ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Starmer's election victory: from the politics of support to the politics of power

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Abstract

Keir Starmer was elected Labour leader in 2020 after the party's worst election defeat since 1935. Just four years later, the party returned to government with a landslide majority. Scholars have explained the dominance of the Conservative Party through an analysis of the 'politics of support' and the 'politics of power'. This article applies that framework to Labour, focussing on how support was built in the run up to 2024. It examines the politics of support across the party organization, parliament and, most importantly, the electorate. I argue that Starmer's bid to achieve *electoral* support relied on two main factors: a 'decontamination' strategy related to the party's immediate past; and a cautious approach that minimized policy commitments and downplayed the role of ideology. The approach was electorally successful, but resulted in shallow support, gained in large part from removing reasons voters in target seats had previously *not* supported the party. The article concludes by discussing the challenges this strategy of support presents for the 'politics of power'.

Keywords Starmer · Labour Party · 2024 general election · Politics of support · Politics of power

Introduction: Starmer's victory

The scale of Labour's election victory in July 2024 was seismic. Under Keir Starmer, Labour won 411 of the 650 seats in the House of Commons. By contrast, the Conservatives, who had been in office for the last 14 years, won just 121—by some distance the lowest figure they had ever achieved. Although the victory was widely predicted, the scale of Starmer's success was still a surprise to some jaded observers, who could note that Labour had previously lost elections after expecting better—notably in 2015 under Ed Miliband when many polls pointed towards a hung parliament and in 1992 when Neil Kinnock was

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widely expected to become prime minister. (Indeed, the 2024 polls did overstate the size of Labour's popular vote—Holl-Allen 2024). It is worth noting that any Labour victory is relatively unusual. The Conservatives had been the dominant political party in Westminster for much of the previous century. Only three previous Labour leaders had ever achieved a comfortable majority in parliament for their party: Clement Attlee in 1945, Harold Wilson in 1966, and Tony Blair after 1997 (and only Blair was able to win consecutive workable majorities). In 2024, Starmer won a majority of 174—just short of Blair's 179 seat majority in 1997. In terms of seats, Labour achieved this landslide from a far worse position going into the election.

The change in electoral fortunes achieved by Labour in 2024 was particularly impressive. Starmer took over the party at a low point. Labour had not won a general election for almost 20 years. In December 2019, the party returned just 202 seats—its fewest since the 1935 vote. Labour had experienced a particularly turbulent period since 2015. Jeremy Corbyn, the veteran left-winger, defeated more centrist candidates after a rule change that gave party members the ultimate say in deciding their leader. Under Corbyn, the party leadership eschewed the conventional wisdom that elections are won from the centre. Corbyn outdid expectations in 2017, preventing the Conservatives from forming a majority government and gaining 30 seats. The election of 2019 was a different story. Corbyn was attacked for his weakness on tackling antisemitism and on national security. Come the election, Boris Johnson—a far more comfortable campaigner than Theresa May, his predecessor as Conservative leader—won a large majority and Corbyn was forced to step down (to the relief of critical factions in his own party).

This paper focuses on the period from Starmer's election as Labour leader in 2020 to just after the 2024 general election. I draw on an analysis of the 'politics of support' and the 'politics of power' to explain Starmer's success and some of the immediate challenges his government faces. The article is, therefore, an account of the strategic decisions that faced the Labour leadership during these years. I begin by introducing the conceptual framework and reflecting on its contemporary application. That is followed by a review of the collapse in Conservative support, which greatly aided Labour's victory. The article then focuses on Starmer and the Labour party. First, I explore how Starmer and those around him built support among the party organisation and parliament from around 2020 onwards. Second, I argue that Labour's electoral support in the run up to 2024 relied on two main elements: a 'decontamination' strategy, which consciously broke with Labour's recent past; and a cautious approach to both ideology and policy. The result was seismic electoral success but shallow support, based in part on the strategic decision to focus on removing obstacles to voting Labour. The consequences of this support raise serious challenges for Labour in power. These are discussed in the final section of this paper. (This cutoff shortly after the general election victory in 2024 means the focus is on the challenges Starmer faces grappling with the politics of power with shallow electoral support. It also avoids the pitfalls of providing a running commentary on the government).

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The 'politics of support'

This paper explores the strategic choices made by Starmer and those around him over the 'politics of support' and, after election victory, in contending with the 'politics of power'. The distinction between these two kinds of politics was made by Andrew Gamble, examining the Conservative Party. Gamble argued "political practice has two main aims: to carry on the government and to win the right to office in a competitive election" (Gamble 1974, p. 2). He continues that, "Presiding over the state, however, and winning the support of the nation are two separate activities in the modern political system" (Gamble 1974, p. 4). As such, we can talk about two kinds of politics: 'a politics of power' and a 'politics of support' (Gamble 1974, p. 3). One advantage of this approach is that it responds to calls to put 'agency back into the study of partisan politics'—in contrast to recent literature, which sees parties largely as the agents of voter preference (Wenzelburger and Zohlnhöfer 2021). This article focuses mainly on Starmer and those around him. As Peter Sloman writes, "In the contemporary Labour Party, policy reasoning is largely an elite affair, dominated by the leader, the Shadow Cabinet, and their advisers" with fairly limited input from the wider membership (Sloman 2024). The focus in this article is, therefore, on elite strategies used to gain support. This division between support and power has recently been used as a helpful framework to reflect on the Conservative government from 2019 to 2024 (in particular, see Killick and Mabbett 2021 and the other contributions to the special section in *Political Quarterly*). This article uses this distinction to shed light on Labour in the run up to the 2024 election victory and after.

