The Qualitative Election Study of Britain Party Leader Evaluations Database, 2010–2019

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Abstract

The authors describe the *Qualitative Election Study of Britain* (QESB) *Party Leader Evaluation Database*, a database containing 4,119 words and phrases evaluating British political party leaders. The data were collected during pre-election focus groups and interviews with participants from England, Scotland, and Wales during the General Election campaigns of 2010, 2015, 2017, and 2019. A supplementary dataset of leaders' evaluation data from Dundee residents after the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014 is also provided. To collect the data, participants viewed headshot pictures of major and minor party leaders (depending on where in Britain they lived) taken from party websites. Participants wrote down words or phrases they associated with

each leader and coded their assessment as positive, negative, or neutral. These data are suitable for content, sentiment, and discourse analysis or analytic generalization.

1.   Introduction

Qualitative research gives participants the opportunity to express and justify their associations, attitudes, and positions in their own words. What is special about qualitative research, in comparison to quantitative research, is that it captures the complexity and variety of motives, influences, and determinants of voters, which cannot be captured by predefined answers. However, there are only a handful of academic qualitative publications on British electoral behaviour (Bartle, 2003; Campbell & Winters, 2008; Carroll & Hall, 2019; Carvalho and Winters, 2014, 2015; White et al., 1999; Winters & Campbell, 2007). To the best of our knowledge, there is not much academic literature on the specific topic of political leadership using qualitative or mixed methods analysis on British political leaders (see Winters and Carvalho, 2013). *The Qualitative Election Study (QESB) of Britain Party Leader Evaluations Database, 2010–2019* fills a gap in previous election research by providing raw data from potential voters in their own words, rather than selecting a predetermined response option. This database is a subset of leader evaluation data collected during waves of the QESB, the first and only longitudinal qualitative election study in Britain. The QESB has been replicated since 2010 and is an excellent case study in how to successfully design cross-nationally or longitudinally replicable qualitative electoral behaviour research using an inductive, data-led qualitative approach. The main aim of the QESB is to generate qualitative longitudinal data for social scientific analysis by replicating focus group and interview data collection. The QESB has been used to investigate political attitudes and voting behaviour of British voters and the political party leaders evaluation component has been a core element of the study since its

inception.[1] We pooled the party leader evaluations (2010–2019) in this separate database for use in analysis.

2.   Research Aim

The QESB *Party Leader Evaluations Database* was designed to be useful to both qualitative and quantitative social scientists. For the qualitative analyst, we extracted, sorted, and published language assessing British party leaders evaluations in a .csv format suitable for qualitative methods of data analysis such as content analysis and thematic analysis. For quantitative analysts, we coded qualitative words into quantitative codes by adding additional columns to make the data suitable for sentiment analysis.

A significant advantage of the Party Leader Evaluation data is that from 2010 and onwards, the words and phrases in the database were coded as positive, negative, or neutral by the participants themselves as a part of the data collection process. Having participants code their own data eliminates the risk of the researcher introducing error by interpreting all words as having only a singular positive, negative, or neutral meaning, or misunderstanding a participant's intended meaning of words or phrases during the data production process.

The data are organized based on two main categories: the party leader and the election year. Each spreadsheet contains the leadership evaluations for a single election, or referendum, year. Each tab within that year's spreadsheet contains the names of people leading a major, national, or minor party in that year's cycle. This allows researchers to use the data from only one point in time or they can pool all the data for a leader who ran in multiple elections or compare the evaluations of different party leaders from the same party over multiple election cycles.

