

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN BRITAIN

Polling, Campaigning
and Media in the
2015 General Election

Edited by
Dominic Wring,
Roger Mortimore,
Simon Atkinson

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Dominic Wring • Roger Mortimore • Simon Atkinson
Editors

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Polling, Campaigning and Media in the 2015
General Election

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Cover illustration: David Cameron campaigning in the Cornish marginal seat of St Ives holding a copy of the 'I'm afraid there is no money' memo written by a former Labour Treasury minister government. The Prime Minister frequently used the letter in the final stage of the General Election to question his opponent's economic record in government.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The arithmetic relating to the UK electoral system proved crucial to determining the result of the 2015 General Election. In previous contests, the party coming first had done so by a margin comfortable enough to govern on its own. This changed in 2010 with the formation of the Coalition after the Conservatives had failed to win an overall majority. Approaching this election, and with successive polls showing a very close race with no single party in a clear lead, there was widespread anticipation of another hung parliament being returned. Yet the Conservatives' 2015 victory was achieved by the margin of votes necessary to enable them to take office on their own, albeit with a relatively small majority. This unexpected result provided a dramatic conclusion to what had been a protracted campaign. The surprise outcome led to intense debate over what had happened among various commentators who had spent the previous weeks speculating over the potential make-up of another coalition government.

This book provides a contribution to understanding what happened in the 2015 General Election and does so from the perspectives of those who played leading roles in the campaign and in the reporting and polling of the race. It also offers comment and analysis from researchers on various other important aspects of the election, including the leader debates and the contribution of social media. The editors are very grateful to all the contributors for their prompt and always courteous responses to our requests. We would like to sincerely thank them all for giving us their insights into a campaign that has threatened to be overshadowed by its largely unanticipated outcome. Some chapters provide invaluable on-the-record accounts of what happened and in certain cases take us behind the

scenes. Together, these and the other contributions offer reflective comments and analysis on several of the least as well as most discussed aspects of the campaign. This was the aim of the *Political Communication* series when it was launched after the 1979 General Election and we are proud to continue in this tradition.

The editors are very grateful to various other people for their help. We would particularly like to thank Bob Worcester, who co-founded and co-edited the first volume in the series, for kindly providing the Foreword for this ninth instalment. Steve Rothberg and Anna Theaker of Loughborough University Enterprise Office together with Charles Pattie of the UK Political Studies Association's Elections, Public Opinion and Parties group provided support that helped to make this book possible; a post-election conference held in Summer 2015 provided the springboard for many of the chapters here. We are also grateful to Chin Guan Goh and his colleagues at the Emmanuel Centre London as well as Danielle Bailey, James Ludley, Kate Mattocks and Jamie Ralph of the Political Studies Association for their input. We would like to express our gratitude to Jo Brewin, Jon Crannage, Suzanne Dexter, Charlotte Hester, Liz Fowkes, Graham Herring, Dane Vincent, Denise Wade and Judy Wing of Loughborough University. Michele Chester, Fiona O'Connor, Rahel Mebrahtu and Duncan Struthers of Ipsos MORI provided invaluable support. Thanks are also due to: Jay Blumler, Martin Boon, Jo Coburn, Stephen Coleman, Tahlia Dolan, Adam Drummond, Tom Edmonds, James Endersby, Geoff Evans, Ed Fieldhouse, Joanna Geary, Jane Green, Michael Jermey, Chris Luffingham, Damian Lyons Lowe, Jane Martinson, Martin Moore and Mike Smithson. Jo Sheriff and Tilly Wring have been of great help to the project. Sara Crowley Vigneau, Ambra Finotello and Imogen Gordon Clark of Palgrave Macmillan have been patient and very helpful from the beginning of this process. Finally, we would also like to repay our gratitude to our anonymous reviewers for their helpful advice and encouragement. We hope this volume proves a fitting addition to the series.

DW, RM and SA

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|-------|---|
| ACC | Arena and Convention Centre (Liverpool) |
| BBC | British Broadcasting Corporation |
| BMRB | British Market Research Bureau |
| BNP | British National Party |
| BPC | British Polling Council |
| CASM | Centre for the Analysis of Social Media |
| CDU | Christian Democratic Union (Germany) |
| CEO | Chief Executive Officer |
| CISTA | Cannabis is Safer Than Alcohol |
| CCHQ | Conservative Campaign Headquarters |
| CRCC | Centre for Research in Communication and Culture (Loughborough University) |
| CSU | Christian Social Union (Germany) |
| DUP | Democratic Unionist Party |
| EU | European Union |
| FDP | Free Democratic Party (Germany) |
| GLC | Greater London Council |
| IPSO | Independent Press Standards Organisation |
| ITN | Independent Television News |
| ITV | Independent Television |
| KPI | Key Performance Indicator |
| LBC | Leading Britain's Conversation (radio channel) |
| LGBT | Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender |
| MEP | Member of the European Parliament |
| MORI | Market Opinion Research International |

xviii LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------|---|
| MP | Member of Parliament (United Kingdom) |
| MRS | Market Research Society |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| NHS | National Health Service |
| NOP | National Opinion Polls |
| NRS | National Readership Survey Ofcom Office for Communications (UK) |
| PEB | Party Election Broadcast |
| PPC | Prospective Parliamentary Candidate |
| PPRB | Party Political and Referendum Broadcasts |
| SDLP | Social Democratic and Labour Party |
| SNP | Scottish National Party |
| STV | Scottish Television |
| TUSC | Trade Union and Socialist Coalition |
| TUV | Traditional Unionist Voice |
| UKIP | UK Independence Party |
| UTV | Ulster Television |
| UUP | Ulster Unionist Party |

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CHAPTER 1

Foreword

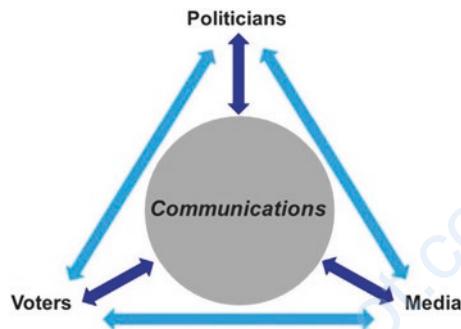
Robert Worcester

Looking back to our Introduction in the first of this series, *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 1979*, my then co-editor, Martin Harrop, and I made the point that while the esteemed “British General Election” books starting in 1945, led for 15 elections by David Butler, included chapters by Martin Harrison and others looking at broadcasting, and by Colin Seymour-Ure and others about the press, we took the view that “scant attention was paid to political communications, to the active dialogue between the elected and the elector, the politicians and the demos, all linked to communications” (Worcester and Harrop, 1982) (Fig. 1.1).

At the initial 1979 post-election seminar, we had presentations from the parties’ ad men, spin doctors, media, pollsters and pundits. These formed the structure of the book’s sections: The Advertisers (Tim Bell, Barry Day and Tim Delaney); Politicians (MPs Austin Mitchell, [Labour] and Tim Rathbone [Conservative]); The Media (Peter Kellner and Bob Worcester, Martin Harrison, Bob Self and Colin Seymour-Ure and Adrian Smith); and The Polls and Psephology (Ivor Crewe, John Barter, Paul McKee, Dennis Kavanagh and Martin Harrop). Our book, largely comprising the papers delivered at the conference, which was held under the auspices

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Fig. 1.1 The active dialogue between the elected and the elector



of the inaugural meeting of the Political Communications Study Group of the Political Studies Association, was following in the footsteps of the Kennedy Institute's *Campaign '72: the managers speak*, and *Campaign for President: the managers look at '76*.¹

It is my hope that there is a place for this look-back at the 2015 General Election campaign, for politics department academics and their students, political editors and their reporters, pundits, political players, both politicians and party activists, and those of the public who perhaps share with so many of us political junkies and nerds with what some would say is an unhealthy interest in the election process and particularly in the strategies and tactics of elections. At that first gathering of political players and their close observers, I posed in my concluding remarks, a number of issues that had been raised but have not even yet been fully answered:

- During (and between) general elections, how much does the public (electorate?) *want* to know?
- How much does the public (electorate) *already know*? And how much of that is incorrect or misconceived?
- Does the public understand the *system*, the *issues* and the *choices*?
- What segments of the public care or do not care, or can be *switched*?
- Which are the *media* of preference, of audience segmentation, of convenience, of cost, of weight, of reach, of value?
- What of the *language/semantics* of the electorate? What does the electorate understand us to be saying? Is this appropriate to the audience? What is the impact? The symbolism?
- Is *failure* to communicate effectively due to the content, the language, the medium or the gatekeepers, the pundits, the commentators? Are these part of the problem or part of the solution?

- How should *political parties'* efforts be balanced between the undecided and the party faithful? What will replace demography as the principal determinants of voting as these ties observably weaken?
- And what are the *responsibilities* of the *politicians*, the *public*, the *media* and the *polls*?

That was the election in 1979, 36 years ago. At the 2015 election seminar, there was a good if not better set of participants: Jeremy Sinclair of M&C Saatchi, a rare participant in such meetings but a famous creative director whose 1979 “Labour isn’t Working” is iconic as great negative political advertising, not from the posters so much as from the spot-on message repeated in newspapers and television’s party election broadcasts. Another was the 1964 American Presidential election’s “Daisy Chain” TV ad by the Democrats against Republican candidate Barry Goldwater, which showed a little girl picking the leaves off a daisy while an unseen male voice counted 10–9–8 ... until a shocking atomic bomb exploded and then as the mushroom cloud rose in the sky, President Lyndon Johnson’s voice-over said “We must all learn to love each other, or die”. Also at the seminar were (Lord) Andrew Cooper for the Tory campaign, Greg Cook, head of political strategy for Labour, and “inside insiders” for the other campaigns as well, Joe Murphy of the *Standard* for print media, TV reporting covered by Michael Crick of Channel 4 and, before that, *Newnight*.

In 1979, there were panels on advertising, campaigning, media and polls, structured so that we could get the “players” to spark off each other. The highlight of the advertising group was Tory advisor Tim Bell’s private plane landing him to shoot over to the meeting in time for his hour and a half long panel, speak for an hour and ten minutes, leaving adman Barry Day, speech writer for the Conservative Leader, and Tim Delaney, Labour adman, about ten minutes each—with Bell apologising that he had to go before hearing their prepared remarks or their comments on his oration as he had to return to the airport to fly back to London for a meeting (no doubt with Mrs Thatcher). Chairing the panel, I did what I could to stop him, but I rather felt like the Chinese protester in front of the tank at Tiananmen Square. In the 2015 *Political Communications in Britain* book, the structure is somewhat different, being in three parts: polling, campaigning and the media.

There are five excellent papers in the polling section, which was intended to provide, as the editors say, insights into the opinion polls in the 2015

election. Unsurprisingly, all are somewhat defensive given the *mea culpa* of the speakers. Nick Moon's post-mortem gave way to the easy responses of "late swing", arguing that polls conducted only a day or two before election have to be seen as predictions. In a recap for younger readers, he said "we ignore the fact that in all three of these 'failure' elections for the polls the fundamental picture was the same—the polls said the Tories would not form a majority Government and they did. It seems improbable that this was a coincidence and any analysis of what went wrong has to take this into account". What he does not say is that, in my view, the "failure" of the polls was not so much in "failing" to "predict" the outcome of "who won" but to fail to find precisely the cause of the "forecast".

I must confess that I am of the old school who believe that "Polls don't 'forecast'; they are a 'snapshot' at a point in time" as I have said hundreds of times, and that time is when the interviewing was done, not the date of publication of the findings of the poll. I may be the last holdout on this, but other pollsters are now falling into their own trap when they use the language of the "poll pickers", the psephologists and pundits, who report the "horse race" polls' findings. They fail to object when broadcasters and editors overclaim by commenting on polls weeks and sometimes months in advance of an election's actual balloting that they show that "Labour is set to win the by-election" or the like. This makes the readers and listeners/viewers think that we pollsters are using our findings as a "prediction" or "forecast" when that is beyond our competence, and rather they should report the savants who use crystal balls (Table 1.1).

There were 11 polls conducted the week before the election. Four were carried out by telephone, and seven over the Internet: there was no statistical significant difference between any of them except one (Survation) that had one party (the Tories) below the usual $+/- 3\%$. Effectively, they were all saying the same thing. Of the four telephone polls, the Conservative share was 35% $+/- 2\%$, Labour 34% $+/- 1\%$, Liberal Democrats 9% $+/- 1\%$, UKIP 11% $+/- 1\%$, Greens 5% $+/- 1\%$ and Others 6% $+/- 2\%$. Among the seven internet polls, the Tories at 33% $+/- 2\%$, Labour 33% $+/- 2\%$, Liberal Democrats 9% $+/- 1\%$, UKIP 14% $+/- 2\%$, Greens 5% $+/- 1\%$ and Others 6% $+/- 1\%$.

It has been contended (Hill 2015) that there are three explanations that could plausibly be levelled at the polling organisations. First, that there was collusion between them. They may have been on the fringes, but in 13 General Elections I have never known the pollsters to be that collegiate on the one hand nor Machiavellian on the other. I do not believe this one was

Table 1.1 The case in point: “The Failure of the Polls” in 2015.*11 Polling agencies, different methodologies, samples, people: statistically identical results*

| <i>Polling agency</i> | <i>Con (%)</i> | <i>Lab (%)</i> | <i>LD (%)</i> | <i>UKIP (%)</i> | <i>Green (%)</i> | <i>Other (%)</i> |
|--------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| ComRes | 35 | 34 | 9 | 12 | 4 | 6 |
| ICM | 34 | 35 | 9 | 11 | 4 | 7 |
| Ipsos MORI | 36 | 35 | 8 | 11 | 5 | 5 |
| Lord Ashcroft | 33 | 33 | 10 | 11 | 6 | 8 |
| Telephone poll average | 34.5 | 34.3 | 9.0 | 11.3 | 4.8 | 6.3 |
| BMG | 34 | 34 | 10 | 12 | 4 | 6 |
| Opinium | 35 | 34 | 8 | 12 | 6 | 5 |
| Panelbase | 31 | 33 | 8 | 16 | 5 | 7 |
| Populus | 33 | 33 | 10 | 14 | 5 | 6 |
| Survation | 31 | 31 | 10 | 16 | 5 | 7 |
| TNS | 33 | 32 | 8 | 14 | 6 | 7 |
| YouGov | 34 | 34 | 10 | 12 | 4 | 6 |
| Online average | 33.1 | 33.1 | 9.1 | 13.7 | 5.0 | 6.2 |
| Tel. v Online difference | -1.4 | -1.2 | +0.1 | +2.4 | +0.2 | -0.1 |
| Overall average | 33.6 | 33.5 | 9.1 | 12.8 | 4.9 | 6.2 |
| Actual result | 37.7 | 31.2 | 8.1 | 12.9 | 3.8 | 6.3 |
| Overall difference | -4.1 | +2.3 | +1.0 | -0.1 | +1.1 | -0.1 |

Source: Worcester et al. (2016), p. 206

any different, certainly among the longer-serving polling organisations. Second, that there was a consistent methodological flaw. This seems not to have been proven, only alleged as a possibility. Third, late swing. Late swing is discounted completely by the fact that there is no quantitative evidence to prove it. Yet anecdotally, we all remember the threat of the Scottish National Party’s Nicola Sturgeon so vigorously pursued by the cartoonists (see below) and commentators, both in the broadcast media and newspapers, making the warning, and on social media. There was certainly a great reluctance among many of the usual Labour Party supporters to vote for Ed Miliband. The fear of a close election with Nicola Sturgeon being widely reported and constantly on television and radio and in social media might have been called a “double whammy”. Certainly there was huge coverage. Nonetheless, it did not show up in the quantitative polling that exists. Neither statistical reliability nor sample size seems relevant in 2015 as the results are so consistent across all 11 sets of results (Fig. 1.2).



Fig. 1.2 *Independent on Sunday*, 19 April 2015

Much has been made by some of our critics suggesting returning to probability sampling to “correct the error”. Little attention has been paid by them to the fact that the accuracy of probability sampling is problematic, given their low response rates in the first round and that “accuracy” improves with multiple call backs for which there is little time, given the pace of elections in Great Britain. Mark Diffley is the Ipsos MORI man in Scotland: his contribution is short and to the point. The Scottish polls engendered little criticism and were remarkably prophetic; indeed, the Ipsos MORI final poll write-up produced the headline “It could be a wipe-out”, and indeed it nearly was. A very substantive and meaty contribution is provided by Australia’s Murray Goot. Professor Goot is one of the best, perhaps the best, foreign observer of British pollsters’ work. He has a good understanding of the British political scene and is appropriately critical.

The media campaign section benefited from the Loughborough University Communications Centre’s content analysis relating the media coverage to election-related items found in the news bulletins, and provides us all with a number of detailed tables which show both television and newspaper quotations, frequency of appearance, positivity (seldom) and various negativity (almost entirely) to the political parties. Emily Harmer’s contribution on the role of pink buses, leaders’ wives and “the most dangerous woman in Britain” makes amusing reading. Regarding a moment of uncertainty in what

was otherwise a rather boring and predictable campaign, quoting Wring and Ward, the country was first stunned and then fascinated by the “takeover” by Nicola Sturgeon by the media. The cartoon (above) and the Tory poster of a malevolent-looking SNP Leader provided the graphic evidence of one part of political coverage seldom noticed in academic critiques of General Elections. Her quote from Trevor Kavanagh was classic, “Usually fierce Nicola Sturgeon looked doe-eyed as she bowed and pounced on Mr Miliband as a spider in sight of her prey, who may wear high heels and a skirt but the eerie silence from ex-leader Alex Salmond proves she eats her partners alive” (published in the *Sun* newspaper on 20 April).

Lilleker and Jackson report that some predicted “it would be the first social media election” (which has been claimed of each election for over a decade). They do report that social media now matches television when it comes to consuming news, but results from several polling organisations suggest it is certainly still far behind in terms of voter receptivity. This election’s debates must have been a nightmare for the television channels: from the disruptive approach taken by Number 10 to the demands by the Greens and their fellow rivals Labour, the parties covered the spectrum. For Ofcom, it must have been a nightmare as well. As an aficionado, I feel that the format was neither particularly informative nor confrontational in way which would have provided impetus for the “don’t knows” to vote or floating voters to switch, and little data were presented to convince me otherwise. Perhaps the most damning statement about the British electors’ attention to the election is provided by Ginnis and Miller, who contrast the 2.6 million different people who follow any MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT (MP) at all on Twitter with Russell Brand’s (at the time of the General Election) 9 million followers.

NOTE

1. See <http://iop.harvard.edu/get-inspired/political-conferences>

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CHAPTER 2

Introduction

Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson

Several times during the 2015 campaign, David Cameron brandished a memo left by the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury Liam Byrne for his eventual successor David Laws in the Coalition formed after the 2010 election. It read: ‘I’m afraid there is no money. Kind regards—and good luck!’. Intended as a joke, Byrne’s note came back to haunt him years later when it became a recurrent prop on the stump. The prime minister used the letter to emphasize how his government’s stewardship of the economy had, he repeatedly asserted, brought the country back from the brink. A young Cameron had learned the lesson of losing financial credibility during his formative years as an aide to the then Conservative Chancellor Norman Lamont during the 1992 so-called Black Wednesday crisis. The legacy of this catastrophe proved long lasting. Cameron was determined to revive memories of the 2008 crash and thereby subject his

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principal opponents to the kind of the adverse scrutiny the hapless Lamont had encountered a generation ago. The Byrne memo provided the ideal opportunity for the Tory leader to exploit.

Whereas the extensive Labour manifesto for the 1983 General Election it lost so heavily has been called the ‘longest suicide note in history’, the brevity of the Byrne letter did not prevent it from gaining similar political notoriety. The Conservatives cited both documents as evidence of their opponent’s unsuitability for office. In 1983 party advertising devised by the Saatchi brothers’ agency likened the Labour manifesto to that of the Communists. In 2015 the Byrne letter played a similarly high profile role, appearing in Cameron’s hands on several occasions towards as the campaign came to a climax. It was seen at a rally addressed by the prime minister. It was read to the audience in the auditorium and at home during the final leaders’ live broadcast debate, BBC1’s Question Time Special. Cameron proved to be something of a warm-up act for rival Ed Miliband who subsequently appeared to face hostile cross-examination from some of the voters who were present.

Symbolically, the Byrne letter made a final appearance in the Conservatives’ closing Party Election Broadcast made under the supervision of Saatchis, who had once again been brought in to devise the party’s advertising. The Broadcast featured a clock being smashed as a metaphor for what would happen to the economy in the event of another Labour-led government taking office. It was another example of the Saatchi company’s philosophy of communicating a message with ‘brutal simplicity’ of thought. The Conservative campaign, stewarded by the Australian strategist Lynton Crosby, had been criticized for its remorseless focus on a few key messages at the expenses of others. But the apparent success and effectiveness of this single-minded approach were soon to be demonstrated.

Central to the Conservative campaign narrative was an emphasis on the economy and the assertion that any deviation from the now established course of austerity set out by the Coalition threatened ruinous financial consequences. This principal theme was invoked by use of the Byrne letter in combination with the other key strategic messages: the weakness of Miliband as a leader and ‘threat’ posed by the Scottish National Party. A Saatchi poster featuring the SNP’s smiling First Minister Nicola Sturgeon tweaking the strings of a diminutive Labour leader was accompanied by the copy ‘More taxes, more borrowing, more debt’. The words and imagery conveyed the essential rationale for voting Conservative. This single-minded, oft-repeated messaging appeared successful in helping frame some news media coverage

of the campaign. The economy, taxation and constitutional issues (including Scotland's future) were in the top five issues for both print and television election reporting. By contrast, the two issues promoted by Labour and UKIP, health and immigration respectively, were less prominent in terms of media coverage. Both policy areas were potentially difficult ones for the Conservatives to negotiate so their comparative marginalization was welcome from their perspective.

Reporting of the General Election was notable for the rise of several hitherto smaller parties that each came to play a more significant role before and during the campaign. What were once called 'minor politicians' emerged as prominent leaders in this race. Given the febrile atmosphere surrounding the uncertain outcome of the election, several commentators discussed the potential make-up of another coalition government. This was due to the widely expected hung parliament being predicted by the various polls taken throughout the campaign. Consequently, there was intense speculation over the potential bargaining positions of Nicola Sturgeon and UKIP's Nigel Farage. Sturgeon, in particular, threatened to overshadow Deputy Prime Minister and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg in coverage terms towards the close of the campaign. Her SNP was about to go on and eclipse Clegg's party in a very real political sense.

The unprecedented coverage devoted to the heads of what had hitherto been collectively labelled 'others' in previous elections formed a significant part of the reporting devoted to these parties in this campaign. It helped that the live face-to-face type of broadcast debates between leaders, introduced for the first ever time in the 2010 General Election, now involved seven rather than just three politicians. This important platform for the Scottish Nationalists, Plaid Cymru, UKIP and Greens combined with the particular dynamics of the campaign helped ensure they attracted more publicity for themselves. Much of this additional coverage focused on the individual leader and made the respective party campaigns even more 'presidential' than those of their larger rivals.

In retrospect, the 2015 campaign will most likely not be remembered for the issues, personalities and events briefly sketched out above and which will be explored and discussed in turn by chapters in this book. Rather perceptions of the General Election have been coloured by the drama that unfolded following publication of the exit poll at the moment the voting booths closed.¹ It forecast a very different outcome to the preceding campaign than almost all commentators had expected and polling studies had predicted. The overwhelming consensus during the months leading up to the election

had been that the race between the Conservatives and Labour was too close to call. In the event the Tories were returned to office with a small overall majority. Even this had not been predicted by the exit poll. The forecast did, however, anticipate the major upheaval north of the border and the unprecedented success of the SNP in taking all but three of Scotland's seats.

Aside from the SNP's significant electoral advance, there was also a marked increase in public support for the UKIP, an electoral force now capable of winning an eighth of the national vote. But due to the majoritarian voting system, this failed to translate into seats. The party returned only one MP for a constituency that it had already represented courtesy of having won it in a by-election. Similarly stark were the changing fortunes of the Liberal Democrats who went from being the junior partners to the Conservatives in the Coalition government that had presided for the last five years to a parliamentary grouping of just eight MPs. Elsewhere the Greens made progress, gaining a million votes for the first time in a general election. Here again the workings of the system gave the party just one MP in the single seat it already held.

This book is divided into three parts, each devoted to a major aspect of the election. If there is a common theme across them all, it is that the growing fragmentation of the public as voters and media consumers has made the democratic process a more complex and multifaceted phenomenon. In the last General Election of 2010, only three parties received more than a million votes; in 2015 six did. The major social media platforms that have existed for around a decade now engage users, and potential voters, in far more significant ways than they did in previous elections. Furthermore this campaign also saw an incredible breadth and depth in the polling undertaken which was in part by a motivation to understand the impact of the aforementioned changes in party and media systems on the electorate.

The first section considers the role polling played. Several representatives from the industry responsible for researching opinion during the campaign offer extended commentaries. Aside from the controversy over the collective failure of the research to forecast the eventual result, other issues discussed include reflections as to the ways in which the polls were conducted. Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells introduce the contributions by examining the range and nature of the work undertaken by the various pollsters during the campaign. Two chapters further extend this discussion: Murray Goot offers a comprehensive survey reviewing the history and scope of polling in the UK, and Nick Moon provides a reflective

assessment of 2015 and how the resulting controversy surrounding the polls compares with previous debates of this kind. The other contributors to the section provide similarly invaluable commentaries on a couple of topics that were salient factors in this campaign. Mark Diffley explores the impact of the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum on the result north of the border in 2015. The piece by Tom Mlodzinski and Katharine Peacock documents the use of constituency polling on an unprecedented scale in the run up to and during the General Election.

The next part of the book turns to the parties themselves. Separate chapters by key strategists responsible for helping to manage the rival efforts offer unique insights into the conduct of the election. Given their centrality to the campaign, accounts are also provided by leading figures from parties other than those previously regarded as ‘the major three’. The interview with Jeremy Sinclair provides considerable insights into the Conservative’s ultimately successful strategy and how the party developed and refined its messages during the campaign. Andrew Cooper complements this by focusing on how the party adopted various techniques, notably micro targeting via direct marketing efforts including Facebook, to communicate with swing voters. Greg Cook offers an appraisal of his party’s campaign from the perspective that despite the polls indicating a competitive race, Labour still had some way to recover from the 2010 Election. For the first time, the series includes a chapter from the Scottish National Party, undoubtedly the other main winners of the General Election. SNP strategist Kevin Pringle explains how his party benefited from the momentum created by the 2014 Referendum to make an unprecedented electoral breakthrough at Westminster through the winning of 50 seats. Studying defeat has always been an important aspect of these books, and Olly Grendon provides a wide-ranging account of the Liberal Democrats’ campaign and the various political and practical difficulties that have beset the party since it became part of the Coalition government. For the other parties, the outcome of the General Election was less clear cut. UKIP made significant advances in terms of winning the support of one in eight voters, but this spectacularly failed to translate into seats, and Gawain Towler’s piece reflects on these difficulties of sustaining the party’s campaign against established, better resourced rivals. The Greens, as Judy Maciejowska makes clear, faced a similar challenge in taking on the major parties, and her piece explores how they succeeded in gaining over a million votes for the first time in a Westminster election. But ultimately, the party was also hampered by an electoral system that returned the same single MP they already had.

The final section considers how the election was reported and represented across various media. Contributions from journalists offer insights into how the practitioners experienced the campaign. There are also commentaries from broadcasters about how they oversaw the regulation of election airtime as well as the arrangements made for the series of live leaders' debates. The section also provides detailed assessments of the roles played by newspapers, television and social media during the election. The piece by David Deacon and his colleagues confirms the extent to which other parties effectively challenged for and in part succeeded in achieving far greater exposure for themselves than in the previous campaigns. The findings also demonstrate the extent to which news media reporting of these parties focused on their leaders and, in particular, Nigel Farage and Nicola Sturgeon. There is also a thorough discussion and analysis of what issues were prioritized by journalists as well as those that were not. The chapter provides context to the rest of a section that explores all aspects of the media campaign. Michael Crick offers invaluable insights from his perspective as a broadcaster trying to report on an election in the service of his viewers but frequently encountering resistance from parties keen to fashion a certain image of themselves and their leaders to the public. The following two chapters provide welcome accounts of two other media practitioners who had extensive dealings with the parties, albeit from a very different perspective to their journalistic colleagues. Adam Baxter discusses Ofcom's role and illuminates the various considerations that inform the regulator's decisions in a complex media environment. Similarly, Ric Bailey reflects on how, compared with 2010, the protracted negotiations between broadcasters and many more parties this time produced a very different set of leadership debates in terms of both their personnel and formats. Complementing this account, Claire Emes and Josh Keith focus on how the public responded to this programming through analysing audience reactions, noting how Nicola Sturgeon was perceived to have done especially well in encounters with her rivals.

The remaining part of the section on the media campaign focuses on one of the oldest conduits for political communication, newspapers, alongside the newest in the guise of social media platforms. Joe Murphy contributes an insightful piece on his experiences as a print journalist, noting how many traditional aspects of the campaign such as press conferences had effectively been abandoned by photo opportunity conscious parties keen to shield their leaders from awkward questioning. The result was a series

of closed rally style events in which politicians were increasingly protected from scrutiny by the media not to mention curious voters. Two chapters focus on the how newspapers covered the campaign. Emily Harmer concentrates on the gendered nature of reporting, particularly in the popular press, and notes how, if they were reported at all, women featured in ways that were quite different to their male counterparts. Ivor Gaber reflects on the highly derogatory reporting of Ed Miliband by leading opinion forming right-wing newspapers and places this in valuable context by assessing how this evolved during the last parliament and also was comparable to newspaper treatments of previous Labour leaders. One criticism made of Miliband was his preparedness to be interviewed by Russell Brand for the latter's online news service, and the remaining chapters explore the role and impact of social media in the campaign. Darren Lilleker and Daniel Jackson provide a comprehensive account, noting this is the fifth election in which the Internet has featured. They explore the extent to which the rival parties, including the less well-resourced ones, used platforms such as Facebook in their campaigning. Steven Ginnis and Carl Miller discuss the impact of another social media phenomenon, Twitter, on the election. They note how, having become a potentially important forum for political dialogue, the medium serves as a useful conduit whereby less well-known politicians emerged as prominent representatives of their parties.

NOTE

1. There are a number of other worthwhile books that discuss and analyse the General Election. These include the classic 'Nuffield study' *The British General Election of 2015* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan) co-authored by Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh and based on copious interviews with key insiders. The book provides an exhaustive account of the events leading up to and during the campaign. Other academic studies include *Britain Votes 2015* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) edited by Andrew Geddes and Jonathan Tonge. This collection features chapters on the parties and campaign along with substantial analysis of major policy areas debated during the election. *Explaining Cameron's Comeback* (London: Indiebooks) co-authored by Bob Worcester, Roger Mortimore, Paul Baines and Mark Gill provides a psephological account of the election using Ipsos MORI data to explore voter perceptions of the campaign, parties and leaders among other things. *Political Marketing and the 2015 UK General Election* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) is a collection edited by Darren Lilleker and Mark Pack looking at different aspects of strategic communication during

the campaign. Two useful reports were also produced offering a range of commentaries and further analysis of the campaign: Daniel Jackson and Einar Thorsen (eds.) *UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign* (Bournemouth: Bournemouth University in conjunction with Political Studies Association, 2015); and Martin Moore, *Election Unspun: Political parties, the press and Twitter during the 2015 UK election campaign* (London: Media Standards Trust, 2015). There are also journalistic accounts including Nick Robinson's *Election Notebook: the inside story of the battle over Britain's future and my personal battle to report it* (London: Bantam Press, 2015). Two other books focused on the major parties' efforts: Tim Ross' *Why the Tories Won: the Inside Story of the 2015 Election* (London: Biteback); and Iain Watson's *Five Million Conversations: How Labour lost an election and rediscovered its roots* (London: Luath Press Ltd., 2015).

