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## Convergence on Crisis? Comparing Labour and Conservative Party

### Framing of the Economic Crisis in Britain, 2008-2014

PATRICK ENGLISH  
University of Manchester

MARIA T. GRASSO  
University of Sheffield

BARBARA BURACZYNSKA  
University of Sheffield

SOTIRIOS KARAMPAMPAS  
University of Sheffield

LUKE TEMPLE  
University of Sheffield

Since the 1980s, Britain's two largest political parties have been converging ever closer on the political spectrum, in line with a Downsian model of two party majoritarian systems. While both Labour and the Conservatives have been moving toward consensus, we investigate the extent to which the recent financial crisis, understood as a critical juncture, interrupted this movement. Using a “*fuzzy set*” ideal type analysis with claims making data, we assess whether or not we can detect and signs of this consensus breaking down as a result of the crisis and events which followed. Our results show that despite this most critical event, consensus was maintained as we found both parties adopting very similar framing and narrating strategies on the economic crisis in their public discourse. The study concludes that the shared discursive framing and narrating between both parties on the crisis demonstrates a continued Thatcherite, neoliberal consensus in British politics.

**Keywords:** Great Britain, United Kingdom, Labour Party, Conservative Party, Convergence, New Labour, Party Politics, Economic Crisis, Great Recession, Fuzzy Set Analysis, Ideal Type Analysis, Political Change, Neoliberalism, Neo-Liberalism, Comparative Political Analysis, Framing.

**Related Articles in this Special Issue:** Temple, Luke, Maria Grasso, Barbara Buraczynska, Sotirios Karampampas, and Patrick English. 2016. “Neoliberal Narrative in Times of Economic Crisis: A Political Claims Analysis of the UK Press, 2007-2014.” *Politics & Policy* 44(3): **PLEASE INSERT PAGE NUMBERS AND WEB ADDRESS TO ABSTRACT WHEN THESE ARE AVAILABLE.**

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Giugni, Marco, and Maria Grasso. 2016. "How Civil Society Actors Responded to the Economic Crisis: The Interaction of Material Deprivation and Perceptions of Political Opportunity Structures." *Politics & Policy* 44(3): PLEASE INSERT PAGE NUMBERS AND WEB ADDRESS TO ABSTRACT WHEN THESE ARE AVAILABLE.

Lahusen, Christian, Maria Kousis, Johannes Keiss, and Maria Paschou. 2016. "Political Claims and Discourse Formations: A Comparative Account on Germany and Greece in the Eurozone Crisis." *Politics & Policy* 44(3): PLEASE INSERT PAGE NUMBERS AND WEB ADDRESS TO ABSTRACT WHEN THESE ARE AVAILABLE.

**Related Media:** ITV News. 2011. "Conservative Party Conference: Cameron's Debt Promise." YouTube. <https://youtu.be/vJ9RfDr6DVg>

Financial Times. 2014. "Miliband Toughens Stance on Deficit." YouTube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVY0t\\_FSN4s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVY0t_FSN4s)

Desde la década de 1980, los dos partidos políticos más grandes de Gran Bretaña se han concentrado cada vez más en el espectro político, esto de acuerdo al modelo Downsiano de un sistema con dos partidos mayoritarios. Mientras el partido Laborista y Conservador se han dirigido hacia un consenso, investigamos a qué grado la crisis financiera, entendida como un cambio estructural, ha afectado este movimiento de convergencia. Usando un análisis de "*conjunto difuso*" ideal con información de discursos, analizamos si es posible o no detectar signos del colapso de esta convergencia como resultado de la crisis y los eventos que siguieron. Nuestros resultados muestran que, a pesar de este evento crítico el consenso se mantuvo ya que ambos partidos adoptaron estrategias de narrativa similares sobre la crisis económica en su discurso público. Este estudio concluye que el discurso y narrativa sobre la crisis que comparten ambos partidos demuestra una continuación de la ideología neoliberal de Thatcher en la política británica.

In recent decades, the range of ideological positions adopted by political parties has been slowly but consistently narrowing down (Crouch 1997; Dalton and Wattenberg 2002; Mudge 2008) in what has been articulated as a global "downgrading of party competition" (Hay 2007, 56). In British politics, the two dominant political parties, Labour and the Conservatives, have been converging on a consensus of ideology and policy outcomes since the 1980s and particularly so on economic issues (Bara 2006; Bara and Budge 2001; Green and Hobolt 2008; Heath, Jowell, and Curtice 2001). These two British political powerhouses have been drifting toward "neoliberal normalization" in

which neoliberalism as an ideology has moved from being a normative proposition to becoming institutionalized and normalized within mainstream political discourse and policy (Hay 2004; Swarts 2013; Cerny 2008). Bara and Budge (2001) have noted the particular strength of this convergence on economic issues. Heffernan (2000), among others, also finds the Labour Party steadily converging with their Conservative counterpart on Thatcherite, or neoliberal, policy ground. Put simply, it is well established that since the early 1990s the Labour Party have been moving steadily and consistently right-ward toward a more neoliberal economic ideology. This process is understood to have emerged from Margaret Thatcher's Conservative governments and the process of neoliberal normalization in the United Kingdom. The Conservative Party has, on this front, remained largely static, with little movement from this neoliberal, Thatcherite position across the years since (Bara 2006).

This movement towards convergence and consensus between the two largest political parties in a two-party system is very much in line with predictions made by Downs (1957). Downs argued that in two-party, majoritarian systems electoral strategy dictates that both parties will seek to occupy policy and ideological positions closest to that of the "median voter" in order to maximize their appeal to the electorate and thus their chances of winning elections. In other words, finding and converging on the "median" position of the electorate is a key part of any party's success in a two-party state (Bara and Budge 2001; Green 2007). Thus, according to the Downsian model, policy convergence is a natural consequence of two-party democracy.

Critics of the Downsian convergence hypothesis, however, argue that it rests upon numerous and necessarily static assumptions about the nature of the political and electoral contexts in which parties are operating that, in some realities, rarely coexist

and in others are very much in flux (see for example Grofman 2004). They argue further that rather than follow the Downsian model, many elections are subject to ever-changing electoral conditions and electoral strategies employed by political parties (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Besley and Preston 2007; Grofman 2004). It is argued by such scholars that in fact the model is “turned on its head” by alterations in electoral contexts and strategies from election to election (Grofman 2004), producing outcomes where divergence is instead the norm resulting in “spaced out politics” (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005). Despite these challenges, extant evidence shows that the Downsian model holds in the context of British politics. Indeed, Besley and Preston (2007, 6) themselves critics write that it “holds quite broadly.”