3.   Data Collection Method

The data in this database were pooled together from individual waves of the *Qualitative Election Study of Britain.* Founded in 2010, the QESB was designed to collect focus group and, later, interview data on individuals' voting calculi, party preferences, leadership evaluations and vote choices in England, Scotland, and Wales in a replicable way (Winters & Carvalho, 2014). This

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1   The study has other replicative elements not discussed here.

database contains only pooled data on the evaluation of British party leaders; all other information collected in the QESB will not be reviewed in this article. The party leader evaluation component of the study collected data on the perceptions (positive, negative, and neutral) of the main UK party leaders in England, Scotland, and Wales and the national party leaders in Scotland and Wales. Focus groups and interviews were conducted in 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019 in England, Scotland, and Wales pre- and post-election. For completeness, we include 2014 data, which were collected in the aftermath of the Scottish Independence Referendum and only took place in Dundee, Scotland. In all other respects, the data collection method in the referendum study was the same as in the main QESB waves.

The 2010–2019 participants were recruited into the QESB panel using a convenience sample from e-mail solicitation plus referrals, and from 2017, using Facebook ads. Participants were offered a small incentive (£30–£40) to increase participation rates. The PIs over-recruited in each wave and invited participants according to a quota to achieve diversity in partisan affiliation, age, geographic location, and employment. To diversify the participant pool, top-up interviews, and online focus groups were used in the 2017 and 2019 waves to collect data from voters who could not attend an in-person focus group. Participants were recruited for theoretical reasons – that is, voters' attitudes and opinions – and not for representativeness; therefore, statistical generalization is not possible from these data.

The party leader evaluation pre-election exercise was conducted in the same way in each wave. Participants were provided a sheet with headshot pictures of the party leaders, depending on where in Britain they lived. Party leader pictures were taken from the party's own websites because these website photos represented the image of the leader the party wanted to project. For purposes of comparability, headshots with neutral backgrounds were used as we wanted the participants to respond to the person, not the context in which the leader was. However, the photos changed with the wave of the study as they reflected the current leader of the party. Participants were instructed to write down as many (or few) words or phrases they associate with each person, and indicate if these associations were positive, negative, or neutral. Having respondents code their own data was employed to eliminate researcher misunderstanding or bias in the interpretation of the data. Following this written brainstorming session, the focus group moderators led the participants in a discussion of their responses where participants got the opportunity of putting their initial responses into context and comparing them with the responses from other participants. Online participants completed the evaluation exercise before their focus group or interview using a Word or Google document. They were

provided with a copy of their responses during the focus group or interview to enable them to put these responses into context. The described database only includes the words and phrases written down by the participants, and not the subsequent discussion, which can be found in the transcripts for that wave of the study.

The 2010 study is covered by ethical approval from Birkbeck College, London. The 2014 supplement and 2015, 2017, and 2019 waves of the study are covered by ethical approval from the University of Dundee. The consent forms signed by participants were deposited with the UKDA to ensure the preservation of the data. Researchers will not have access to these signed forms.

4.   The Database

– **QESB Party Leader Evaluations Database deposited at UK Data Service**
  – **DOI:** www.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-856002
– **Temporal coverage:** 2010–2019

4.1.   *Description of the Database*

The database is available to any user without the requirement for registration, for download, and access. The data are provided by wave as either a .xlsx or .csv file, or as a pooled .xlsx database (see Figure 1). The file contains a single sheet for each party leader of each year surveyed. Table 2 shows for which party leaders data was collected in which year.

The data structure of the pooled party leader evaluation database mirrors data structures used in sentiment analysis. This allows for both qualitative and quantitative analyses. Each sheet contains information about a particular party leader. These are given using four variables, that is, in four columns. The first column lists participants' words and phrases toward the party leader as a string variable; entries are sorted alphabetically. The next two columns list the election leader and year and participant's affective evaluations (relating to, arising from, or influencing feelings or emotions) as a string variable. The last column shows the affective evaluations in numerical form, scaled from negative -1 to positive +1 (see Table 1).