PART I

Part I: Polling

CHAPTER 3

The Polls and Their Context

Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells

The opinion polls have always been one of the strands of the election story covered in the *Political Communications* volume, partly because they are one of the topics on which more can be learned by having the practitioners tell their own story than by relying solely on analysis from outside, but also because the reporting of poll findings is such an inherent part of the media coverage of a modern election, and perhaps a major element in the way the voters perceive that election, that any study of the political communications in the campaign would be conspicuously incomplete without them.

Seldom, however, has the need to understand their role and the way they were conducted been as obvious as in the 2015 election. There were more polls than ever before. There were substantial numbers of constituency polls as well as national polls. But above all, there was an impression that the entire agenda of the election campaign was dependent on what the polls were saying. When their message turned out to have been apparently misleading, so that—far from the result being close between Labour and

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the Conservatives—the Conservatives were well ahead, understanding the extent of their influence and the reasons for the error in the voting predictions became central to understanding the election as a whole.

We need make no apology, therefore, for including a section on polling that is perhaps even more copious than its predecessors. Perhaps we should apologise for being unable to explore in detail the reasons behind the error in the polls, but that is to be the subject of a comprehensive report by a team of experts led by Professor Pat Sturgis, which will be published after this volume is due to be delivered to the publisher, and we would not feel justified in delaying publication of the rest of the material until the conclusions of that enquiry team could be properly digested and tested. Nor would it have been profitable to include speculation on the subject that will possibly be obsolete as soon as the Sturgis report is available. We therefore encourage our readers to seek out that report, and any responses to it that are published, acknowledging that without it our coverage of the polls in the 2015 election is unavoidably incomplete. However, we have asked Nick Moon, without treading on any of the enquiry's toes, to put the error in the polls into historical and political context, and to discuss some of its implications. In other chapters, Tom Mludzinski and Katherine Peacock discuss constituency polling, Mark Diffley considers the polls in Scotland and Murray Goot reminds us that there is much more to polling than the measurement of voting intentions, with a systematic survey of the many other subjects on which the voting public was polled during the election campaign.

But one other topic worthy of discussion, much taken-for-granted and perhaps much misunderstood, is the context in which polling takes place in Britain today—who polls and why, how their findings are disseminated and what this may mean for understanding the role of the polls in 2015 and in the future. Understandings of British polling may perhaps be distorted through the mirror of comparison with other countries where procedures and the polling market, to say nothing of the prevailing culture, are very different. Many of the criticisms that the polling industry receives, both from those in Britain and from elsewhere in the world, are sometimes based entirely on false premises and misunderstandings. This chapter therefore sets out to clear away some of the undergrowth.

The British polling industry and the context in which it operates has changed almost unrecognisably since the *Political Communications* series was begun in 1979, and even since 1992, the last election at which the apparent failure of the polls to predict the outcome was an important

talking-point. It is easy for those within the industry to take many of these changes for granted, and yet they may not be fully appreciated by other observers. The most recent detailed book-length accounts of the British polling industry (Worcester 1991; Broughton 1996; Moon 1999) were published in the last century. Since then, the situation has been entirely revolutionised, not least by the increasing role of the Internet, the impact of which has operated in several different ways. Most obviously, the physical means by which polls are conducted is different: as recently as 1992, most of the final election polls were conducted face-to-face, in street, with pen, paper and the iconic clipboard; now the majority are conducted online and the remainder by telephone. The number of polls published, and the number of polling companies conducting them, have both risen dramatically, in part because of the way online polling has lowered entry costs into the polling market; nor is it simply a growing market, for of the five companies that polled during the 1992 general election, only two now continue to publish political polls regularly. The structure of the British media market, which sponsors almost all the published polls, has also been revolutionised in the last quarter-century, and the relationship between pollsters and newspapers has changed with it. The decline of print means newspaper budgets have far less money to spend on commissioning polls, yet 24-hour rolling news, newspaper websites and social media mean there is an ever greater appetite for content. Moreover, the Internet has changed the way in which poll findings are disseminated, ending the virtual monopoly in distribution that was once held by professional journalists. These changes have had both positive and negative effects.

THE NATURE AND NUMBER OF POLLS

The change in survey mode is the clearest difference with past practice, and some of its implications are obvious, but nor should the possible significance of other more subtle developments in methodology necessarily be discounted. It should be understood that these changes represent a choice by polling companies and their clients. The face-to-face quota sampling approach that was used in the 1980s is still viable, and is most notably still used for Ipsos MORI's monthly Issues Index, which remained face-to-face when the rest of Ipsos MORI's political polling transferred to the telephone, because it was felt that the change in questioning mode would be too disruptive to the continuity of the data. It has not been used for regular voting intentions for Great Britain since TNS moved from face-to-face to online

polling in 2010, and all polls from which voting intentions were published during the 2015 campaign were conducted by either telephone or online.¹ Several of the companies have, at one period or another, simultaneously used different methods for different types of political poll or for polls in different circumstances, and although some of the newer entrants to the market specialise entirely in online research, all of the companies whose polling has been mainly by telephone have also conducted at least some political polling online, although not all have used online surveys for published voting intention measurements.

As Table 3.1 shows, so far as the final “prediction” polls are concerned, 2015 was the first election at which online polls clearly predominated, there having been a roughly even split between online and telephone polls in 2010. While it is not within our remit to speculate upon whether the necessary methodological differences between the two types of poll have any relevance to understanding the accuracy of their election predictions, it is perhaps appropriate at least to outline what those differences are, and how both are different from the face-to-face polls that once predominated.

The most obvious difference is in sampling. In telephone and face-to-face sampling, the pollster selects who is to be approached for interview.

Table 3.1 Numbers of published polls of national voting intention, 1992–2015

| Year | Final prediction polls | | | | Campaign polls Polls in year before campaign/dissolution | | | | Total | Per week |
|------|------------------------|--------------|-------|--------|--|-------|----------|-----|-------|----------|
| | Total | Face-to-face | Phone | Online | New entrants | Total | Per week | | | |
| 1992 | 5 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 58 | 14.0 | 131 | 2.5 | |
| 1997 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 62 | 10.3 | 153 | 2.9 | |
| 2001 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 32 | 7.7 | 88 | 1.7 | |
| 2005 | 6 | 0 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 64 | 15.4 | 87 | 1.7 | |
| 2010 | 12 | 1 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 95 | 22.9 | 231 | 4.4 | |
| 2015 | 11 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 4 | 92 | 17.4 | 506 | 9.7 | |

Source: Calculated from the list of polls collected by Mark Pack (www.markpack.co.uk). “Final polls” include all those known to have been published and making a prediction, with fieldwork wholly in the last week of the election (i.e., after Sunday); it includes some not carried by the news media where the publication of the figures has been verified. Before 2015, the campaign is reckoned as beginning on the day the election date was announced; in 2015, on the day Parliament was dissolved.

With online polling, there is no internet equivalent of a telephone directory or street listing, so, typically, a panel of volunteers is first recruited and members of that panel can then be chosen to take part in each individual poll. Most of the major online polling companies have their own proprietary panels (e.g., YouGov, PopulusLive and ICM's Newvista), although there are also companies such as Toluna and ResearchNow who recruit and manage panels in order to provide sample to research companies, and smaller online companies will buy in sample from a provider. Participants generally receive a small incentive for taking part in an online poll, but not for a telephone or face-to-face poll.²

With all of these interview methods, quotas may be used in the selection of participants to make samples representative. With an internet panel, a large amount of information will normally be available from when the panellist first registered or from previous interviews which is used in selecting those who will be invited to take part; on the telephone or face-to-face, assuming a fresh sample is being used,³ this information must be collected during the interview and there is a practical limit to how many controls can be imposed without making the interviewer's job of finding valid interviewees impossible.

The interview process is also different, of course. In a telephone interview, every question must be read aloud to the interviewee, whose response is then recorded by the interviewer. Online, the participant reads the question for himself or herself on the computer or phone screen and keys in a response, usually by selecting one or more options from the list provided, although it is possible to provide for free-form answers to be typed instead. Face-to-face polls can use either approach or can mix them: most questions will be read out, but written lists of possible answers can be shown instead of reading out the options, and the respondent can be asked to answer privately by, for example, passing over the interviewer's laptop or tablet to enter the answer for themselves. In political polling, these differences have particular relevance for the voting intention question. In 1992, all the polls asked voting intentions unprompted, in other words without suggesting a list of possible parties for whom the respondent might vote. Almost by necessity, online polls offer a list of parties for respondents to choose from, and telephone polls have chosen to do the same: the names of the bigger parties are read out but not those of more minor parties. (This raises issues, of course, of where the line between major and minor parties should be drawn; pollsters faced the decision during the Parliament of when and if it was appropriate to "promote" UKIP to the list of main parties.)

The growth in the number of companies conducting polls is obvious from the table (and is perhaps slightly under-stated by it, since there are other companies that have published polls at one time or another in the last few years without venturing upon an eve-of-poll “prediction”). But what is even more unprecedented is the turnover. Before 2001, the last new company to begin publishing eve-of-poll surveys was, technically, ICM, whose first poll was in 1992, but as ICM had been formed by the former political research team of Marplan, and took over Marplan’s polling contracts, the last entirely new entrant was Audience Selection in 1983. In the four elections from 2001 onwards, a total of 15 different companies published eve-of-poll predictions for the first time; some lasted only for a single election, others are now established in the market.

And, even more obviously, there are many more polls than there used to be. Ivor Crewe complained (Crewe 1986) of “saturation polling” in 1983, when 49 polls were published during the campaign; in 2015, the number was 94. But while the number of polling companies and the number of final polls is much higher than was once the case, there was no escalation between 2010 and 2015: 12 companies produced “predictions” in 2010, 11 in 2015. Nor, despite the apparent impression that 2015 represented a new level of saturation polling during the campaign, was the number of polls in the weeks leading up to the election any higher: with 94 polls, compared to 95 spread over a shorter campaign period in 2010, the number of polls per week was in fact a little lower. But perhaps the impression that the coverage made was deeper.

As Murray Goot mentions in his chapter, this weight of polling was spread relatively evenly through the campaign period, rather than rising in a crescendo during the final few days as happens in some other countries, but then this has always been the case. Almost all the pollsters who will produce a final prediction poll are publishing polls regularly throughout the campaign. It is interesting to note that while the total number of polls during the campaign is higher than it used to be, the number of polls per pollster is if anything a little lower. In 1997, with the market presumably a little depressed by scepticism about the polls following the mispredictions of 1992, 5 pollsters still produced 10 polls a week during the campaign, or an average of 2 each; in 2015, the average was only 1.6 polls per pollster per week. Moreover, that figure is misleading because of YouGov’s daily polling: 35 of the 2015 polls were YouGov’s, with an average of 1.1 polls per week by each of the other 10 pollsters.

But while the number of polls published during the election did not increase in 2015, there was a dramatic increase in the level of “peacetime” polling, with more than 500 voting intention measurements published in the 12 months before the start of the election campaign, double the number before the 2010 election, which was itself almost three times as high as the number in 2004–2005. Again, YouGov’s five polls a week are the biggest component to this, but there are now a number of pollsters producing several polls a month. This is largely an impact of the move to online polling and the consequential reduction in the cost of polling. The costs of conducting a poll by telephone or face-to-face grow with the time taken to conduct each interview—adding voting intention onto a regular telephone survey means paying for the extra time it takes an interviewer to ask that question a thousand times, adding voting intention onto a regular online survey has minimal marginal costs. Apart from the self-funded polls from Lord Ashcroft, the polls publishing more than once a month were all conducted online.

To allow consistency of measurement, the figures in the table are based entirely upon publication of national voting intention figures, which are regularly logged by various observers and easy to define. But although it is a common practice, it is an error to regard “opinion polls” as consisting of nothing but measurements of voting intention. As Murray Goot’s chapter amply demonstrates, voting intentions are only a very small part of what is measured during election campaigns, although certainly they receive attention in the media coverage out of all proportion to their volume. The same is true of the polling between elections, in which a wide range of political topics are covered in the same polls that include the voting intention questions; this includes both the regular tracking of various other political indicators and ad hoc questions on the issues of the day. In these polls, one would imagine the reporting must concentrate less obsessively on voting intentions than may once have been the case—when a newspaper carried one poll a month, the voting intentions could represent an important reference point in their political reporting, but with a daily poll, the fascination of the “horserace” must pall when the election is months or years away.⁴ Yet this has dangers of its own: if voting intentions are headlined only selectively, when they seem to be newsworthy, the probability is that movements in the figures will receive more attention than stability, and since “rogue polls” are unavoidable, the risk is that it is the inaccurate polls that will gain the attention and the accurate polls that will be ignored. This is not a new problem—see Crewe’s three propositions about poll reporting, first prompted by the 1979 election (Crewe 1982, 1986)—but it may be exacerbated as the number of published polls increases.

Concentrating on representative national polls, whether of voting intentions or covering other aspects of the election, is still only to look at part of the picture. In our 2010 volume, we dwelt at length on the polling to pick the “winners” of the leaders’ debates; in 2015, there was similar polling, but it made less of a splash, perhaps inevitably as a seven-leader face-off was never likely to produce an outright victor. Likewise, as in 2010, there was other background research for the broadcasters—such as the “worm”—to help their reporting, especially of the debates (Claire Emes and Josh Keith discuss some aspects of this in Chapter 19). But other types of polling, by contrast, received much more attention in 2015 than previously. There have always been regional polls, constituency polls, polls in marginal constituencies, polls of subgroups of the electorate (first time voters, for example, or women), but they have tended to be mostly a subsidiary part of the story. In 2015, because the fortunes of the SNP, the Liberal Democrats and UKIP were all essential parts of the main election narrative and could not be fully tracked through their national vote shares, the Scottish polls and constituency polls assumed much more importance. Mark Diffley (Chapter 5) and Tom Mludzinski and Katherine Peacock respectively (Chapter 6) consider these in more detail, and Nick Moon (Chapter 4) also discusses the implications of the constituency polling, but we should make the point in our overview that the extraordinary number of published constituency polls was perhaps the biggest novelty of 2015. The bulk of these were conducted before the campaign proper, so perhaps had not the same potential for guiding tactical voting as those in 1997 which Nick Moon recalls, but clearly had the potential for impact on the election agenda, especially in buttressing the assumption that the Liberal Democrats were likely to save many more of their seats than they eventually did. The largest numbers of these constituency polls were by Lord Ashcroft, but there were also polls commissioned by Alan Bown, a UKIP donor, and a good many Liberal Democrat private polls. (Generally, field-work for these polls is carried out by one of the professional polling companies, but the party takes full responsibility for poll design and analysis of the data, and retains the right to decide whether or not to publish the results or even to admit the poll’s existence.) The inclusion of a significant number of the parties’ private polls in the flow of polling information is another new departure for 2015. It is known that the Liberal Democrats conducted many more of these polls than they released ([Wintour 2015](#)), which naturally raises the suspicion that those which the parties published may not have been representative of the whole.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE POLLS AND THEIR MEDIA SPONSORS

The polls cannot be understood without understanding the relationship between the pollsters and their media clients, which has itself been undergoing a process of change, partly because of changes in the media landscape. Polls do not exist in isolation—the purpose of conducting them is to see them published, and therefore the nature of the polling inevitably reflects in great degree the topics on which the journalists see value in writing. Clearly, the preference of the media in modern British elections is to give great weight to reporting the “horserace” and other elements of campaigning process, much less to campaign substance and to an informative function that provides the voters with information and analysis on policies, on candidates or questions of principle. Unsurprisingly, their use of polling information reflects that news agenda, above all in concentrating on the question of who is going to win (and, as a subsidiary question, why). These news values presumably reflect perceptions of the content that viewers or readers most want to consume; reasonably enough, the balance is more towards the informative and educative from the broadcasters, who must temper their adherence to market forces to meet the requirements of public service broadcasting, and television’s coverage of the polls is concentrated much less upon headlining voting intentions than is that of the press. Nevertheless, analysis shows that even at its lowest point, the fifth week of the six-week campaign, 29% of all broadcast bulletins about the election mentioned opinion polls, and in the final week, this rose to 72% (Beckett 2016: 294).

The role of the polls as essentially a part of the news reporting of an election is an important one to understand—they are not in competition with the academic election studies to provide a comprehensive analysis of every facet of electoral behaviour. As the focus of the polls is on those aspects of the election which the media are interested in reporting, they will therefore occasionally be trivial or offbeat (the media often see part of their role being to entertain as well as to inform), and they are unlikely to tackle subjects of such complexity that the journalist would have difficulty conveying the findings or their implications to the audience once the poll was complete. For the scholar, the campaign manager and indeed the interested and numerate general reader, much of the greatest value in survey results comes not from the simple weight of numbers holding different opinions, but from seeing who holds them, and how they correspond

with other opinions—it is here that causes can be detected and perhaps the consequences of different choices by the parties and candidates can be surmised. But this is very heavy-going for the average newspaper news article, even in the quality press. Most reports confine themselves to the “topline” figures from the various questions, or at most distinguish between the opinions expressed by supporters of the different parties or members of different demographic groups, details that can be read off directly from the pollster’s computer cross-tabulations. (Nor are some reporters nearly as punctilious as they should be in considering whether apparently newsworthy differences are statistically significant.)

It might be added that the press concentration upon the “horserace” is not purely driven by the decisions of the editors. The flourishing communities of online enthusiasts who populate the PoliticalBetting and UKPollingReport blogs have access to all the published data from the various pollsters, but the vast majority of their comments concentrate upon the voting intention polling—especially in the run up to the election itself—with questions of other types sometimes called in evidence to support interpretations of the voting figures but much more rarely discussed as interesting in themselves.

The influence of the news agenda on the content of the polls is a constant, but other aspects of the relationship between media and pollsters are changing. In a more competitive media market, with online publications as well as newspapers eager to cover the cut and thrust of politics, it is probably easier than it ever was for pollsters to find clients—but finding paying clients prepared to pay the full going rate can be another matter entirely. Newspapers, even quality newspapers, no longer see it as an imperative to have a contract with a polling company to provide regular polls throughout a parliament and an exclusive prediction on election morning.

Twenty-five years ago, the quality press all had steady contractual relationships with a polling company. The *Daily Telegraph* had published Gallup polls since the demise of the *News Chronicle* in 1960, MORI polled for the *Times* and *Sunday Times*, Harris for the *Observer*, NOP for the *Independent* and ICM for the *Guardian*. Moreover, many of the tabloids also frequently commissioned *ad hoc* polls. By 2015, only two of the main daily broadsheets had regular pollsters—ICM’s relationship with the *Guardian* continued, and YouGov conducted some polls for *The Times* as part of their contract with NewsUK. The *Independent* commissioned regular polling from ComRes until early 2015, when the pollster moved to the *Daily Mail*.⁵ The *Telegraph* and the *Financial Times* commission no regular polls at all.

Without revealing any confidential commercial details, it is not exactly a secret that, on the whole, the press do not pay extravagantly for the opinion polls they publish these days: few if any pay, or would be prepared to pay, nearly as much for a political poll as they would be expected to pay for market research from the same company on an equivalent scale. (It follows, incidentally, that any suggestion that it ought to be economically viable for the pollsters to adopt more costly methods because the newspapers would pay more for more accurate polls is a nonsense.) Butler and Pinto-Duschinsky writing about the 1970 election estimated that “A national quota sample of 1000 interviews must cost a newspaper £1000” (Butler and Pinto-Duschinsky 1971: 176); it is a safe bet that no newspaper paid anything remotely approaching the inflation-adjusted equivalent of that (a little under £15,000) for a single poll in 2015.

The parliament also saw far more regular voting intention polls conducted without a client than was ever the case in the past. If 20 years ago it was unusual to find a serious newspaper that did not commission regular opinion polls during an election, it was equally unusual to find an opinion poll that had not been commissioned by a client. This is no longer the case. As well as Lord Ashcroft’s polls, where he was essentially his own client, Opinium published regular polls without a client from 2010 until securing a contract with the *Observer* in 2012, TNS published regular voting intention polls on their own account, and from early 2013, Populus published twice-weekly voting intention polls without a client. The balance between the newspapers and the pollsters appears to be shifting over time: newspapers may no longer be in the financial position to commission regular polls, but the changes wrought by the internet mean polling companies may no longer need the newspapers in quite the way they once did.

So why are the polls conducted at all? Because their value to the companies that conduct them is not restricted to the price which they charge their clients. It would almost be true to say that in Britain, there is no such thing as a “polling company”: with the exception of Lord Ashcroft, all of the companies conducting political opinion polls in Britain do so as part of a wider survey research business. It represents a relatively small part of their turnover—for the biggest companies, such as Ipsos MORI and TNS, it is a minuscule proportion—but a much bigger part of their public profile. Undoubtedly, there is an element of corporate social responsibility, a belief that publishing good polling in the news media provides a valuable public service that contributes to the democratic process, during

elections and at other points in the political cycle—and indeed such a purpose was in the mind of George Gallup when he invented opinion polling (see Chapter 7) and of his acolyte Henry Durant when he introduced the Gallup method to Britain (Roodhouse 2013: 225). Political polling is also of personal interest to many of the companies' research staff—and, for that matter, to the interviewers of the companies that still use them—and no doubt helps recruitment and retention of personnel who are invaluable to the companies' other work. But by far, the polls' most valuable function to the companies that conduct them is advertisement. It is their shop window, easily the most visible part of their business, their opportunity to make their name known and demonstrate their competence to customers and potential customers; moreover, familiarity of the company's name plays a valuable role in persuading members of the public to take part in all manner of other research projects. The corporate reputation of most of the companies that publish polls regularly is built primarily on their polling, and they are generally far better known to the public than are their competitors who confine their activities to market research.

Because the whole purpose to the polling company is to demonstrate the quality of its research and to promote the wider research industry, credibility is the one overwhelming aim; no pollster has any incentive whatever to do anything except be as accurate as possible. No pollster is beholden to any of the political parties, or has any conceivable motive to produce results that favour one over another, as can sometimes be the case in other countries for small companies whose business consists entirely in political polling. The existence of dedicated Democrat and Republican polling companies in the USA is something that could not happen in the UK. There is simply not the money available to make it a viable business. Nor do polls manipulate their results to suit the political preferences of their newspaper clients.⁶

Lord Ashcroft's position is rather different from that of the other polling companies. The former Conservative Party treasurer began by commissioning polls from YouGov and Populus in the run up to the 2005 election, which he used as the basis of a published analysis of the reasons for the Conservatives' defeat, *Smell the Coffee: A Wake-Up Call For The Conservative Party* (Ashcroft 2005). More recently, he has designed and published polls under his own name (with telephone fieldwork carried out by an unidentified research agency), both at national and constituency levels. These are not commissioned by or exclusive to any media outlet, and the (very considerable) cost of national polls most weeks and some 200

constituency polls is presumably met out of his own pocket. With no wider research business to publicise, Lord Ashcroft's motives clearly differ from those of the other polling companies. He offers this explanation on his own website:

Why do I do it? Several reasons. The interaction between politicians and voters is fascinating in itself. I like to offer new evidence as to how voters see things, and to provoke discussion and debate.

And if it doesn't sound too pompous, there is an element of public service in keeping politicians on their toes. (Ashcroft n.d.)

He adds that while he is a Tory, his polling is intended to be impartial. The Ashcroft polls are professionally designed and conducted, and while they seem to have been inaccurate in 2015, they were no more so than any of the others, with which they were broadly in line. They have given no reason for anybody to be suspicious of his bona fides, and he has widened the polling agenda by funding its expansion beyond the subjects of immediate interest to the newspapers, which must be a positive development.

HOW POLL FINDINGS ARE DISSEMINATED

The arrival of the internet has had impacts on the polling industry that go far beyond offering a new way in which polls can be conducted. One very significant development is the creation of new channels for the pollsters to disseminate their findings, rather than being almost totally reliant on newspaper coverage.

Naturally, all the polling companies have websites, and details of their polls are generally posted there at or very soon after their initial release. This is a much more effective method of dissemination of the information than was available in the past. In the 1980s, most of the main pollsters produced regular newsletters which gave some details of their polls, but these were circulated mainly to subscribers (who would have included some libraries); other interested members of the public were reliant on the much-skimpier detail published in the client newspapers, or would have had to write to the company for further information. Detailed computer tables of the data were produced for internal and client use, and would usually be provided on request at cost to anybody else taking an interest, but were rarely formally published and so would remain (if at all) in company archives rather

than ever reaching the public domain. The detailed respondent-level data from each survey, once stored on punch cards but later in electronic format on computer tapes or disks, were sometimes deposited for academic use at the Data Archive but otherwise rarely saw the light of day once the necessary outputs had been produced. (Until software that allowed such data to be processed on desktop computers came to be available in the early 1990s, even the researchers running the polls would rarely have had hands-on access to the raw data, relying instead on working second-hand through their specialised data processing staff who operated the mainframe computers.) Today, the computer tabulations—showing responses to each question broken down by various demographic and other classifications—are freely available from the company website within (at most) 48 hours of the poll’s results being released. (As discussed below, this is one of the obligations on members of the British Polling Council). The detailed data sets are much less frequently published, but will at least be available to the researchers who conducted the poll, and can often be provided for further research after the event. The post-election enquiry into the failure of the polls at the 1992 election had to rely entirely upon scrutinising topline findings and tabulated cross-breaks from the various polls; for the 2015 enquiry, the team was provided with the full dataset for several polls from almost all of the pollsters (including both of our companies, Ipsos MORI and YouGov), allowing far greater scope for investigation and incidentally dispelling any suspicions that the published voting predictions did not reflect the data collected in the polls.

Of course, awareness of the existence of a newly posted poll is not restricted to casual visitors to the company’s website. News of each new poll is now relayed in a flash through Westminster and the Lobby, and to interested observers outside the bubble, by social media and email. Flourishing communities of professional and amateur poll-watchers download and scrutinise the polls and debate them at (inordinate?) length on a number of specialised blogs (and are quick to attack if they believe a poll is inaccurate, poorly conducted or misleading—perhaps so quick that there is a danger of any valid and important criticism being lost among the other cries of “Wolf!”). The opportunity for useful media coverage is also enhanced—not only can the online editions of the national press afford to spare much more space than could their paper editions, but a whole new family of online news sources has sprung up which may also cover or even sponsor the polls; and coverage in the local and provincial

media, once of very limited impact, is now also—by the magic of Google and its competitors—universally accessible. All these factors contribute to the overall exposure that poll findings receive, and perhaps therefore magnify the influence that they have on media and public perceptions of the course of an election.

Independent websites discussing opinion polling had already emerged in the 2005 and 2010 elections. The two most prominent, UKPollingReport, founded and run by one of the authors, and Mike Smithson's PoliticalBetting, both celebrated ten years of publication in the immediate run up to the election. This election saw these joined by sites from the mainstream media with a focus upon the analysis of election data, most notably the *New Statesman*'s May2015 site. While websites dedicated to polling data will always be of relatively niche interest, readership in the immediate run up to an election is far from negligible—May2015 received 2.9 million page views from 1.3 million people in the final month before the election, UKPollingReport 6.2 million views from 1.2 million people. There was also a much greater proliferation of sites concentrating upon the collation of polling data and using it to project election results. In many ways, their success seemed to draw inspiration from the media prominence of Nate Silver's FiveThirtyEight in the USA, but in contrast to Silver's background as a baseball statistician turned election analyst, in the UK, the field was dominated by political academics. Significant sites included Elections Etc, the Polling Observatory and ElectionForecast—all run by and using models designed by professional political scientists (Nate Silver himself, having come unstuck attempting to predict the 2010 British general election, this time co-opted the ElectionForecast model as his own).

Of course, increased coverage has its drawbacks as well as its advantages. More information about polls is available, but that does not guarantee that they will be better understood. Polling data are complex; pollsters have railed for decades against low standards of secondary reporting even in the serious press (Worcester 1991: 124–130), when the carefully weighed coverage of the expert specialist who has studied the polling data before writing his or her article is reduced to a short and frequently misleading summary by the other papers that pick it up in their later editions; and headline writers have frequently provoked wailing and gnashing of teeth by their distortions of the findings they report. How much greater is the scope for error and misunderstanding today? The subtleties of a poll's

implications and caveats in its interpretation are unlikely to be adequately conveyed in 140 characters. But this is no more true of the polls, of course, than of any other type of scientific or technical information. Caveat lector.

THE REGULATION OF THE POLLS

Concern about the accuracy of the polls in 2015 and the possibility of their having influenced voters has raised once more the question of legal regulation of polls or restrictions on their publication during elections, although it seems unlikely that any action will follow.

At present, there is no legal regulation of polling in Britain beyond the measures that apply to companies of any description,⁷ with the single exception of a ban on publishing “exit polls” before the end of voting (which in practice covers all reporting of how people have already voted, including any early indication of postal voting). However, most of the companies publishing opinion polls voluntarily belong to two industry bodies which require them to comply with their codes of conduct. The distinction in scope and purpose between these two bodies is not, perhaps, widely understood. The British Polling Council (BPC), founded in 2004, is probably the better known of the two, since most of its members make a point of stating in the publication of their polls that they abide by its rules. The BPC has responsibility only in relation to the publication of polls, and in particular for ensuring that the companies are transparent about their survey methodology and that full details of any poll are easily and quickly available after any findings have been published—it states its purpose as “to ensure standards of disclosure that provide consumers of survey results that enter the public domain with an adequate basis for judging the reliability and validity of the results”. This is achieved by requiring its member companies to maintain websites on which they display details of their published polls. The BPC code prevents companies from using secret “black box” methods to calculate their results and from failing to completely report question wording and similar details. It does not have any role in regulating or even monitoring the quality of polling methods, except to the extent that enforcing openness about exactly what their polls say and how they have been conducted allows scrutiny and therefore should encourage the companies to be as competent and professional as possible so as to protect their own reputations.

It is perhaps worth making the point that the BPC's jurisdiction does not extend to "field and tab jobs" where a member company conducts the interviews but takes no responsibility for poll design, analysis or reporting. This applies to all of Lord Ashcroft's polls, since Lord Ashcroft has not joined the BPC, and to many private polls by the parties such as the constituency polls released by the Liberal Democrats. As a result, very few of the constituency polls before and during the 2015 election were subject to the BPC code. But both Lord Ashcroft and the Liberal Democrats were punctilious in publishing detailed tables from their polls so that methodology and results could be scrutinised.

While the BPC does not attempt to regulate the professional standards or methodology of the companies conducting opinion polls, the Market Research Society (MRS) does—although, again, its jurisdiction extends only to its members. Most but not all of the polling companies are affiliated to the MRS or have individual members of the MRS in their senior management positions. The requirements of the MRS Code of Conduct, frequently revised and updated since it was first adopted in 1954, are not for the most part written specifically with political polling in mind. However, the requirements should force members to aspire to the highest quality in their political work as in all other areas of research. Among the mandatory requirements are that "Members must act honestly in their professional activities", "Members must not act in a way which might bring discredit on the profession" and that "Members must ensure that findings disseminated by them are clearly and adequately supported by the data". Members must also "take reasonable steps to ensure" that "data collection processes are fit for purpose" and that "participants are not led towards a particular point of view". Any complaints about the quality or methodology of political polling would therefore come within its remit. The code is enforced by the Market Research Standards Board and the Disciplinary Authority, and they have on numerous occasions adjudicated on complaints about political polls. It was the MRS which set up an enquiry into the polls after the 1992 general election; in 2015, it gave its support to the enquiry launched by the BPC.

While it was probably inevitable that a perceived failure of the polls such as that in 2015 would lead to discussion of imposing legal regulation, it is unlikely to achieve its aims. Quite apart from the impracticality of imposing any such restrictions today (it is now being perfectly possible for internet polls of British voters to be conducted from outside the UK by foreign companies and reported entirely by foreign-based media accessible

to anybody in Britain with internet access), since the polls exist in effect as part of the news reporting of the election, any such restrictions amount to a breach of the freedom of the press. The absence of polls would neither prevent the media from conveying their impression of the state of public opinion nor dampen their desire to do so. (Coverage of the Oldham West & Royton by-election in December 2015 offers a vision of elections without polls: with no polls published, the press came to a collective conclusion that Labour was in danger of losing the seat to UKIP and relentlessly conveyed this impression right up to polling day. Labour held the seat, receiving almost three times as many votes as UKIP.)