While ideological and policy convergence produces political consensus characterized by periods of stability and consistency in political discourse and policy outcomes, these can be subject to sudden changes. Exogenous “critical events” can, and often do, serve as “shocks” to established norms or trends (Staggenborg 1993; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). This idea of a sudden, crucial movement delivered upon the direction or motion of political change or development of an actor, capable of loosening structural influences around them, is defined in the historical institutionalist literature as a “critical juncture” (see Capoccia and Keleman 2007; Soifer 2012). Critical junctures threaten stability and can “establish certain directions of change and foreclose others in a way that shapes politics for years to come” (Collier and Collier 1991, 27). Economic crises such as the “Great Recession,” the worst global economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s, exemplify precisely this kind of exogenous event which could lead to a critical juncture in party political discourse and eventual policy outcomes, capable of altering electoral contexts and thus the tactics parties might apply to

them. An exogenous shock such as a financial crisis could mean that the normally stable British political system could come more closely to reflect the types of scenarios that Besley and Preston (2007), Grofman (2004), and other fellow Downsian critics argue destabilize the Downsian model, making divergence instead of convergence a more likely outcome. As the crisis can clearly be seen as a critical event for the British political system, so it serves as a critical juncture for its actor—in other words, the political parties.

As such, this article investigates to what extent the financial crisis destabilized, if at all, the observed equilibrium of consensus in British mainstream party politics. To this end, this research makes use of political discourse analysis in the form of a media claims analysis of the Labour and Conservative parties over their respective terms in government during the economic crisis. This allows us to empirically establish whether the crisis stimulated the Labour Party to diverge away from the Conservatives, or whether the two dominant parties of British politics continued to converge on their framing of economic issues and maintain a political consensus. The central question of this research is: did the exogeneous shock of the financial crisis lead the Labour Party to diverge from the center-right, neoliberal British political consensus?

### **Previous Research**

The aim of our research is to investigate the extent to which the consensus in mainstream British party politics was challenged during and after the economic crisis. In the study of British politics, “consensus” is understood as relating to a perceived “overlap between the economic, foreign and social policies of both Labour and Conservative governments” (Seldon 1994, 42). The idea of a consensus politics operating between the two major British political parties is far from new; the post-war consensus

emerging since 1945 was widely documented (see e.g., Kavanagh 1989; Marquand 1988; Rose 1984). Nor is it unexpected: policy convergence, as a feature of two-party democratic systems such as that in the UK, was, as noted, the mainstay of Downs' (1957) spatial model. The key argument here was that in a two-party system, rationally acting political parties would drift towards the "center ground," away from polarization on the left-right political spectrum, in order to maximize their appeal (and thus votes). Scholars of British politics have long argued that this has been the case in the United Kingdom, with the literature on New Labour's shift to the "center ground" generally understood in this light (Evans and Norris 1999).

This Downsian approach to two-party competition, however, is not without its critics. Authors such as Adams, Merrill, and Grofman (2005), Besley and Preston (2007), and Grofman (2004) highlight in particular the long and necessary list of conditions and assumptions upon which the convergence hypothesis rests. Grofman (2004, 26) outlines them in a 15-point list which presents a static and stable view of elections and electoral contexts wherein voters hold clear policy preferences and pick parties which clearly align with those preferences. In turn, parties must be consistently able to detect and maneuver towards these preferences from election to election, with little concern for (or perhaps interference from) factors outside of the immediate electoral arena.

Nonetheless, British politics since the Second World War has generally reflected the empirical expectations of this model rather well since it witnessed two major eras of consensus between its two dominant political parties: the "post-war" Keynesian political consensus, and then a "neoliberal" consensus swept in by the Conservative government of 1979-82 led by Margaret Thatcher (Heffernan 2000; Kavanagh 1989; Matthews and Minford 1987; Peck and Tickell 2002). This second consensus saw the rise and

eventual dominance of neoliberalism as a political ideology in the 1980s, which heralded a “neo-liberal age” (Mudge 2008, 703; see also Hall and Soskice 2001) in which free markets are elevated and celebrated as the central component for individual and collective prosperity and freedom (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Fourcade and Heely 2007; Kelly 1997). This neoliberal hegemony is understood to have global reach: as well as coming to dominate the domestic politics of developed countries it was exported to developing countries during a period known as the “Washington Consensus” (see Gore 2000; Williamson 1993, 2009). The impact of this global new consensus upon domestic party politics was profound, and indeed Mudge (2008, 704) stated that across the Western world, “specialists in comparative politics cite the decline of partisan identities within the electorates” and “the rise of professional political parties that do not adhere to ‘old’ ideological divides.” Further, she added. “[b]y the 1990s, some understood neoliberalism’s widespread manifestations as “proof” of its ontological unassailability” (Mudge 2008, 704).

Successive Thatcher governments sought to continue the pursuit of neoliberal ideology and policy outcomes for a time spanning over a decade in what became known as Thatcher’s “neoliberal project,” typified by a “dramatic” change in the view of the state and state intervention/ownership in the economy and a shift toward focusing on private markets as the source of economic growth and prosperity (Green 1989; Heffernan 2000; Peck and Tickle 2002, 2007). The project was so successful that both the Labour and Conservative parties are now in a consensus defined by Thatcher’s project. Bara and Budge (2001, 602) found that there had been a “convergence” between the two parties on a “Thatcherite” stance on the economy and on a general set of social policy outcomes tending toward “social conservatism” for the 2001 election. In subsequent



work, Bara (2006) found little evidence of any fluctuation in this convergent movement in the 2005 election manifestos. A few years later, Green and Hobolt (2008, 464) find further evidence of a convergence between the two major parties toward a “median” consensus. A notable number of other scholars studying the legacy of Thatcher and her neoliberal project have come to similar conclusions, arguing that the following Conservative and Labour governments acted as a “continuation” of Thatcher’s project (Hefernan 2000). So while a consensus was certainly reached, it was very much brought about by a dramatic shifting of Labour Party policy and ideology from their traditional Keynesian base toward that of their Conservative, now indisputably neoliberal, counterparts. Scholars of British politics have understood this convergence on ideology and policy between the major political parties in British politics to now have reached such a stage where ideological differences are no longer the general source of party competition. Green (2008, 630) for example claims that the largest British parties compete primarily no longer on ideology or left-right positioning, but on “competency,” or “valence” (see also Whitely et al. 2013; Green and Hobolt 2008; Clarke et al. 2004). The modern British voter, it is claimed, primarily votes for the party whom they evaluate as the most competent and convincing, particularly in terms of the economy, as opposed to ideological grounds of left or right.

