagan and Mrs. Thatcher believed they came to power, and were repeatedly confirmed in office, with a popular mandate legitimating radical change. The aim was threefold: not just to change legislation, which can always be reversed by their successors, but also to institutionalise the revolution by creating an infrastructure of key appointments at the elite level, and most ambitiously by a crusade to alter the prevailing public philosophy among the electorate.

This raises a significant question for democratic theory: can governments lead, as well as follow, public opinion? During the last decade the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, with a radical agenda which would be implemented over successive terms of office, provide an exceptionally good test of this question. The aim of this paper is to analyse this issue by exploring whether there were significant changes in conservative social values in America and Britain during the 1980s. The paper divides into four main sections. First we outline the debate between those who believe that the political leadership of Reagan and Thatcher resulted in a resurgence of conservative values in the United States and Britain during the 1980s, those who are more skeptical of any consistent change, and those who believe that there has been an anti-conservative reaction during this period. Second, we consider the nature, and limits, of Reagan and Thatcher's challenge to the dominant social values of the 1960s.
Proponents of the conservative revolution thesis point to the evidence of successive Democratic defeats in Presidential elections. In addition Democrats often seemed to follow the Republican vision during the eighties on cultural values from flag-burning to ERA, civil liberties, affirmative action and capital punishment. In the conventional wisdom this trend was symbolised by Dukakis's attempt to disassociate himself from the '1' word, with its 'tax-and-spend' connotations, during the 1988 Presidential campaign. As a result of this development Fraser and Gerstle conclude that President Reagan's inauguration in 1981 saw the birth of a new epoch in the nation's political history, and the death of the old order as a set of dominant ideas, public policies and political alliances.

In Britain commentators point to parallel trends: the evidence of three resounding defeats suffered by the Labour party in successive General Elections, coupled with the apparent popularity of Conservative values on the key issues of privatisation, trade union reform and council house sales. It can be argued that on these issues Mrs Thatcher's instincts were in tune with, and served to reinforce, the individualistic zeitgeist of the 1980s.

The Minimal Change Thesis

Yet others remain skeptical about the ability of the Reagan and Thatcher regimes to implement their policy goals, while even stronger doubts have been expressed about the long-term impact of
capitalism, and strongly anti-Communist, with little change in these abstract beliefs. At the same time Ferguson and Rogers suggest the public remained programmatic liberals supporting New Deal social welfare programmes.

The minimal change thesis can also be seen to apply to Britain. In a series of studies Ivor Crewe has analysed support for Thatcherite values, policy beliefs, and leadership style, using opinion polls by MORI, Gallup, and the British Election Surveys (1970 to 1983). The author has concluded that, with the exception of privatisation, there is no evidence that the government converted the electorate on the central values of strong government, discipline and free enterprise during Mrs Thatcher's first term: "Quite simply, there has been no Thatcherite transformation of attitudes or behaviour among the British public." In addition Crewe points out that during the eighties there was no increase in the Conservative vote, partisanship, or party membership. Further support is provided in studies by John Rentoul and John Curtice.

An Anti-Conservative Counterreaction?

Lastly some suggest, far from minimal change, there has been an anti-conservative reaction to the political leadership of Reagan and Thatcher, which suggests that political leaders may indeed effect public opinion, but not necessarily in the direction they desire. It can be argued that as the policy agenda at the elite level has shifted towards the right, social values
One reason why this controversy remains unresolved has been the nature of the evidence available. There has been much speculation concerning a conservative revolution, and considerable polling data is available, but there has been little systematic analysis of long-term trends over time. It can be argued that the case for and against the thesis remains, at best, unproven.

Much of the proponent case is based upon the assumption that we can determine the nature of public opinion from successive Republican and Conservative election victories; public support at the ballot box is directly equated with a conservative mandate. But Reagan and Thatcher's electoral success is open to a number of interpretations. In Britain Conservative victories may be attributed to the effects of the divided opposition, the problems of the Labour party, or the workings of the electoral system, rather than the popularity of conservative values as such. Equally Reagan's electoral success may be explained plausibly by the performance of the American economy, personal popularity, split-level realignment, or the weakness of Democratic campaigns. Aggregate election results cannot be interpreted as evidence of value change. In the same way Washington and Whitehall observers often mistakenly interpret changes at elite level, for example in Labour and Democratic party leadership, as evidence of value change among the mass electorate. This is equally invalid. Parties may change policies or personnel to keep in step with public opinion, or for other reasons such as intra-party factional conflict.
(NORC), the American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO-Gallup Polls), and the American National Election Surveys (ANES-CPS), since these provide the richest series of continuous data on public opinion trends since the 1950s, while for Britain we will use data from the series of British General Election Surveys (1964-1987).