The distinction between a politics of support and of power is often associated with an analysis of the politics of 'Statecraft', which views the main bias of politics as "the art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office" (Bulpitt 1986: p. 21). This approach was set out by Jim Bulpitt, again in an analysis of the Conservative Party. Statecraft theory has been developed with increasing sophistication —often with a focus on the Conservatives. (The literature is substantial, but for the purposes of this article see Gamble (2015) and Hayton (2014) on Statecraft and the Conservative-led coalition, Griffiths 2015 for a broad response, and Hayton (2021) on Johnson and Statecraft.) However, I argue in this article that an analysis of the 'politics of support' is versatile and is compatible with a wide variety of methodological positions that recognise the importance of strategic thinking in politics. It allows reflections on important choices made by politicians to gain and maintain power.

Writing in the 1970s Gamble argued that "The politics of support in the modern political system takes place in three main arenas—Parliament, the party organization, and the mass electorate" (Gamble 1974, p. 6). These arenas are still important in explaining Starmer's victory fifty years later, though their nature, relative importance and the way in which they reinforce and conflict with one another has changed over time. There are fundamental tensions within the politics of support. Politicians must build support of members and the party organisation that will enable them to compete to win election; but *electoral* success needs

support from a wider body whose priorities are at times very different to those of party members (as I argued below).

The arenas in which the politics of support take place vary over time and place, and notably by party. Gamble set out this framework in *The Conservative Nation*, which was published in 1974. Had he been reflecting on Labour's attempts to win power in the post-war period, he might have identified other institutions as arenas of the politics of support, notably trade unions. Unions' role in selecting Labour leaders is one example of how winning their support would have been a necessary strategic consideration for politicians at certain times. Labour leaders were elected by Members of Parliament from 1922 until 1980 (in a rather more democratic exercise than that followed by the Conservatives, whose leaders emerged from a process of elite consultation). Yet in different ways each party historically gave power to parliamentarians to decide their leader. At the Labour leadership election of 1983, Neil Kinnock defeated his rivals by winning an 'electoral college' of trade unions, delegates from Constituency Labour Parties and of members of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). The Electoral College remained in place in various forms until 2015, when Labour shifted to give party members the ultimate vote. As such, the politics of support varied over time in the Labour Party, with the support of unions and members varying in their significance. Arguably, therefore, trade unions would have provided a fourth arena in the politics of support in the Labour Party at certain points in the twentieth century, though their contemporary importance has decreased given the decline in union power and the power granted to members in electing leaders.

In a democracy, the support of the electorate is needed to gain power and, as Gamble notes, this is organized as a market. This has consequences for the way in which politicians seeking power act: "The political market also lays down a standard of rational behaviour. The goal of parties and politicians that compete in it is … inherent in the way their roles are defined by the market. They must win election, which carries with it the right to office. 'Rational' behaviour is that which is most likely to gain this end, and must therefore seek the most effective means of achieving it" (Gamble 1974, pp. 6–7). There is considerable disagreement about the nature of the 'rational behaviour' that is required to achieve electoral success, as well as on the tensions between interpretations of politics that understand it as the 'rational pursuit' of power for its own sake and those that focus on the role of other factors (including interests and political ideas) in shaping party politics in a democratic system (as noted in the discussion on Statecraft above).

The exact nature of the rational behaviour needed to win electoral support is determined by the electoral system. As Gamble notes, the way in which a politician competes for office is limited by the rules and procedures of electoral competition that are in force. The politics of electoral support in the context of the 'First Past the Post' system used for Westminster elections demands a focus on where support is needed to defeat the opposition. For Labour in 2024, in practice, that meant maintaining a plurality of the vote (and not necessarily more) in existing Labour constituencies, while focussing resources on those constituencies that needed to 'flip' to ensure a majority in the Commons. Labour's electoral success in 2024 was partly due to this approach, which single-mindedly focussed on 'the rules of the electoral

game', and ruthlessly pursued votes where they would return most seats (at the expense of deeper support in safer Labour constituencies). I return to these points in the concluding section on the challenges facing Labour in office.

New governments will find that there are difficult tensions between the politics of support and the politics of power. In particular, the range of possibilities available to politicians and parties operating in a politics of power is far more limited. The politics of power implies that there are certain 'realities' which all governments must accept. In the 1970s, Gamble argued that any politics of power is founded on the ruling mode of production—the manner in which economic activity is socially organized—and which "cannot be legislated away by the government" (Gamble 1974, p. 4). Even without the Marxist terminology, it is evident that any government grappling with the politics of power will face severe constraints and limitations as to what it can do in the face of powerful interests, markets, the media, international commitments, and so on. In 1974, Gamble reflected on how the Conservative party in power had historically gained support by using the state to protect private property and develop a 'Conservative Nation' partly insulated from the vagaries of day-to-day opinion and other interests in society.

Tensions between the possibilities offered in seeking support and the constraints of the politics of power are particularly acute for parties of the left or centre-left, such as Labour. As Gamble notes, "Reformist and left-wing parties that do win elections generally achieve less in office than is expected, because they usually conceive their task in terms of the politics of support rather than the politics of power. They tend to believe that control of the government through victory at the polls gives them the power to implement the policies on which they were elected. When the realities of government present themselves, such parties frequently succumb to prevailing orthodoxies even faster than their political opponents" (Gamble 1974, pp. 5–6). At the time of writing, it remains to be seen whether this will be the case with Starmer's Labour government.