While consensus, of one form or another, may have been the buzzword of British politics for much of its history since WWII, any form of consensus is always threatened by “critical events,” or “shocks,” which throughout history have repeatedly produced significant alterations in the direction of politics and political discourse (Hogan 2006; also see Haggard 1998; Cortell and Peterson 1999). Since 2008, no one has evaluated the extent to which the British political consensus has been maintained. This is of

particular note because since this last major study of the convergence between the two main parties, the world economy succumbed to a large-scale financial crisis which came to be known as the “great recession” (Bell and Blanchflower 2011, 4; Jenkins et al. 2012, 2). The effects of economic crises are wide ranging, creating shocks and challenges across all political, social, and economic boundaries: affecting financial systems and theory (Kirman 2010), political participation (Bosco and Verney 2012; Decker et al. 2013) and migration patterns (Becker et al. 2005) to name but a few. More broadly, scholars have argued that critical events like large scale economic shocks can alter the direction of travel of entire political regimes and administrations (Marangos 2002; Przeworski et al. 1997; Przeworski and Limongi 1997; Gasiorowski 1995). Most relevant perhaps to this study is the finding of previous analysis of an economic crisis providing stern challenges to party-political consensuses in Latin America by Roett (1993).

When an event or any other sudden pressure on a given system produces an instance where norms and conventions are very quickly challenged with alternative choices and consequences open up, it is referred to in historical institutionalist literature as a “critical juncture” (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Soifer 2012). The concept of critical junctures is beginning to be applied across a range of studies. Generally, they are understood as serving an opportunity for actors involved in any given system that the juncture affects to make significant changes in their (or indeed the entire system’s) direction of travel; Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, 343) write that when faced with a critical juncture “the range of plausible choices open to powerful political actors expands substantially,” and that “consequences of their decisions... are potentially much more momentous.” In

this way, the financial crisis could be seen as potentially destabilizing and leading to greater divergence between parties.

The opening of such opportunities would seem to create the kind of conditions which Grofman (2004) and other critics of the Downsian model of party competition argue “turn the model on its head.” A critical juncture such as an economic crisis constitutes the kind of shock to a political equilibrium which would significantly alter preferences among parties and voters (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2012), thus undermining consensus over a “median position.” This blurring of the connection between the behavior of voters and the reciprocal behavior of political parties challenges the assumptions underpinning Downsian predictions of convergence (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman. 2005; Grofman 2004). Seeing as critical junctures both present the opportunity for new directions and for potentially high rewards for embarking on them (Copoccia and Kelemen 2007), policy divergence can become an attractive electoral strategy, especially when we consider the growing anti-austerity, anti-neoliberal discourses post-crisis (della Porta and Mattoni 2014; Fominaya and Cox 2013; Thompson 2013).

As Britain’s traditional “left wing,” working-class party (Hibbs 1977, 1475; see also Thorpe 2008) we expect the Labour Party, not the Conservatives, to be the most likely to be spurred to divergence from the neoliberal consensus in the aftermath of the crisis. We expect this for two reasons, one historical and one logical. Previously the party was in favor of traditional socialist positions such as a strong and large welfare state and sizeable state intervention into the national economy (Thorpe 2008). Second, the Labour Party shifted previously right-ward to produce the current consensus in a Thatcherite direction (Green and Hobolt 2008; Heffernan 2000). As such, we might expect them to move left-ward again to challenge the current set-up. We argue that it is

unlikely that the Conservatives could challenge the consensus by moving further right since this would go against their modernization tendency which paid high dividends in terms of making them electable.

Thus, if we understand the recent economic crisis as a critical event producing a critical juncture, then as an event impacting on the British political system we expect it to both severely challenge the established norms operating within British politics, and to open up new opportunities and choices for its principal actors. We anticipate that both parties would significantly shift their respective discursive framing and positioning between their periods in and out of government. This is mostly due to the particular opportunity structure that being in opposition presents any political party, namely that they can afford to be more radical and outspoken in their discourse and policy statements, without the “shackles” of government (see Sitter 2001). Based on these considerations, we hypothesize:

H1: that the Labour Party will show a significant and consistent divergence from the Conservative framing and narrating of the economic crisis, and

H2): that this divergence would be most apparent in the years of government opposition.

### **Data and Methods**

This research makes use of media claims analysis as its means of investigation. By studying the media interventions of the main British political parties, we investigate whether or not both parties were using similar political framing about the crisis, and to what extent they were sharing similar ideas or challenging them in their claims making about the crisis. Using discourse analysis to investigate claims making by actors is now a key approach across social research (McCright and Dunlap 2000: 502), and in the dis-

cipline of political science, assessing the political discourse of political actors is to assess a key part of their political action (Van Dijk 1997, 20). Koopmans and Statham (2010, 2) argue that assessing the extent to which political actors use or challenge established norms by the way in which they frame key issues, a “political discourse analysis” provides a unique insight into actors’ movements and intentions. Analyzing claim-making by [representatives of] political parties in the media is also argued to provide a crucial analysis of their ideological and policy positions on given issues, and their intended or favored outcomes to events or discussions (see e.g., Bhatia 2006; Fairclough 2001; Van Dijk 1995).

This research embarked on a political discourse analysis by analyzing media-claims made in mainstream newspapers as its source of discursive material. Newspaper claims are a particularly appropriate source of information for a political discourse analysis, as in the words of Koopmans and Statham (1999, 203): “[n]ews reporting assigns meaning to issues by providing a continuous record of public events and visibility to the claims of the actors.” In other words, media claims analysis can be employed to provide a continuous roll of data on the positions of political actors on given issues and serves as a good indicator of any actor’s position and strength on an issue at any given time. Thus we argue that an analysis of newspaper claims made by the two main British political parties constitutes apt measure of the discursive positions of both political parties while in and out of government during the economic crisis and subsequent recession.

