Evaluating the strength of commitments made to swing constituencies

An analysis of the Conservatives’ decision to block Heathrow Expansion

Ben Stevenson
Master of Public Administration
Candidate, Class of 2016
London School of Economics and Political Science
This paper uses the Conservatives’ commitment to block Heathrow expansion to shed light on the role of core and swing communities in distributive politics. While previous studies have focused on the allocation of benefits, the analysis presented here assesses a geographically specific tax, namely the placement of activities that are unpopular with nearby constituencies. By studying the political conditions leading up to the 2010 general election, the essay evidences that the Conservatives’ behaviour exhibited a strong swing-voter bias. However, subsequent shifts within the political landscape bring the durability of their commitment into question, since the electoral incentives may have reverted to supporting the party’s core, pro-business ideology.
INTRODUCTION

Whether parties target benefits to core or swing voters is a long-standing debate within distributive politics. The logic that politicians would convey selective, non-programmatic transfers to the most loyal supporters was enunciated by Cox & McCubbins (1986) but challenged by Dixit & Londregan (1996), who demonstrated the considerable electoral incentives of targeting swing voters. Many have tested the competing theories by examining the determinants of clientelistic or “pork-barrel” rewards (Stokes, 2005; Jablonski, 2014; Vaishnav & Sircar, 2012), however, few have analysed the allocation of activities that are unpopular with local voters. By framing the expansion of London’s Heathrow airport as a tax on local constituents, the following essay assesses whether the core-swing framework helps to illuminate the Conservative Party’s decision to block the construction of a third runway in the run-up to the UK’s 2010 general election. In accordance with Dixit & Londregan (1996), the analysis finds that the notion of swing-bias helps explain why the Conservative party turned against its core, pro-business ideology, but recent events highlight the fragility of their commitment. After reviewing the literature, the essay details the conditions under which the Conservatives would decide to U-turn on the issue of Heathrow expansion, and in doing so suggests an amendment to Dixit & Londregan’s argument; a static view of core and swing leads to an inflexible understanding of distributive politics, as shifting political constellations can precipitate a rapid change in strategy, and challenge the foundations of political promises.

REVIEW OF THE CORE-SWING DEBATE

Core-swing models of distributive politics tend to assume a two-party system, splitting each group’s support into i) the core, whose views strongly reflect the party ideology, ii) its opposition,
who are firmly at the other end of the spectrum, and iii) the swing, whose preferences are not clearly aligned. In a bid to explain the stability of political coalitions in the United States, Cox & McCubbins (1986) argued that targeting the core was the more effective strategy. Their work foregrounded the importance of credible commitments, predicting that the swing’s lack of allegiance makes them a risky investment, which encourages politicians to prioritise the core, who are more responsive to their promises. Contrastingly, Dixit & Londregan (1996) predict a swing-voter bias. In their model, voters align with the party closest to their fixed, ideological preference, but will defect if the other party conveys a sufficiently large benefit. A group that is weakly attached to its political ideology can be “bought” relatively cheaply, especially if its average income level is low. Under such conditions, both parties target swing-voters, unless they are particularly efficient at targeting the core.

Empirical research has advanced the debate by considering a variety of contextual factors that shape political strategies. Milesi-Ferretti et al. (2002) highlight that certain electoral structures lend themselves to specific forms of distributive politics, with single-member district systems having a greater swing-voter bias than those with proportional representation. Rather than focusing on the overlying electoral system, Jablonski’s study of aid flows in Kenya (2014) stresses the importance of the underlying identity politics; his findings suggested that ethnic ties, coupled with patronage networks, encouraged politicians to adopt a core-voter strategy. Stokes (2005) echoes the importance of the underlying political relationships, but argues against a static framework for assessing the distributive outcomes. Studying clientelistic transfers in Argentina, she asserts that patronage networks help improve efficiency, but uses a multi-period model to stress that it is a dynamic, iterated exchange, with politicians employing a variety of techniques to encourage voters to stick to their commitments through time, even when voting in secret ballots. Following Stokes, this essay stresses the importance of political dynamics by considering how the situa-
tion changes from one electoral period to the next. However, rather than assessing whether voters stick to their end of the bargain, it considers whether politicians can renege on their own, allowing them to reallocate benefits from the swing to the core.

