What matters most to voters when they choose their leaders? This book suggests that performance politics is at the heart of contemporary democracy, with voters forming judgments about how well competing parties and leaders perform on important issues. Given the high stakes and uncertainty involved, voters rely heavily on partisan cues and party leader images as guides to electoral choice. However, the authors argue that the issue agenda of British politics has changed markedly in recent years. A cluster of concerns about crime, immigration and terrorism now mix with perennial economic and public service issues. Since voters and parties often share the same positions on these issues, political competition focuses on who can do the best job. This book shows that a model emphasizing flexible partisan attachments, party leader images and judgments of party competence on key issues can explain electoral choice in Britain and elsewhere.

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National election studies long have been major infrastructure projects in political science. The British Election Study (BES) has been conducted at the time of every general election since 1964. Starting in 2001, we have been privileged to be BES principal investigators. The core analyses in Performance Politics and the British Voter are based on survey data gathered in the 2005 study. When conducting the BES and related projects, we have benefited from the advice and assistance of a large number of organizations and individuals. We are pleased to have this opportunity to acknowledge their help.

First is the Economic and Social Research Council (the ESRC). The ESRC funded both the 2001 and 2005 BES, as well as the Dynamics of Democracy surveys conducted in Paul Whiteley’s Participation and Democracy programme. The latter surveys provided us with monthly portraits of British public opinion between January 2000 and December 2002. The ESRC also funded national surveys in March, April–May and October 2003 to gather information on the dynamics of British public opinion about the Iraq War early in the history of that controversial conflict. We particularly appreciate the interest in our research expressed by ESRC officers, Gary Williams and Jennifer Edwards. Gary’s enthusiasm for, and advocacy of, the BES has done much to invigorate research on voting, elections and public opinion in Britain.

Thanks are due also to Sam Younger and the UK Electoral Commission. The Commission helped to fund the 2005 study. These funds enabled us to include extra question batteries, and to expand the Scottish and Welsh booster samples. In addition, we thank BBC Newsnight and other media outlets for providing Sanders and Whiteley with opportunities to discuss the 2005 election with national and regional audiences. These opportunities helped us to disseminate information about BES findings to a large public audience in a timely way.
We thank the National Science Foundation (US) for its support for a now lengthy series of monthly surveys that interface with the BES. The first of these surveys (the Dynamics of Party Support (DPS) project) covered the 1992–9 period, and the second (the Government Performance and Valence Politics (GPVP) Project), the 2004–8 period. Together with the Democracy and Participation project surveys, the NSF-funded research has enabled us to assemble a seventeen-year portrait of British public opinion. In the mid-1990s former NSF Political Science programme officer, Frank Scioli, reacted positively when we first suggested that researchers needed to capture inter-election shifts in public opinion that are crucial for explaining electoral choice. Importantly, he also believed us when we told him that we would not ‘break the bank’ – the requisite research could be done effectively at low cost. Most recently, we secured NSF funding for the ‘Internet Surveys and National Election Studies’ conference organized jointly with Skip Lupia, Jon Krosnick and the American National Election Study (ANES). Again, Frank – with new administrative duties at the NSF’s cyber-infrastructure initiative – was keenly interested in our ideas. We greatly appreciate his support.

Monies provided by University of Texas at Dallas (UTD) to Harold Clarke and Marianne Stewart helped to fund surveys and supported graduate student research assistants. UTD also helped Clarke and Stewart to travel to the University of Essex and other locales in Britain to work with Sanders and Whiteley on the BES and the related projects mentioned above. We especially wish to thank UTD Provost Hobson Wildenthal for his continuing interest in our research and his willingness to facilitate our efforts. At the University of Essex, Jane Daldry, Lennie Lillepuu, Carole Parmenter and other members of the administrative staff in the Department of Government have done much to enable David Sanders to participate in the project while fulfilling his duties as Department Head and joint editor of the British Journal of Political Science.

As BES principal investigators, we have benefited from the support of many members of the academic community. The BES Advisory Board has been especially helpful. Members of the 2005 Board include John Bartle, Paolo Bellucci, André Blais, Rosie Campbell, Ivor Crewe, Russell Dalton, David Denver, Cees van der Eijk, Mark Franklin, Rachel Gibson, Richard Johnston, Ron Johnston, Anthony King, Lawrence LeDuc, Michael Lewis-Beck, Ian McAllister, William
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We were very fortunate to secure the services of the National Centre for Social Research (Natcen) to conduct the 2005 pre- and post-election in-person surveys. Project Director Katarina Thomson, Senior Researcher Mark Johnson, and others at Natcen were terrific. Everything went exactly as promised in their ‘reverse site visit’ with us at Wivenhoe House in summer 2004. Katarina and her colleagues were always available to answer our questions, very high-quality data were delivered ‘on time’, response rates were increased by nearly 10 per cent on 2001, and a comprehensive end-of-project technical report was provided. We sincerely appreciate the work of Katarina and others at Natcen.

We accord equally high praise to YouGov, the firm that conducted the 2005 Rolling Campaign Panel Survey (RCPS). As described in Chapter 1, the RCPS component in the 2005 BES was designed as a mode experiment to gauge the quality of internet data. Results strongly indicate that Internet surveys can be cost-effective vehicles for investigating the dynamics of British public opinion and the forces affecting electoral choice. The success of the 2005 RCPS owes much to the work done by YouGov and its Project Director, Joe Twyman. Like their counterparts at Natcen, Joe and his team delivered high-quality data in a very timely way. YouGov also has conducted the 2004–8 NSF-sponsored monthly surveys and, again, the work consistently has been top-flight. Thanks so much.

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Performance Politics and the British Voter has been an enjoyable collaborative effort. Periodic meetings at the University of Essex have pushed the project forward and, occasionally(!) pushed the authors to consider the need for refreshment. Seeking such at Wivenhoe House Bar, the Rose and Crown quayside, or the garden at the Sun in Dedham (better food than the Marlborough) has been our practice – one that we highly recommend. The synergies of intellectual sustenance and a pint of Broadside should not be underestimated.

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