To place the political discourse analysis in context, our research makes descriptive use of a Downsian style spatial analysis of discourse in the same ilk as that applied by Bara and Budge (2001). The research follows Downs’ (1957) party competition ar-

argument that political parties compete for political “space” among ideological lines, attempting to sense public preference on policy issues and react accordingly (see Jennings 2009, 850-1). The term “space” is analogous with a general idea of policy positions on issues. So if one party is said to be occupying a particular “space,” this means it is understood to have taken up a general set of policies and discourses which would typify that particular “space.” For example, it is often argued that the Conservative Party for a long while owned and occupied the “restrictive” immigration policy space in UK politics (Koopmans et al. 2005; Koopmans and Statham 1999), meaning that they regularly adopted restrictive immigration policies and discourses (in other words, talking “tough” on immigration), in order to appeal to voters looking for restrictive policies on immigration and to squeeze out their party rivals from occupying the same positions. In terms of this research, for the Labour and Conservative parties to be occupying the same “space” in terms of their media discourses on the economic crisis, this would mean using the same or similar discourses to talk about the crisis and the conversations about growth and austerity which followed in the media. If the two parties were using the same space in such a manner, indicating that they were suggesting the same or similar diagnostic causes and prognostic policy solutions (including whom should benefit from prognostic solutions as well as what type of solutions should be offered), it would indicate that the crisis had failed to breakdown the consensus, and that the Labour Party had not shifted away from their Conservative counterparts.

The data used to test the hypotheses is a unique dataset of 1,000 media claims made about the economic crisis by a variety of actors in the United Kingdom from five pre-selected newspapers from 2005 to 2014. This data was collected as part of the LIVEWHAT research project’s investigation into the response of citizens and civil so-

ciety to economic “hard times” resulting from the 2008 stock market crash.<sup>1</sup> This original data collection utilized a random-stratified sample, with the individual newspapers acting as strata. Each stratum contained a minimum of 200 claims. The newspapers represented in the data collection were pre-selected to represent the left-right and tabloid/broadsheet balances of national newspaper circulation in the United Kingdom.

Since the overall economic situation of the country altered significantly between the later years of both governments, with the economy largely returning to growth health by 2014 (World Bank 2014), it is therefore important that we split these two periods. Thus whenever Labour Party discourse is analyzed during its years in opposition, it is being compared directly with Conservative years in opposition.<sup>2</sup> Given that in years of opposition we expect the “shackles” to be removed and for parties to be allowed to become more radical in their policy making, we believed that this presented the Labour Party with greater opportunity to diverge from their Conservative counterparts. As noted in our hypotheses, we expect them to diverge more during their years in opposition.

For this research, the time period from which claims were analyzed was narrowed to 2008-14. This period was selected to capture the political discourse surrounding both the immediate economic crisis (2008-10) and the economic stagnation and aus-

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<sup>1</sup> Results presented in this article have been obtained within the project “Living with Hard Times: How Citizens React to Economic Crises and Their Social and Political Consequences” (LIVEWHAT). This project is/was funded by the European Commission under the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme (grant agreement no. 613237).

<sup>2</sup> Though we include both periods we focus more on analyzing the comparison between each party’s framing during years of government. We retain most of our focus on the governmental record of both parties, as this is consistent with the previous work on the extension of Thatcher’s neoliberal project into following governments of both the Conservative and Labour parties. Indeed, almost all of the literature claiming that the Labour party has adopted and continued Thatcher’s discourses and policies almost exclusively does so in terms of the “New Labour” governments of 1997-2010 (Bara and Budge 2001; Fairclough 2001; Heath, Jowell, and Curtice 2001; Heffernan 2000).

terity periods which followed (2010-14) the “hard times,” but also to eliminate the pre-crisis period (pre-2008). Moving forward, we again narrowed this dataset to include claims made only the Labour and Conservative parties. Claims were then divided by Labour and Conservative-led government years (January 1, 2008 – May 5, 2010 and May 6, 2010 - December 31, 2014, respectively). In total, 111 claims were coded during the Labour government years included in the sample frame, and 164 over the course of the following Conservative-led government.<sup>3</sup> By party, this amounted to 135 claims from the Conservative Party, with 135 individual claims by the Labour Party.

Claims were coded by following set of criteria by five UK-based coders after completing training on the codebook and testing for standardization. This was repeated across 9 other European countries.<sup>4</sup> Each claim made by an actor about the crisis within each article was single-coded into a unique unit of observation.<sup>5</sup> A range of variables were collected about the claims.<sup>6</sup> For our purposes, the most important of these were: the “diagnostic” and “prognostic” frames used by the actor (in our case: the political parties), to whom the actor attributes “blame” for whatever the crisis-related claim concerns, the “object” of the claim who's interests were being affected or would be affected either by the claim or what the claim was proposing should happen or had happened,

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<sup>3</sup> Though this constitutes enough claims to investigate over aggregated periods, it is not enough for a full temporal analysis of the claims (year by year). This would average just a handful of claims per year, and as such is not possible to do with this data. Thus we aggregate each year into periods of Labour and Conservative government in order to test the hypotheses.

<sup>4</sup> See Giugni and Cinalli (2016), in this special issue.

<sup>5</sup> Each article could contain anything from one to several unique claims made by one or multiple actors.

<sup>6</sup> A full list of the information collected from each claim can be found in Giugni and Cinalli (2016) in this special issue.



and the “value” to which the claim attributed its interest or cause (for example “fairness,” or “economic prosperity”).

**[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]**

Table 2 shows the type and list of variables used in our analysis. Each of these individual pieces of information form sub-fields of the overall discourse framing used by the parties over the study period. The “diagnostic” and “blame” framing gives us information about whom the parties were holding responsible for the crisis, and to what the nature of the origins of the crisis was. Equally, the “prognostic” framing variable can tell us what the party was offering in terms of solutions to the crisis and the hard times which followed, while the “object” and “value” frames can tell us much about whom the parties were arguing the crisis was impacting and for what reasons action should be taken to support them. As an example of how claims might translate into such coding, in one article an actor might assert that the crisis was caused by economic actors such as financial markets or banks (this would be the diagnostic frame), and perhaps blame the banks themselves for behaving recklessly (blame frame), and offer the solution that banks should be heavily taxed in order to raise funds (prognostic frame) to assist the beleaguered ordinary citizens struggling to make ends meet (object frame) in the interests of fairness (value frame). Alternatively, a second actor’s claim may insist that the crisis was caused by a failure of government policy (diagnostic), blame the previous administration for not doing enough to protect the national economy against crises events (blame), and suggest that the solution to the crisis was to get money moving in the economy again by cutting taxes and charges for beleaguered businesses (prognostic) who were suffering and struggling to turn a profit (object), so that markets can return to full health (value). With such valuable qualitative information coded into the dataset,

each discursive subfield acted as a unit of measurement from which we were able to assess the similarities between the two party's discourses on the economic crisis.<sup>7</sup> This plethora of coded information provided us with a large amount of data to investigate claims making by the Labour and Conservative parties over the six-year period under study.