The analysis is based on a regional “tax”, more specifically, the environmental and social costs of a new airport runway. Since it is unpopular with local constituents, a commitment to block its construction can be thought of as a targeted group transfer of “welfare,” which is realised after the election. It therefore falls under the heading of “pork barrel” politics, as opposed to clientelism, which is associated with a more direct *quid pro quo* for an individual’s vote (Hicken, 2011). Taking the form of geographically concentrated benefits, studies of “pork” often focus on swing-constituencies rather than swing-voters (Golden & Min, 2013). For example, Vaishnav & Sircar (2012), tested whether school building in India was higher in constituencies with narrower political margins. This study is in a similar vein, but differs in the sense that school buildings are difficult to rescind after construction, whereas commitments *not* to build something are more vulnerable to periodic shifts in electoral incentives.

**HEATHROW EXPANSION AND THE 2010 GENERAL ELECTION**

Speaking at a West London rally in 2009, David Cameron, the Leader of the Conservative Party, stated: “No ifs, no buts, there will be no third runway.” The statement cemented his party’s commitment to block the expansion of Heathrow, the U.K.’s largest airport, if he became prime minister after the 2010 general election. At the time, the incumbents, Labour (centre left) were facing competition from two main challengers: the Conservatives (centre-right) and the Liberal Democrats (centrist liberals). The challenging parties were both in strong positions, with Liberal
Democrats experiencing a considerable surge in popularity over the course of the 2000s, particularly in London.

The arguments in favour of expanding Heathrow are largely economic and are in tune with the Conservatives’ core, pro-business ideology. The Labour Leader, Gordon Brown, supported the development, and many expected David Cameron to follow suit. It was a great shock therefore when he sided with the Liberal Democrats, and came out in opposition. It was not only a surprise to the party’s core voters; various commercial and aviation groups had been lobbying intensively and were confident of Conservative support (Hayden, 2014). To rationalise the strategy, Hayden (2014) argued that it formed part of the political absorption of environmental values, which was part of the “detoxification” of the Conservative brand, and aimed at bringing environmentally conscious voters into the Conservative fold. This appears to fit with a Downsian prediction that parties gradually adopt the views of pivotal voters. However, by suggesting that the strategy was designed to capitalize on a countywide wave of environmentalism, Hayden’s analysis is effectively limited to the national scale. By doing so, it fails to consider the policy’s local, distributional element, and therefore provides only a partial understanding of the multifaceted electoral incentives.

While capturing the national environmentalist vote may have contributed to the decision, the policy was instrumental in local-level politics. Despite the economic benefits from expansion, the vast majority of constituents in Heathrow’s vicinity opposed it on the grounds of increased road congestion and aircraft noise pollution. Local opposition crystallised in particular around the latter, indeed, a 2008 survey in Richmond, which is one of the worse affected constituencies, found 89 per cent of residents were opposed to expansion due to the noise (Richmond Gov, 2008). As shown in Table 1, many of the worst affected boroughs were marginal constituencies, which provided an opportunity for political parties to garner local support by committing to block the move.
As shown in Figure 1, the airport sits at the edge of West London, in the constituency of Hayes and Harlington. To the West, are the counties of Surrey, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire; historically the Conservative heartland. However, in the 2005 general election, the urban constituencies (labelled in Figure 1), elected MPs from Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The 2005 results are shown in Table 1, and illustrate the narrow margins in Ealing Central, Brentford & Isleworth, and Richmond. In line with Dixit & Londregan’s prediction, these narrow margins would alter the Conservatives’ political calculus. Despite being unpopular with the national, core support base, the decision to match the Liberal Democrats’ offer of blocking expansion, would give them a chance to retake pivotal voters, and shift the balance of power in West London.