The Conservative Party has dominated government since the arrival of universal male suffrage. Since Gamble wrote *The Conservative Nation* in 1974, the party has continued this electoral success, enjoying two long spells in government (from 1979–1997 and from 2010–2024) to Labour's one (1997–2010). After their 2024 election win, Labour would have to remain in office for three full parliaments before those numbers even out. Although the Conservatives have generally been the party of government, Gamble was dismissive of many explanations for their success, noting the role of contingency in politics: "Much ingenuity has been devoted to explaining [the Conservatives] remarkable performance, but it should not be overrated. It is largely accounted for by the accidents of electoral politics", notably the division of the opposition Liberals over Home Rule and tariff reform around the turn of the twentieth century, and the slow emergence of Labour as a viable party of opposition in the interwar period (Gamble 1974, p. 10). These divisions continued, in the 1980s, with the split between Labour and the Social Democratic Party, which arguably eased the electoral route for Thatcher (Denver and Garnett 2021). In any competition, the performance of the opponent or opponents matters. This is certainly true in any analysis of the success of Labour in 2024, which was aided significantly by the failure of the Conservative Party—through a range of missteps—to use the

politics of power to buttress a new and ongoing politics of support (as I note in the section below).

One virtue of exploring Labour's election victory through an examination of the politics of support and of power is the breadth of factors that can be considered in the analysis compared to other approaches. Two insightful articles have sought to explain Labour's recent ideological shifts through 'policy reasoning'—that is those "substantive debates about the merits of alternative policies and the likelihood of their being successful in achieving the party's goals". For Michael Jacobs and Andrew Hindmoor, the form of policy reasoning that is most important to party positioning is economic: "Labour moves to the right and a redistributive economic strategy … when the economy is performing reasonably well. It moves to the left and a structural economic reform programme … when the economy is performing badly and perceived to be in crisis" (Jacobs and Hindmoor 2024).

In response, Peter Sloman has argued that Jacobs and Hindmoor's account is too narrow, noting that "parties can engage in policy reasoning in all policy areas", not just the economic. He argues that given the importance of welfare to Labour, its ideological position is likely to be shaped by its reasoning about social policy as much as its economic policy. Sloman also usefully notes that "the process of policy reasoning is structured by the electoral cycle. As a result, substantive policy reasoning is closely intertwined with political reasoning". He then goes on to provide a compelling account of Labour's policy and political reasoning, focussing on the importance of policies being 'fully costed' to ensure their credibility. He quotes the journalist Chaminda Jayanetti, who argued that "Labour's view of its policy constraints" under Sir Keir Starmer is "driven primarily by "costings"". As such, Sloman argued political and policy reasoning in the run up to 2024 largely took place "within a fiscal register". It is surely right to stress the importance of costings and credibility in Labour's electoral strategy—and Sloman's approach informs the account of Labour's electoral strategy set out below, which focuses on ideological 'quietism' and caution (Sloman, 2024).

One virtue of the alternative approach set out in this article, however, is that it is not limited to explaining the party positioning through an analysis of policy reasoning in particular areas. Labour's economic policy is part of the picture, as is its political and policy reasoning over welfare costings. Yet policy reasoning is just one important part of the politics of support and power. Policy, presentation and image, rhetoric, the approach to campaigning and the decision *not* to announce policy[1] in particular areas, among other things, are all valid in telling the story of how Starmer was able to use the politics of support.

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[1] Definitions of 'policy' vary hugely and range from small-scale specific interventions (e.g. the use of a particular statutory instrument), through specific programmes and proposals (e.g. Labour's Employment Rights Bill), to broad public directives (e.g. support for Ukraine) or even general fields of activity (e.g. economic or foreign policy). A very wide understanding of policy is 'Whatever governments [or oppositions] choose to do or not to do [or propose or do not propose]' (see Page 2018). This latter definition seems far wider than Sloman or Jacobs and Hindmoor are drawing on, but gets across the breadth of possible areas of analysis that the politics of power and support could draw on in this article.

Oppositions don't win elections …

Labour's success was in part down to Conservative failure. Boris Johnson was overwhelmingly successful in the EU-focussed general election of 2019, when he promised to 'Get Brexit Done'. He gained the backing of those voters who had supported leaving the EU, won far more marginal seats than Labour, and limited the swings against the party in those Conservative areas that were less keen on Brexit or on Johnson himself (Ford et al. 2022). Under Johnson, the Conservatives appeared to combine a move to the left on economics—through a rhetoric of 'levelling up' for voters in the 'red wall' of traditional Labour seats—with right-wing social conservatism, particularly around immigration, and an 'Anglo-British' conception of nationalism (Cooper and Cooper 2020; Gamble 2021; Hayton 2021; Hickson and Williams 2023). Yet despite the scale of the 2019 election victory, Johnson (who lasted as prime minister from 2019–22) was not able to turn an impressive politics of support across members, parliament, and the electorate into a lasting politics of power.

The Conservative failure to build on their support in power after 2019 was largely of their own making, through scandals, missteps, and internal divisions. 'Partygate'—the revelation that Johnson (and senior colleagues) had ignored the 'lockdown' rules that they had imposed on the rest of the country during Covid then lied about this to parliament (Lilly 2022)—fatally damaged his premiership from late 2021. Johnson was forced out in June 2022 (after an underwhelming victory in a Vote of No Confidence among his parliamentary party, he limped on for another month until a scandal over his backing of Conservative whip and ally, Chris Pincher, who had been accused sexual assault, led to Johnson's fall).