It is not the existence of polling that creates interest in the state of public opinion—it is because the media and their audiences are already interested that the polls are conducted in the first place. If the polls have influence over voters, it is because voters are interested in what other voters think or what other voters are going to do. That interest will presumably survive however adequate or inadequate are the means they have of judging it. There is no reason to suppose that legal regulation of polls will make them more accurate. A ban on polls will simply create a vacuum which will be filled by other information sources, with no likelihood that they will be more reliable. The real issue is not the imperfection of the polls in 2015, but the impossibility that they can ever expect to be perfect, and the (assumed but not proved) inability of the public to take into account the possible unreliability of the information they receive from them. And that is an issue which arises also with every other facet of political communications.

NOTES

1. The academic British Election Study still includes a large face-to-face element, but this was conducted in the months after the general election and used random probability sampling, which is extremely expensive and took several months of fieldwork. (It is probably not unrealistic to guess that more was spent on the British Election Study than on all 92 of the published campaign polls combined.) Face-to-face polling for public voting intention polls in contrast used to use quota sampling, which was cheaper and faster.
2. Incentives are often offered for longer and more elaborate face-to-face or telephone surveys.
3. Panel surveys, in which those already interviewed on an earlier occasion are re-interviewed, are also possible but have not been much used in recent elections.

4. This was a conscious consideration when YouGov introduced the daily poll they ran between 2010 and 2015. The hope was that it would make voting intention into a regular background figure in political reporting, rather than an infrequent number that was often grossly over-interpreted. In a few areas, it was successful (newspapers who produced a daily news email would quote the figures without hyperbole and the *Sun* included the bare figures in a daily graphic during the election campaign), but generally the media continued to get far too excited about the occasional rogue poll, and did not bother with those showing no real movement.
5. ComRes continued to conduct online polling for the *Independent on Sunday*.
6. Nor even do the newspaper clients systematically favour pollsters whose methods produce results in line with their predilections. (In fact since 1992, the most-consistently high findings for Conservative strength have been in ICM's polls for the left-leaning *Guardian*.)
7. Some of these nevertheless have particular relevance for the work of survey researchers, not least the laws surrounding privacy and data protection. Much of the data collected in the course of political polls, and of many other surveys, come within the legal definition of personal information, and strict rules are laid down for the collection, storage and use of this. But such considerations have always been borne in mind by researchers, and the professional protocols on respondent confidentiality, intended to offer similar protection to those asked to take part in surveys, long predate modern privacy legislation.

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CHAPTER 4

The Performance of the Polls

Nick Moon

In recent books in this series, the chapter on polling has tended to tell the story of how the polls developed during the election, drawing attention to the themes that emerged from them, leading up to the final polls and the election result. The polls could be said to have performed two main functions—informing poll users as to how people were likely to vote and explaining the main themes of the election and their impact on voters. In short, they were telling us who was going to win, and hypothesising why.

But in the case of the 2015 election, we have no choice but to start at the end and work backwards, for the pollsters had one of their worst elections ever. (I should perhaps state at this point that I had no skin in this particular game. While I have been responsible for pre-election polling for many elections, some more successfully than others, I was not involved in any polling [other than the exit poll] in 2015.)

Since polling became a mainstream electoral activity, there have been three British elections where the polls have got the result spectacularly wrong. To avoid getting side-tracked by any arguments about whether a photograph taken three furlongs from home can be said to be predictive of the result of the Grand National, I would argue that polls conducted

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only a day or two before the election have to be seen as predictions. If not, what are they claiming to be doing? (There is of course still a possibility of *very* late swing, but history shows this is very unlikely, and I address this point later on).

If we accept the argument that final polls are indeed supposed to be predictive, then the three spectacular failures of the polls were the general elections of 1970, 1992 and 2015. (It may or may not be significant that—provided we treat the two elections in 1974 as a single election year—there were four reasonably successful election years between each notable failure. At least I will not be around to worry about polling in 2040.) To recap for younger readers, we cannot ignore the fact that in all three of these “failure” elections for the polls, the fundamental picture was the same—the polls said the Tories would not form a majority government and they did. It seems improbable that this was a coincidence, and any analysis of what went wrong has to take this into account.

Having stated that the failure of the polls in 2015 means this chapter has to start at the end and work backwards, we now paradoxically need to go back even before the start of this election and spend some time examining the performance of the polls more generally, while trying to avoid making this chapter Polling 101.

One small digression is to decide what we mean by “the polls got it wrong”, or “failure of the polls”, for this is not as obvious as might first appear. I mentioned above the election of 1992—far worse than the 1970 one for the polls, and up till now generally seen as the biggest polling failure. The following election, in 1997, was generally seen as a good performance by the polls, but in fact the mean total error on the final polls on the two main parties—arguably the best measure of performance—in the 1997 polls was still one of the biggest since UK polling began. The reason why the polls were not castigated in 1997 was that in 1992, the error had a huge impact in terms of predicting who was going to win the election, while in 1997, the still-substantial error got lost in the Blair landslide.

Pollsters have to accept, as part of the territory, that how they are judged depends primarily not just on how accurate they were in predicting vote share—all they can realistically be expected to do—but also on how accurate they were in predicting the look of the House of Commons. Which is in turn dependent not just on the vagaries of seat size, differential turnout and the first-past-the-post system that make the votes-to-seats equation so difficult, but also on the closeness of the race.

Polls in the UK have tended to perform fairly well for the most part, but their apparent closeness to the actual result in most elections has tended to distract attention from the fact that they have been exhibiting bias in almost all elections, rather than the error one would ideally see instead. Although sampling errors can only really be calculated for probability samples, it has long been the norm for sampling errors to be presented for polls as if they were random samples, and so it is common for polls to be accompanied by a statement along the lines of “this poll is subject to sampling error of $+/-3\%$ ”.

For most elections, the final polls have fallen well within that margin of the actual result, but this is a merely superficial indicator of success. If the polls were exhibiting error, then half the polls would overstate the winning party and half would underestimate it: it is a characteristic of error that it is randomly distributed. But at almost every election since 1983, all the polls have been out in the same direction—strung out on one side of the result rather than scattered around it. And to make matters worse, they have in almost all cases been out in the same direction: under-stating the Conservative vote and over-stating the Labour share. The only exception was the election of 2010, when the polls all under-stated the Labour vote.

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 illustrate clearly the presence of this bias. I am indebted to Will Jennings of Southampton University who produced them (in a nice piece of symbiosis using data from my own book on opinion polling). The first shows the average performance of the final prediction polls at each election in terms of forecasting the Conservative vote share.

This shows a clear pattern of the early polls all over-estimating the Conservative vote share, but since the mid-1960s, only the 1983 election saw an overestimate of the Conservatives. There was a high degree of consistency in this bias, with seven of the ten elections since 1970 being in the band of 0 to -2 on the Conservative vote, and the four elections starting with 1997 exhibiting almost identical performances.

The pattern for Labour is not, as one might suspect, a mirror image, for the final polls have overestimated Labour at almost every election since 1955, in nine of those cases (including six of the last seven elections) by two percentage points or more.

The 2010 election had one of the lowest-ever mean errors on the total Labour/Conservative share, and bucked the long-term trend of over-estimating the Labour vote, but 2015 dashed any hopes that this might usher in a new era during which the polls, if they could not scatter around the actual result, could at least redress the historical balance by being wrong in the Conservatives’ favour for a while.

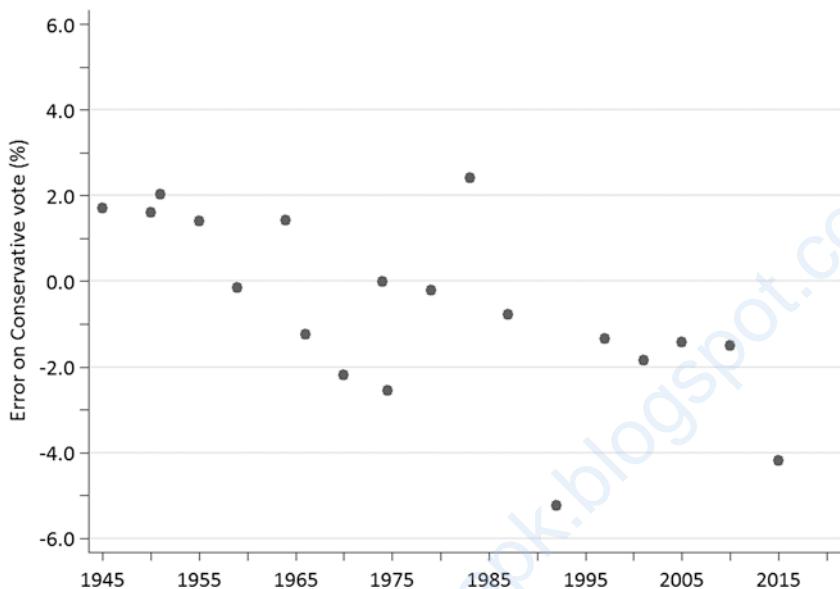


Fig. 4.1 Average poll error in Conservative vote share, 1945–2015.

Source: Sturgis et al. (2016)

It was not so much the scale of the pollsters' error that caused shockwaves in 2015 as its implications in terms of the outcome. In 1970, the polls had indicated that the election would be extremely close, and the very final poll published had even put the Conservatives ahead. In 1992, the outcome was a narrow Conservative victory rather than the narrow Labour one predicted by the polls. But these differences paled into insignificance when compared with 2015. The narrative of the 2015 polls had been very clear: the parties were effectively neck and neck, but for various structural reasons, the most likely outcome was a Labour government, either in coalition or as a minority government. Some felt that a minority Conservative government might be possible, but no-one foresaw the overall Conservative majority that resulted. (At least apart from those who said after the event that they had known all along this was bound to happen, but had kept quiet for reasons of their own.)

As in 1992, the scale of the failure of the polls led to the setting up of an enquiry, although the one set up in 2015 differed in two key respects.

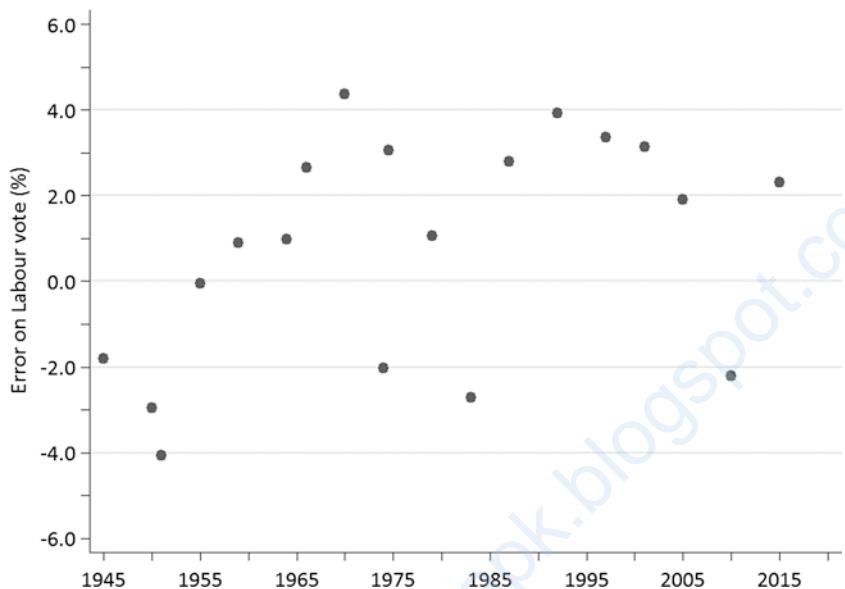


Fig. 4.2 Average poll error in Labour vote share, 1945–2015.

Source: Sturgis et al. (2016)

First, it was entirely independent of the polling industry. In my role as Secretary/Treasurer of the British Polling Council—the body set up to ensure transparency by the pollsters—and alongside BPC President Professor John Curtice and another management member, I invited Professor Patrick Sturgis to chair an inquiry. The inquiry was also supported by the Market Research Society, and its members were drawn mostly from academia, with some from market research organisations who had not personally been involved in any polling.

The other difference was that the inquiry was asked to report considerably quicker than the 1992 enquiry, which did not report until July 1994, more than two years after the election. The 2015 enquiry agreed to report by March 2016, with preliminary findings to be announced in January.

Even this admirable speed means that this chapter has been written before the preliminary findings are known, and it would be wrong for me to attempt to prejudge the report. But there are some broad points that I think can reasonably be made at this point. The first is that we can rule out

late swing as an explanation. Although one poll, conducted the day before the election but not released, did show a Conservative lead, the results of the recall surveys conducted by many of the pollsters (going back after the election to people interviewed on their final poll) showed no confirmation of this, and we have to assume that this unpublished poll was 1 of the 20 polls that we would expect to differ significantly from the average.

It is also, I believe, relevant that there is no sign of polling have stopped working altogether. Polls in the Scottish referendum did, it is true, all underestimate the size of the “No” majority, but all the final polls did predict a “No” win. Also there are plausible arguments that in a referendum the “don’t knows” tend, if they vote at all, to come down on the side of the status quo, and that, in the somewhat febrile atmosphere of the campaign, “No” voters may have felt some concerns about expressing their preference to strangers. Furthermore, the many polls that were conducted solely within Scotland during the 2015 election proved to be far more accurate than the national polls, as did those in Wales and London. The most obvious common factor about these three geographies is that the Tories did far less well in all three than in the rest of Great Britain. Finally, the polls measured support for UKIP far more accurately than they did support for Labour or the Conservatives, despite this arguably being the harder task, because of a suspicion that a significant sub-set of UKIP voters may be reluctant to reveal that support in a poll.

My own view is that people who told pollsters that they intended to vote Labour were probably less likely actually to go and vote (even though they had told the pollsters they were “certain” to vote) than were those who said they were Conservative supporters; and that, for various reasons, Conservative voters were less likely to be in poll samples in the first place. Support for this latter view comes from the British Election Study, conducted by the company I work for, GfK, using a random probability sample and achieving a 56% response rate, which had a reported vote that matched the actual Conservative lead over Labour far more closely than the opinion polls.

Before leaving the thorny topic of the failure of the polls and moving on to examine other features of them, there is one other factor that I think makes 2015 different from 1970 or 2010. This is that the narrative of the election was largely determined by the polls, and some commentators have gone as far as to suggest that the outcome of the election might have been slightly different had the polls correctly reported that the Conservatives

were headed for a position where they could form a government without needing a second coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

There never seemed a realistic possibility that Labour would be able to form a majority government, especially as it seemed clear that the SNP was going to end up as by far the third largest party in Westminster, and so the media were full of discussions about whether Labour would form a coalition with the Lib Dems or with the SNP, or would attempt to form a minority government, supported by one or more smaller parties either on a formal confidence-and-supply basis, or on a less formal ad hoc basis.

This in turn enabled the Conservatives to suggest that a Labour government would be permanently at the beck-and-call of the SNP, a line of attack that seemed to resonate with many voters.

The *Guardian*, writing shortly after the election, posited a potentially serious implication of this media obsession with possible arrangements between Labour and the SNP:

Had the forecasts been different, then the nightly news bulletins would surely have concentrated rather more on the vast spending cuts to come, and rather less on the potential role of Scottish nationalists in a hung parliament. That might have influenced the result. (*Guardian* 2015)

Other than the simple fact of the polls being so wrong, the other key distinguishing feature of the 2015 election is the sheer scale, and possible influence, of the Ashcroft Polls. Lord Ashcroft, former Conservative Party Treasurer, had conducted polling during the 2010 election, but the scale of his operation in the run up to the 2015 election was remarkable. Altogether, Ashcroft conducted constituency polls in 167 different constituencies, with some of them polled multiple times, and there is no doubt that, like the national polls, the steady flow of information from these constituency polls played a part in setting the agenda for coverage of the election.

There has never been an election with anything like as many constituency polls, and constituency polls are potentially important in influencing opinion. Under the British electoral system, it is difficult for people who wish to vote tactically—most usually to keep their least-liked party out—to know exactly how they should do so. Knowing the Lib Dems are running massively behind Labour overall is no use to an anti-Conservative voter living in a Conservative seat with the Lib Dems in second place but Labour in a strong third place in the last election. If the Lib Dems are collapsing nationally, does that necessarily mean that they have fallen behind

Labour as the challenger to the Conservatives in that particular seat? Only local polling can tell our tactical voter that.

British elections are usually determined by a small number of constituencies (because a large proportion of seats never change hands from one election to the next), and so there have always been attempts to poll in a small number of key constituencies to try to predict the result more accurately, and for the reasons just discussed, this then has the potential to influence the results of these seats.

For example, in the 1997 election, the *Observer* conducted polls in a number of key seats where it was not necessarily clear whether Labour or the Lib Dems were best-placed to unseat the Conservative incumbent. These included my own constituency, St Albans, where the polls showed that despite being a poor third in 1992, Labour were well ahead of the Lib Dems. Labour duly won St Albans, as it did several other of the *Observer's* key seats, and understandably the *Observer* claimed a degree of influence on the overall result, without going quite so far as to claim “it was the *Observer* what won it”.

This seemed a superficially plausible claim and would thus have potential implications for future elections, but Phil Cowley from Nottingham University largely debunked this by showing that the *Observer* polls basically observed shifts in opinion that had already happened, and there were in most cases no further shifts in voting intention once people had seen the results of the *Observer* poll (Cowley 2001).

There certainly are a few examples where it seems that campaign constituency polls have influenced the result by helping those who wished to vote tactically—the Bermondsey and Ribble Valley by-elections are good examples of the polls suggesting a trend that then accelerated—and it may have been the hopes that this might happen as much as the simple desire to examine the state of play that led Lord Ashcroft to conduct quite so many constituency polls in 2015.

Although they covered much of the country and many types of contests, the Ashcroft polls understandably made a particular effort to estimate the impact of UKIP—the last of the factors that made polling in 2015 different from previous elections. For the first time since the creation of the SDP, there was a new party that threatened to have a significant impact on the result.

No-one thought that UKIP would win seats in anything like the proportion of their vote share—they were always bound to be by far the biggest losers of the election in terms of share of vote turning into share of seats—but there was much speculation as to exactly which parties their

votes were coming from, and in particular whether they could cause the Conservatives to lose seats by splitting the right-wing vote.

For precisely this reason, many media clients conducted polls in key UKIP target seats, as well the Ashcroft polls looking closely at them. Because many of the constituency polls were well in advance of the election, it is difficult to form a view of how accurate they were, but it is possible to reach some broad conclusions.

Despite repeatedly saying he was not making predictions with his polls, Lord Ashcroft was happy, post-election, to claim that “In England and Wales, the constituency polls I conducted during the campaign had an average ‘error’ of just 3 per cent, and identified the right winner seven times out of ten” (Ashcroft 2015). While this is true, it ignores some spectacular failures among his constituency polls, including some conducted within a week of the election, where it is hard to argue that they should not have been able to predict the result. In North Cornwall, for example, a 1 May poll had the Lib Dems two points ahead. This was well within the margin of error of a narrow Tory victory, but in fact, the Tories won by 14 points. In similar vein, a 1 May poll in Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale had the SNP a comfortable 11 points ahead, but in fact, the Tories won by 1.5 points.

Although he wrote his own questionnaires, and played a significant role in the design of his polls, all the Ashcroft polls were actually conducted by exactly the same polling organisations who were polling under their own names, so it is not very surprising that they suffered errors in the same direction, even if sometimes on a much larger scale.

South Thanet, the seat contested by UKIP leader Nigel Farage, is a good example of the difficulties faced by those conducting constituency polling. The final Ashcroft poll, on 15 April, showed a narrow Tory lead of 34% to 32%, not dramatically far from the actual result of 38% to 32%. But a Survation poll conducted a week later showed a UKIP lead of 9%—a massive error of 15% on the gap between the two main parties.

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CHAPTER 5

The Election in Scotland

Mark Diffley

Coming just 230 days after the “No” vote victory in the independence referendum, the general election in Scotland was fought in the shadow of the constitutional debate that had gripped the nation and dominated political discourse for the previous three years.

In the early hours of 19 September 2014, as the referendum result began to become clear, few could have predicted the impact that the result would have on the outcome of the 2015 general election in Scotland.

Outside 10 Downing Street, the prime minister spoke of his delight at a “clear result” and his plans to make progress with enhancing the powers of the Holyrood parliament, as well as addressing the perennial “West Lothian question” through his proposed “English Votes for English Laws” legislation (BBC News 2014).

Hours later, as First Minister Alex Salmond announced his intention to step down, it may have been assumed that the parties who had backed a “No” vote would gain political capital. Instead, it soon became evident that opposite would be the case.

Our poll in late October 2014 (Ipsos MORI 2014b), the first which asked about Westminster voting intentions in Scotland since the referendum,

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provided the initial signal that it was going to be the referendum's losers that would be the election winners and vice-versa.

Every poll between then and polling day told a similar story and one which ultimately was borne out on 7 May. As seat after seat across Scotland fell to the SNP and the political map of Scotland became almost entirely yellow, it was clear that history was being made. In the end, 56 of Scotland's 59 Westminster constituencies returned SNP Members of Parliament,¹ leaving Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats with just a single MP each.

There are a number of reasons which explain this historic result, and which give pointers to the immediate political future in Scotland.

I would argue that there are at least three clear reasons for the SNP's success in the 2015 general election.

(1) The independence referendum changed everything

Our October 2014 poll signalled a sea change in support for the SNP, a fact borne out by a closer look at polling data. Between the May 2010 general election and the September 2014 independence referendum, a total of 25 polls were conducted in Scotland which asked respondents how they would vote in an immediate UK general election.

The average (mean) support for the SNP across those 25 polls was 31%, compared to 40% for Scottish Labour and 16% for the Scottish Conservatives (What Scotland Thinks n.d., b).

In the period between the independence vote and the general election, a total of 33 polls were conducted in Scotland which asked respondents how they would vote in an immediate UK general election.

In stark contrast to polls conducted before the referendum, support for the SNP soared, mainly at the expense of Scottish Labour. The average (mean) support for the SNP across those polls was 47%, compared to 27% for Scottish Labour and 15% for the Scottish Conservatives (What Scotland Thinks n.d., b).

The reasons for this are likely to be numerous, albeit linked to the independence referendum. One reason is simple arithmetic; the 45% who voted "Yes" in the independence referendum were always most likely to vote for the party most associated with support for independence in an election eight months later, giving the SNP an inherent advantage in a "first-past-the-post" election against three parties who had each backed a "No" vote.

The support gained by the SNP came mainly at the expense of Scottish Labour whose support fell from 42% at the 2010 general election to 24% in May 2015, a decline that was almost perfectly mirrored by the SNP's rise in support.

We know from focus groups we conducted immediately before the referendum among those who had switched from supporting "No" to backing "Yes" that the stance taken by the Labour Party during the referendum campaign contributed to some of that switching. It is likely that Labour lost these voters at the general election (Ipsos MORI 2014a). This research highlighted five key reasons which explained why some voters were moving to support independence late in the campaign. Part of the answer lay in the perceived positivity coming from the "Yes" campaign. But many "switchers" spoke of being "disillusioned" at how Labour, in Scotland and across the UK, had approached the campaign and had been part of what they saw as the "scaremongering" operation run by "Better Together". This clearly led to some Labour voters backing a "Yes" vote and subsequently moving their electoral support to the SNP.

It is also likely that a proportion of the 55% who voted "No" in September will nonetheless have backed the SNP in May 2015. In our polling leading up to the referendum, we regularly found that a significant number of SNP voters intended to vote "No"; for example, in our poll for Scottish Television, published on 17 September 2014, some 11% of those who had voted for the SNP at the 2011 Holyrood election were going to vote "No" the following day.

In the end, on a 71.1% turnout in Scotland, the SNP recorded 50% of the vote on 7 May, ahead of Scottish Labour on 24%, the Scottish Conservatives on 15% and the Scottish Liberal Democrats on 7.5%. This result is even more remarkable when one considers that it was traditionally Scottish Labour that has done better at Westminster elections while the SNP fare better at Holyrood.

At least for now, this no longer applies.

(2) Labour's decline in Scotland has been apparent for many years

As argued, the independence referendum undoubtedly changed the political landscape in Scotland and provided the SNP with the opportunity to make significant electoral gains at the general election.

In 2015, their gains came primarily at the expense of Scottish Labour whose vote share, as noted, collapsed from 42% in 2010 to 24%. The

speed and scale of this decline in support for Scottish Labour was certainly brought on by the referendum and the criticism from many of the party's core supporters about its staunchly pro-union stance in the campaign.

However, Labour's decline in popularity in Scotland pre-dates the referendum by many years. In truth, the party has been losing support north of the border in general elections since the New Labour landslide of 1997 and in Holyrood votes since the first election to the new parliament in 1999.

In the 16 years and eight elections conducted at a Scottish or UK level since 1997, Labour has traditionally done better at UK-wide general elections where the choice has primarily been between a Labour and a Conservative government (Fig. 5.1).

In 2015, this "tradition" was shattered. Indeed, in general election terms, the positions of Labour and the SNP almost entirely mirror one another. At the 1997 general election, Labour secured 46% of the vote in Scotland (taking 56 of the 72 seats in the process) while the SNP recorded 22% support (and 6 seats). By 2015, the roles were reversed, with Labour

Labour Vote Share in Scotland

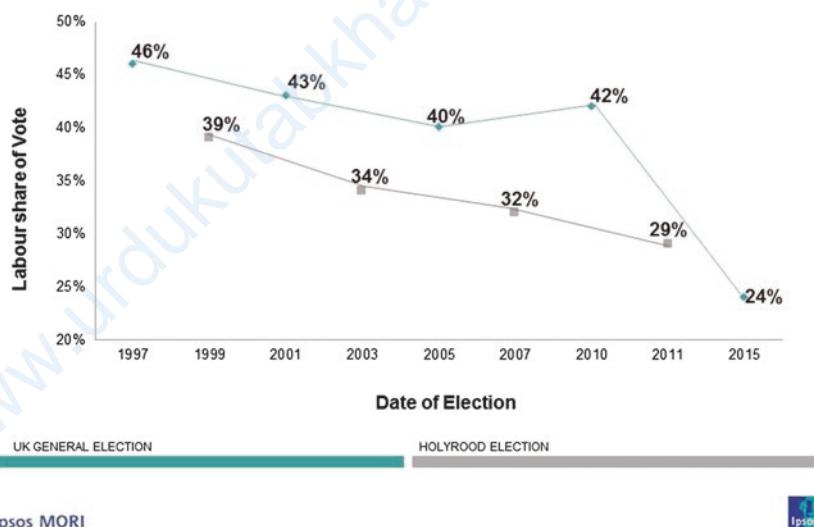


Fig. 5.1 Labour vote share in parliamentary elections in Scotland, 1997–2015

taking 24% of the popular vote, and just one of the 59 seats, while the SNP secured 50% of the vote and 56 seats.

In only one of the eight elections in Scotland since 1997 (Westminster or Holyrood) has Labour's vote share increased. That was at the 2010 general election where support rose from 40% in 2005 to 42%. This election was held when Gordon Brown was prime minister, a politician considerably more popular in Scotland than in the rest of the UK.

At the first Holyrood election in 1999, Labour won 39% of the constituency element of the vote, enough to be the largest party and lead the coalition with the Scottish Liberal Democrats, as it did after the 2003 election. Since 1999 Labour's vote share has fallen at each subsequent Holyrood election and reached 29% in 2011, 10 points lower than 1999.

The reasons for this decline in support are many and varied (Diffley 2015). They lie partly in the appeal of policies, with the SNP in recent elections putting forward a policy programme which resonates with voters and has left Scottish Labour struggling to differentiate itself. This is evident in our analysis of the 2011 Scottish Parliament election result which highlights how key SNP pledges around a Council Tax freeze and ring-fencing NHS budgets were broadly supported by voters (Holyrood 2011). A further clue in explaining Labour's decline lies in public satisfaction with the party's various leaders through this period, discussed in greater detail below.

But while these "policy" and "personality" issues have undoubtedly contributed to Labour's long-term decline, it is the impact of the 2014 independence referendum which explains the most recent and most dramatic loss in the party's popularity with Scots.

(3) The SNP has significant leadership advantages

One of the many inherent advantages currently enjoyed by the SNP, and apparent throughout the 2015 campaign, was the popularity of its leaders, particularly current First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, compared to Labour leaders in Scotland or across the UK in recent years.

At the 2010 election, then Labour leader and Prime Minister Gordon Brown enjoyed a similar satisfaction rating (48%) as the then First Minister and leader of the SNP Alex Salmond (49%).

Over the next five years, the SNP has developed a growing advantage in leader ratings. At the time of the 2011 Holyrood election, 60% of Scots were satisfied with the performance of Alex Salmond, with only 27% dissatisfied; this compares favourably to the ratings of then Scottish Labour leader Iain Gray, with whom 35% were satisfied and 36% dissatisfied.

Salmond remained Scotland's popular political leader at the time of the independence referendum and was an asset to the "Yes" campaign in the sense that his personal approval rating (then at 49%) was higher than the support enjoyed by the "Yes" campaign. And this rating was higher than those recorded for both then Scottish Labour leader Johann Lamont (40%) and then UK Labour leader Ed Miliband (18%).

By the 2015 election, this differential was even more marked. In the months following her becoming First Minister and leader of the SNP, Nicola Sturgeon received approval ratings among Scots of around 70%, the scale of which can only be matched by Tony Blair in the early years of his leadership of Labour. Indeed, her approval rating among Scots was more than double those enjoyed by then Labour leaders Jim Murphy (33%) and Ed Miliband (30%), Prime Minister David Cameron (31%) and then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg (26%) ([Ipsos MORI 2016, 1997](#)).

Electing leaders at a Scottish or UK level who can challenge the popularity of the First Minister is a key challenge for Labour. The Scottish and UK Labour leaders elected in 2015, Kezia Dugdale and Jeremy Corbyn, have not enjoyed personal approval ratings that look like meeting this challenge (Figs. 5.2 and 5.3).

In August 2015, after Kezia Dugdale had been elected and with Jeremy Corbyn heading for victory, Scots were asked whether either leader would make them more or less likely to support Labour. In each case, more voters reported being less likely than more likely. For Kezia Dugdale, 20% would be more likely to vote Labour with 23% less likely, while 23% said they would be more likely to support a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour Party compared to 34% who would be less likely.

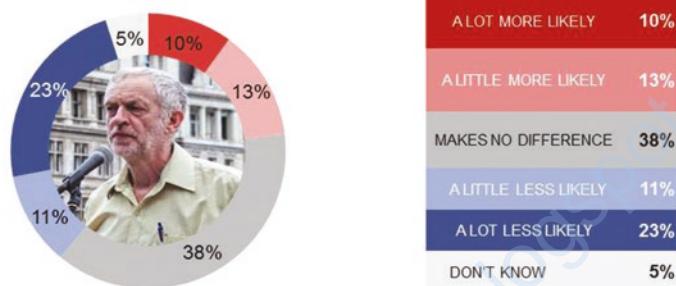
The profile of that gained/lost support for each leader is different. Kezia Dugdale was more popular among those who currently supported Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives, while Jeremy Corbyn was more likely to appeal to SNP supporters, possibly especially those who have defected to the SNP since the independence referendum ([Ipsos MORI 2015](#)).

Looking ahead, polling provides a number of pointers to what we might expect in Scottish politics in the short-term future.

- (1) The SNP is on course for continued electoral dominance

Labour- Jeremy Corbyn

AS YOU MAY KNOW, THE UK LABOUR PARTY IS CURRENTLY ELECTING A NEW LEADER. YOU MAY BE AWARE THAT ONE OF THE CANDIDATES IN THAT ELECTION IS JEREMY CORBYN. IF JEREMY CORBYN WAS ELECTED AS LEADER OF THE LABOUR PARTY WOULD YOU BE MORE OR LESS LIKELY TO VOTE LABOUR AT THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS IN MAY 2016?



