



*Dear Simon,*

*What are the most salient issues in this year's election campaign?*

As always in an election, in the UK or anywhere else, there is a gap between what parties want to campaign on and what the general public think is important.

For the two main parties, the lines have been clear for a long time now.

The Conservatives will concentrate on the economy, which has been producing some good headlines in the past year, as it climbs out of recession. While the Eurozone's problems have made this look a bit unstable, the very fact of not being tied to a single currency union has allowed for more radical austerity measures.

Labour are instead talking about public services, especially the National Health Service, a highly emotive issue on which they consistently out-poll the Tories. It allows them to sidestep talking about their role in encouraging the conditions that led to the 2008 economic crisis, while also letting them paint the Tories as 'the nasty party'.

While these are both issues that the public talks about, it is not all that concerns them. Worries about immigration have become ever more common in recent years and often come top in surveys of important issues, but parties have been mostly unwilling to have a very full debate on this. The reason lies in the understanding that anything that looks like xenophobia or racism will be punished heavily by voters. This is why the one party that does talk a lot about immigration – UKIP – gets a lot of attention about how it talks about this, with much effort being put by others into making it look like nationalistic prejudice. Just as in France, and elsewhere, that strategy by other parties hasn't really worked, because UKIP has been able to turn that to their advantage, saying that they are the only ones 'telling it like it is'.

However, all of this masks a deeper issue, namely that there is actually not much to choose between the main parties in the campaign. Instead, there is a lot of different emphasis around a consensus view of the organisation of society and economy. This means that personality politics become ever more important. One example of this is the debate over the past months about whether and how party leaders should run television debates in the campaign period.

As the campaign runs on to May, the more we will see of these kind of questions, about who we engage as a party leader, rather than whose policy mix is the best for the UK.

Talk soon,

*Simon*