**FIGURE 1 MAP OF LONDON SHOWING HEATHROW AIRPORT AND SURROUNDING CONSTITUENCIES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>Liberal Democrat</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Margin of victory over Conservatives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brentford &amp; Isleworth</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ealing Central</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ealing North</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ealing South</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayes G Ealing</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heston Richmond Park</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond Twickenham</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uxbridge Hayes G</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: 2005 Election results (%): London constituencies near Heathrow (shaded: win; bold: victory margin >10%)
These marginal seats were already under the flight path, but their generally affluent constituents feared they would be amongst the worst affected by the third runway (particularly through reduced property values), and would be too far from the development to experience benefits such as labour market improvements. A recent map published by the Heathrow group in 2014, suggests that the constituents’ fears about noise were well founded, as they predicted that the third runway would exacerbate noise pollution in Ealing, Brentford and Richmond (which are circled in Figure 2). Cameron’s commitment capitalised on these concerns, consolidated support under the Heathrow flight path, and arguably tipped the balance. As shown in Table 2, which displays the 2010 election results, all three constituencies swung to the Conservatives.

**FIGURE 2 MAP SHOWING NOISE IMPACTS OF A THIRD RUNWAY AT HEATHROW, WITH EALING, BRENTFORD AND RICHMOND, CIRCLED**

Source: Heathrow; Taking Britain Further, 2014.
### Table 2

2010 Election Results (%): London constituencies near Heathrow (Shaded: win. Bold: victory margin < 10%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>Labour</th>
<th>Conservative</th>
<th>Liberal Democrat</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brentford &amp; Isleworth</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ealing, Central</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ealing, North</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ealing, Southall</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feltham &amp; Heston</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayes &amp; Harlington</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>50.4</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond Park</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twickenham North</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twickenham Central</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Table 2: 2010 Election Results (%): London constituencies near Heathrow (Shaded: win. Bold: victory margin < 10%)
It is beyond the scope of this study to estimate how much of the vote gains can be attributed to Cameron’s commitment to blocking Heathrow expansion. However, it seems that the experiences of Ealing Central, Brentford & Isleworth and Richmond, are quite distinctive when compared to the rest of London. Of the 74 constituencies in Greater London, seven swung to the Conservatives in the 2010 election, suggesting that political allegiances were quite stable in the majority of London boroughs. The circle in figure 2. surrounds the block of the West London constituencies, and points to one of the main areas of change between the two periods, especially within the external ring of London’s more suburban boroughs. This suggests that there was something distinctive about the area’s interaction with the Conservatives. This is by no means proof that the airport bargain was the determining factor in the electoral outcomes (as it could still be attributed to other borough-specific characteristics that resonated with the Conservative message, such as the level of affluence of the constituents) however it is certainly consistent with the argument that the commitment was instrumental in political outcomes.

FIGURE 3 ELECTORAL RESULTS IN 2005 AND 2010. EALING CENTRAL, BRENTFORD & ISLEWORTH, & RICHMOND CIRCLED

Source: Parliamentary commons, 2015.
LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR A U-TURN

In the wake of the 2010 election, the Conservatives formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats. Their joint commitment to blocking airport expansion was formalised in the coalition’s programme. Many assumed that David Cameron’s commitment would persist, but there has been mounting concern that the Conservatives have reassessed their position and are preparing to row back on their commitment.

The party rhetoric has shifted from “no ifs, no buts” to a more pragmatic, pro-business stance. In 2012, the government established the Airports commission, which will provide an independent review of the case for the third runway. The results are due to be released at the beginning of the 2015 parliament.¹ Most probably, if the Conservatives are in power, and the commission finds in favour of expanding Heathrow, David Cameron will argue that it is in national interests that they renege on their 2010 manifesto commitment. Such a U-turn would result in considerable reputation loss in the West London constituencies, but the swing voters in those areas may be less numerous than they were in 2010. If the Conservatives thought that the runway issue was still a critical component of their electoral strategy, they would probably have reiterated their 2010 commitment, but their 2015 manifesto is non-committal, simply stating that they will “respond to the Airports Commission’s final report” (Conservative Manifesto, 2015, p.14).