A “fuzzy set” ideal type analysis was the approach selected by this research to investigate the closeness of fit of Labour Party discourse surrounding the crisis to their Conservative counterparts. Testing for divergence using qualitative data of this kind is not often done, and so there is little previous methodology to go by. However, a key contribution to qualitative data research was made by Uta Gerhardt in 1994, who laid out the case and groundwork for the use of “ideal type” analysis of qualitative data in contemporary methodology (Gerhardt 1994, 78-80). The process is very much grounded in the research of sociologist Max Weber, who argued that practical realities may be judged by hypothetical standards using ideal type analysis and stated that the ideal type in any given hypothetical is a case “unaffected by errors” (Weber 1978, 9).

Essentially, an “ideal type” analysis considers the “ideal picture” of whatever it is we are looking to test and then assesses to what extent following cases or observations align with or tend towards that ideal picture. Such analysis is mostly used in the study of sociology (see Ciccio and Verloo 2012; Forsberg 2011). In each case, the ideal type method can be used to assess to what extent a particular case tends toward another along predefined characteristics/criterion, with the other assumed to be the ideal case of those given characteristics/criterion.

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<sup>7</sup> A full explanation of the coding scheme and the rules applied to sampling and case selection can be found in the introduction to this special issue (Giugni and Cinalli 2016).

The process and its place in qualitative research is perhaps best articulated by Kvist (2007, 1) who states that ideal type analyses allow us a “precise operationalisation of theoretical concepts,” allowing for a true connection between data and theory. Kvist’s own research seeks to establish to what extent various Western-European welfare regimes fall into “ideal type” categories of various hypothetical regimes, including “old social democratic,” “new social democratic,” “new conservative,” and many others (Kvist 2007, 7). Each welfare regime over time formed a unit of measurement, and was qualitatively constructed and judged against by Kvist himself. Kvist employs a “fuzzy type” analysis which instead of a binary “in/out” measure of a case’s fit into the ideal type, which allows him to create a scale of degrees of “in/out” within the two limits of 0 (being fully out of the set) and 1 (being fully in). Kvist created a list of scores and attributed each with “verbal labels”; for example, a “fuzzy set” score of 0.85 would indicate that a case was “almost fully in the set,” while a score of 0.2 would indicate a case was “fairly out of the set,” and so on (Kvist 2007, 5).

This method is perhaps best understood as a measure of closeness of fit between an ideal, hypothetical case and its associated real-world comparatives. Kvist (2007, 5-6) makes a strong justification for the use of both “fuzzy sets” and ideal type theory in qualitative research, particularly concerning how we can link qualitative judgements and score based assessments to theoretical relationships. The methods used in this research are a slight depart from those used by Kvist in three ways. Firstly, the operationalization in this case is not of a hypothetical, but an actual. Instead of measuring our cases against an imagined, ideal type, this analysis assumes that the Conservative Party discursive position on the crisis is the ideal type, and measures to what extent the Labour Party fits into that ideal type. Thus we are calculating the extent to which the La-

bour Party usage of each frame within each discursive field mirrors the same usage by the Conservative Party. This closeness of fit analysis of Labour to the Conservatives is our test for divergence; if the scores are low, then this would indicate that the Labour Party was using a significantly different framing and narrating of the crisis.

The following formula outlines the calculation for the closeness of fit (B) for the use of a frame within a given variable (Fx), where LFx is the proportion of total claims containing a given frame by the Labour Party, and CFx being the same for the Conservative Party. For an example, imagine if our Fx in this case was the use of economic frame within claims offering prognosis. LFx would be the proportion of overall claims offering a prognosis which suggested an economic policy based prognosis, with CFx being the same for the Conservative Party. The formula below works out how close the Labour Party align to the ideal type.<sup>8</sup>

$$\beta Fx = \sqrt{\left[1 - \frac{LFx}{CFx}\right]^2}$$

A second diversion from Kvist's (2007) work is that each case in this analysis contains cases within cases which are of varying importance to the overall assessment. In other words, BFx will only tell us the closeness of fit of the use of one frame type by

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<sup>8</sup> Subtracting the result of the percentage fraction from 1 derives how close the Labour Party use of each frame is to the Conservative equivalent (for example  $25/50 = 0.5$ ,  $1 - 0.5 = 0.5$  = the Labour Party usage of this frame is only halfway to that of the Conservatives'). The squaring and following positive square rooting eliminates any negative indices which may result from the initial equation and converts them to positive numbers.

the Labour Party within a given discursive field, rather than the closeness of fit of the whole discursive field. Furthermore, these cases within cases are of varying degrees of importance to the overall fit of the discursive field. So while an aggregate score for each variable is needed, we must weight each individual case-within-case score (BFx) according to its overall size in the Conservative Party discourse. Thus the overall “frame difference score” (B) for a discursive case (Vx) is calculated by the following, where q is the total number of different possible frames within a discursive field variable. Fy and Fz are further frames (or cases) within the discursive field.

$$\beta V x = \frac{(CFx)(BFx) + (CFy)(BFy) + (CFz)(BFz) \dots}{q}$$

Table 3 demonstrates how each calculation of fit (BVx) translates into Fuzzy Set membership score (as presented by Kvist (2007)), and how this again translates into the verbal labels Kvist assigned each fuzzy set. As explained above, each individual sub-field of the claims coded by the team is given has its own individual closeness of fit score, which is then weighted according to how prevalent each particular frame is used in the overall ideal type (Conservative Party claims making) before being aggregated into a final closeness of sit score. The scores tell us to what extent the Labour Party cases for each sub-set of the claims fit into the way in which the Conservatives’ (the ideal type) were making claims about the crisis. The above table then translates each overall closeness of fit score into “fuzzy set” scores. The verbal labels attached to each “fuzzy

set” give us a qualitative assessment of how close the Labour Party claims making reflected that of their Conservative counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

The allocation of fuzzy set scores to calculation scores was not drawn up by some random or arbitrary measurement; a number of hypothetical experiments were run using the formula to calculate scores for invented discursive sets which we considered close together, neither too close nor too far apart, and those which were completely distinct from each other.<sup>10</sup> After multiple rounds of testing, we produced the translations of formula scores to fuzzy set types which closely follow the logic used by Kvist (2007).