The data processing team made notes on unusual or double-coded words or phrases in a separate tab called 'Outliers & Resolutions'. Decisions on how outliers were coded are documented there. A summary of the leaders evaluated, the number of participants in each wave, and the number of evaluation responses in each wave is provided in Table 2. Within a year of study, the sheets for each party leader may contain a different number of

1	leader-evaluation_text	eval_directed_at	affective_evaluation	numeric_code
2	'Dave'	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
3	'God like' sun behind	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
4	"tries too hard"	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
5	a Thatcher disciple whom I would never vote	David Cameron 2010	neutral or uncoded	0
6	airbrushed	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
7	airbrushed	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
8	ambitious	David Cameron 2010	neutral or uncoded	0
9	anti-bureaucracy if true	David Cameron 2010	positive	1
10	anti-European	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
11	Approachable	David Cameron 2010	positive	1
12	arrogant	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
13	arrogant	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
14	articulate	David Cameron 2010	positive	1
15	bereavement	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
16	bicycle man	David Cameron 2010	positive	1
17	bit of a media / advertising leech	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
18	bitchy campaigning	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
19	bitchy	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
20	Bland	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
21	blue eyes	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
22	botox	David Cameron 2010	neutral or uncoded	0
23	Bullingdon club	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
24	Bully	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
25	businessman	David Cameron 2010	negative	-1
26	Calm	David Cameron 2010	positive	1
27	Change	David Cameron 2010	positive	1

Tabs: 2010 Cameron | 2010 Clegg | 2014 Cameron | 2014 Milliband | 2014 Clegg | 2014 Sturgeon | 2015 Cameron | 2015 Millband
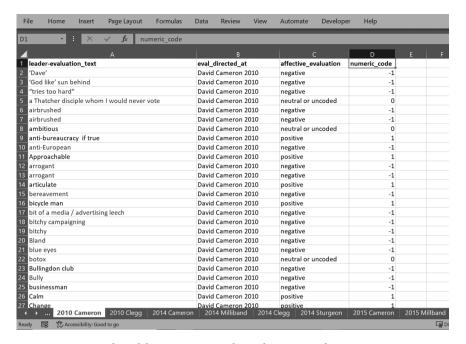
FIGURE 1   Screenshot of the QESB Party Leader Evaluations Database, 2010–2019, using Excel

sentences from respondents. This is because respondents were free to decide how many sentences they wanted to write about a party leader. It is important to point out that some participants contributed several words, while others contributed fewer. Therefore, simplistic frequency distribution comparisons

TABLE 1   Leaders evaluation variable overview

Variable labels	Contents	Data Type
leader-evaluation_text	Participant words & phrases	String
eval_directed_at	Year and party leader name	String
affective_evaluation	Importance coded by participants and uncoded responses	String
numeric_code	Positive = 1 Neutral & uncoded = 0 Negative = -1	Numeric

TABLE 2   Leaders evaluation metadata description

Year	Candidates	N (total number of respondents)	No of participants
2010	Gordon Brown David Cameron Nick Clegg	665	76
Supplementary dataset: 2014 Dundee	David Cameron Nick Clegg Ed Miliband Nicola Sturgeon	287	27
2015	Natalia Bennet David Cameron Nick Clegg Nigel Farage Ed Miliband Nicola Sturgeon Leanne Wood	1,767	94
2017	Jonathan Bartley & Caroline Lucas Jeremy Corbyn Tim Farron Theresa May Paul Nutall Nicola Sturgeon Leanne Wood	1,011	56
2019	Sian Berry & Jonathan Bartley Jeremy Corbyn Nigel Farage Boris Johnson Adam Price Nicola Sturgeon Jo Swinson	676	43

cannot be made. A lack of participant-specific identifiers means that we cannot link multiple evaluations from the same respondent, which might limit some analytical approaches. However, the aggregate trends and insights into public perceptions of political leaders remain valuable for various research purposes.

4.2. *Data Quality and Usage*

The data collected are suitable for sentiment and discourse analysis, or analytic generalization – establishing that a concept exists within a population regardless of the number of people who hold it. By collecting leader evaluation data in the same format for every wave of the study, the findings can be compared to determine whether the same leadership characteristics emerged across participants' demographic characteristics, leaders, regions, and elections.