Johnson was replaced by Liz Truss in September 2022, who had significant support among party members, but not Conservative MPs. Truss's chaotic premiership lasted just 49 days, during which a radical right-wing budget promised unfunded tax cuts which ultimately forced up mortgage rates for millions of voters and led to a polling collapse for the party (the precipitous fall can be seen in polling trackers, such as BBC 2024). She was replaced by Rishi Sunak, whom members had rejected as leader of the party in favour of Truss just a few months before. Sunak stabilised the polling collapse but struggled with the politics of support among members and parliamentarians. Factional squabbles among Conservatives, which often seemed puerile, self-aggrandizing and indulgent, continued throughout Sunak's premiership (see for example the factions set out in Guido Fawkes 2023 and the 'crime family' metaphor used to describe the various groups). The Conservatives went into the 2024 general election around 20 percent behind in the polls.

Unnecessary blunders in the election campaign compounded Conservative woes. It was Sunak's choice, as prime minister, to hold the election in July, rather than waiting until later in the year. Why he chose to go early when his party were so far behind in opinion polls is unknown (however, there was speculation that he was heading off a leadership challenge—Oliver 2024—or he suspected some of the tax cuts promised for the autumn would not be deliverable—Parker et al

2024). Sunak's announcement of the election was a presentational disaster—he gave a sodden speech outside Downing Street in torrential rain (while a protester drowned out his words by playing Labour's 1997 election anthem—'Things Can Only Get Better' by D:Ream—over a loudspeaker. In the first few days of the campaign, Sunak was criticised for leaving the commemorations of the 80th anniversary of D-Day early to prepare for the first television debate. Finally, the story broke that senior Conservatives close to Sunak had illegally bet on the date of the general election. From the Partygate scandals to the election campaign itself, the Conservatives hardly helped themselves to win electoral support.

There were also important external challenges to the Conservative Party from the right. In particular, they came from the rise of Reform UK, which had its roots in UKIP and the Brexit Party (all three parties had been led by Nigel Farage). Farage's decision to return to UK politics in the first weeks of the election was the final nail in the coffin for any Conservative hopes of re-election. The disproportionate nature of the UK's Single Member Plurality electoral system ('First Past the Post') meant that Reform won just 5 of 650 MPs in the House of Commons—while they attracted 14 percent of the popular vote (gaining more voters that the Liberal Democrats, who won 72 seats with 12 percent of the vote). (The scale of Labour's success also can't be understood without acknowledging the collapse of the SNP in Scotland, which had its own internal problems, and meant a gain of 36 Scottish seats for Labour.)

The small number of seats Reform UK won underplays their immense impact. Reform was a wrecking ball to the campaigns of dozens of Conservative candidates. Throughout election night, in constituencies around the country, the combined total of Conservative and Reform votes would have been enough to defeat the winning candidate, which gives a very rough indication of what might have happened had a Reform candidate not stood in those seats. In short, many voters who had previously plumbed for the Conservatives gave their votes to Reform, splitting the vote on the right and allowing Labour candidates to win a plurality at constituency level. In 2019, Nigel Farage had decided not to field candidates against the Conservatives, with a stated fear of splitting the 'Leave' vote and undermining Brexit (Norris 2019). By contrast, Reform's decision to stand in 2024 took huge numbers of votes from the Conservatives. Early modelling estimated that Reform's presence on the ballot may have cost the Conservatives 80 seats (Corfe 2024). As Gamble notes, "One of the basic rules of Tory statecraft is that a party to the right of the Conservatives must be avoided at all costs. If one became established, it could split the Conservative vote in a way that, in a first past the post system, would be disastrous for the party—just as splits among left of centre parties have often been for Labour" (Gamble 2021), A significant Tory split could ensure Labour power for a long time. The level of Reform support demonstrates deep scepticism about the main Westminster parties (as I argue in the concluding section). In 2024, however, Reform eased Labour's path to victory.

Starmer is frequently described as a 'lucky general' (see for example the discussion in Pickard 2024) and, as I noted above, in looking at the success of the Conservative Party in the twentieth century contingency and accident play an important role in election victory. The scale of the victory Labour achieved was in part due to divisions in opposition, largely outside of Labour's control (just as the Conservatives

had benefited in the 1980s and during the pre-war period). Starmer's strategy worked in part because it took place in the context of anti-Conservative headwinds. Yet, there were other factors that explain the scale of Labour's success, to which I turn below.

Party and parliamentary support

For party leaders focussed on power, members can occupy a paradoxical place in the politics of support. They are courted during leadership elections, when they are needed. Once elected, they are often ignored like an opinionated uncle at Christmas. On the one hand, across the three main UK parties, members have huge power as they are now responsible for choosing their leader (with a gatekeeping role of more or less significance given to parliamentarians over the choices available to members). Labour followed the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in giving party members the final say in choosing its party leader in 2014 (Johnston 2022; Quinn 2015). As a result, Labour Party members (and affiliates) were granted the power to elect their party leader directly for the first time. This granted Labour members a right that had been enjoyed by the Conservatives since William Hague's reforms of 1998 and the Liberal Democrats since the party's creation in 1988. This role gives members significant power during leadership contests and means their support is crucial for want-to-be leaders.