### **[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]**

### **Results**

According to the dataset the framing employed by both parties during the crisis is remarkably similar. Variations from Government to Opposition periods also largely map perfectly across both parties. For instance, both parties use economic framing of the crisis in their diagnostic narratives in over two-thirds of claims while in government, but both switch to using political diagnostic framing in over 50 percent of all claim making during years in opposition. Substantively, this indicates that both parties went

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<sup>9</sup> By proxy, we are also measuring how close the Labour Party fit into the Thatcherite, neoliberal frame, as we are assuming that this is the framing of the crisis which the Conservative Party used. This assumption is based on the aforementioned neoliberal normalization and convergence literature, which asserts that it was the Conservatives who began the process of normalization of neoliberalism as an ideology, with Labour under Tony Blair converging and continuing this process. There has been no noted change of track by the Conservatives in these literatures.

<sup>10</sup> Five rounds of testing with the formulas above examined the outcomes to ensure that the range and distribution of possible scores accurately reflected the corresponding qualitative fuzzy set labels. Distributions of the calculation score for each frame within each subfield were carefully inspected when drawing up the scores so as to ascertain the full range of scores coming out from the formulas, and to check that the formulas did not unnaturally “heap” claims and subfields into any categories. Experiments also sought ways to restrict the set scores tending towards infinity (for example by replacing each 0 in the Conservative cases with 0.001). See Appendix for full information about how the scores were calculated and fit into the overall fuzzy set scores for each subfield.

from mostly discussing the crisis as having economic causes during their years in opposition, but then during terms in opposition chose almost exclusively to point to political causes (namely, their opponents in government). Some similarities maintain static through both government and opposition periods, with both parties using economic prognostic frames (indicating they believe the solution to the crisis being in economic policies and/or action) in again around two-thirds of all claims making across the study period. In terms of value framing, the claims making of both parties is once again dominated by the economic frame; most strikingly around three-quarters of all claims made during governmental years for both parties employs this frame. This indicates that, while in office, both parties were strongly stressing the need to take action (or inaction) on the crisis for the good of economic prosperity or the protection/assistance of economic markets and institutions above all else (as opposed to for other institutions or groups such as Trade Unions, workers, families, and so on). The largest difference was found in the actor blame attribution while in Government. Here there was a very significant divergence with the Conservative Party choosing to blame government actors 50 percent of the time but their Labour counterparts instead blaming economic actors in the same proportion of cases as their dominant choice of frame. The full list of subfields and frame usage can be seen in the Appendix.

Table 4 shows the results of the closeness of fit of the Labour Party's discursive framing from each discursive subfield into that of their Conservative Party rivals. It also shows the closeness of fit translated into Fuzzy Set scores. As we can clearly see, only in two cases were the Labour Party nearing an entirely different use of frames—their diagnostic and blame framing during government. Overall, eight of the total ten cases analyzed pass over the crossover point and tend towards 1: the Conservative position.

Considering this, it does not appear there has been a clear break away from the Conservative Party's framing of the crisis and hard times that were followed by the Labour Party.

**[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]**

The Labour Party twice used framing almost entirely matching that of their Conservative counterparts: their prognostic and blaming frames while in opposition. When we look at years in Government years, Labour Party framing here is less close to that of the Conservatives than it is during their time in opposition, with no cases exceeding a value of 0.75. However, three of the five cases do show significant degrees of similarity with the framing used by the Conservative Party during their years in government during the period under study. Furthermore, the significant break in the two subfields noted above could potentially be explained in other terms; while in these cases the Labour Party spent a significant proportion of their crisis discourse during their years in government blaming economic actors and diagnosing the crisis as of economic causes, the Conservative Party campaigned for the 2010 election on a position which blamed the then-current Labour Party administration itself for the crisis. The Conservatives continued to hold and further this position during their years in government, electing to blame the previous administration for the crisis more often than economic actors. The difference then in these two discursive subfields is perhaps better explained as the result of a strategic electoral ploy by the Conservatives which the Labour Party, in power at the beginning of the crisis with three previous Labour administrations before them, were unable to follow. This seems a reasonable explanation for this observed difference than any conscious discursive breakaway on the part of the Labour Party. Rather than choos-



ing not to follow suit and blame the previous government for the crisis, the Labour Party realistically could not.

Figure 1 visualizes the above observations clearly showing the Labour Party scores tending closer towards 1 during Opposition years, with both the Diagnostic and Blame framing appearing as something of outliers in an otherwise fairly stable picture. That picture suggests no real, wholesome differences in between the narrating of the crisis and the hard times which followed by both the Labour and Conservative parties.

Regarding our hypotheses, since the only clear breaks from the Conservative discursive cases observed in the data can be largely explained as a result of Conservative Party electoral tactics rather than a conscious divergence by the Labour Party, and all other cases show significant convergence, the data presented in this research suggests that hypothesis 1 does not hold: the Labour Party did not take the opportunity of the crisis to undertake a significant diversion away from its convergence with the Conservatives. Our second hypothesis does not fare any better. According to the data the greatest divergence was actually in years of Government, with the Labour Party rather than opposition. Thus the results reject the hypotheses and instead suggest that in keeping with the theme observed by previous scholars since the 1980s, the Labour Party converged toward the Conservative position both in and out of government.