From a strategic perspective, muddying of the waters around the Conservative commitment can be interpreted as a strong signal that they would be willing to revert to their core, pro-business position. In 2010, the commitment to block expansion helped to deliver a pivotal group of swing voters. A wholehearted adoption of Dixit & Londregan’s thesis would suggest that failing to renew that commitment would overturn those political gains. However, despite the considerable damage to the Conservatives’ reputa-

¹. Subsequent to writing the paper, the report has been published, and argues that a third runway at Heathrow would be the most effective way to increase airport capacity.
tion, the political calculus may now lean towards a reversal of the commitment. The implicit calculation is to weigh the negative implications of the reputation damage, which could result in the loss of seats in West London, against the benefits of attracting voters who support Heathrow expansion, spread more evenly throughout the country.

Two key elements, relating to the shifting political context between 2010 and 2015, have meant that the negative electoral implications, in that block of West London boroughs, would be dampened to a considerable extent. First, the compromises forced on the Liberal Democrats in the coalition (such as raising university tuition fees) have undermined their liberal-minded core supporters, and reduced the pressure on the Conservatives in affluent areas like Richmond. Second, there has been a shift in the relative popularity of Labour and the Conservatives. A flagship policy of Ed Milliband’s Labour opposition has been a progressive “mansion tax” on houses worth over £2 million. A study by Knight Frank, a London-based estate agent, highlighted that West London would be the most affected part of the country by the tax, and indeed found that Richmond would be one of the six most affected constituencies (Telegraph, 2015). Such changes give the Conservatives a greater degree of certainty that the swing voters gained in 2010 would not defect, even if the party failed to uphold its end of the airport bargain.

If, leading up to the 2015 election, the Conservatives are more insulated from political competition in those West London seats, then the commitment would be unlikely to alter political outcomes in those boroughs. According to Downsian theory, the Conservatives may be encouraged to revert to a median-voter strategy. While Hayden (2014) might argue that prioritizing the environment has significant power to determine political outcomes, the discussion in the lead up to the 2015 election leaned heavily towards economic stewardship. Concerns that a Labour government would destabilise a fragile economic recovery have
provided conditions that encourage Cameron to reinforce the Conservatives’ reputation as the party that sets economic stability as its first priority. Thus, from the Conservatives’ perspective, the apparent erosion of the strategic importance of voters that are firmly against Heathrow expansion would allow the party to revert to their core position.

**CONCLUSION**

The issue of airport expansion offers a useful lens through which to assess Dixit & Londregan’s swing voter theory. The analysis fits with their prediction of swing voter bias, but suggests a subtle shift in emphasis when thinking about long-term political outcomes. While swing voter theory certainly helps explain why transfers are established, the assumption of fixed voter preferences hampers our ability to assess their durability. With existing commitments, the question becomes whether swing constituencies are still strategically important enough to warrant a tax on the core. This has implications for understanding the evolution of distributive politics, as parties will constantly reevaluate the situation between electoral periods, assessing whether intervening political shifts allow them to revert to their core preference.

In terms of the policy implications, the case is quite distinctive in the sense that supporting Heathrow expansion has become an issue of national political significance, as a touchstone of a party’s willingness to trade economic growth for environmental sustainability. At the same time however, local externalities mean that elections in the near vicinity are highly sensitive to a party’s political stance. These conflicting priorities are shared by other nationally significant projects that come up against local resistance. In the U.K., issues that would fit into this category include: the construction of new housing, the allocation of energy infrastructure (on-shore wind farms, new-generation nuclear power
plants), unconventional oil exploration (fracking) and decisions about routes for new transport links. In these cases, the durability of political commitments that supposedly steer such projects away from swing constituencies may be limited, as the strategic importance of these groups of voters may well change.

REFERENCES

BBC (2010) Data from: news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election2010/results/constituency/c04.stm
Richmond Gov (2008): Available at: http://www.richmond.gov.uk/heathrow_expansion_history
Vaishnav, Milan & Sircar, N. (2012) "Core or Swing? The Role of Electoral Context in Shaping Pork Barrel" Department of political Science Colombia University available at: https://nsircar.files.wordpress.com/2013/02/vaishnav_sircar_03-12-12.pdf