On the other hand, the power of party members and the need for their support is less than at any other time. The first reason for this is tied to the decline in party membership: membership of the main political parties is a fraction of its post-war high. In the 1950s, around 2.8 million people in the UK were members of the Conservative Party and over a million were members of the Labour Party. These numbers remained relatively high well into the 1970s. When Gamble was setting out the importance of party members in the politics of support, he really could claim to be writing during the age of the mass political party. Party membership can rise and fall, although the trend is downwards. Significant numbers of supporters joined Labour to vote in Jeremy Corbyn as leader in 2015, which led to strategic choices for Starmer when he had to juggle the need for support from the membership and the wider electorate, as I note below. For the Conservatives, membership had fallen to just 172,000 shortly before the 2024 general election—around six percent of its peak (Burton and Tunnicliffe 2022). In general, party members are less important in the politics of support today, in large part simply because there are far fewer of them.

A partial consequence of the decline in membership is that this smaller group is far less representative in terms of its demographics and values than political party members used to be. The result is that party leaders are elected by the most activist members of a small group, whose values are different to the electorate as a whole (Bale et al 2020, ch. 4). Bale's book described members as 'footsoldiers', but at times they are more like a 'Dad's Army' (as depicted in the BBC sitcom)—older, depleted in number, and more eccentric, while the actual action of winning the electoral battle is carried on elsewhere. This creates significant challenges for

any politician dealing with the tensions in the different arenas of support—as Liz Truss found in 2022, when the popularity she enjoyed with party members, which had ensured her election as leader, was not matched by her support among the wider population. (Indeed, as I argue below, Starmer actively distanced himself from the views of some party members in the run up to 2024 as part of a strategy of separating the party from its recent past.) The tensions in the politics of support mean that once a politician becomes party leader, in some cases, they will actively distance themselves from their membership to move towards a politics of electoral support.

A second reason that the ongoing support of party members is less necessary than at any other time comes from the changing nature of political communication. Parties do not rely on members to generate support in the way that they once did. The door knocking, leaflet delivery, fundraising carried out by members still links party leaderships to the wider electorate, but politicians can also increasingly bypass members and reach voters directly to pursue electoral support in a way they could not in the mid-twentieth century. Gamble could see this trend in the 1970s when he wrote that, "recently, politicians have sought ways of bypassing their party organizations to some extent and reaching the electorate directly, using market research, opinion polls, and new media like television, in an attempt to reduce their dependence on their parties" (Gamble 1974, p. 9). In particular, the ability of party campaigns to effectively target messages online, via social media and email, to potential voters is quicker, more focussed and on a greater scale than traditional member-led campaign approaches. Information about potential voters is now what wins elections. The databases, technology, and expertise necessary to run any election campaign are expensive and need time and crucially money from political donations to target support. New technologies and the money needed to implement them have fundamentally changed the politics of support (Dommett et al 2024). Members are still important to campaigning, but far less so. Any contemporary discussion of the politics of support and of power should reflect these changes. The possibilities offered by communications in a digital age have radically reduced the need for members to act as the link between politicians and the wider electorate.

Starmer's relationship with party members reflected this paradoxical relationship. To become party leader, he needed the support of members. During his leadership campaign, Starmer minimised policy differences with Corbyn to win and received widespread support across the membership (Heppell et al 2021). In the leadership campaign, Starmer issued a video emphasising his radicalism (noting the legal help he had given to striking miners and poll tax protesters and his opposition to the Iraq war). He issued ten pledges that suggested he would consolidate a Corbynite position in the party. His advocacy of a second referendum on Brexit (which was quickly dropped after election) had also endeared him to many members in the party. As Fielding notes, "He did all this because, while enjoying the support of most of Corbyn's opponents, Starmer still needed the votes of a significant proportion of those who still supported Corbyn's policies … Starmer could therefore not have become leader without Corbynite votes" (Fielding 2021). His leadership campaign drew on the technological advances and need for data raised above. Anushka Asthana sets out how Morgan McSweeney, who ran Starmer's leadership bid and headed the think tank 'Labour Together' (which was repurposed to help the campaign), drew on membership data to target messages to his

potential voters (Asthana 2024). The strategy was successful with Starmer eventually securing 56 percent of members' support—significantly more than his more Corbynite rival, Rebecca Long Bailey. Looking at this first year as leader, Steven Fielding was still able to describe 'Starmerism' as 'Corbynism with the brakes on' (Fielding 2021). However, once elected leader Starmer increasingly distanced himself from 'Corbynite' members. As Bale et al. foundargued in 2021, "A significant number of members, perhaps especially those disinclined to regard antisemitism as a serious problem, could leave as a result of Corbyn being replaced (and possibly removed) by Starmer. Whether this will have much impact on Labour's electoral prospects is debatable" (2021). The socialist grassroots organisation Momentum, made up of pro-Corbyn party members, was increasingly pushed out. Starmer was able to generate enough support from members to get elected, but increasingly was able to distance himself from left-wing elements in their party's membership as leader.

Starmer was also able to increasingly exert control of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the party's broader organisation. He inherited significant divisions, with the PLP—at its simplest—split between clusters on the left and mainstream (Jeffery et al 2024). Over the next few years, the Labour left was 'frozen out' (Murphy and Steer 2023) in favour of groups backing the leadership from the centre and right of the party. Starmer's allies quickly gained control of the National Executive Committee, exerting significant say over candidate selection, with several MPs in the 'Socialist Campaign Group', including Beth Winter and Sam Tarry, not selected to stand again (Adu 2023). Nowhere was Starmer's dominance of the PLP demonstrated more clearly than in the suspension of Jeremy Corbyn in 2020 (and the later refusal to let him stand for election as a Labour candidate) and in the demotion of his Corbyn-supporting rival, Rebecca Long Bailey, in 2020 (Massey 2020).