**The Challenge of Conservatism**

Before we can assess this evidence we need to consider how far Reaganism and Thatcherism can be interpreted as representing a decisive challenge to the public philosophy prevalent before they came into office. The extensive literature which has developed to explain the phenomenon indicates that Reaganism and Thatcherism embody many inherent contradictions and tensions - between continuity and change, pragmatism and rhetoric, ideology and practice. Interpretations depend upon what is seen as central and peripheral.

Many have seen these leaders as ideologues driven from the start by a radical mission and theoretical programme to overturn Keynesianism, restore the unregulated free market, dismantle the welfare state, adopt an aggressive anti-communist stance, and implement doctrinaire economic theories, irrespective of the political cost. Reagan and Thatcher have been interpreted as 'conviction politicians', engaged in a war of ideas which challenges the dominant political hegemony taken for granted as 'common-sense' in social and political thought.
"Reagan was a consensus politician, not an ideologue. He had no business trying to make a revolution because it wasn't in his bones. He leaned to the right, there was no doubt about that. Yet his conservative vision was only a vision. He had a sense of ultimate values and a feel for long-term directions, but he had no blue-print for radical governance." 19.

Accordingly this paper argues that if we look at Reagan and Thatcher's speeches before they came to office, it is clear what they were for and against in terms of certain recurrent themes, they had a 'strategy of values', but there is little evidence that they had a single all-inclusive philosophy 20. In this sense the central message of Reaganism and Thatcherism was less abstract supply-side theories or the principles of monetarism that the need to break with the failures - economic, social, foreign policy and moral - associated with the late sixties and seventies. Their leadership speeches contain few phrases which capture the public imagination; the rhetoric is low-key, the idioms familiar, the language commonplace. Reagan's speeches articulate certain core values through folksy stories and personal anecdotes, eschewing doctrinaire argument. The significance of values was acknowledged by Mrs. Thatcher, when trying to articulate the future direction for the Conservative party in the early stages of her leadership: "I began with our vision, and put it in the centre of the stage. I stress vision, not blue-print; values and principles, not doctrines." 21
Underlying the economic agenda was a broader message of **moral traditionalism**, important for the populist appeal of these leaders, although less central to their policy priorities, about the need to restore traditional 'family' values at home and national security abroad, to reverse the social mores associated with the late sixties and seventies. The promise was to change rising levels of crime, sexual permissiveness, abortion, drugs, single-parent families and racial problems. This was coupled with an aggressive stance against communism, the need to rebuild strong national defences, to revive national pride, patriotism and confidence.

**Trends in Public Opinion**

If we accept this interpretation, we can start to assess the impact of Reagan and Thatcher's strategy of values on the public philosophy which prevailed before they came into office. As we would expect, although there are many parallels, these general values were expressed within a different political context in each country. In the United States public opinion towards the value of free enterprise is reflected in debates about the appropriate role of government spending on social programmes, the issue of taxation, and general confidence in government. The moral traditionalism dimension is reflected in foreign policy with debates about defence spending and relations with the Soviet Union, and in the social agenda with controversies about abortion, school prayer and crime. In Britain public opinion towards the value of free enterprise is expressed in argument over privatisation versus nationalisation, trade union reform and
programatically liberal from 1973 to 1988. The surveys asked whether the government was spending too much or too little money on improving and protecting the environment, the nation's health, the education system, welfare, public transport, urban problems, and the conditions of blacks. Overall the results show remarkable stability over fifteen years (see Diagram 1), although during Reagan's first term of office there is evidence of a movement across all issues in favour of greater spending. The distribution of public opinion can be summarised by the percentage difference index (PDI), which is calculated by the percentage who favour greater spending minus those who favour less. The results indicate that on balance the public felt the government was spending too little on all issues except welfare, with the strongest support for programs relating to health, the environment and education. The greatest variance is shown in attitudes towards welfare, where the evidence shows a backlash against spending from 1975 to 1976, although since 1980, in line with other programs, attitudes have gradually moved in a more liberal direction.