**[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]**

### **Conclusion**

The results from a media claims analysis presented in this article have shown that the Labour Party broadly occupied the same positions, consistently using the same

framing and narrating of the crisis both in and out of government, as the Conservatives on the key economic issue of the past decade—the financial crisis. This suggests that a) the British political consensus continues to be maintained, and thus b) the critical juncture of the economic crisis did not challenge the consensus between the Labour Party and Conservatives. These findings attest to the strength of the neoliberal consensus in British politics and the extent to which the two largest and most successful parties continue to converge upon the same “political space.” The legacy of Thatcherism thus appears remarkably resilient even in the face of significant external shocks. The crisis is discussed as a crisis of markets, needing only market-based solutions (see Temple et al. 2016). Our results show that Thatcher’s legacy survives even in the Labour Party, particularly in terms of its economic liberalism (see Bara and Budge 2001, 602). This Thatcherite stance is heavily reflected in the data, with prognostic framing dominated by economic policy solutions and economic prosperity the dominant “value” of claims made by the Labour Party (see Appendix). That the party’s discourse is so heavily driven by economic prognostic solutions and values reflect the wider positions and prognoses of the party which have been dominated by the pursuit of growth and economic prosperity as the key issue over the last few decades—in return reflecting to a great extent the values of the Conservative Party (Bara 2006; Bara and Budge 2001; Green and Hobolt 2008). Further research should attempt to test these mechanisms more deeply. In particular, it will be interesting to explore whether these patterns will evolve with the new Labour leadership under Jeremy Corbyn.

#### **About the Authors**

**Patrick English** is currently undertaking a PhD at the University of Manchester with a focus on anti-immigrant attitudes and the descriptive representation of immigrant com-

munities in the United Kingdom. He received his BA in Politics and Philosophy and MA in Politics with Research Methods at the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield. Patrick is interested in public opinion and engagement, elections, surveys, and methods. He sits as a research associate on both the FP7: LIVEWHAT and ORA: PATHWAYS research projects, and has been a Visiting Research Fellow at the CEVIPOF, Sciences Po.

**Dr. Maria T. Grasso** is Lecturer in Politics and Quantitative Methods at the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield. She received her BA (Hons.) in Philosophy, Politics and Economics (2005), MSc in Sociology with Distinction (2006), and doctorate from the University of Oxford (2011, Nuffield College). She is Deputy Editor for Western Europe of *Mobilization*. Her research interests are in political sociology, political participation, social change, and social movements. She is the author of *Generations, Political Participation and Social Change in Western Europe* (Routledge 2016) and co-editor of *Austerity and Protest: Popular Contention in Times of Economic Crisis* (Routledge 2015).

**Barbara Buraczynska** is a PhD candidate in Quantitative Methods and Comparative Politics at the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield. She received a BA (Hons.) and Masters (Hons.) from the University of Sheffield. Her main interests include democratization, racial and political prejudice, British politics, ethics, international conflict, and regime change. She has published in the fields of British politics, political psychology and international relations. She is currently a researcher on the LIVEWHAT (Living with Hard Times) project, funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for Research, Technological Development and Demonstration.

**Sotirios Karampampas** is a PhD Researcher and Teaching Associate at the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield. He received his BA in Political Studies and Public Administration from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (2008), and his MA in International Politics and Security Studies with Distinction from the University of Bradford (2009). His research interests are in political violence, social movements, political participation, and terrorism.

**Luke Temple** is a Research Associate at the Department of Politics, University of Sheffield. He received his BA (Hons.) in Politics and Geography and MSc in Social and Spatial Inequalities also at the University of Sheffield. He is currently in the final submission stages of his PhD and has research interests in democracy, democratization and civic participation. He is Assistant Editor of the British Policy and Politics blog at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He recently co-authored “Austerity Measures Across Europe” as part of the report In Defence of Welfare II (Social Policy Association 2015).

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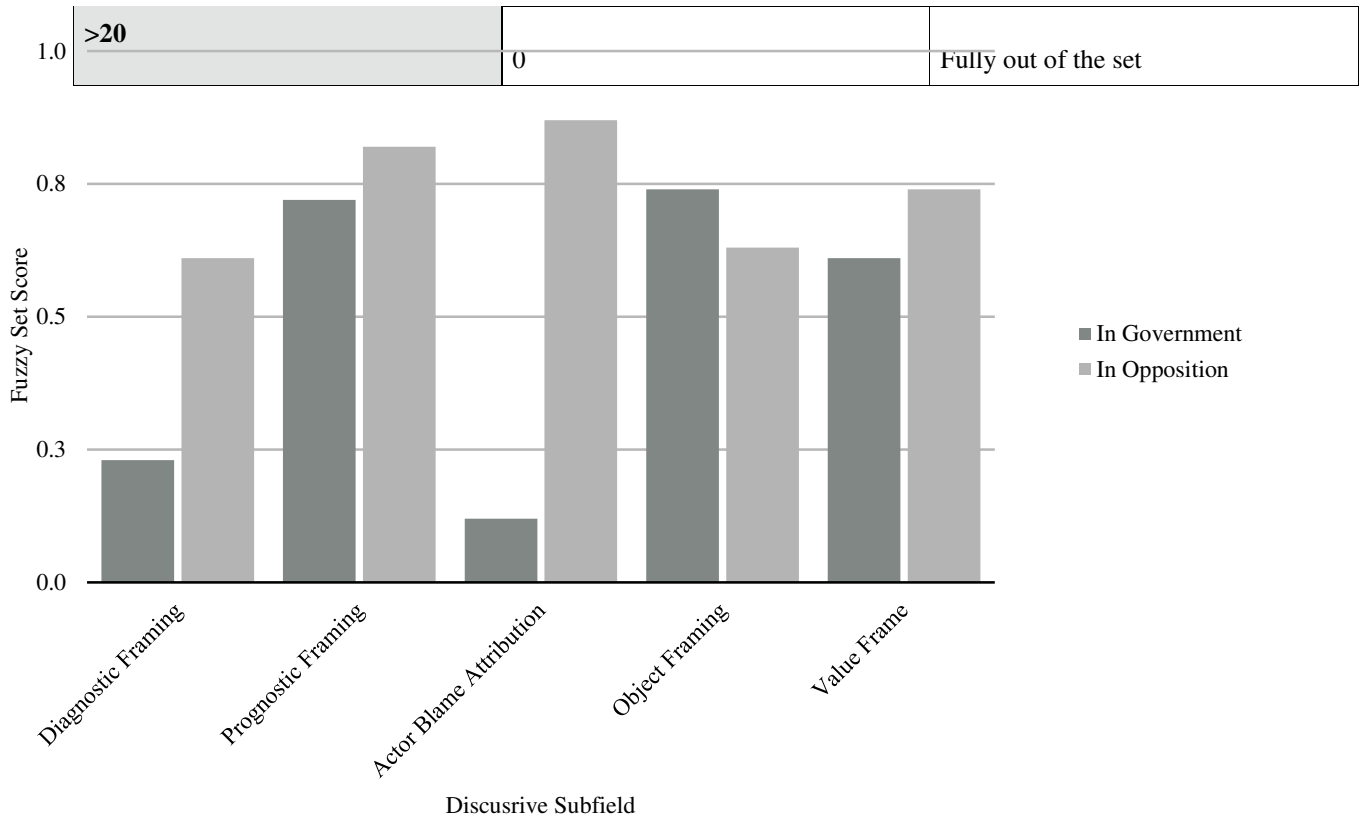
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<u>Table 1. Variable Types and Lists</u>	
Variable Type	Variables
<b>Discursive Field Variables</b>	Diagnostic Frame, Prognostic Frame, Blame, Object, Value.
<b>Actor Variables</b>	Labour Party, Conservative Party
<b>Period Variables</b>	Labour Government (Jan 2008 - May 2010), Conservative Government years (May 2010 - Dec 2014)