Starmer gained the support of Labour MPs and of party members (as far as and when needed). The increasing tension with members and some in the parliamentary party is arguably a logical consequence of seeking mass electoral support.

Electoral support

Winning power in the UK system relies on a successful strategy to gain enough support to win a plurality of votes in something over half of the constituencies that make up the UK. I argue that Starmer built *electoral* support in two ways. First, Starmer pursued a strategy of decontamination. This approach has previously been used to describe the Conservative Party in opposition after 2005. Second, by Starmer took an ideologically and politically cautious approach designed to remove reasons that potential voters had not to support votingLabour—including concerns about Corbyn, costings, defence and antisemitism.

Decontaminating the brand

Tony Blair's former 'spin doctor', Alastair Campbell, reported Starmer as stating that to win he needed to "decontaminate the Labour brand" (Campbell 2023). I

argue that Starmer's most obvious strategic parallel is to the Conservatives under David Cameron after 2005. The phrase "decontamination" was frequently used to explain Cameron's strategy for the Conservatives in opposition (Stelzer 2007, pp. 16–17). Both the Conservatives after 2005 and Labour after 2020 were unpopular with a proportion of the electorate they needed the votes of to win power. The Conservatives had lost elections in 1997, 2001, and 2005 before Cameron's election as leader. The party was seen as uncaring on social issues and was associated with scandal, economic crisis, and division (particularly over Europe). Theresa May, Cameron's Home Secretary and later prime minister, had noted the need for change in 2002 when she stated to the Tory conference that some people saw them as "the nasty party" (White and Perkins 2002). Cameron was elected explicitly acknowledging that change was needed when he launched his leadership campaign, arguing that the party "has got to think, look and feel and sound like a completely different organisation" (Wintour 2005). As leader, he set about attempting to radically alter public perceptions of the party. The political scientist George Jones noted in 2006 that, "Rarely a week goes by without Mr Cameron ditching a piece of traditional Tory policy or shamelessly pinching an idea from New Labour" (Jones 2006). Cameron offered a series of public apologies which drew a line under the party's recent past (including for the introduction of the 'poll tax' early in Scotland, the failure to provide sanctions against apartheid era South Africa and for rail privatization—Evans 2010).

Cameron was clearly influenced by Blair, so the 'decontamination' strategy was part of both parties' recent past. Indeed, the Conservative leader was frequently described as 'heir to Blair' (The Times 2005, p. 9). From 1994, Blair also publicly distanced the party from its recent history. The exemplar of this move was the decision to take on conference to ensure a rewrite of Clause IV of the party's constitution, ditching the commitment to the public ownership of the means of production (a commitment already dropped in practice under one of Blair's predecessors, Neil Kinnock or earlier). It was Blair who made this commitment explicit. Blair's decision to re-brand the party as *New* Labour was also part of the strategy of showing that the party had changed and was different to that which had existed before. (These changes are recently reviewed in Murphy 2023, pp. 1–40 and extensively elsewhere.)

The challenges that Starmer faced in 2020 were clearly different to those the Conservatives faced in 2005, but there are important parallels (not least inheriting a party that had lost a run of general elections—three in eight years for Cameron and four in just under ten years for Starmer). However, although Labour's challenges were very different, its public perception was equally problematic for a significant number of voters. As support from his parliamentary party and membership became less of an issue, Starmer increasingly confronted elements of the party's recent past, publicly distancing his leadership from Corbyn's. (The result was obvious disillusion from many Labour supporters—or former supporters—who had been sympathetic to Starmer's predecessor).

There were several elements to the 'decontamination' strategy, but three are of particular note. First, Starmer apologised for the way in which the party dealt with cases of antisemitism (Starmer 2023). When his predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn,

questioned elements of the Equality and Human Right Commission report, which had been critical of Labour, he was suspended. Starmer took a hardline on antisemitism in the party, which remained a very public issue after the start of the Hamas-Israel conflict in October 2023. The result was a series of suspensions and the deselection of candidates after controversial comments resurfaced. The most notable case was Labour's decision to pull support for its own candidate, Azhar Ali, from the 2024 Rochdale byelection after earlier antisemitic comments resurfaced and were reported in the press.

Second, Starmer altered the party's image through a series of symbolically important policy pledges. In particular, the 2024 Labour manifesto committed to boosting defence spending to 2.5 percent of GDP (one of a limited number of pledges to spend large amounts of money, when other costly pledges were dropped). Starmer also distanced himself from Corbyn's opposition to the renewal and possession of the Trident nuclear missile system (which had become party policy despite Corbyn's clear objections—Mason 2017). Indeed, a photo of Starmer dressed in military fatigues on a NATO training exercise near the Russian border was widely used in the media in December 2023 (shown in Forrest 2023, for example). The photo was a conscious and successful effort to ditch the party's earlier reputation as anti-military. It mirrored Cameron's 2005 photo, also in the snow, this time with a team of huskies on a Norwegian glacier, which emphasised Cameron's Conservatives concern for the environment (Wintour 2006). Although the pictures were very different, both photo opportunities were used to symbolise change in their respective parties.

Third, as his control over the party grew, Starmer explicitly distanced himself from Corbyn. At the Party Conference in 2023, with Labour well ahead in the polls, Starmer was able to dismiss a protestor who jumped on to the stage and covered him in glitter, with the words: "Protest or power, that's why we've changed" (Nevett 2023). A year later, he referenced a heckler during his conference speech with the line, "This guy has obviously got a pass from the 2019 conference" (as reported in Crerar and Walker 2024). In the run up to the general election, Starmer was fully focussed on the politics of electoral support. In the campaign itself, Starmer dismissed the Conservative manifesto as unrealistic, describing it as "Jeremy Corbyn-style" (Whannel 2024). The break with the party's past was now heavily underlined whenever possible.