Base: All. Data collected among 1,002 Scottish adults 16+, 24th - 30th August 2015

Source: Ipsos MORI Scottish Public Opinion Monitor

Ipsos MORI



Fig. 5.2 Scottish attitudes to Jeremy Corbyn, August 2015

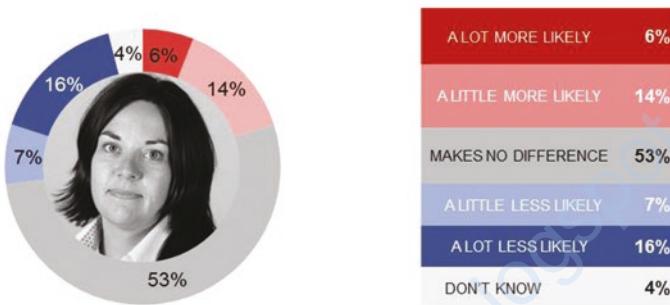
Just as polling between September 2014 and May 2015 revealed the extent of the SNP's upcoming success at the general election, so polling conducted in the wake of that election suggested continued SNP dominance.

The first 12 polls conducted in Scotland since the May 2015 general election confirmed that the SNP continued to hold a significant advantage. For example, when it comes to voting intention for the Scottish Parliament, the average (mean) support for the SNP in terms of selecting a constituency MSP was 56%, compared to 21% for Scottish Labour and 14% for the Scottish Conservatives (What Scotland Thinks n.d., c).

Similarly, these polls pointed to a convincing, if slightly reduced, lead for the SNP in terms of regional votes, to elect a regional MSP, where more parties tend to put up candidates (What Scotland Thinks n.d., a). On average from the same polls, the SNP would receive 49% of the second votes, compared to 21% for Scottish Labour, 14% for the Scottish Conservatives, 6% for the Scottish Liberal Democrats and 7% for the Scottish Greens.

Labour- Kezia Dugdale

AS YOU MAY KNOW, KEZIA DUGDALE WAS ELECTED AS THE NEW LEADER OF THE SCOTTISH LABOUR PARTY IN AUGUST 2015. DOES HER APPOINTMENT MAKE YOU MORE LIKELY OR LESS LIKELY TO VOTE FOR THE SCOTTISH LABOUR PARTY AT THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS IN MAY 2016?



Base: All. Data collected among 1,002 Scottish adults 16+, 24th - 30th August 2015

Source: Ipsos MORI Scottish Public Opinion Monitor

Ipsos MORI



Fig. 5.3 Scottish attitudes to Kezia Dugdale, August 2015

(2) The SNP remains ahead on all the key metrics

These positive voting intention figures for the SNP are mirrored when studying opinions to the key factors which political polls ask about to measure the state of public opinion.

I have already looked at public opinions of key political leaders, where the SNP has a clear advantage. The Scottish Government, led by the SNP since 2007, also enjoys a healthy satisfaction rating; in our poll of August 2015 (Ipsos MORI 2015), 62% said they were satisfied with the performance of the Scottish Government, compared to 31% dissatisfied. It is unusual for a government to enjoy such positive ratings after such a long period in office.

The other key pointer is to look at voter attitudes to policies, particularly the key devolved policies over which Scottish Parliamentary elections tend to be fought.

When voters were asked in the same August 2015 poll which party they thought had the best policies for Scotland on the key devolved areas,

the SNP again emerged with a significant advantage (Fig. 5.4). On the NHS and education, the SNP polled as much as three times ahead of Labour. On health, 48% thought the SNP has the best policies compared to 18% for Labour, while the gap on education was even wider, at 49% versus 16%. These policy leads are even more significant since they concern issues which, until recently, would have been considered natural Labour strengths.

On crime, the SNP was a little less strong, at 40%, though it remained significantly ahead of the Conservatives (15%) and Labour (14%). And on policies towards the environment, where the SNP was not seen as having the best policies, it was the Green Party ahead on 36%, compared to 28% for the SNP and 9% for Labour.

While the SNP continues to have such dominance in public opinion terms over the key devolved policy issues, it is difficult for the opposition parties to fight elections on the government's perceived competence and performance.

Which party do you think has the best policies for Scotland?

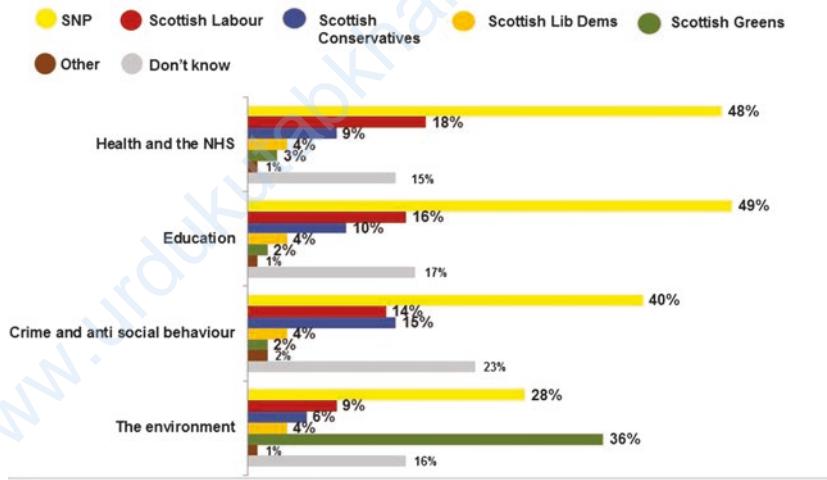


Fig. 5.4 Party with best policies on key issues, Scotland, August 2015

- (3) The Scotland Bill is unlikely to settle the constitutional position in the longer term

Looking further ahead is the issue of the constitutional arrangements between Scotland and the rest of the UK and whether there will be a second independence referendum in the foreseeable future.

Following the prime minister's speech in the early hours of 19 September, a commission headed by Lord Smith of Kelvin was established to oversee the process of implementing the devolution commitments on further powers to Holyrood, made in the latter stages of the independence referendum campaign.

The Smith Commission report was published in November 2014 (Smith Commission 2014). After the 2015 general election, the UK Parliament debated the contents of the Scotland Bill which flowed directly from the Smith Commission proposals until all elements of the legislation were agreed between the two governments.

Support for a future referendum

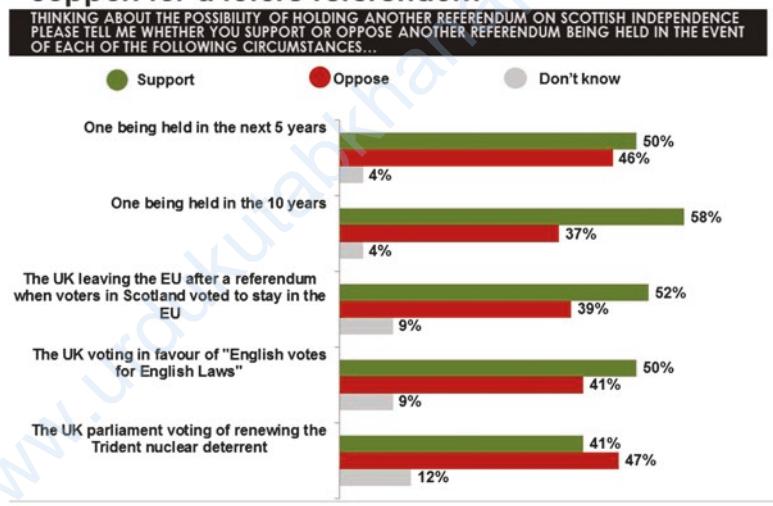


Fig. 5.5 Support for a second referendum in Scotland

While it is unclear how these new powers will be used, how popular they will be among the public and whether they will dampen enthusiasm for a second independence referendum campaign, it looks unlikely that it will be the long-term end point as far as Scotland's constitutional future is concerned.

Polling conducted in August 2015 (Fig. 5.5) highlights significant support for a second referendum, in particular among those who voted "Yes" in 2014 and/or support the SNP. Support peaks at 52% in the event of the UK voting to leave the European Union despite voters in Scotland opting to remain in.

Equally, an earlier poll, from January 2015, suggests that the new powers being invested in the Scottish Parliament are unlikely to dampen support for independence. Indeed, among those who had read or heard about the Smith Commission, more than twice as many reported that they would be more likely to vote "Yes" (27%) than "No" (12%), though for most voters (55%) it made no difference (Fig. 5.6). So it may not be the game-changer that settles Scotland's constitutional arrangements in the long term.

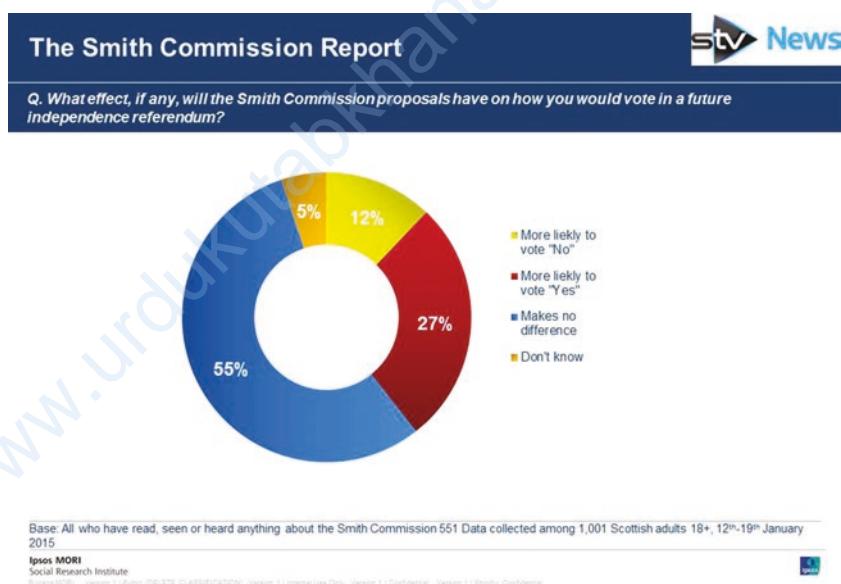


Fig. 5.6 Attitudes to the Smith Commission Report

All of this suggests that while attitudes to independence have not yet changed sufficiently to confidently predict a different result from September 2014, the issue will remain the dominant theme and the fault line in Scottish politics for the foreseeable future.

NOTE

1. At March 2016, the SNP had 54 MPs with the party whip.

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CHAPTER 6

Outside the Marginals: Constituency and Regional Polling at the 2015 General Elections

Tom Mludzinski and Katharine Peacock

As the door to Number 10 Downing Street shut behind David Cameron and Nick Clegg on 12 May 2010, the political map of the UK was being redrawn. The Conservative–Liberal Democrat Government ushered in a new era of coalition and with it came a new era of political polling.

The five years of the 2010–2015 parliament saw constituency polls (covering a single constituency or a number of different constituencies) being published at an unprecedented level. (This chapter covers only the constituency polls published by the public pollsters in their normal course of business, but it should be borne in mind that the parties' private polling also included many constituency polls, and results from a number of these—by the Liberal Democrats and by UKIP—were also released, both before the formal election campaign and during it.) The contribution of the published constituency polls to the election was significant—and different to

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the stream of national polls. Many local campaigns were given a helpful amount of (free) data on the state of the race in their constituency as well as useful pointers on key campaign metrics such as voter contact rates.

Constituency polls also helped to add insight and understanding to an otherwise complicated and often fragmented political picture at the national level. Individual constituency polls, and aggregated polls across more than one constituency, helped to shed light on just how many seats the Liberal Democrats might lose, whether UKIP could make an electoral breakthrough and just how well the SNP would do post-referendum (Scotland is covered in more detail in Chapter 5), as well as, of course, focussing on some of the key Labour–Conservative battles.

THE 2010 GENERAL ELECTION

While it is often seen as a phenomenon distinctive to the 2015 election, constituency polling did exist in 2010, albeit in a slightly different guise. During the 2010 election campaign, Populus and Ipsos MORI both conducted a series of polls across Labour-held constituencies (57 seats for Ipsos MORI and 100 for Populus), and ICM also had a poll covering 42 Liberal Democrat target seats.

The desire for this polling was largely driven by the national polls showing the Conservatives' ability to win a majority on a knife-edge. By focussing on the Labour seats that the Conservatives would need to win in order to gain a majority, these polls went beyond what the national polls could tell us and aimed to answer the key question of whether David Cameron would be walking into Downing Street after the election or not. Indeed, many of the constituencies included in these polls were thought to include the elusive “motorway man” and voters living along the M4 and M5 corridors—the key demographic of swing voters thought to hold the key to victory.

These polls took the “aggregate” approach, interviewing c.1000 people across the chosen seats, aiming for a representative sample of the combined seats, rather than individual constituency polls.

The polls of the Labour–Conservative marginals provided further evidence that the large national poll lead for David Cameron's party would likely not be enough to avoid 2010 being the first UK general election to result in a hung parliament since February 1974. For example, Ipsos MORI's final marginals poll for Reuters showed Labour and the Conservatives tied on 36%, a swing to the Conservatives of 7 percentage points, a result that would leave David Cameron on the cusp of a majority, but likely falling short (Mortimore et al. 2011).

THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTION

Fall short he did. With Nick Clegg by his side in the Downing Street Rose Garden, a new era of coalition politics began. And throughout the life of the Coalition, a number of political unknowns would emerge which made the focus on regions and constituencies greater than ever. How would the Liberal Democrats—the traditional party of protest—fare as a party of government and what would happen to their support? Following a surprise second place in the Barnsley Central by-election and winning the European elections, would UKIP become a new force in British politics, and just how well could they do? What would the fall out of the independence referendum in Scotland be on UK politics, could the SNP surge despite losing the referendum?

THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

The 2010 General Election result renewed focus on the relationship between the number of votes and the number of seats a party wins. The Liberal Democrats' seats-to-votes ratio had traditionally worked against them. As Table 6.1 demonstrates, the Liberal Democrats won a disproportionately low number of seats compared to the share of the vote won—perhaps a key driver of their support for electoral reform.

However, having formed a coalition with the Conservatives, the Lib Dems fell dramatically in the polls from 23% at the General Election to 11% by the end of 2010 and averaged around 8% in 2015. A cursory look at experience from other coalition governments suggested that junior coalition partners always face a torrid time. The nearest parallel could be found in Germany. In 2009, Germany's Lib Dem sister party (the FDP) won a strong 14.6% of the national vote, and went into coalition with Angela Merkel's larger CDU-CSU Christian Democrats (a centre-right

Table 6.1 2010 General Election results

| | <i>UK % share of vote</i> | <i>UK % share of seats in House of Commons</i> |
|--------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Conservative Party | 36.1 | 47.1 |
| Labour Party | 29.0 | 39.7 |
| Liberal Democrats | 23.0 | 8.8 |

grouping). At the following election, their share fell nearly ten points to just 4.8%, despite the government being relatively popular.

Despite the Liberal Democrats' low national showing, many of those forecasting seat projections were still predicting Nick Clegg's party to win 20–30 seats (Electionforecast.co.uk had a final prediction of 27 Lib Dem seats; Elections Etc predicted 25). These projections and predictions often sought to take into account the fabled Liberal Democrat incumbency advantage and the perceived individual popularity of their local candidates and MPs.

As a new party of government, in a position to potentially be king-makers either out of strength (who they would go into coalition with) or weakness (which party would benefit from their collapse), the number of seats the Liberal Democrats would win became a key facet of this election.

Constituency and local polling on the Liberal Democrats' position was therefore a useful guide in totting up the numbers as the parties raced to the 326 needed for a majority and the smaller parties battled to be in a position of significance in potential coalition negotiations.

THE RISE OF UKIP

The link between votes and seats won was put under further strain with the rise of UKIP. What started in 2011 with UKIP coming second at the Barnsley Central by-election led to them winning the European Election in 2014, the defection of two Conservative MPs and, crucially in this story, overtaking the Liberal Democrats in the national polls on a consistent basis.

Despite becoming the third party of British politics in terms of nationwide popularity—according to national and constituency polls—forecasting models based on uniform national swing, and other projections, saw UKIP winning no more seats than could be counted on the fingers of one hand. The Liberal Democrats however, were predicted to do significantly better.

Speculation over the threat UKIP could pose to the Conservatives and Labour, coupled with the big characters at play (Nigel Farage), sparked significant interest in particular constituencies as commentators desperately sought to shed light on the new unknown in British politics. Constituency polls were being used to answer questions such as: would Nigel Farage become an MP? Is UKIP's national support concentrated

enough in any one area to win a seat? Could UKIP win any new seats from the Conservatives or from Labour? Who would be most affected by the disruptive influence of UKIP?

For example, the ComRes/ITV News poll (mid April 2015) across ten Conservative-held UKIP target seats showed Nigel Farage's party trailing in third place. Particularly revealing was that it was in fact the collapse of the Liberal Democrats that was bolstering Labour and the Conservatives and preventing greater UKIP success. A quarter (25%) of 2010 Liberal Democrat voters said they would vote for Labour at the General Election and 21% would be voting for the Conservatives. Just 8 % said they would be switching to UKIP. A further clue to UKIP's failure to gain any new seats was the finding that just one in five (18%) voters across these seats believed Nigel Farage would make a good Prime Minister. Even among UKIP supporters only half (53%) backed their leader in this respect, perhaps suggesting that when it came to the crunch voters did not see the UKIP leader as a serious contender.

The fact that South Thanet and Sheffield Hallam were the two most polled constituencies—at least among the published polls—demonstrates that it was the attraction of the big beasts such as Nigel Farage and Nick Clegg, and the new Lib Dem/UKIP dynamic that drove significant interest in local polling.

THE MISSING “WORCESTER WOMAN” AND “MONDEO MAN”

Unlike 2010’s “motorway man” or the “Worcester woman” and “Mondeo man” used by strategists and commentators to describe key voter groups in elections gone by, 2015 had no such magic bullet. The fragmentation of party support and demographic links, and the rise of insurgent parties, meant that instead there was a greater media focus on the different aspects of the race: Labour against SNP in Scotland, Liberal Democrats against Conservatives in the South West, the “nation” of London which does not follow the wider trend, and of course the new kid on the block, UKIP.

Rather than *who*—which demographic group—would win the election for either the Conservatives or Labour, attention was drawn to *where* the election would be won or lost, and which specific seats may decide who gets into Downing Street.

LORD ASHCROFT

Any discussion of constituency polling at the 2015 General Election must also mention Lord Ashcroft. The former Conservative Party Deputy Chairman left his role after David Cameron became Prime Minister, and soon began publishing his own “Lord Ashcroft Polls”. In the year before the 2015 General Election he polled in 167 constituencies, some more than once, and throughout the course of the parliament he polled in at least nine by-elections, again some more than once. The individual constituency polls were largely conducted with a sample size of 1000, allowing for significant analysis of each specific seat and providing the media and local campaigns with a wealth of useful data. Without Lord Ashcroft’s move out of Conservative Party Headquarters into the world of public polling, single constituency polls would have been far less of a story of the 2015 General Election.

HOW THE POLLS WERE DONE

Table 6.2 demonstrates the different types of constituency polls conducted around the 2015 election.

These different types of polls serve slightly different purposes. Single constituency polls are fairly straightforward; they present a picture of what is happening in that specific seat at the time of fieldwork. The other types of polls, aggregated across a particular region or type of seat (e.g. Conservative-held marginals) are telling a broader story across a region or type of seat.

Methodologically, aggregated polls are similar to nationally representative polls. They use combined quotas and weights to reflect the entire population across the entire region or multiple constituencies rather than replicating each individual constituency. Much as any regional (sub-national) findings in a national poll should be regarded as indicative rather than representative, findings from a particular constituency within a multi-constituency poll must be read with caution.

The ComRes “battleground” polls were carefully chosen to enable ITV News to add greater detail to a multi-layered national election by digging below the national picture and telling the story of lower level, but equally important, races. By focussing on the Labour–SNP battle, UKIP’s fight against the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrat struggle and the top-ticket Labour–Conservative race, their coverage could take in all angles of the election. Similarly, Lord Ashcroft often released his single constituency

Table 6.2 Constituency polling at the 2015 General Election (approximate)

| | <i>Published</i> | <i>Carried out by</i> | <i>Method</i> |
|---------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Single constituency polls | 274 | Lord Ashcroft, ComRes, ICM, Survation | Usually c.1000 interviews per constituency |
| “Battlebus polls” | 4 | ComRes | 1000 interviews across the 40 most marginal seats held by Labour and the Conservatives |
| “Battleground polls” | 4 | ComRes | 1000 interviews across specific sets of seats: Lib Dem-held in South West, Conservative-held UKIP targets, Labour-held Scottish seats, Conservative–Labour marginals |
| Marginal seats polls | 3 | Lord Ashcroft | Aggregate of several thousand interviews across specific sets of seats, e.g. Conservative-held marginals |

polls in batches, grouped topically or regionally in order to be able to tell a more specific story, whether that be the plight of the Liberal Democrats or the rise of the SNP among others.

QUESTION WORDING

With the influx of constituency polls came scrutiny of methodology, and in particular a debate about the question wording used for voting intention data. Constituency polling was used to give a more localised picture than national polls and therefore polling organisations had to consider whether to adjust approaches in order to reflect that. The issue centred largely on how much emphasis should be given in the question to the choice between parties and how much, if any, to the identity of the candidates standing for those parties in the constituency.

National polls ask a variation of the standard question: “*If there was a general election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?*” However, in constituency polls, different questions and approaches were employed by different polling companies.

Lord Ashcroft adopted a two-question approach, asking a general voting intention to begin with and following up by prompting respondents to think about their constituency and the particular candidates standing (without

naming them). The results of both questions were published separately. The rationale behind this approach was to try to place respondents in the mindset of their local constituency, as it was argued they would be on election day itself—taking into greater consideration local factors when giving their voting intention. Lord Ashcroft explained why he decided on this approach, as opposed to prompting with candidates' names:

On balance I continue to think that when people are prompted to consider their own area and the local candidates, an MP's personal reputation should be baked into their voting decisions. ... I suspect that prompting with the candidate's name at a general election puts too much importance on one of the many factors that go into an individual's decision. (Ashcroft 2015c)

From this explanation it is clear Lord Ashcroft believed that prompting actual candidate names was giving undue prominence to incumbents. This was backed up the ComRes/ITV News poll in the South West which found that Liberal Democrat voters were most likely to say they would vote for the candidate they like best. In Lord Ashcroft's own polls of Liberal Democrat seats, the Lib Dem vote was significantly higher in all seats when respondents were asked to think about their local constituency and candidates. What is unknown is whether this two-stage approach genuinely put respondents into a polling station mindset or whether differences in their responses were a by-product of being prompted to think again before answering another voting intention question.

Lord Ashcroft was the only pollster publishing constituency polls using this two-stage approach. However, other pollsters employed other techniques to make the voting intention question more relevant to respondents' constituencies. For example, in their mid-parliament constituency polls Survation asked "Which party do you think you would be most likely to vote for in your [name] constituency?". During the campaign period, Survation also named the specific candidates standing in that constituency: this famously showed Nigel Farage with a 9 point lead in South Thanet two weeks before the election. However, just a few weeks earlier, ComRes had conducted a poll in the same constituency, also prompting with the individual candidates' names, and showed the UKIP leader in second place, one point behind the Conservatives and just one point ahead of the Labour candidate.

In ComRes's constituency and battleground polls, an introduction to the voting intention question was used to prompt respondents to think about their local constituency: "Please now think specifically about your own constituency, the issues it faces, the local MP and the different candidates. At the General Election coming up in May, would you vote Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, UKIP or for some other party?"

It is difficult to draw too many conclusions about how much of an effect these different approaches had on the poll results, as there are not enough directly comparable cases polled to make a judgement. It is also not known how other variations between pollsters in methodology, such as turnout adjustments and weighting, may have made a difference or how the impact of this may have compared to any impact of question wording.

Furthermore, it is not possible to pass definitive judgement as to the accuracy of the constituency polls taken during the 2010–2015 parliament. There were no published constituency polls where fieldwork took place in the final week of the campaign, and therefore none would be counted as eve-of-election predictions. Indeed, the very publication of particular constituency polls may have led to them becoming self-falsifying, with campaigns choosing to switch resources into or out of seats based on the latest polling information. Similarly, we cannot discount the possibility—albeit somewhat slim—that some voters, with a better understanding of the election in their constituency through having seen the poll findings, voted tactically for a preferred outcome. The impact of constituency polls is better judged in the information it provided voters, campaigners and the media forming a more granular picture of the electoral landscape.

INCREASING OUR UNDERSTANDING

The aggregated polls conducted by ComRes for ITV News came in for some scrutiny during the campaign, particularly from UKIP and the Liberal Democrats. When ComRes/ITV News published a poll suggesting the Liberal Democrats would lose all 14 of their seats in the South West Nick Clegg described the poll as "baloney" and "bogus science" (BBC News 2015). Similarly, Nigel Farage attacked the ComRes/ITV News poll across 10 UKIP target seats which showed UKIP in third place and struggling to win a single new seat as a "terrible" way to poll (Payne 2015). Of course, come the election both of those polls were proved right. The Liberal Democrats did lose all their seats in the South West where the Conservatives were in second place, and UKIP did not win any new seats.

The local, regional, topical and single constituency polls contributed significantly to the debate, revealing a much more complicated picture below the surface than was immediately obvious from the headline voting intention polls.

As discussed above, there were hints within the polls that UKIP would struggle to capitalise on their increased national support and win new MPs—although some polls did have Nigel Farage ahead in South Thanet. Further fuel was added to the narrative that UKIP had already reached their peak when Lord Ashcroft released his polls across Conservative–Labour marginals on 8 April 2015. These polls found “a move towards the two main parties at the expense of UKIP”, something he also found in Liberal Democrat seats.

The ComRes/ITV News poll pointed to a Liberal Democrat collapse in their heartlands which spelled bad news for the junior coalition partner more widely. Lord Ashcroft’s polls in Liberal Democrat seats told a slightly more mixed story, with the Conservatives gaining in seats such as North Devon, Camborne & Redruth and St Austell & Newquay, but this was not reflected in some of the other South West seats he polled in.

In the underlying data from Lord Ashcroft’s final release of marginal polls in the week before the election there were signs that the Conservatives might be on course to outperform their national standing. The polls found (see Table 6.3) that in each of these eight constituencies David Cameron was preferred over Ed Miliband as prime minister, despite the voting intention data in the same polls suggesting the Conservatives would win just four of the seats. Come election day, all but one went blue. Wirral West was the only one of these that was won by Labour—incidentally that was also the only one where more people said they were dissatisfied with David Cameron and preferred Ed Miliband than were satisfied with the prime minister.

These “internal numbers” (data below the headline voting intention figures) have been significant in understanding what happened at the 2015 general election, and can be useful for those looking to learn the lessons of victory and defeat. Analysing this detail in the aftermath of the election, a ComRes post-election experiment provided a pointer as to why the Conservatives won a majority. The experiment involved redistributing poll respondents who were undecided or refused to give a voting intention, based on their prime ministerial preference: this changed the numbers in their final poll from a one-point Conservative lead to a five-point lead. It is exactly this additional data—from national and constituency polls alike—that was available to help in painting a more detailed picture of what was going on beneath the line.

Table 6.3 Final Lord Ashcroft polls in marginal seats

| | Satisfied with Cameron | Dissatisfied with Cameron, but prefer Cameron to Miliband | Dissatisfied with Cameron, and prefer Miliband | Refused/don't know |
|---------------------|------------------------|---|--|--------------------|
| Battersea (%) | 44 | 17 | 31 | 7 |
| Croydon Central (%) | 37 | 19 | 33 | 11 |
| Norwich North (%) | 35 | 23 | 32 | 9 |
| Peterborough (%) | 33 | 24 | 31 | 13 |
| Pudsey (%) | 36 | 20 | 34 | 11 |
| Stourbridge (%) | 39 | 22 | 29 | 10 |
| Wirral West (%) | 34 | 16 | 39 | 11 |
| North Cornwall (%) | 42 | 27 | 21 | 10 |

Source: Ashcroft (2015b)

Q. Which of the following statements do you most agree with?

- (a) “I am satisfied with the job David Cameron is doing overall as Prime Minister”.
- (b) “I am dissatisfied with the job David Cameron is doing overall as Prime Minister—BUT I’d still prefer to have him as Prime Minister than have Ed Miliband as Prime Minister”.
- (c) “I am dissatisfied with the job David Cameron is doing overall as Prime Minister—AND I’d prefer to have Ed Miliband as Prime Minister instead”.

CAMPAIGN DATA

Election campaigns are often described in terms of the “air war” (messages to voters through the media) and the “ground war” (knocking on doors and local organisation). With Ed Miliband tasking Labour’s activists to have “4 million conversations” with voters on the doorstep, it was clear where Labour’s campaign efforts were being focussed.

Lord Ashcroft’s polling showed that, indeed, Labour’s concentration on the ground war was happening. His last batch of marginal polls, released in the week before the election, showed that in each of the seven Conservative-held seats that were polled, more people had heard from Labour than from any other party (Table 6.4). Similarly, Lord Ashcroft and Survation found UKIP had a wider campaign reach in South Thanet than any other party.

As it turned out, contact rates were not necessarily a good barometer for eventual winners. Nigel Farage of course failed in South Thanet, while Labour lost six of the seven constituencies in Table 6.4, despite contacting more constituents than their rivals.

Table 6.4 Campaign contact rates in marginal constituencies

| % Having heard from ... | From Con | From Lab | From Lib Dem | From UKIP | From none |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| Battersea | 69 | 74 | 39 | 20 | 14 |
| Croydon Central | 73 | 84 | 23 | 30 | 8 |
| Norwich North | 68 | 76 | 40 | 42 | 12 |
| Peterborough | 68 | 74 | 38 | 37 | 15 |
| Pudsey | 79 | 89 | 38 | 40 | 6 |
| Stourbridge | 64 | 71 | 25 | 44 | 15 |
| Wirral West | 85 | 88 | 56 | 46 | 6 |

Source: Ashcroft (2015a)

Q. “I would like to ask whether any of the main political parties have contacted you over the last few weeks—whether by delivering leaflets or newspapers, sending personally addressed letters, emailing, telephoning you at home or knocking on your door. Have you heard in any of these ways from the Conservatives, Labour, the Lib Dems or UKIP?”

This local contact data provides an extremely useful resource for election strategists looking to review the efforts of the ground game. For example, if Labour was achieving the higher contact rates that these polls were suggesting, then they would do well to understand who those conversations were with, whether they were targeted properly to get their supporters out on Election Day and what the nature of those conversations was. Perhaps in this instance quality of conversation was more important than quantity.

While this contact data was a useful resource for constituency campaigns, so the amount of local level polling now available could also be used by those planning campaign activities at a higher level. For example, some polls showing a close race in Sheffield Hallam, where Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg was defending his seat, may have diverted Labour resource from some defensive constituencies. Indeed, a tweet from influential campaigning Labour MP Tom Watson suggests Lord Ashcroft’s polls were certainly being taken notice of: “A wet day for my fourth visit to Sheffield Hallam as @LordAshcroft puts a spring in our step. theguardian.com/politics/2015” (Watson 2015).

It is of course up to strategists and campaign teams to decide the merits of, and how to use, the data available. However, the sheer volume and granularity of the constituency polls available—for free—would have been too tempting to ignore. Indeed, with a Labour Party falling behind the Conservatives in terms of finances available, the increase in published constituency polls helped to provide additional data they may otherwise

not have had—though, of course, they were at the whim of the pollsters and their media partners as to where and when the polls were happening. Therefore these polls may have been more useful for local campaigns, while the national campaigns would still be relying on their own strategic polling rather than the polls being published for media purposes.

It is difficult to know what sort of impact, if any, the abundance of constituency polls had on the outcome of the election. The 2010–2015 parliament was peculiar, with its own set of unique circumstances. The type of polls conducted and the stories pollsters looked to uncover were driven by the specific events of the parliament: coalition politics, the Scottish referendum, and the rise of UKIP. The 2015–2020 parliament is already shaping up to be very different. Whether constituency polls are as frequent—or even as useful—or whether there will be a greater concentration on “internal” metrics such as leadership is likely to be a chapter for 2020’s book.