<u>Table 2. Calculation of Fit Scores and Translation into ‘Fuzzy Sets’</u>		
Calculation of Fit	‘Fuzzy Set’ Fit Scores	‘Fuzzy Set’ Verbal Labels
<b>0 - 0.99</b>	1	Fully in the set
<b>1 - 3.49</b>	0.84-0.99	Almost fully in the set
<b>3.5 - 5.99</b>	0.68-0.83	Fairly in the set

<u>Table 3. Closeness of Fit and Fuzzy Sets Scores of Labour Crisis Discourse in Government and Opposition</u>					
<b>Labour Party Scores</b>					
Period	Diagnostic Framing	Prognostic Framing	Actor Blame Attribution	Object Framing	Value Frame
<b>Government (Closeness)</b>	16.63	5.28 0.18-0.33	18.45	5.06 Fairly out of the set	7.05
<b>Opposition (Closeness)</b>	7.2	3.7	3.2	6.74	5.1
<b>Government (Fuzzy Set)</b>	0.23	0.72	0.12	0.74	0.61
<b>Opposition (Fuzzy Set)</b>	0.61	0.82	0.87	0.63	0.74

Figure 1 - Labour Party Fuzzy Set Scores in Government and Opposition



1 = Conservative Position (ideal type). As columns tend towards 1, so the Labour Party framing is tending towards the Conservative position according to the data.

### Appendix 1 - Individual Frame Scores and Associated Case Scores/Labels

The following tables show the individual set scores from within each type of frame both during Government and Opposition. The percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. Also included in the tables are the Closeness of Fit score and associated Fuzzy Set labels.

In two instances, a particular frame is shown as being used by the Conservative Party in 0.01% of circumstances. In order for the respective Labour Closeness of Fit scores to be calculated a figure >0 is needed in each Conservative frame. In reality, where 0.01% is seen this actually indicates that the frame was not used by the Conservative Party in that particular instance. The 0.01% figure is only present so as the Closeness of Fit calculations can be made.

#### Diagnostic Framing - In Government

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Economic Frame</b>	66%	80%		
<b>Le- gal/Administrative Frame</b>	14%	14%		
<b>Political Frame</b>	9%	2%		
<b>Other Framing</b>	9%	5%		
<b>Overall</b>	100% n=54	100% n=44	16.63	Fairly out of the set

#### Diagnostic Framing - In Opposition

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Economic Frame</b>	26%	20%		
<b>Political Frame</b>	52%	66%		
<b>Le- gal/Administrative Frame</b>	16%	10%		
<b>Other Framing</b>	7%	4%		

Labour and Conservative Framing of the Crisis

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Overall</b>	100% n=31	100% n=50	7.2	More or less in the set

Prognostic Framing - In Government

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Economic Frame</b>	66%	74%		
<b>Political Frame</b>	5%	8%		
<b>Ad- min/Regulatory/Leg al Frame</b>	13%	10%		
<b>Other Framing</b>	16%	8%		
<b>Overall</b>	100% n=56	100% n=50	5.28	Fairly in the set

Prognostic Framing - In Opposition

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Economic Frame</b>	64%	61%		
<b>Political Frame</b>	18%	22%		
<b>Ad- min/Regulatory/Leg al Frame</b>	9%	4%		
<b>Other Framing</b>	9%	13%		
<b>Overall</b>	100% n=22	100% n=23	3.7	Fairly in the set

Blame Framing - In Government

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Blame Economic Actor</b>	22%	51%		
<b>Blame Government</b>	51%	29%		
<b>Blame Other Political Body</b>	8%	10%		

Labour and Conservative Framing of the Crisis

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Blame others</b>	19%	5%		
<b>Overall</b>	100% n=37	100% n=21	18.45	Almost fully out of the set

Blame Framing - In Opposition

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Blame Economic Actor</b>	4%	9%		
<b>Blame Government</b>	90%	87%		
<b>Blame Other Political Body</b>	4%	0%		
<b>Blame others</b>	4%	4%		
<b>Overall</b>	100% n=29	100% n=45	3.2	Almost fully in the set

Object Framing - In Government

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Economic Actor</b>	45%	39%		
<b>Government</b>	8%	11%		
<b>Other Political Actor</b>	5%	1%		
<b>People/Citizens</b>	19%	29%		
<b>Other Actors</b>	22%	20%		
<b>Overall</b>	100% n=95	100% n=70	5.06	Fairly in the set

Object Framing - In Opposition

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Economic Actor</b>	36%%	37%		
<b>Government</b>	31%%	20%		

## Labour and Conservative Framing of the Crisis

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Other Political Actor</b>	0.01%	9%		
<b>People/Citizens</b>	18%	25%		
<b>Other Actors</b>	15%	9%		
<b>Overall</b>	100% n=39	100% n=65	6.74	More or less in the set

### Value Framing - In Government

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Fairness, ethics</b>	4%	12%		
<b>Economic/Market prosperity</b>	73%	79%		
<b>Social justice/wellbeing</b>	8%	6%		
<b>Other values</b>	15%	3%		
<b>Overall</b>	100% n=86	100% n=66	7.05	More or less in the set

### Value Framing - In Opposition

	Conservative	Labour	Closeness of Fit	Fuzzy Set Label
<b>Fairness, ethics</b>	11%	21%		
<b>Economic/Market prosperity</b>	65%	65%		
<b>Social justice/wellbeing</b>	11%	8%		
<b>Other values</b>	14%	6%		
<b>Overall</b>	100% n=37	100% n=62	5.1	Fairly in the set