By the election of 2024, barely an interview passed without reference to how Labour had completely changed from 2019. Starmer had broken with the party's past and attempted to 'decontaminate' the brand as fully as Cameron had done 15 years before.

Caution and 'quietism'

In the four years from his election as Labour leader to becoming prime minister, Starmer was widely advised by commentators and Labour-leaning academics to set out the ideology that would guide his government (see for example Martell 2023). Advocates drew on a range of historical analogies with opposition leaders who had set out their stall early in an effort to convince voters. There were allusions to Blair's

attempts to redefine Labour between 1994 and its election in 1997. Various commentators argued that Starmer could draw on Blair in opposition, who explicitly reflected on the meaning of socialism and community at the end of the twentieth century (see, for example, Kuper 2024 or Rentoul 2023). In different ways, Kevin Hickson and Steven Fielding have separately argued that Starmer should draw on Harold Wilson's leadership of the party before 1964—variously highlighting Wilson's warm personality, patriotism, 'sensible radicalism', and rhetoric (particularly in the 1964 campaign, which saw Wilson's rejection of '13 wasted Tory years' and the modernising call for economic change through the 'white heat of technology'. (Starmer does appear to have taken Fielding's early advice to be more explicit about his working-class background, repeating the line that he was 'son of a toolmaker and nurse' throughout the election campaign.) More surprisingly, some commentators have found a model in earlier Labour leaders who never won a general election. Peter Kellner argues that Starmer has managed to draw on Neil Kinnock in imposing his authority on the party, marginalising the party's 'hard left' and 'modernising' its policy programme. Election victory was the final step once those were in place (Kellner 2022). Christine Berry argued that Starmer's attempt to distance himself from Corbyn risks paralysing the party, rather than offering a 'democratic socialist' vision based around economic rights, and democratising ownership and power (Berry 2021). For Berry, in broad terms, the party needed Corbynism without Corbyn. Starmer ignored this advice and was reticent to set out any clear ideological position. As Nick Garland notes, this reticence marked "a striking departure from the more radically revisionist intellectual efforts of the Blair or Miliband era" (2024).

In contrast to the advice to set out his stall, Starmer seemed to have adopted a position of 'ideological quietism' (Dommett 2016; Goes 2021). According to Kate Dommett, "'Quietism' refers to the process of quieting, subduing or lessening an idea and hence emphasises the possibility that actors can depict ideology in a way that lessens its apparent significance. By selecting different rhetorical strategies, an actor can (often unconsciously) project a message that does not appear to be ideological" (Dommett 2016). To Dommett, this can be done by avoiding any indicators of ideology (such as direct references to ideology or ideological traditions); moving away from discussing particular concepts associated with an ideology; and reducing ideational conflict in rhetoric.

Eunice Goes argues that ideological quietism was adopted by Starmer to win the support of socially conservative voters at the expense of more activist, university-educated, younger, urban voters (who Goes argues ideological appeals are more likely to attract). She finds that Starmer draws on all the forms of ideological quietism that Dommett sets out above (eschewing indicators of ideology, such as direct references to socialism; underplaying commitments to core socialist concepts like equality; and avoiding ideological conflict in his speeches) in order to demonstrate the break with Corbyn (who—by contrast—was explicitly socialist in his ideological rhetoric). To Goes, Starmer adds another strategy to promote ideological quietism, that is downplaying and diluting the radicalism of Labour's socialist identity, by borrowing ideas and values from other political traditions in public statements—notably the use of the concepts 'justice' and 'opportunity', in the same space that more

ideologically explicit speakers would talk about equality. When pushed Starmer describes himself as a socialist (as reported by Geiger 2024, for example), but that is almost always in response to questions from journalists, rather than proactively.

The decontamination strategy set out above distanced the party from its recent history—particularly on defence, antisemitism, and spending. Starmer was also careful not to present—in ideological terms—a clear call for socialism as Corbyn had done. Instead, he simply let it be known that the party had changed and was not the same kind of socialist party Corbyn had led. Starmer, in short, followed a pursuit of ideological quietism to distance himself from Corbyn and reach out to more socially conservative voters who would be wary of this rhetoric.

In policy terms too, there was a cautious approach. With few exceptions (for example military spending and Trident, discussed above, which helped with the decontamination strategy) specific policy pledges were limited where spending was involved. Some radical policies were ditched (notably the £28 billion green investment pledge, which was watered down in February 2024—Mason and Seddon 2024). The radicalism of the Corbyn era—which included manifesto commitments in 2017 to nationalisation, ending tuition fees and raising income tax for higher earners—had been moved aside to develop a politics of electoral support, focussed on those constituencies Labour needed to win from rival parties to gain power. This is in keeping with Gamble's observation, made fifty years before, that "In general, the politics of support are concerned with how support can be won for political parties that intend to stick to 'practical' politics, and accept the "realities" and the constraints of the prevailing politics of power … For a politician or a political party to go beyond these limits and break with the 'consensus' in a radical way requires either an indifference to gain the spoils of office, or a revolutionary movement to transform society". (Gamble 1974, p. 5). Starmer was taking a cautious approach to build the politics of support that was practical and accepted certain realities and constraints.