(Diagram 1 about here)

If we look at trends in American attitudes towards taxation, notably levels of federal income tax, the AIPO / NORC survey data indicates more conservative trends (see Diagram 2). The surveys suggest there were two main periods of 'tax revolt' - from 1967 to 1969, when there was a sharp jump in the number of people who protested that they were paying too much income tax, then again from 1976 to 1982. If we compare different types of taxation it
British Public Opinion towards Free Enterprise

Were there similar trends in British social values? Here we can examine changes in public opinion towards privatisation, trade union reform, and welfare benefits. The move to promote free enterprise through privatisation and de-regulation can be seen as one of the classic hall-marks of Thatcherism, although the policy hardly featured in the 1979 manifesto, it did not play a major role in the first Conservative administration, and it has been implemented by Conservative and Socialist governments across Western countries. The effect of the British government's programme have been radical: between 1979 and 1989 the sale of shares in Jaguar, British Telecom, British Gas, British Airways and Rolls-Royce, along with the flotations of government holdings and company sales, led to the transfer of about 40% of the nationalised sector. Major flotations before the 1991/2 General Election, including the electricity industry and the water authorities, will raise that to two thirds. By the beginning of 1988 the government had sold well over £20 billion worth of state assets to private hands. The explicit aim was to develop popular capitalism by expanding individual share-ownership. In this the government seems to have been remarkably successful: among the adult British population the proportion of all shareholders more than tripled from 1984 to 1988 - from 6% to over 20%, although ownership is spread thinly: most have only a small number of shares.
series of measures: the 1980, 1982 and 1988 Employment Acts, the 1980 Employment Protection Act and the 1984 Trade Union Act, which transformed industrial relations, restricted unlawful picketing, removed union immunities from civil actions, limited union closed shops, and required a pre-strike ballot of the workforce in support of any industrial action 32.

(Diagram 6 about here)

The evidence available from the series of British Election surveys suggests that in the early 1960s the majority felt unions were too powerful. This proportion increased substantially during the next decade: from 54% in 1964 to 64% in 1966, and 77% in 1974 (Oct) and 1979. Nevertheless support for this position peaked in the 1979 survey, declined slowly during the first Conservative administration (70%), then dropped sharply by the 1987 General Election (to 45%) (See Diagram 6). Part of this change may be due to differences in measurement 33 but this change in public opinion is confirmed in questions about attitudes towards trade union reform. In 1979, after the winter of discontent, two-thirds of the electorate thought there should be stricter laws to regulate the activities of trade unions (see Diagram 7). Support for this proposition fell in subsequent surveys until by 1987 opinion was more evenly divided: a half favoured further reform while a third were against more legislation. Again it seems that on trade unions Mrs Thatcher benefited by the tide of public opinion in the late 1970s which swept her into office, and trade unions continue to remain
The evidence we have presented so far is limited but nevertheless on this basis we can draw some initial conclusions about changes in British and American public opinion towards free enterprise values. The evidence suggests when Reagan and Thatcher came to power they were in tune with national mood in articulating the values of the enterprise culture, and attacking high levels of personal taxation, although at the same time the public remained firmly wedded to basic social welfarism in government services. Nevertheless during the eighties the 'law of unintended consequences' produced a back-lash against the conservative leadership in both countries, which tipped the balance in a more liberal direction on the issues of spending, taxation and confidence in government. In other words, far from a conservative revolution during the eighties, the most appropriate interpretation of recent history is an anti-conservative reaction.

American Public Opinion towards Moral Traditionalism

Did these leaders have greater success in persuading the public of the importance of the values of moral traditionalism? On the moral agenda there were a range of issues championed by the religious right designed to restore 'family values'. The conservative revolution thesis argues that during the late 1970s and 1980s the public swung towards the right on these issues, in reaction against increased levels of urban crime, drugs, abortion, illegitimacy and divorce. At the same time in foreign and defence policy the conventional wisdom of the conservative
Gallup (AIPO) surveys also show long-term trends towards in support for American military spending, where there have been some dramatic shifts in opinion. After the Vietnam war defence spending fell steadily throughout the 1970s until by 1980 only 5% of GNP was used for defence (Peterson and Rom 1988). The evidence suggests that when Reagan first came to office he was in tune with American public opinion when he called for a military build-up: from 1976 to 1981 public support for greater defence spending increased sharply (see Diagram 10). Yet in 1981/2 again the liberal backlash is evident: real spending on defence increased by 17% in Reagan's first year in office and this was immediately followed by a sharp downturn in public support for increased resources. Lastly turning to more general attitudes towards communism, in NORC data from 1973 to 1988, display greater stability over time (see Diagram 11). The balance of American opinion is overwhelmingly negative, although, consistently with trends observed so far, there is evidence of movement in a more liberal direction from 1982 onwards.