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CHAPTER 7

What the Polls Polled: Towards a Political Economy of British Election Polls

Murray Goot

Whether the polls got it right, and if not why not, are the questions most frequently asked about the opinion polls after every election; *a fortiori* after an election when the polling organisations, on their own admission, did not get it right. What is true of the press and politicians is also true of the pollsters - with the important exception of the MORI series of election studies initiated by Bob Worcester and Roger Mortimore after the 1997 election - of political scientists and of others whose interests lie in political communication. The Nuffield election studies since 1945 with a chapter on the polls for every election since 1959, except for February 1974¹; the series on *Britain at the Polls*, dating from the 1974 elections with a chapter on the polls for each election in 1974, as well as for 1979 and 1983, though the series skips 1987; the *Political Communications* series,

The data for the individual polls were collated from the polling companies' websites. A media search was also conducted to identify any polls that may not have been listed on the companies' websites. Thanks are due to Tom D.C. Roberts for assembling the polls, and to Tom Wynter for constructing a series of databases. Thanks also to Roger Mortimore and Bob Worcester for comments on an earlier draft.

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commenced after the 1979 election with at least two chapters devoted to the polls in every volume; and the Hansard Society's accounts produced since the 1992 election with a chapter on the polls for every election up to 2005: all take an interest in the polls conducted during the campaign and publicly released² that focuses on what the polls had to say about shifts in voting intentions and the likelihood of respondents turning out, whether they picked the winning party, how "accurate" they were and (more often than is widely realised) where they seemed to have gone wrong. The chapters dedicated to the polls in these series are almost entirely consumed by considerations of this kind; the *Political Communications* series, with more than one contributor focused on the polls, is the exception.

This is not to say that these studies have not shown an interest in the other results reported by the polls; they have. Voting trends apart, the most regularly discussed of the polls' findings cover the party leaders, issues—respondents' issue positions, their ranking of the issues and their views about the parties best able to handle particular issues—and the kinds of things respondents think influence their vote. The attention given to the success or otherwise of the parties' attempts to engage the electorate—via letterboxing, canvassing, public meetings and so on—supplemented by data gathered after the election, is also notable; until 2005, the Nuffield series could boast a long record on this.

Nonetheless, the volumes in these four series discuss almost any of these topics (other than voting intentions) in relation to fewer than half the campaigns they cover. The regularity with which they touch on the less frequently discussed topics—including party images and respondents' views of the outcomes—is even lower. Understandably, authors' interests vary and, of necessity, they have to be selective; they are interested in some of the questions asked by the pollsters, not others. Even so, for those questions in which they are interested, they generally restrict themselves to the findings reported by a single source. In short, post-election accounts of what the polls have produced in the course of a campaign are never synoptic. In the first of the Nuffield studies, the only Gallup findings reported, other than those on how respondents intended to vote, related to housing (McCallum and Readman 1947: 150n, 203–4, 237, 242). Even if 1945 was "the housing election", and Gallup the only national poll on which to draw (Crewe 2001: 97), there were a number of other election-relevant questions that Gallup asked to which the study might have referred (see Gallup 1976: 108–12). Clearly, the tone had been set: polls were to be mined for the insights they offered about public opinion, not taken on their own terms; pollsters were not to be treated as players in their own right.

This chapter seeks to open up a wider investigation of the public opinion polls—those commissioned by the media or at least publicly released—by cataloguing all the substantive questions the polls asked during the 2015 campaign, in the period stretching from the dissolution of the parliament on 30 March to election day, 7 May. The analysis encompasses those polls conducted not only among cross-sections of voters in Britain, but also in Scotland, in particular constituencies, among respondents who viewed the leaders' debates, and so on. And it seeks to document not only the number of polls that were conducted, when they were conducted and where, but also the different kinds of questions that they asked—questions about voting, the leaders, issues, the campaign, the parties and what respondents expected or hoped for from the election outcome—the number of questions asked and the frequency with which they were asked. It also seeks to document both the similarities and the differences in the kinds of questions the various polling organisations asked or failed to ask.

The number of polls conducted during the campaign was large. Across Britain, there were 104 polls. Another 34 polls were conducted among sub-populations of various kinds. The total number of questions the polls asked was over 2500. The number of polls conducted and the populations sampled varied depending on the polling company and (except where the polls were self-funded) on their clients, overwhelmingly media organisations. So, too, did the questions asked and the frequency with which they were repeated. The only questions asked by the pollsters on every occasion were about how respondents intended to vote, though even with a question as basic as this there were variations in the wording and response options. There were also questions designed to determine whether respondents would actually vote.

If the attention of commentators, both during the campaign and after it, focused on questions about the vote, almost 80 per cent of the questions asked in the polls were about things other than the vote. Over a quarter of the questions were about the party leaders, though the number of questions that framed the election as a presidential contest was relatively small. Over a quarter of the questions were about issues—questions that appear to have weighed more lightly with the pollsters than with those who analyse campaigns afterwards. Relatively few questions were concerned with respondents' images of the parties, their experience of the campaign or their hopes about or expectations of the outcome. While every polling organisation asked about voting intentions what is more striking is the vast differences in the other questions they asked, or did not ask, and how little any two organisations had in common.

WHEN, WHERE AND WHAT

Just how many polls were conducted during the campaign is a matter on which poll-watchers differ. Table 7.1 lists 104 from 11 polling companies; Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh, co-authors of the latest Nuffield study, say the number produced by the same 11 was 82—though even that represents nearly a three-fold increase on the number they calculate for 2001 (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016: 251n1). The number of polls usually counted in post-election studies is the number of “national” polls—more precisely, the number conducted across Britain. From just one poll in 1945—arguably two (see Gallup 1976: 108–12)—the number rose, according to Ivor Crewe, to 20 in 1959; stood at 25 in February 1974, 27 in October 1974 and 26 in 1979; climbed to 46 in 1983, 54 in 1987 and a high of 57 in 1992; before falling to 44 in 1997 and 32 in 2001 (Crewe 1997: 67, 2001: 92). However, where there are other accounts, they differ. Thus, in February 1974, where Crewe counts 25 (27 in an earlier count; 1992: 475), Richard Rose enumerated 22 (1975a: 115); in October 1974, where Crewe counts 27 (26 in an earlier count; 1992: 475), Rose lists 23 (1975b: 223); in 1979, where Crewe counts 26 (46 in an earlier count; 1992: 475), Rose identifies 28 (1981: 196–98); in 1983, where Crewe counts 46 (54 in an earlier count; 1992: 475), Rose makes it 48, 49 or 51 (1985: 112, 113, 119); in 2001, where Crewe counts 32 or even 36 (2005: 29), Cowley and Kavanagh count no more than 31, jumping in 2005 to 52 and jumping again in 2010 to 81 (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016, 251n1). A number of things might explain these differences: starting dates (in particular, the announcement of the election rather than the dissolution of the parliament); finishing times (the inclusion or exclusion of day-of-the-election polls) and errors (from arithmetic errors to polls overlooked). The data in Table 7.1 cover polls conducted from the dissolution of the parliament up to and including the day of the election; it includes polls that were in the field at the time of the dissolution. Totals are derived from a poll-by-poll enumeration, based on a search of company websites. It is not simply a summary statistic.

What is remarkable is just how many polls there were—a number boosted, no doubt, by the extraordinary length of the campaign.³ Over a period of 39 days, from the dissolution of the Parliament on 30 March to Election Day, 138 polls were conducted, an average of 3.5 per day. Since most, including the final polls, were conducted over two days (63 polls), three days (35) or four days (nine)—only three were conducted on

Table 7.1 Polls in the field from the dissolution of the Parliament 30 March to Election Day 7 May 2015

| Day | Ashcroft | BMG | ComRes | ICM | Ipsos MORI | Opinium | Panelbase | Populus | Survation | TNS-BMRB | YouGov | Total |
|-------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-------|
| 1 Mon | <i>comp</i> <i>Con-Lab; def</i> | | <i>Scot; mary</i> | <i>TV</i> | <i>Eng 16+</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>Scot</i> | | <i>mums</i> | <i>GB; Scot</i> | <i>GB</i> | 9→12 |
| 2 | <i>comp</i> <i>Con-Lab; def</i> | <i>GB; Scot; mary; DK</i> | | <i>TV</i> | <i>Eng 16+</i> | | <i>GB; Scot</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>mums</i> | <i>Scot</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | 9→14 |
| 3 | <i>comp</i> <i>Con-Lab; def</i> | <i>GB; Scot; mary; DK</i> | | <i>TV</i> | <i>Eng 16+</i> | | <i>GB; Scot</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; mums</i> | <i>Scot; Scot</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | 9→17 |
| 4 | <i>comp</i> <i>Con-Lab; def</i> | | <i>mary; DK; TV</i> | | <i>GB</i> | | <i>GB; Scot</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; GB; TV; J</i> | <i>GB; Scot; GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | 9→18 |
| 5 | <i>comp</i> <i>Con-Lab; def</i> | | <i>mary; DK</i> | | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | | <i>GB; J</i> | <i>GB; Scot; Scot</i> | <i>GB</i> | 7→13 |
| 6 | <i>comp</i> <i>Con-Lab; def</i> | | <i>mary; DK</i> | | | | <i>GB</i> | <i>J</i> | | <i>GB; Scot; GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | 6→11 |
| 7 | <i>Con-Lab; def</i> | | | | <i>mary; DK</i> | | | <i>GB</i> | <i>J</i> | <i>GB; Scot; GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | 5→8 |
| 8 Mon | | | | | <i>mary; DK</i> | | | <i>GB</i> | <i>J</i> | <i>GB; Scot; GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | 5→8 |

(continued)

Table 7.1 (continued)

| Day | Ashcroft | BMG | ComRes | ICM | <i>Ipsos MORI</i> | Opinium | Panellbase | Populus | Survation | TNS-BMRB | YouGov | Total |
|-----|-------------------|-----|--------|-----|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| 9 | | | | | GB; marg; | GB | | J | GB; Scot; | GB; GB | 5→10 | |
| 10 | | | | | <i>DK</i> | GB; GB | GB | GB | <u>GB</u>; GB | <u>Scot</u>; <u>Scot</u> | 8→13 | |
| 11 | Scot | | | | GB | GB | GB | GB | <u>GB</u>; GB | <u>GB</u>; GB | 9→13 | |
| 12 | GB; Scot | | | | <i>Lib-Dem;</i> | GB | GB | GB | <u>GB</u>; GB | <u>GB</u>; GB | 8→12 | |
| 13 | GB; Scot | | | | <i>DK</i> | Lib-Dem; | GB | GB | GB | GB; Scot | GB; GB | 7→11 |
| 14 | GB; Scot | | | | <i>DK</i> | Lib-Dem; | GB | GB; GB | GB | GB; Scot | <u>GB</u>; GB | 7→12 |
| 15 | <i>Scot</i> | | | | <i>DK</i> | GB; GB | | | GB; GB | GB; GB | 4→7 | |
| 16 | <i>Mon</i> | | | | | GB; GB | | | | Scot | GB; GB | 4→6 |
| 17 | <i>Scot</i> | | | | | <i>DK</i> | GB; GB | GB | GB | Scot | GB; GB | 7→9 |
| 18 | <i>Scot; mary</i> | | | | | <i>DK</i> | GB | GB | GB | TV | GB; GB | 9→14 |
| 19 | GB; Scot; | | | | <i>mary</i> | GB; Com v GB | GB | GB | GB | GB; GB | GB; GB | 9→16 |
| 20 | GB; mary | | | | | <i>GBRP; DK</i> | GB; Com v GB | GB | GB | GB | GB; GB | 7→12 |

| <i>Day</i> | <i>Ashcroft</i> | <i>BMG</i> | <i>CamRes</i> | <i>ICM</i> | <i>Ipos</i> | <i>Opinium</i> | <i>Panellbase</i> | <i>Populus</i> | <i>Survation</i> | <i>TNS-BMRB</i> | <i>YouGov</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|------------|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|
| 21 | <i>GB; marg</i> | <i>GB; Con v GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | | | | <i>GB</i> | | | <i>GB; Scot</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | <i>7→12</i> |
| 22 | <i>marg</i> | <i>GBIP; DK</i> | <i>GB</i> | | | | | | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | <i>6→7</i> |
| Mon | | <i>DK</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| 23 | <i>marg</i> | <i>GB; DK</i> | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; Scot</i> | | | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | <i>6→9</i> |
| 24 | <i>marg; marg</i> | <i>GB; GB;</i> | | <i>W</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; Scot</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; Scot</i> | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | <i>9→15</i> |
| 25 | <i>marg; marg</i> | <i>GB; W</i> | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; Scot</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; Scot</i> | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | <i>9→15</i> |
| 26 | <i>GB;</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; Con;</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; Scot</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; Scot</i> | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | <i>10→16</i> |
| | <i>Con-Lab;</i> | | <i>DK</i> | | | | | | | | | |
| 27 | <i>marg</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; Con;</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>Scot</i> | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; Scot</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | <i>9→15</i> |
| | <i>Con-Lab;</i> | | <i>DK</i> | | | | | | | | | |
| 28 | <i>marg</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; Con;</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>Scot; GB</i> | | | | | | |
| | <i>GB;</i> | | <i>DK</i> | | | | | | | | | |
| | <i>Con-Lab;</i> | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 29 | <i>marg</i> | <i>GB</i> | | | | <i>Scot; GB</i> | | | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | <i>7→10</i> |
| Mon | <i>Con-Lab;</i> | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 30 | <i>marg</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | | <i>TV</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | | | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | <i>7→10</i> |
| | <i>Con-Lab;</i> | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 31 | <i>marg</i> | <i>GB; DK</i> | <i>TV</i> | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB</i> | | <i>GB</i> | <i>GB; GB</i> | | <i>GB; GB</i> | <i>8→11</i> | |
| | <i>Con-Lab</i> | | | | | | | | | | | |

(continued)

Table 7.1 (continued)

| Day | Ashcroft | BMG | ComRes | ICM | Ipsos MORI | Opinium | Panelbase | Populus | Survation | TNS-BMRB | YouGov | Total |
|--------------------|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| 32 | <i>Con-Lab</i> | GB , DK | <i>TV</i> | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB ; GB | GB ; GB | 9→11 |
| 33 | GB | DK | <i>marg</i> | | | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB ; GB | GB ; GB | 8→9 |
| 34 | GB | DK | <i>marg</i> | | | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB ; GB | GB ; GB | 7→8 |
| 35 | GB | GB , DK | GB ; <i>marg</i> | | GB | | | | <i>Scot</i> | GB | GB ; GB | 8→11 |
| 36 | | GB | GB , DK | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB | <i>GB</i> ; <i>Scot</i> | GB | GB ; GB | 8→11 |
| Mon | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 37 | GB ; GB | GB | GB ; GB | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB ; <i>Scot</i> | GB | GB | 10→13 |
| 38 | GB ; GB | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB | GB ; <i>Scot</i> | GB | GB | 9→11 |
| 39 | GB | | | | | | | | | | | 2→2 |
| Polls ^a | 12 (6) | 2 (2) | 23 (11) | 8 (5) | 6 (4) | 8 (8) | 8 (6) | 12 (12) | 16 (9) | 9 (7) | 34 (34) | 138 (104) |

^aNumber conducted across Great Britain in brackets^bOne survey spread over four non-consecutive days

Note: 9→13: number of polling organisations in the field→number of polls in the field

Bold: polls conducted across Great Britain

Italics: polls run over more than one day

Underlining: distinguishes polls of the same population run on the same or consecutive days by the same organisation

DK: undecided voters

Scot: Scotland

Eng: England

marg: marginal seats;

Con-Lab: seats where the contest was likely to between the Conservatives and Labour;

Con-UKIP: seats where UKIP threatened Conservative MPs;

Comp Con-Lab: competitive Conservative and Labour seats;

Def Con-Lab: defensive Conservative and Labour seats;

TV: viewers of TV debate;

J: Jewish identifiers;

Mums: Netmum users in GB.

Source: <http://www.bmgsresearch.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/> and <http://www.bmgsresearch.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/>; <http://conres.co.uk/our-work/poll-archive>; <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive.aspx>; <http://www.populus.co.uk/media/polls.aspx>; <http://www.populus.co.uk/Poll/?pollyear=2015>; <http://survation.com/archive/2015-2;http://www.rns-bmrb.co.uk/news;https://yougov.co.uk/publicopinion/archive>

a single day—and 15 were in the field for a week or more (including nine that were in the field before the Parliament was dissolved), the number of polling organisations in the field on any day of the campaign (except for election day) was at least four and as many as 10 (Day 37), the number of polls being conducted on any day of the campaign—with some firms running more than one poll—being fairly evenly spread from eight or fewer (on seven occasions) to 15 or more (six occasions), the median being not 3.5 but around 11. Surprisingly, neither the number of polling organisations—nearly twice as many as in any other British election (see Kellner et al. 2011: 95, for the numbers since 1945)—nor the number of polls increased as the election drew near. For the first five days of the campaign, between seven and nine pollsters were in the field each day with 14 polls, on average. During the last five days (excluding Election Day), there were between seven and ten pollsters per day, conducting ten polls, on average. In between, there were roughly 7 pollsters per day, conducting slightly fewer than 11 polls, on average.

Frequency and intensity varied from one polling organisation to another. Both were a function, no doubt, of how much money clients were prepared to spend, Ashcroft and TNS-BMRB being the only players to pay their own way. At one end of the spectrum was YouGov, which produced 34 polls. ComRes was another that polled early and often; it produced 23 polls. At the other end of the spectrum was Ipsos MORI; its first Britain-wide poll commenced on Day 12 and it produced only five other polls. BMG, entering the fray on Day 26, produced just two. In producing relatively few polls, they were not alone. Panelbase produced six, Opinium eight, ICM eight and TNS-BMRB nine. In the middle of this range came Ashcroft with 12, Populus with 12 and Survation with 16. On a number of days, several firms had more than one poll in the field across Britain. From Day 9 to Day 35, YouGov had two polls in the field. There were five days when ComRes also had two such polls in the field. Even firms that polled much less often sometimes had two Britain-wide polls running together: Survation and Populus on three occasions; Ipsos MORI for two periods; and Ashcroft and TNS-BMRB once.

Most of the polls (104 of the 138) attempted to draw their respondents from cross-sections of the British electorate (excluding Northern Ireland); as the post-election reviews indicate, their attempts were not entirely successful (Clark and Perraudin 2016). Of the other polls, eight were restricted to Scotland (Ashcroft, ComRes and Panelbase conducted separate polls in Scotland, Survation and TNS doing so twice),⁴ while another

(from Ipsos MORI) for the Chartered Institute of Housing confined its interviews to respondents aged 16 plus in England. Eleven targeted seats variously described as: “battleground seats” (adapted from “battleground states” in the USA); “competitive” or “defensive” Conservative-Labour seats, “Conservative-held UKIP targets”, “key marginals” and so on (five by Ashcroft, four by ComRes, one by ICM and one by Survation), the last of these (ICM) being completed on 3 May. Five polls were based on interviews with respondents who had watched one of the television programmes that featured the leaders—the ITV Leaders’ Debate on 2 April with David Cameron, Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg, Nigel Farage, Nicola Sturgeon, Natalie Bennett and Leanne Wood (ComRes, ICM, Survation); the BBC Election Debate on 16 April with Miliband, Farage, Sturgeon, Bennett and Wood (Survation); or the special BBC *Question Time* on 30 April with Cameron, Miliband and Clegg (ComRes). Polls conducted across Britain also ran questions about the debates (Opinium, Panelbase, TNS-BMRB, YouGov), two by Panelbase in advance of the event rather than after it. In addition, three ComRes polls were based on reinterviews with respondents classified as “undecided”; two polls, both conducted by Survation, were based on interviews with women—one, focusing on “Netmum users”; the other, for the *Jewish Chronicle*, reporting the views of “Jewish identifiers”.

More remarkable than the number of polls was the number of substantive questions—not the background or demographic questions—that the pollsters asked: at least 2593 (see Table 7.2). Since some of the questions asked, including questions about voting behaviour at the last election, did not always appear in the lists of questions pollsters put up on their websites, the numbers in the table are lower than they should be. To the total number of questions recorded in the table, the various polling organisations contributed quite unequally. YouGov asked 541 questions, well above the average of 236; so did Survation (498), an organisation whose polling was both less frequent and less intense. Other above-average contributions came from Opinium (375) and ComRes (343). Well below average were Ipsos MORI (166), Ashcroft (124), ICM (122), Panelbase (98), Populus (59) and BMG (11).

Voting questions were dominated by questions of two sorts. One was about how respondents might vote. These were among the kinds of questions most likely to get the polling organisations and their polls on to the front-page, into the news bulletins and across the social media—the kinds of questions that give the polls their greatest cachet while placing them at

Table 7.2 Questions in the polls, 30 March—7 May 2015

| | <i>Ashcroft</i> | <i>BMG</i> | <i>ComRes</i> | <i>ICM</i> | <i>Ipsos MORI</i> | <i>Opinium</i> | <i>Panellbase</i> | <i>Populus</i> | <i>Survation</i> | <i>TNS</i> | <i>YouGov</i> | Total |
|------------------------|-----------------|------------|---------------|------------|-------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|------------|---------------|------------|
| | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) | N (%) |
| Voting | 54 (43.5) | 5 (45.5) | 69 (20.1) | 15 (12.3) | 14 (8.4) | 18 (4.8) | 35 (35.7) | 37 (62.7) | 111 (22.3) | 66 (25.8) | 104 (19.2) | 528 (20.4) |
| Leaders | 12 (9.7) | 1 (9.0) | 78 (22.7) | 69 (56.6) | 66 (39.8) | 164 (43.7) | 25 (25.5) | 10 (16.9) | 181 (36.3) | 11 (4.3) | 111 (20.5) | 728 (28.1) |
| Issues | 12 (9.7) | 1 (9.0) | 138 (40.2) | 15 (11.4) | 19 (12.3) | 24 (6.4) | 18 (18.4) | 12 (20.3) | 118 (23.7) | 143 (55.9) | 174 (32.2) | 674 (26.0) |
| Campaigning Parties | 26 (21.0) | 17 (5.0) | 7 (5.7) | 2 (1.2) | 145 (38.7) | 5 (5.1) | 0 (0.0) | 5 (1.2) | 25 (5.0) | 17 (6.6) | 9 (1.7) | 253 (9.8) |
| Outcomes | 13 (10.5) | 4 (36.4) | 28 (8.2) | 16 (13.1) | 17 (10.2) | 23 (6.1) | 15 (15.3) | 57 (11.4) | 17 (6.6) | 69 (12.8) | 259 (10.0) | |
| Total | 124 (100) | 11 (100) | 343 (100) | 122 (100) | 166 (100) | 375 (100) | 98 (100) | 59 (100) | 498 (100) | 256 (100) | 541 (100) | 2593 (100) |

Source: See Table 7.1

greatest reputational risk. The other question, asked almost as frequently, was about how respondents had voted in the past. But questions about voting also included questions about whether respondents were registered, whether they intended to vote—asked so that pollsters could calculate the “headline” vote—why they intended to vote for a particular party, and whether they might change their mind. In addition, there were questions about whether respondents had voted in some election other than the 2010 election or in some referendums, how they had voted and how they might vote at some future election. Questions to do with voting account for a fifth (20.4%) of all the questions asked. However, for some firms, voting questions loomed much larger. Populus devoted nearly two-thirds (62.7%) of its items to voting questions. BMG (45.5%), Ashcroft (43.5%) and Panelbase (35.7%) also attached greater than average importance to these questions. For others—Opinium (4.8%), Ipsos MORI (8.4%), ICM (12.3%)—voting questions proved less important.

More numerous than voting questions were questions about the party *leaders*. Apart from questions about who would make the better or best prime minister, there were questions about the performance of the leaders, their qualities and their policies. Questions of these kinds account for 28.1 per cent of the questions asked, almost half as many again as the number on voting. Again, the emphasis on leadership was much greater among some firms than among others; ICM (with 56.6 per cent of its questions focused on the leaders), Opinium (43.7%), Ipsos MORI (39.8%) and Survation (36.3%) placed much greater emphasis on these questions than did Ashcroft (9.7%), BMG (9%) or TNS (4.3%).

The other large cluster of questions focused on *issues*. Pollsters asked respondents about their positions on issues, about which of the parties they would trust to deal with particular issues, and about the issues they considered important, including issues that might influence their vote. They also asked respondents about the state of the economy and of their own economic circumstances—questions that were not directly about issues but are usually treated as such in voting studies. Just over a quarter (26.0%) of the questions covered issues of these kinds. The emphasis given to these questions differed hugely between firms. For TNS, most (55.9%) of whose questions were about issues, and for ComRes (40.2%), they loomed much larger than for Panelbase (18.4%), ICM (12.3%), Ipsos MORI (11.4%), Ashcroft (9.7%), BMG (9.0%) or Opinium (6.4%). In some cases, the questions were open-ended, allowing respondents to nominate more than one issue; Ipsos MORI asked questions of this kind

three times. Open-ended questions consumed more interviewer time, and the answers cost more to process than pre-coded questions; but they also yielded considerably more data.

Questions about the *campaign*, which made up 9.8 per cent of the questions asked, varied considerably, too. They included questions about respondents' exposure to the campaign not only through television but also through billboards, public meetings, canvassing and the like; questions about the quality of the parties' campaigns; and questions about the impact of the campaigns. For Opinium, 38.7 per cent of whose questions were about the campaign and for Ashcroft (21.0%), the campaign figured prominently—indeed, for these firms, the campaign figured more prominently than almost any other category. Others, by contrast, asked either no questions about the campaign (BMG, Populus) or hardly any questions (YouGov, 1.7 per cent; Ipsos MORI, 1.2%).

Fewer questions (5.6 per cent overall) focused on the *parties*, including what they stood for, whether they could be trusted and whether they were different from one another. Even so, Ipsos MORI devoted a much greater proportion (28.9%) of its questions to the parties than it did to the campaign. So did YouGov (13.7%). On the other hand, BMG, ICM, Panelbase and Populus asked no questions at all about the parties. Opinium (0.3%), TNS (0.8%) and Survation (1.2%) asked hardly any.

The remaining questions (10.0 per cent of the total) addressed election *outcomes*: parliamentary outcomes, policy outcomes, outcomes for the economy and so on. Some were about what respondents expected to happen, others were about what they wanted to happen. Questions about the parliamentary outcomes asked what respondents thought the balance of forces might be or how they felt about the possible balance; generally, they focused on the likelihood of a hung parliament—a likelihood that the responses to the polls' questions on voting intentions helped reinforce. Questions about outcomes figured rather more prominently in the polls generated by Panelbase (where they made up 15.3 per cent of all the questions it asked), YouGov (12.8%) and ICM (13.1%). Nonetheless, they figured in the output of all 11 pollsters except one—Populus.

VOTING QUESTIONS

Questions about respondents' *voting intentions* may have been asked by all the polls and may have been among the questions that mattered most. However, as Table 7.3 shows, even among the voting questions, they

appear to account for just one quarter (25.4%) of the questions asked, or just under a third if we include the questions (5.9%) that asked respondents to assume a ballot in which every party had nominated a candidate. The number of questions asked in an attempt to pin down respondents will have been underestimated if any polling organisation failed to disclose that respondents unwilling to nominate their voting intention when first asked were then asked to which party they were inclined or leaning; judging by the information on their websites, Ipsos MORI and Panelbase were the only polls to have pushed respondents in this or some other way. Some asked the voting intention question twice—once as an open question, once as a closed question with a list of parties (Ashcroft); once as a question about 7 May and once as a question about “today” (Panelbase); or once as a general question and once as a question about the respondent’s specific constituency (YouGov). Questions about how respondents intended to vote made up more than half the voting questions asked by ICM, about half the questions asked by Panelbase and about a third of the questions asked by Populus and YouGov. If we include hypothetical questions about who voters would have supported if candidates from every party stood, then about a third of the questions asked by Ashcroft were of this kind as were two-fifths of the questions BMG asked, a third of the questions ComRes and Ipsos MORI asked, and a quarter of the questions Survation asked; but no more than half this proportion for TNS.

Enquiries about whether respondents were *likely to vote* made up another 17.6 per cent of the voting questions. For Opinium (33%), Populus (32%) and ICM (29%), the figure was substantially higher. TNS, more often than not, and Ipsos MORI, once, also asked whether respondents were registered to vote; Panelbase was the only firm not to ask their respondents about either. A further 7 per cent of the voting questions were about whether respondents *might change their vote* or had definitely made up their minds—a figure that nearly doubles (to 13.1%) if we include follow-up or related questions about the other parties respondents would consider voting for (asked by six of the pollsters) or the parties respondents were leaning towards or moving away from (asked by three). Remarkably few of these questions (2.6%) were about whether respondents might vote *tactically* (BMG, ComRes, Ipsos MORI, Survation, YouGov)—a question that Mark Textor, who polled for the Conservatives, thought the public polls should have been included more often (Taylor 2015). A similar proportion (2.5%) of the questions were about respondents’ *reasons for their choice of party* (Ashcroft, BMG, ComRes, Survation), or their reasons

Table 7.3 Voting questions, 30 March–7 May 2015

| | Ashcroft | BMG | ComRes | ICM | Ipsos MORI | Opinium | Panelsbase | Populus | Survation | TNS | YouGov | Total |
|---|----------|-----|--------|-----|------------|---------|------------|---------|-----------|-----|--------|---------------|
| | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N (%) |
| Registered Likelihood of voting | 5 | 1 | 10 | 5 | 1 | 6 | | 12 | 13 | 7 | 8 | 8 (1.5) |
| Party choice | 20 | | 10 | 8 | 4 | 6 | 17 | 12 | 13 | 10 | 34 | 93 (17.6) |
| Party choice if... Likelihood of change | 15 | 2 | 13 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 10 | | 15 | 8 | 5 | 31 (5.9) |
| Reasons for choice | 1 | 1 | 2 | | | | 7 | | 2 | | | 69 (13.1) |
| Tactical voting | | 1 | 2 | | 1 | | | | 8 | 2 | | 13 (2.5) |
| Party identification | | | 9 | | | | | 12 | | | | 21 (4.0) |
| Past voting | 10 | | 13 | | | 5 | | | 35 | 33 | 33 | 129 (24.4) |
| Future voting | | | | | | | | | 8 | | | 8 (1.5) |
| Other | 3 | 5 | 69 | 15 | 1 | 14 | 18 | 1 | 1 | 2 | | 8 (1.5) |
| Total | 54 | | | | | | | 35 | 37 | 111 | 66 | 104 528 (100) |

Source: See Table 7.1

for not choosing a party—Labour or the SNP (Panelbase). The reasons reported were not necessarily those that might have been volunteered (an administratively expensive option) but those respondents chose from lists of between two and seven alternatives. Some pollsters also reported their respondents' *party identification*; questions along these lines account for 4 per cent of the questions asked. ComRes asked: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as [Conservative, Labour ... ?]”; Populus asked respondents about the “political party ... you have usually most closely identified yourself with”.

Roughly a quarter (24.4%) of the voting questions were not about the 2015 election at all. They were about whether respondents had voted—and *how they had voted*—at the 2010 election (18%), though an opportunity for respondents to say that they had not voted was sometimes included in the question about how they had voted instead of being asked separately. Some of the questions (6%) about past voting were about the 2014 Scottish referendum, the 2014 European election or the 2010 Scottish election. Other questions were about their likely *future votes*—how respondents might vote at the next local, Scottish or European elections (1.5%).

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE LEADERS

Questions in the polls about the leaders, Rose insisted after the 1979 election, “imply that a general election is like a presidential campaign—or even more, like a presidential *primary* campaign—in which party labels are of no account; a voter is assumed to choose solely or primarily on the basis of personality” (Rose 1981: 188–89). This is wide of the mark. Questions that asked respondents to make comparisons between or among the leaders account for no more than a third (32.3%) of the questions asked about leaders in 2015—less than one-in-ten of all the questions the pollsters asked. Direct comparisons between the alternative Prime Ministers Cameron and Miliband—the comparisons we might expect to find in relatively large number if the polls were bent on the “*presidentialising*” of electoral politics—made up no more than 8.4 per cent of the leadership questions (top half of Table 7.4). Other two-way comparisons, though they could hardly count as evidence relevant to the presidentialising of politics, involved: Cameron and Sturgeon, and Miliband and Sturgeon (YouGov); Conservative and Labour Chancellors, Foreign

Secretaries, Home Secretaries and Deputy Prime Ministers (Survation); and Conservative and Labour leader and Chancellor teams (ICM).