In general, Starmer seemed to draw upon Roy Jenkins' much quoted metaphor and approached the election like someone asked to carry a priceless Ming vase across a highly polished floor: one slip would lead to disaster (This approach is discussed in Williamson 2023). As such, there was fastidious control of policy and messaging. His leadership in the run up to the election was cautious, careful, and competent, with few grand plans on what a Labour government would do in power. Despite drawing the chagrin of commentators calling for a bolder approach, these strategies to gain electoral support worked, and Starmer won election handsomely in 2024. In the final section, I examine the challenges that a politics of electoral support based on decontamination and quietism create for the politics of power.

Conclusions: from a politics of support to a politics of power

Starmer and those around him played the electoral game superbly. When Boris Johnson won a majority in 2019, some thought that Labour might never again be a party of government. Instead, greatly aided by a range of Conservative failings in power, Starmer and those around him found a strategy that allowed Labour to

win comprehensively. This electoral strategy, however, meant that the nature of the party's support in 2024 was unusual and is likely to create challenges for Labour in power. Victory was not gained by those means traditionally used to build support—eye-catching policy pledges, the establishment of a shared set of values, a vision for modernisation, or the mobilisation of particular interests, for example. Instead, the strategy focussed on removing those reasons key voters had previously *not* supported Labour. In the context of growing anti-Conservative headwinds after 'partygate' and the Truss budget, the approach paid dividends. Next election, however, those winds are unlikely to blow in the same direction.

This context meant that Starmer's success in 2024 did not come from the support of a broad 'Labour Nation'. When Gamble wrote *The Conservative Nation* (1974), it assumed a mass member party and high electoral turnout. Today, we are facing a very different situation. The number of non-voters in 2024 was substantially higher than the post-war norm. Just under 60 percent of those eligible to do so voted (only a fraction of a percentage below Blair's low in 2001, which precipitated a crisis in confidence in politics). By contrast, turnout was never below 70 percent from 1945 to 1997. The result in 2024 was therefore a huge Labour majority with the support of only around 1 in 5 eligible voters. The party's share of the popular vote was just under 34 percent—by far the lowest of any majority government in UK history. Under Starmer, Labour was amazingly efficient at converting its vote into seats in the Commons. Despite the scale of the electoral success, these are not the kinds of numbers that currently reflect a 'Labour Nation' (which the party arguably did achieve in 1945, 1964, and 1997, when Labour achieved landslide majorities with widespread support—Gamble 2021). The shallowness of electoral support in 2024 meant that Labour's hold on power is unstable.

The relative weakness in popular support for Labour in 2024 can also be seen by comparison with Starmer's predecessor. Corbyn failed electorally but achieved popular support among a large proportion of the membership (which swelled before and during his time as leader) and a far higher number of voters. In the 2017 general election, Labour achieved 12.9 million votes. In 2024, the party won just 9.7 million votes. Yet Corbyn ultimately failed in the electoral arena, generating huge support largely in constituencies already voting Labour. By contrast, Starmer's 'rational' approach to the politics of support won power but failed to galvanise many potential voters who stayed at home. It reflected the fundamental strategic clash in the politics of support between 'traditional' party supporters and the wider electorate, which saw Starmer decisively choose the latter. This clash was significantly worsened by the 'rules of the game' under the 'First Past the Post' electoral system, which meant that the rational strategic choice was to focus on winning the support of a small number of the total electorate in winnable constituencies (given the results in other seats could be assumed without significant investment of time or money). By contrast, Corbyn achieved a large popular vote in 2017 and in 2019 seemingly at the expense of those key voters Labour actually needed to win election.

On the face of it, Labour has found itself facing similar challenges before. Tony Blair won election in 2001 with a majority almost as big as Starmer's in 2024 and turnout a fraction lower—an election described by Martin Harrop as the 'apathetic landslide' (2001). This result led to a wave of academic interest in and analysis of political

apathy, which we are likely to see again (see, for example, Hay 2007 and Stoker 2006 and recently Seyd 2024). Yet Starmer faces far graver challenges than Blair. In 2001, Labour had already completed a full term in power, the economy was growing (and would do until near the end of the decade), and the reach of radical right parties threatening to break the dominance of Labour and the Conservatives was far less.

To build a long-term politics of power, in the way the Conservatives achieved for much of the twentieth century, Labour's support needs to be far deeper than in 2024. The electoral strategy outlined in this article creates the risk that citizens lack deeper reasons to support Labour once the Conservatives had been removed. The instability of Labour's support was evident in the months immediately after their election victory, when a series of unpopular policies were announced in the name of economic stability (notably the removal of winter fuel support for pensioners). The party experienced a sharp fall in poll ratings as a result. At the moment, there appears to be limited depth in support from potential voters who will be needed to back Labour through the difficult decisions of power and who would be willing turn out for the party in future. In short, shallow support makes the politics of power difficult to sustain in the long term.

Starmer's government still has time to use the politics of power to create a more stable, deeper support. Yet the challenges it faces are significant. Even in narrow electoral terms, Labour needs to create positive reasons for support. This will include confronting the disillusion with politics that led to a steep drop in turnout, demonstrating that politics can be a solution to many of our problems—rather than an alien, self-interested, and elite activity—and reawakening the optimism among citizens that the future can be better than the past. All this is easy to write, but for Labour to build longer-term support, Starmer needs to bring citizens back into the political system and demonstrate politics can work for them. Without these changes, the foundations for Labour's victory are shallow and liable to crumble. Whether Labour can deepen this shallow support through a successful politics of power will be seen through the decisions Starmer makes in office and which will come to define his government.

Declarations

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