The data can also be linked to the contextual discussions related to the leader or leadership quality that occurred during the focus groups or interviews. These contextual data (available in transcript format) add further details on the rationale, thought processes, and linkages that participants make when evaluating party leaders. An example of these data from the 2015 wave of the QESB is provided below. It highlights the context and explanation for the evaluations of David Cameron by participants in a Dundee pre-election focus group (Carvalho and Winters, 2019; see Winters et al., 2017 on how to interpret these data).

> **Audrey:** I've put 'idealistic,' which sounds like it should be a positive, but I think because he has a different world view that I'm putting it down as a negative.
>
> (Later)
>
> **Fiona:** I had 'arrogant and insincere' as well, but I also have 'scripted and speaks at the people.' Somebody said intelligent, and I don't see him as being intelligent, I see him as well scripted. He got the information from people and he's perhaps a speaker.

5.   Context and Relevance

The concept of leadership has been explored in multiple social science contexts and has been a subject of academic scrutiny in multiple disciplines including management studies and psychology (see, inter alia: Andersen, 2006; Chatman & Kennedy, 2010; Day et al., 2014; Dinh et al., 2014; Hogan et al., 1994; Lord & Dinh, 2014; and of particular interest is Parry et al.'s (2014) review of the use of

qualitative methods in leadership research). Within political science, four broad overlapping areas of research relating to leadership have emerged (Bell, 2014): a) the constitutive elements of leadership; b) popular perceptions of leadership and specific leaders; c) the psychological aspects of leadership (factors that have an effect on the emergence of leaders, how leaders make decisions, etc.); and d) the effectiveness of leaders (the impact of perceptions of leaders, their psychological dimensions, and the structures within which they function) on electoral or policy success. These areas map onto the areas of research on leadership in other social science disciplines (Andersen, 2006). Till the advent of political psychology, research on the perceptions of British political leaders employed case studies of specific leaders such as Gordon Brown, Tony Blair, and Margaret Thatcher with academic experts evaluating how they were perceived, their skills, and effectiveness (Finlayson, 2002; King, 2002; Theakston, 2011).

The concept of implicit (social and political) attitudes has developed from psychology. These attitudes "operate (relative to explicit processes) with less conscious accessibility, faster, with less or no volition or effort, and largely outside conscious control" (Ksiazkiewicz & Hedrick, 2013, p. 525). These attitudes form the basis of Implicit Leadership theories (ILTs) which are "cognitive categories or schemas … used by perceivers to infer leadership in others based on observed physical characteristics and traits or, alternatively, successful unit performance" (Lord & Dinh, 2014, p. 159). Research into ILTs identified a range of leadership traits or their combinations – as intelligence, dominance, sensitivity, strength, and trust – as traits that are perceived in potential or actual leaders (Lord & Dinh, 2014). Research in political psychology has found competence and integrity as the primary traits that political candidates are evaluated on and that affect their electoral success with dynamism/strength and personal likeability, charm, or empathy bringing additional dimensions to leader evaluations (Chen et al., 2014; McGraw, 2011; Miller et al., 1986; Pancer et al., 1999). Related research has found that partisanship (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Hayes, 2005; Highton, 2012) and policy positions (McGraw, 2011) affect how individuals perceive and evaluate political leaders.

Our pooled evaluations provide new data for researchers to find insights into the concept boundaries of evaluations of British political leaders and the concept of political leadership. Those who investigate the data will see, using an inductive approach, stability in core leadership concepts used over time but also complexity and variety in the ways voters combine them to assess a wide variety of party leaders. We encourage especially those electoral behaviour researchers who normally stay within the confines of quantitative data analysis to explore the QESB datasets and discover the nuance and complexity of concepts at work as voters decide for whom to vote.

Acknowledgements

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