A greater proportion of the questions sought comparisons that were three-way, four-way or five-way: Cameron, Miliband and Clegg (1.7%); Cameron, Miliband, Clegg and Farage (4.3%); Clegg, Farage, Sturgeon and Salmond (0.8%); Cameron, Miliband, Clegg, Farage and Bennett or Sturgeon (1.8%); and Miliband, Farage, Sturgeon, Bennett and Wood (2.2%), following the BBC debate in which Cameron and Clegg played no part. Other polls involved six-way or seven-way comparisons: Cameron, Miliband, Clegg, Farage, Bennett and Sturgeon (0.4%); Cameron, Miliband, Clegg, Farage, Bennett, Sturgeon and Wood (9.2%), the latter marginally more frequent than Cameron versus Miliband. There were even nine-way comparisons—one, a Survation poll that asked which of nine women celebrities would make the best prime minister—and another in which Survation asked which of 13 women politicians would make the best prime minister. The interest of the pollsters in match-ups of one kind or another was anything but uniform. Populus and TNS showed little or no interest. Ashcroft's only interest was in the Cameron–Miliband contest. Survation, responsible for 29.8 per cent of these questions, asked twice as many questions about the leaders as any other firm.

Remarkably few (15.7%) of the questions involving direct comparisons were about who would make “the best Prime Minister”, and the like. More than a third (38.3%) were about the leaders' *personal qualities*: which of them was more “out of touch”, was more “honest” or “trustworthy”, would “govern for all”, was the “sexiest” and so on; Survation even asked about which of leader would be “most likely to cook you a good meal” or “fix a wonky door handle”. Almost as many questions (36.2%) were about the leaders' performances in the campaign, especially in the head-to-head contests on television. The rest (9.8%) included questions about who might replace the respective party leaders, assuming their respective parties lost the election.

Questions asked separately about Cameron and Miliband (the lower half of Table 7.4) easily exceeded the number asked about them head-to-head. The questions asked about the two prime ministerial aspirants separately made up a third (34.4%) of all the questions on the leaders—four times as many as the head-to-head questions about the two—those about Cameron accounting for 16 per cent and those about Miliband accounting for 18.4 per cent of the questions asked about the leaders

Table 7.4 Questions about the leaders, 30 March–7 May 2015

| | <i>Ashcroft</i> | <i>BMG</i> | <i>ComRes</i> | <i>ICM</i> | <i>Ipsos</i> | <i>Opinium</i> | <i>Panellus</i> | <i>Populus</i> | <i>Survation</i> | <i>TNS</i> | <i>YouGov</i> | <i>Sub-Totals</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|------------|---------------|------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N (%) | % | |
| <i>(a) Match-ups</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cameron & Miliband | 9 | 15 | 26 | 1 | 2 | | 8 | | | 1 | 1 | 61 (26.0) | 8.4 |
| C, M & Clegg | | 2 | 1 | | | | 8 | | | 12 (5.1) | | 1.7 | |
| C, M, C & Farage | | 10 | | | | | 8 | | | 31 (13.2) | | 4.3 | |
| C, M, C, F & Bennett | | 6 | | | | | 2 | | | 8 (3.4) | | 1.1 | |
| C, M, C, F & Sturgeon | | | | | | | | | | 5 | 5 (2.1) | | 0.7 |
| C, M, C, F, B & S | | | | | | | 1 | | | 2 | 3 (1.3) | | 0.4 |
| C,M,C,F,B,S & Wood | | 7 | 28 | | 17 | | 14 | | | 1 | 67 (28.6) | | 9.2 |
| M, F, S, B & W | | | | | | 1 | 14 | | | 1 | 16 (6.8) | | 2.2 |
| Clegg, F, S & Salmon | | 4 | | | | | 2 | | | | 6 (2.6) | | 0.8 |
| Other | | 1 | 35 | 1 | 4 | 3 | | 13 | | 1 | 3 | 26 (11.1) | 3.4 |
| <i>Sub-total (a)</i> | <i>9</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>36</i> | <i>6</i> | <i>33</i> | <i>18</i> | <i>0</i> | <i>70</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>26</i> | <i>235 (100)</i> | <i>32.3</i> | |
| Best PM | 9 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | | 14 | | 4 | 37 (15.7) | | 5.0 |
| Best qualities/most trusted | | 26 | 21 | 13 | | | | 16 | 1 | 13 | 90 (38.3) | | 12.4 |
| Best in campaign | | 2 | 13 | | 15 | 16 | | 33 | | 6 | 85 (36.2) | | 11.7 |
| Other | | 4 | 4 | 3 | 2 | | 7 | | | 3 | 23 (9.8) | | 3.2 |
| <i>Sub-total (a)</i> | <i>9</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>35</i> | <i>6</i> | <i>33</i> | <i>18</i> | <i>0</i> | <i>70</i> | <i>1</i> | <i>26</i> | <i>235 (100)</i> | <i>32.3</i> | |
| <i>(b) Individuals</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cameron | 1 | 8 | 8 | 13 | 32 | 1 | 1 | 27 | 2 | 23 | 116 (23.5) | 16.0 | |
| Miliband | 1 | 12 | 8 | 13 | 35 | 1 | 1 | 30 | 2 | 31 | 134 (27.2) | 18.4 | |
| Clegg | 1 | 4 | 5 | 13 | 32 | 1 | 1 | 12 | 2 | 21 | 92 (18.7) | 12.7 | |

(continued)

Table 7.4 (continued)

| | <i>Ashcroft</i> | <i>BMG</i> | <i>ComRes</i> | <i>ICM</i> | <i>Ipsos</i> | <i>Opinium</i> | <i>Panelbase</i> | <i>Populus</i> | <i>Survation</i> | <i>TNS YouGov</i> | <i>Sub-Totals</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|------------|---------------|------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N (%) | % |
| Farage | 4 | 4 | 13 | 30 | 1 | 1 | 12 | 2 | 7 | 73 (14.8) | 10.0 | |
| Sturgeon | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 12 | 1 | 1 | 25 (5.1) | 3.4 | |
| Bennett | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 | | 1 | 6 | | | 15 (3.0) | 2.1 | |
| Other, incl locals/ families | 9 | 2 | 5 | | 3 | 4 | 12 | 1 | 2 | | 38 (7.7) | 5.2 |
| <i>Sub-total (b)</i> | <i>43</i> | <i>33</i> | <i>60</i> | <i>131</i> | <i>7</i> | <i>10</i> | <i>111</i> | <i>10</i> | <i>85</i> | <i>493 (100)</i> | <i>67.7</i> | |
| Approve/satisfied | 3 | 10 | 22 | 11 | 24 | 7 | | 66 | 10 | 20 | 173 (35.1) | 23.8 |
| Qualities | 14 | 6 | 40 | 101 | | | | 33 | 10 | 56 | 250 (50.7) | 34.4 |
| Campaign | 18 | 5 | 9 | 6 | | | 10 | 9 | 4 | 61 (12.4) | 8.4 | |
| Other | 1 | | | | | | 3 | | 5 | 9 (1.8) | 1.2 | |
| <i>Sub-total (b)</i> | <i>3</i> | <i>0</i> | <i>43</i> | <i>33</i> | <i>60</i> | <i>131</i> | <i>7</i> | <i>10</i> | <i>111</i> | <i>10</i> | <i>85</i> | <i>493 (100)</i> |
| Total (a) + (b) | 12 | 1 | 78 | 69 | 66 | 164 | 25 | 10 | 181 | 11 | 111 | 728(100) |

Source: See Table 7.1

(excluding questions classified under Outcomes; see below). Cameron's possible Coalition partners, Clegg and Farage, were also in the pollsters' sights: 12.7 per cent of the leadership questions focused on Clegg, 10 per cent on Farage. Many of the questions asked about one of the leaders were also asked about one or more of the others. Leaders who might have come to some arrangement with a government led by Miliband attracted much less interest than questions about leaders who might have come to some arrangement with a government led by Cameron. Did the pollsters think a coalition of the right more likely than a coalition of the left? Only 5.5 per cent of all the questions on leaders singled out those who did not lead the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats or UKIP; 3.4 per cent were about Sturgeon, 2.1 per cent about Bennett. Differences in the intensity of the polling were even more marked here than they were around the match-ups with Ashcroft, Panelbase, Populus and TNS showing little interest—certainly when compared with the amount of polling around these issues generated by Opinium and to a lesser extent Survation and YouGov.

Most (50.7%) of the questions about individual leaders were about their qualities; the closer to power, the greater the focus on their attributes. Less common (35.1%) were questions about whether respondents "approved" of or were "satisfied" with one or other of the leaders, "liked" them, or "trusted" them. Questions about those leaders with little chance of being included in a new government were disproportionately likely to be couched in these very general terms—the more so, the lower their chances. Thus, while no more than a quarter of the questions about Cameron (25%) or Miliband (21.6%) were of this kind, for Clegg, the proportion was 31.5 per cent, for Farage 36.5 per cent, Sturgeon 56 per cent and Bennett 66.7 per cent. For leaders with no prospect of leading the country, questions focused disproportionately on their campaigning—including, courtesy of YouGov, whether respondents knew if they were standing.⁵ Beyond all this was the absence of any attempt to determine what respondents knew about any of the leaders.

THE ISSUES

The justification for polling, according to George Gallup, was not simply the polls' ability to report the state of party support or the level of support for particular party leaders; it was their ability to report the extent of popular support for particular policies. Polls that attempted to predict

the outcome of an election allowed the technique to be tested. What they were testing was the claims of the polls “to provide a continuous chart of the opinions of the man[sic] in the street”. Elections allowed voters to decide who would govern them; opinion polls allowed politicians to see what “the people” wanted their governments to do (Gallup and Rae 1940: v, 12–14).

Of the questions that asked about issues no more than one-in-five (19.3 per cent or just 5 per cent of all the questions asked) asked about the sorts of issues that Gallup had foremost in mind. Famously, Donald Stokes (1966/1963: 170) defined these “*position issues*” as “those that involve advocacy of government actions from a set of alternatives”. The only polls to pay much attention to these were Survation (28 per cent of its issues questions fell into this category), YouGov (20.7%) and ComRes (15.2%), though all but one of the dozen issues questions Populus asked were of this kind as were half the small number of issues questions asked by ICM and Panelbase (see Table 7.5). What attention pollsters paid to party manifestos we cannot say. Some absences from their lists of issues, however, are worth noting; global warming, for instance, though raised by respondents in response to an open-ended question from Ipsos MORI, made it on to no pollster’s list.

What public policy positions respondents prefer, and what policy considerations actually influence their vote, are separate matters. Roughly one question in every five (19.4%) was devoted to what we might call “*vote drivers*”—respondents’ reports of the issues that might influence their vote—almost exactly the same number of questions as were devoted to ascertaining respondents’ issue positions. However, the number of questions about vote drivers was almost wholly due to a series of questions in two TNS polls where respondents were asked whether they would consider voting for a party that advocated one or more of 53 policies to do with education and 54 to do with health—an approach similar to that pioneered in Canada in 2011 by Vote Compass, an approach that matches respondents’ positions to party manifestos.⁶ ComRes and ICM pursued more orthodox approaches, presenting lists (varying in length from 6 items to 14) and asking respondents to nominate up to three issues that were or would be of greatest relevance to their vote. Only Ipsos MORI allowed respondents an open-ended response. Related questions from several other pollsters gave respondents the opportunity to select the issues they regarded as “important” generally (4.5 per cent of the issue questions) or important personally (4.9%).

Table 7.5 Issue questions, 30 March—7 May 2015

| | <i>Ashcroft</i> | <i>BMG</i> | <i>ComRes</i> | <i>ICM</i> | <i>Ipsos</i> | <i>Opinium</i> | <i>Panelsource</i> | <i>Populus</i> | <i>Surreyam</i> | <i>TNS</i> | <i>YouGov</i> | Total |
|------------------------|-----------------|------------|---------------|------------|--------------|----------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|------------|---------------|-----------|
| | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N (%) |
| Position issues | 21 | 7 | 1 | 5 | 9 | 11 | 33 | 7 | 36 | 130 | | (19.3) |
| Vote drivers | 1 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 1 | | 8 | | 109 | 1 | 131 | (19.4) |
| Importance of issue | 8 | | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 14 | 1 | 30 | (4.5) |
| Importance, personally | 7 | | | | | | 1 | | 25 | | 33 | (4.9) |
| Valence issues | 53 | | 13 | 11 | | | 59 | 5 | 33 | 174 | | (25.8) |
| Parties' credibility | 3 | | 3 | | | | 6 | 1 | 10 | | 23 | (3.4) |
| Knowledge | 8 | | | | | | 3 | 1 | | | 12 | (1.8) |
| Sociotropic issues | 6 | | | 1 | 2 | 1 | | 2 | 5 | | 17 | (2.5) |
| Pocketbook issues | 6 | | | | | 1 | 5 | 3 | 9 | | 24 | (3.6) |
| Other issues | 18 | | | 4 | | 5 | 1 | 1 | 6 | | 34 | (5.0) |
| Miscellaneous issues | 16 | | | | | | 1 | 1 | 48 | | 66 | (9.8) |
| Total | 12 | 1 | 138 | 15 | 19 | 24 | 18 | 12 | 118 | 143 | 174 | 674 (100) |

Source: See Table 7.1

Greater in number than position issues or vote drivers were questions about “*valence*” issues, as Stokes called them: issues that “involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate” (1966/1963: 170–71)—or here, at least, positively or negatively valued by the pollsters. Questions about which party was best able or could be trusted most to “handle the NHS”, “lower unemployment”, “improve the education system” and so on accounted for no less than a quarter (25.8%) of all the issues’ questions. Compared with the questions on position issues or vote drivers, questions organised around valence issues were more evenly spread: Survation (with 59) and ComRes (53) stand out; YouGov (33), Ipsos MORI (13) and Opinium (11) also devoted a substantial proportion of issue questions to issues of this kind; the others, apart from TNS, ignored them completely. Related questions focused on the credibility of the parties either in general or in relation to specific promises (3.4%). Substituting “leaders” for “parties”, in Stokes’ definition, we could add all the questions on which of the leaders had the “right ideas”, were “strongest”, were least “out of touch” and so on (Stokes 1992: 147). There were few questions (1.8%) about the issues that attempted to discover what respondents actually knew about any of the issues.

Two other kinds of questions, both having the makings of valence issues by being linked in respondents’ minds to the parties or leaders in office, were designed to establish what respondents thought about the current or future state of the British economy (2.5%) or what they thought had happened, or might happen in the future, to their own prosperity (3.6%)—the first connected to what has been called “*sociotropic*” voting, the latter to “*pocketbook*” voting (Kinder and Kiewiet 1979).

Of the other issues questions, some simply asked respondents what they thought about various states of the world; tax avoidance, for example (5 per cent of all the issues’ questions). Others (9.8%), asked mostly by YouGov, bore no connection to the election at all—questions about members of the Royal Family, experiences with do-it-yourself repairs and the whistling of tunes. This is not a criticism, simply an observation. Pollsters with contracts to conduct polls on a regular basis for newspapers inevitably find themselves including questions during election campaigns on topics other than election, especially when the interest of readership in the campaign is limited or the campaign period is inordinately long.

CAMPAIGNING

The question about whether respondents had paid much attention to the campaign was a question the polls virtually ignored (see Table 7.6). However, the polls took some interest in whether respondents had watched the leaders' debates or the *Question Time* special (4.7 per cent of the campaign questions) and they took an interest in what they had made of the leaders' performances (noted above). They took even more interest (15.4 per cent of these questions) in what respondents' thought about the quality of the campaign—whether it was “boring”, and so on, but especially in whether the parties were “negative” or “positive”.

The main focus (68.8%) of the questions on the campaign, however, was on how successful the parties' (rather than the leaders) had been in reaching respondents. Ashcroft asked respondents whether “any of the main political parties”—the Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats or UKIP—had “contacted” them “over the last few weeks, whether by delivering leaflets or newspapers, sending personally addressed letters, emailing, telephoning ... at home or knocking on [their] door”, a question it asked six times in different constituencies. Opinium, which asked over half the questions asked by pollsters on the campaign (57.3%), went further. It asked in respect of each of the parties—including the SNP, Greens, Plaid Cymru or any “other”—whether they had knocked on the door “to talk” about the election, “telephoned” or “sent leaflets”; whether respondents had heard any of their “political broadcasts on television” and whether respondents had seen any “stall or stand” of theirs “in high streets”, any of their “billboards or outdoor posters” or any of their “Facebook advertising” or “sponsored Tweets”. The polls' interest in the impact of the parties' campaign—in terms of how convincing any of the parties had been (Opinium) or whether the campaign had made respondents more or less likely to vote for any of the parties (TNS), for example—was slight by comparison (9.9 per cent of these questions). While the question of how much attention respondents paid to the campaign was virtually ignored by the pollsters, in the Nuffield study of the election (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016) respondents' reports about their experience of the campaign, something the polls did address, passes without mention.

Table 7.6 Questions about the campaigning, 30 March–7 May 2015

| | <i>Ashcroft</i> | <i>ComRes</i> | <i>ICM</i> | <i>Ipsos</i> | <i>Opinium</i> | <i>Panelbase</i> | <i>Survation</i> | <i>TNS</i> | <i>YouGov</i> | Total |
|------------|-----------------|---------------|------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|------------|---------------|------------|
| | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N (%) |
| Interest | | | | | | | | | | |
| TV viewing | 1 | | | 2 | | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 (1.2) |
| Other | 25 | 1 | | | 136 | | 12 | | 3 | 12 (4.7) |
| exposure | | | | | | | | | | 174 (68.8) |
| Quality | 14 | | 3 | 1 | | | 10 | 7 | 4 | 39 (15.4) |
| Impact | 2 | | 2 | 1 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 1 | 25 (9.9) |
| Total | 26 | 17 | 7 | 2 | 145 | 5 | 25 | 17 | 9 | 253 (100) |

Note: BMG and Populus asked no questions of this kind

Source: see Table 7.1

PARTIES AND THE COALITION

The main campaign challenge for party managers, Graham Wallas argued in a seminal work now largely unread (1948/1908: 84), is to ensure that the “automatic associations” that voters make with a party’s “image” are “as clear as possible”, that they are “shared by as many as possible”, and that they “call up as many and as strong emotions as possible”. If much of the image-making today is organised around leaders, and was perhaps even in Wallas’ day (Crewe and King 1984: 204), much of it is still organised around the parties. Whether the press sees it that way, or encourages the pollsters it hires to see it that way, is another matter.

While every pollster asked about the leaders, few asked about the parties—even if we include questions that linked leaders to the parties. And the questions that were asked about the parties were not always the sorts of questions Wallas might have had in mind. As Table 7.7 shows, YouGov asked about half (49%) of the questions, Ipsos MORI about a third (31.8%). The questions asked most frequently were about whether respondents’ approved or disapproved “the Government’s record to date”; in its 34 surveys, YouGov asked this question 32 times. On five occasions, it also asked whether the “Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition partners are working together well or badly”, whether “this coalition government is good or bad for people like you” and about its “economic management over the last 12 months”. On four occasions, it asked to which of the parties (the Conservatives, Labour or the Liberal Democrats) the following applied most: “the kind of society it wants is broadly the kind of society I want”; “it is led by people of real ability”; “its leaders are prepared to take tough and unpopular decisions” and “it seems to chop and change all the time: you can never be quite sure what it stands for”. Ipsos MORI, the one organisation to ask respondents whether it was true that “these days” they do not know what each of the parties stands for, also wanted to know whether respondents thought each of the four main parties (the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats and UKIP) “keeps its promises”, “understands the problems facing Britain”, “has a good team of leaders”, “will promise anything to win votes”, is “divided”, is “extreme”, “looks after the interests of people like me”, is “fit to govern”, is “out of date” or is “different to other parties”. Some questions—from ComRes and Survation, in particular—were concerned with just one of the parties.

Table 7.7 Questions about parties and the Coalition, 30 March–7 May 2015

| | <i>Ashcroft</i> | <i>ComRes</i> | <i>Ipsos</i> | <i>Opinium</i> | <i>Survation</i> | <i>TNS</i> | <i>YouGov</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|--|-----------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|------------|---------------|----------------|
| | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N |
| <i>Coalition</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Good for people like me | | | | | | 5 | | 5 (3.3) |
| Works well/support coalition | | | | | | 7 | | 7 (4.6) |
| Approve government's record | 4 | | | | | | 32 | 36 |
| Time for a change/ wrong direction/ deserves re-election | 2 | | | | | 1 | | (23.8) 3 (2.0) |
| Economic management | | | | | | 1 | 5 | 6 (4.0) |
| <i>Parties</i> | | | | | | | | |
| No differences | | | | | | 1 | | 1 (0.7) |
| Conservatives | 1 | | | | 5 | | 1 | 7 (4.6) |
| Labour | | | | 1 | | | | 1 (0.7) |
| Lib-Dems | 1 | 4 | | | | | 2 | 7 (4.6) |
| UKIP | | 4 | | | | | | 4 (2.6) |
| <i>Cons/Lab/Lib-Dems/ UKIP</i> | | | | | | | | |
| I feel positive/ negative towards it | 4 | | | | | | | 4 (2.6) |
| Clear what party stands for | | 4 | | | | | | 4 (2.6) |
| Keeps promises | | 4 | | | | | | 4 (2.6) |
| Understands problems facing Britain | | 4 | | | | | | 4 (2.6) |
| Has a good team of leaders | | 4 | | | | | | 4 (2.6) |
| Will promise anything to win votes | | 4 | | | | | 4 | (2.6)) |
| Divided | | 4 | | | | | | 4 (2.6) |
| Extreme | | 4 | | | | | 4 | (2.6)) |
| Looks after interests of people like me | | 4 | | | | | | 4 (2.6) |
| Fit to govern | | 4 | | | | | | 4 (2.6) |

(continued)

Table 7.7 (continued)

| | <i>Ashcroft</i> | <i>ComRes</i> | <i>Ipsos</i> | <i>Opinium</i> | <i>Survation</i> | <i>TNS</i> | <i>YouGov</i> | Total |
|---|-----------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|------------------|------------|---------------|--------------|
| | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N |
| Out of date | | | 4 | | | | | 4 (2.6)) |
| Different from other parties | | | 4 | | | | | 4 (2.6) |
| <i>Cons/Lab/Lib-Dems</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Led by people of real ability | | | | | | 4 | 4 (2.6) | |
| Never sure what it stands for | | | | | | 4 | 4 (2.6) | |
| Has leaders prepared to take unpopular decisions | | | | | | 4 | 4 (2.6) | |
| Wants the kind of society I want | | | | | | 4 | 4 (2.6) | |
| Tired/heart in right place/appeals to all/ has moved on | | | | | | 4 | 4 (2.6)) | |
| Other | | | | | | | 1 | 1 (0.7) |
| <i>Women in politics</i> | 7 | 4 | 48 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 74 | 151 (100) |
| Total | 7 | 13 | 48 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 74 | 151 (100) |

Note: BMG, ICM, Panelbase and Populus asked no questions of this kind

Source: see Table 7.1

A handful of questions from ComRes and Survation also addressed the representation of women by the political parties or the presence of women in politics more generally. However, in a multiracial Britain, there were no questions about the representation of racial or ethnic groups. Nor were there questions linked to other aspects of “identity politics”, including the composition of the parties by class, life experience, or LGBT.

OUTCOME

Having helped generate expectations among election watchers of a “hung” parliament, a number of pollsters asked respondents what sort of outcomes—policy and economic, not just electoral—they expected. The pollsters proved even keener to discover what sort of parliamentary outcome

respondents wanted. This constituted as clear a case of a feedback loop—the results of the polls’ questions on voting intentions influencing the polls’ questions on the parliamentary outcomes—as one could imagine.

Questions about *electoral expectations* (14.3 per cent of the questions about outcomes, as Table 7.8 shows) included questions about the parties’ likely vote shares (ICM), the most likely result overall (asked between four and six times by Survation and TNS) and who would emerge as the Prime Minister (TNS, six times). YouGov wanted to know whether the prospect of deals by the Conservatives or Labour with one or more of the other parties discouraged respondents from voting Conservative or Labour. Questions about the *policies* that might emerge (15.8 per cent of these questions) focused on the prospect of tax rises (YouGov), while expectations about the *economic impact* (7.7 per cent of the questions) focused on the impact of a Conservative or Labour victory on business owners, workers and consumers (YouGov).

Whether the result would make much difference to the country was a question asked only by Survation. How important to respondents the winner might be was a question asked only by Ipsos MORI. TNS also ventured some questions on the attention voters received from governments and whether elections encouraged governments to attend to what voters thought. Given the concern about voter turnout, evidence that voters had become increasingly disillusioned by the main parties and evidence from the polls of support for some of the newer parties, the wonder is that there were not more questions like these.

Most of the questions about outcomes (57.9%) were about *preferred outcomes* not expected outcomes. Dominated by Survation, ComRes, Opinium and YouGov, which asked two-thirds (66%) of these questions, the questions focused on the place of small parties in a democracy, which party or combination of parties’ should form or help form the next government, and which parties should not. Again, this was the kind of polling that Gallup might have argued showed the way polls served democracy.

CONCLUSION

Writing after the 1983 election, Rose insisted that “[t]he contents of opinion polls vary far less than do the interests of their users”. While one cannot be sure about the interests of the polls’ users, it is certainly true that the “contents” of the polls vary a good deal more than the interests of the academics who comment on the performance of the polls after election

Table 7.8 Questions about the outcomes, 30 March—7 May 2015

| | <i>Ashcroft</i> | <i>BMG</i> | <i>ComRes</i> | <i>ICM</i> | <i>Ipsos MORI</i> | <i>Opinium</i> | <i>Panelbase</i> | <i>Surrey</i> | <i>TNS</i> | <i>YouGov</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|------------|---------------|------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|---------------|------------|---------------|--------------|
| | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N (%) |
| Expectations: electoral | | 10 | 3 | 2 | | | 11 | 7 | 4 | | 33 (14.3) |
| Expectations: policies | | 1 | | | 1 | | 10 | | 29 | | 41 (15.8) |
| Expectations: economic | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | 18 | | 20 (7.7) |
| Expectations: attention | | | | | | | | | 2 | | 2 (0.8) |
| Importance | | | | 2 | | | | 1 | | 1 | 5 (1.9) |
| Preferred party outcomes | 13 | 1 | 26 | 6 | 12 | 21 | 13 | 34 | 6 | 18 | 150 |
| Other | | 3 | 1 | | | | | | | | (57.9) |
| Total | 13 | 4 | 28 | 16 | 17 | 23 | 15 | 57 | 17 | 69 | 259 (100) |

Note: Populus asked no questions of this kind

Source: see Table 7.1

campaigns. “Most polls”, Rose added, “ask the same types of questions about the parties, the personalities of leaders, issues and social characteristics of voters” (1985: 124). But, as the analysis in this chapter also shows, this is not true either. Moreover, the substantive questions in the polls range more widely than parties, personalities and political issues.

Polling agendas have always been diverse. The Gallup Poll conducted for the *News Chronicle* in the first half of June 1945, ahead of the General Election in July, included three questions on the vote (on turnout, on party choice and on whether respondents had “definitely made up [their] mind”), three on the leaders (none head-to-head), five on position issues, a valence issue and three others (see Gallup 1976: 110–12). Students of politics, the polls or the press need to take the diversity of the polls seriously. They need to ask about the sorts of questions that are—and are not—asked. They need to ask about the frequency and timing of questions. And they need to ask about the framing and phrasing of the questions. They also need to ask, more systematically than they have in the past, how the polls are reported (or not reported) in the press and other media, what prominence they are given and how they feed into the campaign and into stories about the campaign.

Questions about how respondents intend to vote are the *sine qua non* of election polling; they are what readers of all kinds are most interested in, even as the value of the question is challenged by evidence that what predicts election outcomes better are questions about which party respondents think will win (see Rothschild and Wolfers 2012). Some of the other forces that help fashion polling agendas might also be noted: questions about minor parties reflected the state of the Parliament; questions about a hung parliament were largely a consequence of polls predicting a hung parliament; questions about how the leaders performed in the debates were possible only because there were debates. Even so, not all the polling firms asked questions about the minor parties, not all the polling firms picked up on the prospect of a hung Parliament and not all the polling firms were interested in the leadership debates.

Much as they had in common, every polling organisation had different clients—clients that backed different parties and published for different audiences—a distinctive agenda and its own ways of doing things. More generally, every organisation has its own history. While there are several volumes on public opinion polls in Britain that include brief histories of the polls up to the early 1990s (Hodder-Williams 1970; Teer and Spence 1973; Worcester 1991; Broughton 1995; Moon 1999), there is not a

single-volume history of any of the polls. One could write a history of the polls' success in predicting vote shares at successive general elections by mining these books as well as the rich seam of British election studies and the special reports that have investigated various failures. But until we have more comprehensive histories of the organisations that polled in 2015—or at least accounts of what each of them, other than the newcomers (BMG, Panelbase, Survation), generated in any of the earlier elections—our ways of understanding what they did in 2015 must remain highly circumscribed.

NOTES

1. Unfortunately, the practice of listing all the national voting intention polls conducted during the campaign with date of poll, sample size, publisher and date of publication was discontinued in 2010.
2. As well as in: private polls, conducted mostly for the parties; polls conducted ahead of the campaign; exit polls, day of the election polls and post-election polls; and, increasingly, data from the British Election Study. This chapter is concerned with none of these.
3. In 2010, the campaign ran for 25 days, from 12 April to 6 May. For much of the post-war period, the “formal campaign” lasted “a mere three weeks” (Butler and Pinto-Duschinsky, 1971: 139). For the general elections from 1945 to 1959, see Butler and Rose (1960: 46).
4. Polling in Scotland was a consequence of the emergence in 1974 of the Scottish National Party (Rose, 1975b: 224).
5. In addition, three questions (two from ICM, one from Survation) sought to discover if respondents knew the names of the candidates standing in their constituency.
6. See <http://votecompass.com/> for a history that encompasses Canada, the USA and Australia.

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PART II

Campaigns

CHAPTER 8

An Interview with Jeremy Sinclair

Jeremy Sinclair and Simon Atkinson

Jeremy Sinclair is Chairman of M&C Saatchi PLC, the advertising agency he co-founded in 1995. Sinclair's best-known creative work has been done for various government organisations, including the "Pregnant Man" campaign for the Family Planning Association, various antismoking campaigns for the Health Education Council and political campaigns for the Conservative Party, notably for Margaret Thatcher (three elections), John Major (two elections) and David Cameron (two elections). More recently, he worked for the Scottish Referendum Campaign to keep the UK together. Below he reflects on some of these experiences including his role advising the Conservatives.

Looking back at the 2015 Campaign, in a few words, what would you say were the main reasons why the Conservatives won—albeit with a slender majority?

We hate being ruled or bossed about by foreigners. French, Germans, Scots, anyone—and it looked as though we were going to be run by Alex Salmond. Every election has one image, and Mr Salmond with Mr

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Miliband in his pocket was that in 2015. The issue just took off. Research showed that people in the North of England were particularly concerned, and they feared the subsidies that they currently get would just go on the Flying Scotsman to the north and bypass them. So, that's my take—it is a most powerful thing when people are threatened by government by outsiders. It is the essence of the EU debate.

And, thinking about the Conservative campaign, was that something that the Tories had put in their strategy at the start or was it more something that they were able to latch onto and make the most of as the campaign progressed?

It grew as we went along. We were looking at this in November, December of the year before. We tested a concept with a nervous Mr Miliband on the edge of a swimming pool with armbands, dithering at the deep end. Our research showed that people saw this as accurate but a bit rude and so then we put in, just along the edge of the swimming pool, we added a picture of Alex Salmond sitting in a deckchair saying, I'll save you. This transformed people's take on it, they stopped thinking it was rude and they thought "That's how it is". So this gave us the clue that there was something in this—that the Scottish dimension could play a big role.