(Diagrams 10 & 11 about here)

Turning to the moral agenda if we consider attitudes towards abortion in NORC data from 1965 to 1988, it is evident that although the 'Moral Majority' and anti-abortion groups became more active during the 1980s, there was no parallel change in public opinion (see Diagram 12). Rather, when asked about the circumstances in which abortion should be legal, there is remarkable stability in attitudes from Roe v. Wade in 1973 to the end of Reagan's term of office. Opinion remains polarised
surveys the data suggest a gradual move in a liberal direction from 1956 to 1966, before a conservative swing which steadily increased from 1972 onwards.

(Diagram 14 & 15 about here)

**British Public Opinion Towards Moral Traditionalism**

On the British social agenda there were a range of issues underlying the populist appeal of Thatcherism, designed to restore respect for traditional authority and 'family values'. Again the conventional wisdom holds that during the late 1970s and 1980s the public swung towards the right on these issues, in reaction against increased levels of sexual permissiveness, lawlessness, racial conflict, illegitimacy and divorce. Yet the available BES evidence on moral traditionalism, including attitudes towards abortion, equal opportunities for women and ethnic minorities, suggests that generally the period from 1974-87 was one of increasing liberalism, particularly on the issue of sexual equality (See Diagram 16). The trends in Britain seem to parallel those which we have already observed in the United States.

(Diagram 16 about here)
public opinion. During the eighties, especially during Mrs Thatcher's first term in office, there were similar anti-conservative trends concerning privatisation, trade union reform, welfare benefits, taxation and sexual equality. In this sense, far from continuing the momentum of the conservative revolution, the Reagan and Thatcher Administrations may have reflected its apotheosis. This reality may be recognised in the 'kinder, gentler' rhetoric of the Bush Presidency, and the strong challenge of leadership contenders from the 'wet' side of the Tory party. The implications of this analysis are that political leaders within democratic systems are forced by electoral pressures to follow, rather than lead, public opinion. Leaders with a radical vision, and a long period in office, may affect the balance of social values, but not necessarily in the direction which they intend.
exception of denationalisation, the voters actually sympathised less with Mrs Thatcher's convictions after a decade of crusading than they did at the beginning."pp377/8.


(12) Ferguson and Rogers Op Cit.


(14) Crewe and Searing 1988 Op Cit.


(17) Peter Jenkins Op cit.

(18) "In most agencies and programmes, the Reagan Revolution turned out to be a paper tiger; the bureaucracy and the iron triangles had mobilised for a blitz that never came...Indeed, it is astounding that there were so many issues on which ...the Reagan administration 'never even showed up' for battle."David Boaz Assessing the Reagan Years (Cato Institute, 1988) 5; Paul Weaver "The Intellectual Debate" in Boaz Ibid.


(33) Although it should be noted that the question wording was modified from 1983 to 1987. Q.1983: "Do you think that trade unions in this country have too much power or not?" Q.1987 "Do you think that trade unions in this country have too much power or too little power?" (coded on a five point Likert scale).

(34) BES Q. Next we want to ask you about some changes that have been happening in Britain over the years. For each one can you say whether it has gone too far, not far enough, or is it about right?: RACIAL EQUALITY: Attempts to give equal opportunities to black people and Asians in Britain; ABORTION: The availability of abortion on the National Health Service; SEXUAL EQUALITY: Attempts to give equal opportunities to women in Britain. The PDI represents the proportion 'Too Far' minus the proportion 'Not far enough'
Diagram 2

Attitudes Towards Federal Taxes
USA 1966-1982
Trendex

"Do you feel you are getting good, moderate, or poor value for...federal tax..."
Diagram 4

Attitudes Towards Government
USA 1958-84

Source: CPS
Diagram 6

Attitudes Towards Unions
GB 1964-87

"Do unions have too much/not too much power?" (see fn.33)
Diagram 8

Attitudes towards Welfare Benefits
GB 1974-1987

Source: BES 1974-87
Diagram 10

Attitudes towards Defence Spending
USA 1960-86

Source: Gallup
Diagram 12

Attitudes towards Abortion
USA 1965-88
Circumstances when should be legal

Unmarried
Rape
LowIncome
WomansHlth
FamilySize
DefectBaby

"Please tell me whether or not it should be possible to obtain a legal abortion."
Courts Treatment of Criminals
USA 1965-88
AIPO/NDRC

"Do you think the courts deal too harshly or not harshly enough, with criminals?"
Diagram 16

Attitudes towards Moral Traditionalism
GB 1974-1987
PDI

Source: BES 1974-87 (See fn 34)


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