So, roll forward to what you actually saw in the 2015 Campaign. As a seasoned observer and participant, how did the way that the Conservatives approached the campaign this time differ let's say from 2010, for example, when perhaps they didn't do as well as we might have expected?

Well certainly this time they did a lot of in-house social media, a lot of messaging, they probably placed more emphasis on the marginals in 2015 than ever before. And if you look at the swing in the marginals, the swing to the Tories was much greater than elsewhere. The campaign quite shamelessly targeted Lib Dem seats; again the swing there was greater than it was nationally. So that was different. And remember by 2015, people had got used to Mr Cameron, he's not an extreme figure, he's a sort of decent fellow and I think people said yeah okay, give him another go.

From our point of view, apart from the 1992 election, the John Major one, 2015 was perhaps the most satisfying. There is a delight in proving all the pollsters wrong. It's satisfying when your critics have been going on at you for months saying it's not working, look at the polls, you're behind. And we had this again, just as in 1992, it had a similar feeling to us, people criticising what we were doing but you just carry on.

There's often talk about advertising and market research not always being the best bed fellows because creative people get blocked by these tedious market researchers with their spreadsheets and numbers and that sort of thing. This time around, it felt like the Conservatives were using data quite a lot: was there a good marriage, shall we say, of creative and data this time round?

Well, Lynton [Crosby] is very data orientated, but he recognises an idea when he sees it, so he could see what we were getting at and he knew that what we were trying to do was supported by the figures that he was getting in from his researchers. He very much comes at it from the analytical point of view. But also what he was good at, he put discipline into the party, he smacked them if they stepped out of line. So he was the general in charge, the general Mr Cameron and Mr Osborne had appointed. And people listened. So he did supply an energy and a precision to their behaviour, which is what you need to do.

And would it be fair to say that this kind of energy and precision was less evident in 2010, if we take that as an example?

Now, Steve Hilton who was doing that job, Steve's got many brilliant qualities, he's a visionary political thinker, he's a great strategist, all these things but he doesn't have the ruthless streak [of Lynton].

Just to move sides for the moment, can we think about “Brand Ed Miliband”, if I can call it that. Looking back, and again thinking about what you've seen and experienced over the years, could anything have been done better by the Labour people in terms of marketing and pushing Ed?

We were called in at the last minute to the Scottish referendum, and the client then was mostly the Labour Party because they were very much the dominant party in the *Better Together* campaign. They were the worst client: inefficient, dogmatic, unyielding. And so we took great comfort from this because we thought “these boys are going to be the opposition when it comes to the election”, and so it transpired. (I believe they were responsible for the embarrassing granite Ed Stone.) It's not easy to be a good client and one thing that Conservatives are good at, they're good clients. Back to Mrs Thatcher's day and she was the most strident person you've ever met but she believed in letting the professional do their job. I've only seen one good Labour client and that's Ken Livingstone, he's the only one that's used advertising properly in all this time. That was when he was fighting to keep the GLC [Greater London Council]. Not when he was elected recently, but way back and he ran a campaign against

the government for trying to get rid of the GLC. And so he buys good ads, but more generally Labour have got a huge disadvantage in that they rarely buy good ads.

You are on record as saying that Mrs Thatcher and I think also people around her like Cecil Parkinson at one point were seen as good clients.

Parkinson was an excellent client, as was Norman Tebbit. Chris Patten was also excellent; they appreciate what you're trying to do and they understand that you've got to sprinkle a bit of magic and you can't just produce boring arguments, dull leaflets and think the public will be persuaded. So, could anything be done to rescue Mr Miliband? Difficult, but he could have done better, he could have taken some better choices of advisors. There were some terrible stories coming out, that he wanted Cameron to move straight out of Number 10 and all the rest of it, well, this is asking the gods to smack you in the face you know by telling them that you are so confident of winning that you want to fix the hour the Camerons move out of Downing Street!

If I come back to the Tories, we have various chapters in this book where we have “air war” and “ground war” being mentioned. Looking back to the Thatcher period, would you say the balance has changed—or actually is it pretty much as it ever was in terms of following some simple rules?

It's exactly the same, exactly the same and your method, your medium changes so that we're not allowed to do TV advertising in this country but you can in cinema but you still need a simple message that you could get over in 30 seconds or 45 seconds or whatever it is. People often say to me that posters, billboards, they will disappear. But I don't think they will because a poster forces your brain to say “now, in this sentence, tell me what you're about”. And so you have to do that and if you look at what's happening in America in 2016, you can see that Mrs Clinton has got a simple strategy, Mr Trump has got a simple strategy and the best will win, that argument will win. So despite things like, social media, all this stuff we've come up with, I think the simple basic rules haven't changed a millimetre.

And would you say that applies also to the ground campaign as well?

Yes, because your people are knocking on the door, they need to like, to know and be able to say what you stand for.

Was that challenge of getting the “top-line” message out onto the doorsteps something that the Conservatives put a lot of energy into—given that you do need to have local agents and activists “selling” the product?

Yes, you are always having to think of that. We've always had in mind that quite a bit of your advertising effort, however you express it, whatever media you use, is aimed at your own people. So, and this is not unusual in business, it often looks like you're aiming your advertising at the public but you're also aiming it at your own staff—trying to gee them up, trying to get them to smile, trying to get them to love the customers, trying to give them the sales patter so they are the sales force but they need to be briefed and so it's important that they like your stuff, they're a definite important target market.

Can I ask you about posters? As a bystander, it seems, just in terms of their look and feel they seem to be evolving—although perhaps not as quickly as one might have thought. You see the ones with blinds that move and you see the ones with to some extent moving pictures and the like. Where's it all going, and will that really change anything?

It's fantastic, because now we could create a poster this afternoon, it could be up this evening. The electronic media is so fast, so that your ability to do spontaneous response to the situation is improved dramatically, by a fantastic proportion which we couldn't do in days of old. Then you had to get the artwork done, you'd have to then get it to the printer, the printer would say “well it's going to take five days to do this, that and the other”, you'd have to go to the printer and watch the colour corrections and all the rest. Now, everything has just sped up.

And then chaps have to go and get out there with their glue or whatever?

Exactly, the sticker person had got to get out there with his glue.

And was there much of that kind of immediate fast-reaction advertising in 2015?

There was a bit of it, we did a bit, but the possibility is there and we could do, you could break things down and focus on different areas easily.

So, that “immediacy” might be something to watch for next time?

Yes, and the other thing is that you can do moving pictures now so you can have before and after, you can have like a mini film. So you can get the same effect as you have in Piccadilly Circus.

If you were crystal ball gazing, looking ahead to the 2020 Campaign, what else might we see?

What happens now, which is rather interesting, is that you do stuff that you know people will mimic and change, which they never used to do. So, now you know, if you have Miliband in Salmond's pocket, you know that people will virally put other people in the pocket, you encourage it. The more people that are playing your game, the better.

And that's part of the planning, you've learnt to actually plan for that rather than it's a nice afterthought or nice side effect?

Yes.

We've talked about posters, leaflets, cinema ads and all of that. To what extent do you find it the message needs to be adapted to the different sort of formats? We've talked about simplicity but again are there a lot of headaches compared to the old days of having to adapt concept X to format Y and social media channel Z? Or is it more that one good idea can bloom in various ways?

That's it, you see, so once you've got an idea, if it's a good simple idea, it will work in every format. That's your test.

Can we turn to the smaller parties who were such a key features this time round? We had UKIP, we had the Greens. Was there anything that you saw them doing perhaps quite well on limited budgets or with limited experience?

That was a nice broadcast that the Greens did. It was testimonial, just a girl speaking straight to camera, she was so beautifully direct. Aside from that I didn't see anything else much. I'm told that UKIP people had very good grassroots support, you know a lot of activity on the street. Our strategy was to ignore them.

What about the Scottish Nationalists, I suppose I mean by all accounts this was a very dramatically successful campaign in terms of what happened. To what extent did their communications and the way that they did their messaging reinforce the momentum they had?

Well again, I'm told that they have excellent ground support and also Nicola Sturgeon is a very fresh face and a fresh voice. I don't know how long she can keep that up. It's a great novelty when someone comes on the stage and they're not speaking in the usual clichés and she had that quality and I hope she can, I don't know, we'll see if she can continue. I did worry when, during the referendum, they said "this is it for a generation" and then a few months later they said, well we might do another one and I thought "aha, sounds like a politician". That's when you start making

people mistrust you. To begin with I think Farage had this and I think she has it, they're just not speaking from the party political handbook, they're just saying it as they see it and she has that quality.

Would you say that the big business advertisers have learnt from politics and election campaigns, given that they're such an unusual kind of event?

Not that I'm aware of. It's more the other way round. For example, our use to the Conservatives, certainly in the early years, and certainly in broadcast, was we just applied everything we'd ever learnt in advertising to a political party. As I said, that's particularly true of the party political broadcasts—we just decided they've got to be funny, got to be interesting, got to be dramatic and use all the rules that you follow for a piece of commercial advertising.

CHAPTER 9

The Conservative Campaign

Andrew Cooper

The former Democratic Party Governor of New York, Mario Cuomo, famously said that “you campaign in poetry, you govern in prose”. It is hard to think of many poetic campaigns at UK elections—but the 2015 Conservative Party election campaign certainly was not one of them. It was singularly prosaic from start to finish; triumphantly so, as it turned out.

It has often been noted that there are, ultimately, only two election campaigns a party can run. There are variations on the theme, but at heart they are either arguing that “it’s time for a change” or arguing that the country is better off sticking with what it has.

The story of the Conservative Party’s 2015 general election campaign must start with the 2010 election. 2010 was a big-change election, and for that reasons, it was always more likely, in terms of the rhythm of the political cycle, that 2015 would not be. In 2010, Conservative private polling found over 80% of voters agreeing that “it’s time for a change”—and 75% consistently agreeing that “it’s time for a change *from Labour*”. Having made virtually no progress at all in the 2001 and 2005 elections, the Conservatives had a mountain to climb in 2010. They ended up gaining 100 seats, their biggest advance at a single election since 1931—an impressive achievement.

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But, in 2010, only slightly less than half of those who said it was “time for a change from Labour” ended up voting Conservative. The 36% vote share they achieved was the fifth worst Tory result in the 29 general elections since 1900. Given the scale of the mood for change in 2010, there are many Conservative Party strategists who believe that the Tories could and should have done even better than they did; that the 5% swing from Labour to Conservative in 2010 could and should have been closer to the 10% swing from Conservative to Labour at the previous big-change election, in 1997, when Labour gained 145 seats in one go and the Conservatives lost nearly 180.

It was the limitations of the 2010 Conservative air war at least as much as the effectiveness of Labour’s ground war, which yielded in 2010 a 1992-scale result for Labour in terms of seats from a 1983-scale result in terms of votes. Labour’s defeat in 2010 was, in other words, worse than it looked, which in turn made the return of a Labour government in 2015 look a much likelier prospect than it probably ever was.

It is also necessary to understand the internal criticism of the 2010 Tory campaign in order to understand their 2015 campaign. The Conservative campaign in 2010 was predominantly negative—with strong personal attacks on Gordon Brown recurring throughout. They ran a big poster campaign focusing on people who had never voted Conservative before—aimed at the large numbers of voters who told focus groups that they wanted change, but that various deceased family members would spin in the grave if they were to vote Tory. The policy emphasis, mainly via the ground campaign, was primarily seeking a mandate on deficit reduction, with reassurance about areas that would be protected, in an effort to neutralise Tory policy vulnerabilities, especially on the NHS and pensioner benefits.

Most of the Conservative voice in the 2010 campaign was devoted to the need for change—redundantly since the numbers saying it was time for change could scarcely have been higher. But the party never settled on a clear, consistent, resonant argument why those wanting change should vote Conservative. They could not agree among themselves what the best case—or just the true answer—was to the question “Why the Conservatives?” which arguably should have been the foundation point for the whole campaign.

David Cameron, George Osborne and Andrew Feldman, among others, all agreed in the post-match analysis of the 2010 campaign that they must not make the same mistake in 2015. They were determined that 2015 would be a much more tightly focused campaign, with clarity and

discipline on the “why” as well as the “what”. That was Lynton Crosby’s mandate when he was hired, at the end of 2012, to run the campaign. The fact that the Conservatives hired their general election campaign manager two and a half years ahead of the general election, barely half-way through the Parliament, shows how committed the Tory leadership were to a disciplined campaign—and that they had absorbed one of Lynton Crosby’s favourite aphorisms: “You can’t fatten the pig on market day”.

The script for the Conservative Party’s 2015 election campaign was, with one significant exception, defined more than two years earlier. Having won the argument in 2010 that austerity was inevitable, the Conservatives wrestled for some time with a consistent and resonant way to frame their economic decisions. The perception of “cuts” dominated voters’ views of the government, and the Tories needed people to believe there was a greater purpose to the government’s actions than merely cutting the deficit for its own sake. And, crucially, since economic recovery would be far from complete by 2015, the Tories needed to persuade voters to have faith that, if re-elected, they would preside over a continuing recovery that would directly benefit ordinary people.

This imperative was captured in one particular poll finding, which was used repeatedly in internal Tory presentations during the first couple of years of the Parliament: 83% of voters agreed—and more than half strongly agreed—that “In these tough economic times, what matters *most* is being able to have confidence that, as the economy recovers, the rewards will go to people who work hard and want to get on—ordinary people, not just the well-off”.

Voters wanted a government that was not just balancing the books, but also addressing a range of longer-term problems that left a large majority feeling very pessimistic about Britain’s place in the world and its future. The electorate wanted, in other words, a government with not just a short-term programme for dealing with the deficit, but a ‘long-term economic plan’. For more than a year and a half, the Tories used that phrase tirelessly to frame their programme, while the Labour Party compounded its other problems by never settling on a consistent strategy or message.

The other side of the Conservative Party’s 2015 general election campaign was also defined years earlier: to be precise, on 25 September 2010, when Ed Miliband became Labour leader. The Conservative leadership could not believe their luck. Ed Miliband was never a saleable product; the voter reaction to him was instant and visceral—very reminiscent of the reaction to William Hague during his equally unconvincing spell as leader.

The auto-reaction to Ed Miliband in focus groups was, virtually from day one, that “they chose the wrong brother”. Initial attempts by the Tories to frame him as the heir to Gordon Brown lapsed simply because the Labour leader was so innately unelectable in his own terms that it was not necessary to frame him at all. His unfitness, in the eyes of most voters, to be prime minister spoke for itself. It was hard to test in focus groups what people thought of Ed Miliband’s arguments because clips of him speaking elicited one or both of two reflex reactions: laughter and (an often almost involuntary) “No”. Voters often said that it would be embarrassing for Britain if the leader representing us on the world stage was Ed Miliband.

Even though David Cameron’s personal poll numbers were never, in absolute terms, particularly strong, he nevertheless remained more popular than his party throughout the 2010–2015 Parliament—and a significant majority, even of those who didn’t like David Cameron either, agreed that they would still much rather have him as prime minister than have Ed Miliband.

Lynton Crosby says of himself, as a campaign manager, that what he does is “keep you on the train tracks”. He de-clutters—“scraping off the barnacles” as he puts it—and he makes sure the campaign is remorselessly focused. The Conservative train tracks for the 2015 election, defined years earlier, were defined long in advance as “long-term economic plan” and “Cameron versus Miliband”.

The Conservative manifesto, whose randomness in 2010 was symbolic of the party’s lack of clarity in that campaign, brought the two recurring campaign themes together in its title and spelled out what these would mean for voters: “Strong Leadership. A clear economic plan. A brighter, more secure future”. It was not poetry, but it was remorselessly disciplined.

There was, of course, an important third element which was added to the campaign plan rather later—though not as late as some commentary has asserted or assumed. That, of course, was the spectre of a minority Labour government propped up by, and dancing to the tune of, the SNP. We can observe now that, at the very least, the probability of this post-election scenario was significantly exaggerated by the pre-election polls. But the Conservative campaign was alert to the potency of the issue well before it became the dominant media fixation in the final weeks of the campaign. They were onto this risk as a key election theme as soon as it became clear from Scottish polls - in the weeks after the independence referendum - that Labour were likely to lose substantial numbers of seats

to the SNP, which was virtually certain to be the third largest party in the House of Commons.

The memorable poster of Alex Salmond with Ed Miliband in his top pocket—perhaps (alongside the “Ed Stone”) the most abiding image of the 2015 election—was conceived in February and launched at the beginning of March: nearly a month before the formal campaign started and several weeks before the media became fixated with the issue. It is fair to conclude that the Tory campaign did not simply react to the SNP scare, it helped to foster it.

Considering that the polls never moved—and that the virtually unquestioned narrative was therefore that the Tory campaign was not working—the Conservatives remained creditably steady and the campaign was remarkable for the absence of leaks, splits or visible wobbles. The Tories stuck very largely to their long-term election plan. If the polls had been right—and shown the Conservatives with a decisive lead throughout—the Tory campaign would have earned plaudits from the media for its focus and discipline, rather than criticism for its lack of pace and momentum.

If the 2015 general election was an epic failure for the opinion pollsters—and it was—it should be judged also as a big failure for Britain’s political media. Fixated by process stories and constantly trying to jump ahead to what would happen after the election because they were bored by the campaign, the press failed to follow one of the cardinal rules of both journalism and politics: follow the money.

In previous general election campaigns, billboards all over the country were plastered with party advertising—and the booking of billboard sites was one of the most critical parts of election campaign planning. Newspapers used to be laden with party adverts, too. It is debatable how effective this advertising ever was in actually moving votes, but it provided a wallpaper that gave campaigns a presence wherever you went. Even for voters determined to avoid news coverage of the election and who put all the campaign literature straight in the bin, it was hard to escape the reality of the election or a general sense of what the parties regarded as their most important messages.

Election advertising has been all but killed off by the combination of declining newspaper readership and the emergence of social media, the campaign spending cap introduced in 2000 and the growing preference in campaigns for narrow-cast messaging. In 2015, there was very little campaign advertising of the traditional kind. But no one seemed to ask the question that flowed from this: what were the Conservatives spending their money on instead?

Neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats had much money—relatively speaking. It was a certainty, by contrast, that the Tory campaign would—thanks to the fundraising genius of then party Chairman Andrew Feldman—spend the maximum allowed in the regulated period, around £19 million. The Conservative campaign was, therefore, spending a huge amount of money on something other than billboard and newspaper advertising; something, in fact, that was not visible from the outside, and which therefore took many in the media—and, more importantly, the other parties—by surprise.

There was much coverage throughout the campaign of Labour's advantage in ground troops—and the “5 million conversations” that Ed Miliband boasted of taking place between Labour canvassers and voters on doorsteps around the country. This supposed ground-war advantage seemed to be borne out by the large-scale constituency level opinion polls commissioned and published in the run-up to the general election by Lord Ashcroft. In all, Ashcroft polled in over 200 constituencies. One of the questions asked in all his polls was how much contact—of different types—people had received from each of the main parties. The polls found significantly higher contact rates from the Labour Party than from the Conservatives—and this Labour advantage widened during the course of the campaign. The Ashcroft constituency polls, published in batches—geographically or by marginality—also seemed to show that Labour were doing better and the Tories worse in the key battleground constituencies. This was taken by many observers as proof that the Labour advantage in ground troops was winning out.

In fact, closer analysis would have revealed that neither of these conclusions was true. Looked at individually, rather than in terms of average swing across a batch of polls, the Ashcroft data clearly showed that the Labour Party was doing worse in its target seats than the national polls suggested, not better. It also showed that though voters were getting more contact, on average, from Labour than from the Tories, there was precisely zero correlation between the reported contact rates and the recorded swing in the same poll. Even if it was true that Labour was racking up more “conversations” and handing over more leaflets, this was not making any difference—because it was too unfocused and too untargeted.

There was relatively little media coverage of the infinitely more sophisticated Conservative Party communications strategy. This was partly because the Conservatives were commendably disciplined in not talking about exactly what they were doing or how they were doing it. Such coverage as there was mostly focused just on the social media side of the Tory campaign—which

tended to be characterised as a gimmick, rather than as the critically important campaign channel that it was. The social media campaign was a vital part of the micro-targeting strategy that the Conservatives had been following since the middle of the Parliament—and the micro-targeting strategy was the real story of the election campaign.

As early as 2011, the Tories had embarked on the first steps of their voter targeting plan for a general election still more than three and a half years away. A highly nuanced voter segmentation, based on sophisticated statistical analysis of a huge poll, defined the electorate into archetypes and separated the biddable from the unbiddable. The Conservative doorstep canvassing script was reinvented to collect key information needed to allocate each voter contacted to one of the targeting segments. Through a combination of large-scale telephone canvassing, direct mail surveys and doorstep activity, the party started to accumulate vast volumes of data. This in turn enabled the Tory campaign team to identify discrete voter types within its core segmentation.

Drawing on the innovations of the two cutting-edge Obama Presidential election campaigns, the Conservative team, led by the remorseless focus of Lynton Crosby and the organisational genius of Stephen Gilbert, the party's long-time campaign guru, created a model to identify different voter groups. The brilliant research of Crosby's partner, the Australian polling legend Mark Textor, informed and honed the messages that would move each of the target groups.

One of the most important lessons taken from the victorious Obama campaigns was the importance of testing every piece of campaign communications. Jim Messina, the éminence grise of the Obama campaign—hired in 2013 to advise the Conservative election campaign—had observed a vast difference between the most effective and least effective way of saying the same thing; equally important, he had also learned that even the shrewdest minds within the campaign were rarely able to predict correctly which execution of a message would be the most effective. This was a critical insight because it enabled the campaign team to embed the rule that communications would be defined by the research, not by the whims and hunches of politicians.

The micro-targeting took into account which mode of communication was most effective, as well as which iteration of what message. The more data that the campaign accumulated, the better they were able to fine-tune the targeting. Some direct mail scripts had literally hundreds of small but important variations. The canvassing script used on one doorstep was often materially different from the script used a few doors down the same road.

The Conservatives continued to refine their targeting right to the final days before the election. But the power and effectiveness of the Tory campaign lay in the fact that they had started to make their case directly to the key voters in the critical constituencies nearly two years earlier. This meant they had the time to implement another lesson from the best practice manual of cutting-edge American campaigns: it takes multiple contacts to get most voters to internalise a message and get comfortable with its implications for their voting decision. By election day, many key target voters will have been directly contacted several times; towards the end of the campaign, callers from the Tory telephone centres were frequently hearing voters spontaneously play back to them exact language from earlier communications.

The continuous process of data gathering meant that those at the heart of the Tory campaign knew that their micro-targeting strategy was working, which meant they were puzzled by, but not worried about, the fact that the public polls kept finding the election in stasis and Britain headed for a grisly stalemate.

It is the nature of micro-targeting that it can be hard to spot. Well before polling day, senior figures in the Conservative campaign were totally confident that they would sweep the board in the Tory-Lib Dem battleground, yet even when the exit poll results were revealed on election night, the Lib Dems still did not realise what had happened to them, in what had been their heartlands.

Very few in Conservative high command believed they would be able to squeeze out an overall majority, but almost all were very confident that their vote share would be 3–5% higher than the public polls uniformly predicted. The Tory targeting was generally too micro to be easily visible even in constituency level polls, let alone national ones. The steady flow of private data—and the sheer volume of it—meant that the Conservative campaign leadership knew that the targeting was working. Their only hesitation was whether it would work enough to take them into majority government territory. The Tories had, all along, a much better sense of what was really happening in the election than almost anyone else.

Perhaps the lowest moment for the Tories came ten days before the election. An exhausted David Cameron had a brain-fade moment and said that his favourite football team was West Ham, whose colours are the same claret and blue as the team he has always supported, Aston Villa. It was a lapse that was tailor-made to become a Twitter meme, which made it feel like a bigger moment than it was. Many on the left hoped - and some Tories worried - that it could be a defining moment, a turning point, in perceptions of Cameron. The Prime Minister may well have had

this moment particularly in mind when he noted in his party conference speech five months after the election that the election result showed that “Britain isn’t Twitter”.

A week before the election, the two core elements of the Tory message—Labour’s weakness on the economy and Ed Miliband’s unfitness to be prime minister—crystallised in a single event. The leaders of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties appeared separately on a BBC *Question Time* programme. Ed Miliband stumbled and nearly fell as he came off stage after his session, which many felt was a metaphor for his leadership. More importantly—in a moment that captured for many how deeply out of touch he was with the mainstream of the country he aspired to lead—Miliband was loudly heckled by the studio audience after refusing to accept that the previous Labour government had borrowed and spent too much.

A few days later, the “Ed Stone” was unveiled; social media again went into meltdown. As many pointed out, it was hard to imagine how anyone could, at any stage, have thought this was a good idea, let alone allow it actually to go ahead. If the polls had not continued to say that Miliband was nevertheless on course to be the most likely next prime minister, the Ed Stone would have seemed an even odder and more jarring error of judgement.

And if the polls had not said, right to the end, that the Tories were stuck in a grim dead-heat with Miliband’s Labour, the Conservative campaign would have got much more credit throughout. There is, frustratingly, no way of knowing when or why the polls ceased, sometime between May 2010 and May 2015, to produce accurate snapshots of party support; this means there is also no objective way to measure the impact of the campaign itself. Some analysis suggests that the polls went wrong almost immediately after the 2010 election and that, in fact, Labour never led the Tories at any point in the Parliament. Countless sane and serious politicians and commentators, on the other hand, report evidence of large numbers of voters deciding only at the very last minute (and with considerable lack of enthusiasm) that it was just too risky not to vote Conservative, suggesting that there must have been a significant and very late swing.

We will never know exactly what happened. But we can conclude with certainty that the 2015 general election campaign was a triumphant victory for big data, sophisticated analytics and micro-targeting over old-fashioned campaigning and “5 million conversations”—and a reward for the sheer discipline, focus and sustained messaging of a Conservative campaign shaped by the lessons from triumphant US elections and from its own campaign failures five years earlier.

CHAPTER 10

The Labour Campaign

Greg Cook

The journalist Janan Ganesh caused some consternation among political campaigners with his typically iconoclastic take on an age-old debate in 2013.

The first law of politics is that almost nothing matters. Voters barely notice, much less are they moved by, the events, speeches, tactics, campaigns or even strategies that are ultimately aimed at them. Elections are largely determined by a few fundamentals: the economy, the political cycle, the basic appeal of the party leaders. The role of human agency is not trivial, but it is rarely decisive either. (Ganesh 2013)

Were this to become the accepted wisdom, many voters might heave a sigh of relief. If nothing that is done during a campaign can shift those pre-determined essentials then politicians, media and campaigners could put their feet up, relax and swing into action as the polling stations close.

Voters may indeed have found themselves bemused during the 2015 election campaign as the parties sought whatever means they could to break out of what appeared to be an electoral stalemate, those means usually taking the form of a policy announcement designed to appeal to one part of the electorate or another. So desperate did this contest become that the

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usual requirement that a pledge be “costed” was pretty much abandoned, most notably by the Conservatives with their apparently unfunded promise to increase spending on the NHS by £8 billion. In some areas like childcare, the differences between the major parties may have seemed almost comical, amounting to a choice between 25 and 30 hours free per week. Was this really what the choice of different governments amounted to?

These voters, or at least a good proportion of them, actually do “notice ... events, speeches, tactics”, at least if focus groups are any guide. During the campaign, it was a constant pleasant surprise to hear participants repeat much of the content of the debate, often some of the obscure bits of it. Many were aware of the pledges that were on offer, although they may not have been able to discern who was saying what. Ganesh may though be correct in claiming that they are barely “moved by” them. Neither party seemed to lay much of a blow let alone a knock-out one in the to-ing and fro-ing of the campaign. To the extent that they are moved, the effects cancel each other out.

Yet it turned out that the election was not the stalemate that the polls seemed to indicate, and one of the features the 2015 election will be remembered for is that the outcome was a surprise to most. So were the polls faulty, or in this campaign did something “matter”, or both?

THE ELECTORAL CONTEXT

It is surprising that expectations for Labour in 2015 were as high as they were. The party had suffered a heavy defeat in 2010, with the second worst share of the vote in its history. Its 258 Members of Parliament (MPs) was the equal third lowest, and it required to make 68 net constituency gains for a majority of one, more than it had achieved in any election except 1997. The enormity of these hurdles was masked by the modest share of the vote achieved by the Conservatives and crucially by their failure to reach a majority of seats. Pundits rightly identified that it was rare for a party of government to increase its share of the vote at its next election and concluded that the Tories had peaked in 2010.

One element of this thesis was that the electoral system was biased against them, and that at any given share of the vote Labour would have more seats than the Tories. The Tories thus supposedly needed to be four percentage points ahead in order to be the larger party let alone have a majority.

The whole concept of bias in the electoral system is tenuous and should have been recognised as such by anyone who could remember the mid-1980s when it was routinely believed that it worked in the Tories' favour. While there are distortions created by under-registration and by the unequal electorates of constituencies, the primary sources of differential votes to seats ratios are political. Just as the Tory advantage in 1983 and 1987 was the product of a temporary split of the non-Tory vote, so the Labour advantage in 2005 and 2010 was the result of a combination of essentially political factors which dictated the distribution of the parties' votes. Any change in that distribution, including changes in turnout, would immediately unpick those calculations, and such a change was almost a certainty.

That is not to say that the electoral system was a level playing field, and the Tories themselves were clearly convinced even before the 2010 election that it was stacked against them, hence the priority which they gave to the boundary review in the context of the reduction in the number of MPs. Undoubtedly, the outcome of that review, in particular the reduction in the number of seats in Wales and the redistribution of MPs from the conurbations to the shire counties, would have significantly shifted the balance and probably would have produced a tiny Conservative majority had it been in place in 2010. The vote not to adopt those changes which followed the collapse of House of Lords reform in 2013 seemed to have made the achievement of a Tory majority in 2015 a near-impossibility.

Most therefore expected that, with Labour and Conservative both up against what seemed long odds on reaching a majority, another hung parliament was likely, and implicitly the interest then shifted to what kind of government might emerge. The politics of coalition seemed here to stay.

THE CONSEQUENCE OF COALITION

What was perhaps underestimated was the extent to which the coalition that had been agreed in 2010 itself had transformed the context of the election. It was obvious from a very early stage that the Liberal Democrats had paid a heavy price for their decision to join the Conservatives in coalition. Their poll rating began to decline almost immediately and, after a respectable showing in the Oldham East & Saddleworth by-election in January 2011, so did their performance in real elections.

This should not have been unexpected. All parties of government lose popularity between elections for obvious reasons. The Lib Dems' decline however was of a different order. By May 2011, they were averaging 10%

in the polls and that was roughly where they stayed. Their notional share of the vote in local elections fell from 25% before 2010 to 15% in 2011 and 12% in 2014. They lost hundreds of council seats and by 2015 controlled just 10 local authorities. In the Scottish Parliamentary Election, their share of the vote halved; in the European Election in 2014, they came fifth behind the Greens. They took 9.2% of the vote in the 19 parliamentary by-elections, losing their deposit in 11 of them.

The consistent refrain in focus groups about the Liberal Democrats was that they were “weak”. Both supporters and opponents of the coalition struggled to recognise any specific Lib Dem contribution to it beyond the referendum on the electoral system and then, totemically, their volte face on the issue of tuition fees. The emotions expressed ranged from contempt to indifference, with much of it focused personally on Nick Clegg. Memories of his performance in the first TV debate were vivid, and many of those who had voted Lib Dem in 2010 specifically recalled this as their reason for having done so. The let-down was thus magnified.

An understanding of the British electorate and long-term trends within it to a large extent depends upon how the Lib Dem vote is interpreted. In 2010 for the first time, the combined vote of Labour and Conservative parties was less than two-thirds of the total, but did that symbolise a drift away from support for major parties per se, or the development of a real three-party system? If the latter, what was the political profile of Lib Dem support? Were the Lib Dems a protest party who attracted support because they were not Labour or Conservative, or were they a “major” party, potential participants in government with values which people supported?

Since the formation of the Liberal Democrats and their origins in the Social Democratic Party split, the assumption had been that were by instinct a centre left party. In 1992 and 1997, they posed principally as opponents of the Tories. In 2001 with their advocacy of higher income tax, and more overtly in 2005, they appealed explicitly to voters on the liberal left. The very fact of Labour’s being in government meant that the disaffected voters they attracted tended to be those who had previously voted Labour. The pattern of their additional support in 2005 as seen in the seats where they achieved the largest swings (some of which they gained) was concentrated among although not exclusive to the professional urban middle classes. In 2010, the Labour to Lib Dem defectors may have been more diverse, but they could broadly be categorised as those who could not support Labour but were culturally antagonistic to the Conservatives. By 2010, their accumulated support probably leaned decisively against the Tories.

To a significant proportion of their supporters therefore, the Liberal Democrats' decision to join the Conservatives in a coalition was an unpleasant surprise, particularly when as they perceived it, the Lib Dems had little or no influence within it. Within a year, it was clear that a large proportion of the Liberal Democrats' supporters in the 2010 election, up to one in three of them, appeared to have defected to Labour.

THE PROGRESSIVE VOTE UNITED?

That switch of support from the Liberal Democrats to Labour remained, until the rise of the Scottish National Party, the single most important electoral development of the parliament. It was possible to interpret this as an unprecedented windfall for Labour with the prospect of uniting the anti-Conservative vote on a scale not seen in over 40 years. One in three Liberal Democrats amounted to about 8% of voters, which by any standard was a huge swing. If translated into uniform swing calculations, it was sufficient by itself to guarantee that at worst Labour would be the largest party after 2015.

That swing manifested itself not just in the polls but in real elections. In much of the country, in particular the large metropolitan authorities of the Midlands and the North of England, the Lib Dems were almost wiped out. Most dramatic of all was the City of Liverpool which had had a Lib Dem majority council right up to 2010, but where by 2015, their representation had been reduced to just 2 of the 90 councillors. This was an extreme example, but the trend was clear. The Lib Dems' biggest losses were in areas where they had gained their seats from Labour.

THE ECONOMY AND THE DEFICIT

Any analysis of the 2015 election is likely to conclude that economic policy was the single defining issue between Labour and Conservatives, and perhaps equally importantly between Labour and the Coalition. It is unremarkable to observe, in fact almost a truism, that any party which aspires to government has to have the confidence of the public in its ability to manage the economy. The circumstances under which Labour left office however made this the issue to which the voters were most sensitive.

The belief that Labour had "spent too much" while in office was very widely accepted, even among many Labour supporters. However, there was a distinction between the debate as conducted by the politicians and

the story as perceived by the public. The Tory charge was that Labour had “failed to fix the roof while the sun was shining”, that no surplus had been built up in years of plenty that might have cushioned the economy when the downturn came. Most voters were less interested in the precise sequence of who had spent what and when. Arguments about structural and cyclical deficits, whether or not too much had been spent on health and education, were, to most, literally academic. The destructive (from Labour’s point of view) narrative was that everyone had enjoyed the spending while it lasted but that there had been an inevitable reckoning as after any period of indulgence. In that sense, “over-spending” was bracketed with all the other things about Labour which were unpopular, such as what some believed had been large-scale immigration and abuse of the welfare system.

The pattern became set quite early in the parliament whereby there was broad opposition to “cuts” but support for the strategy of cutting the deficit by cutting spending. A fascinating set of YouGov questions showed that by a margin of two-to-one, people did describe the cuts as “Unfair”, but by the same margin, they believed them to be “Necessary”. This balance was established in 2011 and with the exception of a brief period in 2012 never changed right up to the election. Whatever the economic merits of the Tories’ spending policies, their purpose was simple to understand, had superficial attractiveness and suited perfectly their overall message. An image of fiscal responsibility could be contrasted with the memories of economic disintegration which were associated with the latter years of Labour government. Many focus group respondents accepted and repeated the Tories’ assertions of their historic role in cleaning up the “mess” that Labour left behind.

Against this, the Labour message about the pace of spending cuts, of the need for stimulus and a balanced fiscal policy was too nuanced to make much instinctive impression. Perhaps the only point where the public acquiescence in the Tory strategy was challenged was after the 2012 budget when a series of shambolic U-turns and dismal national economic data briefly shifted the balance of the polls. In the latter part of the parliament, the upturn in some of economic indicators seemed to bolster a steady increase in support for the Coalition strategy and confidence that it was succeeding.

The Labour strategy was to draw on the sluggishness of the recovery and translate the macro-economic statistics into an argument about the “real” economy, and in the particular the stagnation of real wages.

The term “Cost of Living Crisis”, which was first adopted at the 2013 Labour Conference and accompanied by a headline policy of freezing energy prices, resonated widely. A series of further policy announcements designed to focus on how most people did not recognise or benefit from economic recovery were well received. The need for a higher minimum wage, more investment in child care and an end to the abuse of zero-hours contracts arguably set the agenda of the debate. The Tories sought to match both the rhetoric and some of the policies.

Despite this, the assumption that Labour’s instincts were to spend more than the country could afford never lost its potency. While during the short campaign, individual Labour policies on the cost of living were attractive and relevant, they could not trump the reputational damage to the party done by what the Tories increasingly characterised as “The Great Recession”. Again, the word “recession” was not understood as two consecutive quarters of negative gross domestic product growth. It was about a national malaise, and it was assumed to be something very long term. In the first half of the parliament, when asked about the prospects for the country, the mood among focus group respondents tended to be extremely downbeat. “It will take years to get out of this recession” was a typical reply. In that context and paradoxically the Tories’ message of restraint and fiscal probity was actually one of hope while Labour’s more measured alternative simply did not match the scale of the national challenge. The Tories’ medicine might taste unpleasant, but surely the nastier the medicine the more likely it is to work.

One effect of the Coalition of course was that when it came to the economic argument, Labour was broadly up against the Tories and the Liberal Democrats. Even Vince Cable who was widely understood to be anti-Tory went out of his way to condemn Labour’s record on the economy and to acknowledge the need for some kind of cuts strategy. The net effect of this inevitably was to make the government’s policy seem more moderate and mainstream and Labour’s more out of the mainstream.

ONE NATION

This polarisation of the economic argument over Labour’s record in government and the Tories’ deficit reduction narrative was fundamental to the shape of the election. It made direct switching between the two parties a rarity. A 2010 Conservative voter signed him or herself up to a long-term strategy. If the Tories were able to demonstrate progress by 2015,

then emotionally that voter had some stake in that progress and would be naturally loath to want change. It seems that the numbers of people directly switching between Labour and the Conservatives in 2015 were minimal and self-cancelling. The net swing between the two parties was the lowest ever. The big arguments between them were arguably a re-run of those in 2010 and with the same answer. The philosophy espoused by Ed Miliband in his speech to the 2012 Labour Conference on the need for collectivism and inclusiveness was unable to detach significant numbers of moderate Tories who might have been concerned as to the social costs of the Tories' policies.

The assumption that Labour had abandoned any attempt to attract defectors from the Conservatives led some to claim that there was a "35% strategy" intended to shore up a left of centre minority based solely on defectors from the Liberal Democrats. The implication that there was an incompatibility between appealing to these different segments of the electorate by itself underlined the complex and fragmentary nature of the election. In different parts of the country, others argued for a strategy to attract UKIP supporters, or to prevent defection to them, or to appeal to Green voters. Different policies could to some extent be emphasised discretely to different groups, but the ultimate choice between Labour and Conservative governments remained the same and was based in a fundamental political choice. Any attempt to disaggregate the election into a collection of isolated retail offers to divergent political groups could only be futile and self-defeating.

Against this standstill between Labour and Tories, the 2015 election produced turmoil among smaller parties. The implosion of the Liberal Democrats found its mirror in the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party and the Scottish National Party.

The latter of course turned out to be by far the more significant to the outcome of the election and has no real precedent by which it can be analysed. It has some parallels in smaller-scale bandwagons in lower tier elections such as by-elections and the European elections when voters have been caught by a popular anti-establishment mood, but this of course was on a far greater scale and amounted to a much more coherent political movement. Whatever the longer-term causes, the circumstances of the Referendum campaign were the clear catalyst for a transformation of the party balance in Scotland, although the wider context of the coalition government was important in its own way.

The rise of the SNP was without doubt, more even than the collapse of the Liberal Democrats, the most important development of the parliament. It was not just a matter that, from September 2014 onwards, there

was a clear possibility that Labour would lose all or most of its 41 seats in Scotland. It meant that, potentially, Labour would be pulled towards distinct if not contradictory messages in the different countries of the UK. Added to that the challenge to Labour in what was one of its cultural heartlands inevitably destabilised the party as a whole. Most obviously in a close election where there was already speculation about hung parliament outcomes and legitimacy of different combinations of parties, the loss of 40 seats was almost certainly going to be decisive.

Despite some speculation about Tory–SNP arrangements, it was clear that this would be politically untenable for the SNP and therefore a Labour–SNP coalition became an obvious possible outcome of the election. Many have speculated about how the potential involvement of the SNP in a Westminster government, which was undoubtedly deeply unpopular across much of the English electorate, may have assisted the Tories. Some believe based largely on anecdote that it was the major source of a late swing to the Tories, particularly from the Liberal Democrats. There seems little quantitative support for this contention which in any case is impossible to quantify. Its significance may have been more in reinforcing the general trends towards conservatism and continuity.

The problem of multiple and potentially contradictory messages was further exacerbated by the rise of UKIP in the latter part of the parliament. In this, their 27.8% of the vote in the Eastleigh by-election in February 2013 marked the symbolic breakthrough, followed by the national equivalent 20% of the vote in county council elections that year. Their steady 12 to 15% of the vote in opinion polls filled the gap left by the decline of the Lib Dems, but was the product of much more complex swings of votes. All the polls showed that the main source of UKIP support was 2010 Conservative voters with previous Labour and Lib Dem supporters contributing much smaller numbers. Attitudinally, they were much more anti-Labour than anti-Conservative, although mainly motivated by a rejection of what they saw as a politically correct establishment. The combination of a large swing of Lib Dems to Labour and a large swing of Tories to UKIP provided what looked like an ideal electoral scenario for Labour.

The rapid collapse of UKIP after the 2009 European Election provided one template for how their support may develop, but their resilience in the polls made this less and less likely, and their victories in the Clacton and Rochester & Strood by-elections seemed to make it certain that they would be significant protagonists in the general election. Their strong second place in the Heywood & Middleton by-election in particular caused

concern that they might attract votes from Labour which might make them competitive in Labour seats and mitigate Tory losses in some marginals. Overall however, there was no doubt that were UKIP to be reduced to a single figure percentage, then it would benefit the Tories.

A CAMPAIGN THAT MATTERED?

So how then did this apparent stalemate produce the Tory majority which had eluded them in 2010?

Ganesh would no doubt argue that a Tory victory was determined by those few fundamentals, “the economy, the political cycle and the basic appeal of the party leaders”. What that implies however is that these are somehow objective variables beyond the control of politicians ignoring the role of strategy, message and tactics in shaping those fundamentals. The Tories’ advantage on the economy was less to do with the reality of economic statistics than with their ability to shape the presentation of that reality within their “long-term economic plan”. Here is where message and strategy really matter and where incumbent parties have their bonus. Almost whatever the real economic trends that emerged, the Tories could have presented their policies and their narrative to suit their overall message. Individual voters each have their own perspective on something as ephemeral as the “state of the economy”, and it need bear no relation to macro-economic reality. The perception as to whether or not prices are going up has absolutely no correlation with the level of inflation (which is why the cost of living was a salient theme for Labour). The level of unemployment has little to do with the personal experience which anyone might have in the jobs market. So the idea that there is a real economy that determines electoral outcomes is far-fetched. It is the message that matters and its resonance, not some kind of deterministic and anonymous dynamic.

The concept of a political cycle is more pertinent if by that is meant the constant tension between change and continuity. There was an acknowledgement, if not a complete appreciation, that it was unusual (if not unheard of) for a party to bounce straight back into power in one go having lost an election. Certainly no party had done so from such a deficit of seats and votes. Indeed, the pattern in 1955, 1966, 1983 and 2001 had actually been that the opposition party had lost votes.¹

The starting point for analysing the likely trends in any election is what happened in the previous one and whether there is actually any desire on

the part of the electorate to revisit their decision. Despite their losses to UKIP, there was never really a sense that the Tories had lost the confidence of those that had voted them in.

One aspect of the Tories' advantage that was anticipated was the benefit that they might receive from incumbency and the apparent electoral bonus that MPs defending their seats for the first time appear to receive, especially when they have previously defeated an MP of another party. The 2015 election would obviously be the moment of peak advantage to the Tories in this regard, and it prompted an intense focus of organisational efforts to counter it, including early selection of candidates and employment of local organisers. Such a strategy can though only make a difference at the margins and can obviously only be successful relative to the equivalent efforts of other parties.

We return therefore to the conundrum. Why did an election whose essential components had been established months and years beforehand produce a result which not many anticipated? In many respects, the polls were remarkably robust in describing what were complex shifts within the electorate. They correctly predicted the overall shares of the vote for the Scottish National Party, UKIP, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. The disintegration of the Liberal Democrats appears to have reflected what the polls said. Somewhere between one in three and one in four switched to Labour. But the sum of the parts did not add up to the whole, and they failed to identify the Tories' increased share of the vote and their national lead.

At the time of writing, the British Polling Council/Market Research Society inquiry into the polls' performance has not been published. It may be that some sampling or weighting problem played a role in that failure. There must though have been some kind of late swing, what is interesting is what form that swing took. Was it ever possible that the Tories would not win the election?

Incumbency effects are usually thought of in terms of personality and local campaigning. Another sort of incumbency is inertia, the reaction against the possibility of change towards a default position. Large numbers of voters, the ones who actually decide elections, have little firm commitment to one party or another and may feature in all sorts of ways in opinion polls, loosely attaching themselves to different parties at different times for different short-term reasons, often being undecided. If, however, late in a campaign they start to behave in a more coherent way, then that may create the illusion of a swing. What may have decided the 2015

election was the outcome of a lot of that late decision-making among people who had not, for a combination of reasons, been convinced by the argument for change, and in all likelihood never would have been.

It is a moot point whether anything Labour could have done, in the short campaign or more credibly years beforehand, might have shifted that collective settlement. Maybe this is the “political cycle” which Ganesh refers to and which has mitigated against change in the majority of British general elections. One consequence was that while the Liberal Democrats were losing the plurality of their votes to Labour, they were losing the plurality of their seats to the Tories, that rearrangement of the distribution of votes referred to above which was one reason why the disciples of uniform swing were undone. It was this that enabled the Tories to do what they had failed to do in 2010 and win a majority while hardly adding to their overall vote. It may be that that late decision-making and the late “swing” which it created were concentrated in these seats. That fundamental choice on the economy was as much between Labour and the Coalition as between Labour and the Tories, so where the choice was between the two coalition partners that choice may have been a distinction without a difference.

NOTE

1. In 2001, the big drop in turnout meant that the Tories’ share of the vote slightly increased.

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CHAPTER 11

The SNP Campaign

Kevin Pringle

The election result came as an extraordinary surprise across the UK body politic, and was seen as an amazing, unprecedented event in Scotland. In a way, it had been foreshadowed by the 2011 Scottish parliament elections, but there were major questions people were asking. Can the SNP win parliamentary seats in Glasgow? We had never won one in our 81-year history. We had occasionally won a seat in a by-election, but never a general election seat in Scotland's largest city. Could the SNP really win in what appeared to be really well-entrenched Lib Dem seats? Well of course, it was theoretically possible because it had been done before, as the SNP did win seats like North East Fife and in Glasgow at the Scottish parliament election in 2011. The issue was: could it be replicated at a general election? I think it is the case that the particular circumstances of the post-referendum period meant that yes, it could be replicated.

Historically, one of the big features of Scottish politics is the divergence of voting behaviour between the Scottish parliament elections and UK general elections. While the SNP were obviously capable of doing very well at Scottish parliament elections, the record had not been so good in general elections. The footballing analogy would be that for us Scottish parliament elections were like playing at home and Westminster elections were like

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playing away. Could we do as well when we were playing away fixtures as we had at home fixtures? That had not happened before. Because Scottish parliament elections were seen as being something particularly close to the SNP in the post-devolution period, this in a sense made the challenge of the Westminster elections event greater for the SNP.

Beforehand, when there were only the Westminster elections, for people who were at all inclined to vote SNP that was where to do it. But devolution created that divergence where the SNP were getting about a fifth of the votes in UK general elections. Slightly below that, interestingly, in the post- rather than pre-devolution period, but still roundabout that one fifth of the vote. For us, the big challenge in Westminster general elections was this: could we equalise voting behaviour in Scotland to bring about a situation where folk were voting in a general election in the same way as they were voting in a Scottish Parliament election. We obviously did manage to do that. In fact, we got a better vote in May 2015 than we got in the 2011 Holyrood elections. We got 45% in 2011 and 50% in 2015, bringing with it of course 56 of the 59 seats.

But the reason for that is that the referendum made the difference. Had it not been for the referendum experience, then I think the Westminster general election patterns in Scotland would have been similar, more or less, to past experience. Arguably, over a period of time, the two trends would have come into convergence. Over a period of time, because with the Scottish Parliament becoming the dominant body in Scotland, Westminster voting patterns in Scotland would have become more centred on Scots' voting trends for Holyrood. But it was the referendum that accelerated that process—meaning that something that would have taken some time happened much faster. In many ways, the factors that lay behind it were in a political bubble, which is probably why it was not necessarily anticipated by everyone.

The big increase in SNP members after the referendum was a really crucial factor. On referendum day, we had 25,000 members, and this went up to over 100,000 by the time of the general election. As a point of comparison, as far as we can tell the Labour membership in Scotland is about 13,000 or perhaps 15,000. That was really important from a campaign activity point of view. The general election campaign was a bit like the referendum campaign in a sense. The media narrative is always important; it was ultimately this media narrative that meant the Yes campaign did not win the referendum. But what was as important, indeed in some ways

more important, was the campaigning on the ground—door knocking, local meetings and leafleting—which really came into vogue in the referendum and carried on into the general election. The SNP were now in a position to out-campaign all the other parties. So, whether it was against established Labour seats or Lib Dems in other parts of Scotland, the SNP were able to capture the energy of the referendum campaign. People had become involved in politics because of the referendum, and this had been carried on in the general election; that was a huge resource to encourage more people to vote SNP.

I suppose the most interesting thing about the general election in Scotland is that it had been pretty settled for a long time—from about October, the indications from the pollsters were that the result was set, and it more or less stayed the same. While in the UK the polls were wrong but the people believed them, in Scotland, the polls were right, but we felt disinclined to believe them. We took the view that the work remains to be done and it is not in the bag. The polls could very well change at any point. In fact, they never did change. I think that is explained in terms of the issues being clearer in Scotland for a longer period of time about what people wanted to accomplish in the general election.

What were these issues? They were two-fold. The first one, if you think about the legacy of the referendum in terms of the way that the campaign was pursued by the “No” and the “Yes” campaigns, was that “No” was successful. So what did “No” say? Do not support independence, stay part of the UK, continue to be represented at Westminster and have a strong voice in Westminster. That is what to do. Well, if you look at political attitudes in Scotland over a long time, if you ask people what provides Scotland with the strongest voice, in general terms, they would always tend to say “that’s what the SNP does”. So the narrative or the legacy of the referendum from the No campaign was that it is very, very, important that Scotland continues to remain part of the UK and continues to send representatives to Westminster—that Scotland must have a strong voice in Westminster. Then logically people took that message into the general election and said “well look at the SNP—that’s what they will give us”.

In a funny way, and in an ironic fashion, the general election result was a follow on from what the “No” campaign said in the referendum. The message was to Scotland, as Scotland: stay, have a strong voice in the UK. And that is what Scots decided to do—we will seek to have a strong voice for Scotland and lead the UK in a different direction by voting SNP.

The other hugely important element of the campaign was the need to challenge austerity effectively, politically, in terms of an economic programme. And that also followed on from the referendum campaign, in terms of the desire for a much more equal society. The economic cost of the UK's inequality, which has been so very well documented over the years, had to be challenged, and as we were not able to accomplish that in the referendum, we did seek to do that in the general election.

So, while I would expect the other parties to learn their own lessons from the general election, it is important that one part of the UK made a very strong challenge to austerity—not seeking just a different form of austerity, but a challenge was highly successful in Scotland, and could have been elsewhere.

My final point is about the SNP projected onto the UK-wide political stage. One of the reasons for our success is that in previous times, we have had a limited role in UK-wide media coverage of a general election. This time I think it is fair to say that we were on the UK-wide media stage every day. It has happened in Scotland but not on the UK-wide stage. The Tories used that in order to attack the other political parties. My point is you cannot stop other parties saying nasty things about you, but it does come down to how you respond to it. The most prominent image was Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon with Ed Miliband in their pocket. What is the response to that? Well, it can either legitimise it, to underline the Tory message of saying never in a million years will we have anything to do with these people. That was done by Labour over the course of the campaign, culminating with Ed Miliband in the *Question Time* Special: he said he would rather not go in to government with the help of the SNP than be in government. It was certainly disastrous in Scotland for Labour.

But the other way to look at it from a Labour perspective is that, we have just been through a referendum only a few months ago, saying that we want you to stay and have a strong voice in Westminster. We want you to lead the UK and not leave it. Well, the other response is to say “isn’t it interesting, the Tories seem to be conceding the election”. They are talking about Labour being in power with support from other progressive political parties. Well, that is good, let us really hammer that point home, the Tories are conceding the election. And the second point is why cannot we stand on a progressive platform? There is nothing wrong with that. That is a good thing that would advance politics across the UK. So, rather than legitimising the Tory message by saying we will have nothing to do with the SNP, the alternative approach would be to embrace the message.

Labour could have said: “Absolutely, we are going to advance progressive politics across the UK and we will work with other progressive parties and we will be very happy to do that should the electorate come to that conclusion both sides of the border”.

In a campaign, you never know at the beginning the issues that will dominate by the end of it. But in the end, it has to be about having the courage of your convictions, and the SNP were able to do that, particularly in the post-referendum environment. The electorate in Scotland saw a range of parties and did not see that other parties, particularly Labour, had retained the courage of their convictions, and so opted for the SNP in unprecedented numbers. At the end, that is what happened in Scotland.

CHAPTER 12

Chill Wind: The Liberal Democrat Campaign

Olly Grender

“I am sorry about what happened to your Party in the election” said one of David Cameron’s Special Advisers. “But it was your strategy to destroy us, wasn’t it?” I replied. “Yes”, he said “but we never thought it would work”. I guess that sums up political strategy. You need it, you can apply it, but sometimes the wind also needs to blow in your favour. For the Conservatives, the chill SNP wind from the North was used ruthlessly to create a climate of fear.

For the Liberal Democrats, when it came to a strategy for the general election, it was a battle against a wind which made a tsunami look tame.

In years to come, students of politics and media will be offered up the Liberal Democrat conundrum in May 2010 and told to come up with a plan that avoids electoral disaster five years later.

The impossible situation the Party was in, the moment the polls closed in 2010, was a choice that would cause molten fury, amongst either set of traditional Liberal Democrat voters, which was always present. It was balanced out by the first opportunity in a generation to actually get hands on the levers of power.

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POWER FOR A REASON

A few months after the 2010 General Election, I talked at length with a friend, a former Labour Secretary of State. He was still devastated, almost in mourning, for the loss of power. When people talk about the desire for political power being all about the “chauffeur driven cars”, it is a complete failure to understand what motivates most politicians. To be in power is to realise the ambition of a lifetime. For us, it was a chance to change things for the first time in a generation. It was a chance for constitutional reforms, a change in funding of education for poorer children, an almost revolutionary increase in apprenticeships, a shift towards taxation which rewards work rather than wealth, a long-term approach to the economy, transformative changes to pensions, equal marriage, climate change and more. Forget the “all they want are seats in a limo”, that is baloney. A chance to do something, not whinge about it from the sidelines, is everything in politics and then add some.

THE PRICE OF POWER

But that power came at an enormous price. The Liberal Democrats started sliding in the polls from the minute we went into Government with our long-standing enemies, The Conservative Party.

All the way through the Coalition Parliament, there was a desperate search, for the one argument, the one message, the one policy shock moment that would mean with one bound the Party was free from the negative associations with that 2010 decision. The effect of the tuition fees issue, the potential to change the voting system and the health reforms will all be examined elsewhere.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

For whoever was charged with running the general election campaign had an unenviable task. To state the obvious “I would never have started from here” merely wasted time. Much has been written about how the coalition was formed in the first place ([Laws 2010](#)). Much will be written about what the Liberal Democrats achieved in Government and where some of the mistakes were made (by colleagues including David Laws, Lynne Featherstone, Norman Baker, Nick Clegg and Vince Cable). This chapter is about what the Party tried to do for a General Election campaign and some of the unexplored internal issues that impacted on that campaign.

THE “WHEELHOUSE”

In September 2012, Nick Clegg persuaded a reluctant former leader Paddy Ashdown to Chair the General Election campaign. Whilst hardly a stranger to impossible roles, Ashdown knew that this was a huge challenge: he often described the campaign as a “survival election”. At the same time, Ryan Coetzee, political strategist and CEO from the Democratic Alliance in South Africa, became a special adviser to Nick Clegg, later becoming the General Election Director of Strategy. Both David Laws and Danny Alexander were key players in all decisions. Following the transfer of staff from roles in government, Lena Pietsch headed up the Leader’s Tour, Jonny Oates on issues management and continuing as Nick Clegg’s Chief of Staff; in the final year, Stephen Lotinga joined the Government team as the Director of Communications. I was brought in as Paddy’s Deputy. In a wider team, which was consulted on a regular basis, were Tim Farron, who had headed up the previous year’s European Election campaign in May 2014, Sal Brinton as President and Nick Harvey MP, who was there to challenge on behalf of the Parliamentary Party, especially backbenchers. Along with the team in Headquarters, the “Wheelhouse” was appointed.

In the Liberal Democrats, there are many democratic constraints which mean that it could never emulate the centralised operation of the Conservatives. The Federal Executive, the Campaigns and Communications Committee, the English Party, each Regional Party—all had certain powers over expenditure and the all-important candidate selection process. The Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors was represented by Tim Pickstone. The Federal Policy Committee had control of the manifesto. So it was never a question of pulling a lever; often strategists like Ryan Coetzee had to persuade the lever to move of its own accord. He went to every regional conference and explained the strategy. For the first time in any campaign, every member received a full explanation of the strategy and messaging.

THE MESSAGE

One of the first debates the team held was about the messaging. Traditionally, the Liberal Democrats have been able to pursue a message as the outsiders, “a plague on both your houses”. The insurgent versus the establishment. For the first time, this was no longer a credible message. Firstly, both the SNP and UKIP had taken that message. Secondly, it lacked credibility for a party in power.

In a binary two-party campaign, using first-past-the-post voting, there are two classic messages, either “stick with the plan” or “time for a change”. The Liberal Democrats needed “stick with the plan”, but with a coalition twist. When studied in depth, those people who were prepared to consider voting for the party—the “non rejectors”—recognised that the Liberal Democrats brought something to the coalition, greater fairness in the tax system, for instance. For a good part of the five years, even the Conservatives’ private polling showed that people recognised the Liberal Democrats had delivered a dramatic change to the tax system with the raising of the tax threshold. Given it would be hard to argue we were heading for majority government, the messaging needed to reflect what we would bring to a coalition government: “A stronger economy and fairer society” became the message. As David Laws said at the time “we don’t have confidence that Labour is serious on economic policy, or that the Conservatives have a strong enough policy commitment to creating a fairer society”. However, Ashdown argued that it needed something in addition to that message, which argued our values as a party, namely our belief in empowerment. So “Enabling every person to get on in life” was added. Post the election, some critics in the Party have said this was too “middle of the road” as a message and lacked identity or, as former Cabinet member Ed Davey put it, “we lacked a high visibility jacket”.

MANIFESTO KEY THEMES

The front page of the manifesto was also seen as a critical part of the message, because it would be a strong hint about bottom lines to negotiate in the event of a hung Parliament. It had the key negotiating points on the front of the Manifesto in 2010, something of which every Lib Dem was aware but not necessarily the media or electorate. It speaks volumes about the decision-making processes that those involved in messaging and strategy wanted only three commitments. The politicians wanted one more, and finally the Federal Policy Committee insisted on a fifth! A useful guide to the fraught decision-making processes in a fully democratised party. Compare that to the Conservatives who had one—the long-term economic plan—and you start to see a problem developing! In the end, the front-page commitments were on education, health, balancing the budget, tax cuts and climate change. Less than the 2005 list of 10, but too many nonetheless for effective and ruthless communication.

GROUND WAR AND MORALE

The ground war was identified as the most critical part of the campaign, given the lack of print media support from either the left or the right. It was also crucial that we argued our case to the key voters, setting out what we had delivered in Government and why.

Throughout the period of Coalition Government, the Party continued to be united in the original decision to form a coalition which was backed by a special conference in Birmingham in May 2010 as part of the complex “triple lock” democratic process in the party in the event of a hung parliament. That vote held the Party together through the tougher periods in the Coalition.

Organisationaly, it was a tale of two parties. Whilst one part of the Party went into Government with all the highs and lows of that unique experience, another part and in particular the campaigning part of the Party was haemorrhaging experienced staff, councillors every May and activists on the ground.

The loss of Short Money to the centre, money allocated for parliamentary staff according to numbers of votes and MPs, and a significant reduction in experienced field staff in the first two years meant that in many parts of the UK, the campaigning knowledge was hollowed out of the Party at an alarming pace. At the same time whilst traditional soft Conservative voters recognised why, in a critical moment for the economy, the party had gone into Coalition government, for those activists in Labour-facing seats, the experience on the doorstep was harsh. May 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013 saw losses in Council seats; the Scots in 2010 were particularly unforgiving to Liberal Democrats for working with the “toxic” Conservatives. So the tradition of activism the Party had relied on to overcome the lack of trades union or big business funding the other parties received became much harder to maintain.

MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

Tim Gordon came in as the new CEO of the party in November 2011. He, along with the team in Lib Dem Headquarters, quickly identified the need to get the activists back out on the doorstep and explaining what we had achieved in Government. Incentives were introduced to increase membership and gain financial reward within constituencies. As a result, the Lib Dems could claim to be the only party that had increased membership whilst in Government in recent times. Though it came from a low base, post the losses experienced in 2010.

INCUMBENCY

Whilst nationally the party continued to go down in the polls, local incumbency became the bed rock of the campaign. There was significant evidence in both private and public polling that our hardworking MPs were liked and respected. Hilary Stephenson, Director of Elections and Field Operations, and her team identified a series of Key Performance Indicators that had to be met in each target seat. A “dragons den” process invited seats to apply to be targets. The expectations placed on MPs were tough. One former minister, as late as Autumn 2014, having been “nagged” for two years to be more active in his seat said: “I don’t see what all the fuss is about, I will start knocking on doors in January as I normally do”. Another said in retrospect “to be fair you were warning us to panic for two years but I didn’t”. There were others who threw themselves into their seats and meet their KPIs in full. The toughest one to watch was John Leach MP in his seat in Manchester Withington who exceeded every KPI but still looked like a clear loss. That all categories of MPs came up with roughly the same result suggests that it made little difference.

Early on in the campaign, we were aware that incumbency was not sufficient on its own. Lib Dem polling gave us credit for having the strongest local candidate and being the best choice for the area, but in the same polls, more than half said they would vote on national issues and only just over ten per cent for the candidate and the same on local issues. It was essential to win the national argument and that all hinged on the economy yet, even the constituencies we held, only 7% said they trusted us most on the economy.

A decision early on in the campaign was taken that as much resource as possible would go to the local campaigns. But when you compare this with the £30 million spent by the Conservatives in the short campaign, £3 million from the Liberal Democrats was a mere drop in the ocean.

THE MONEY AND IN-SEAT RESOURCE

The Conservative Party out-spent us by five to one. What this heralds is a dangerous drift towards US-style money politics, but with only one dominant political party. In the last Parliament, 27 of the 59 richest hedge fund managers gave £19 million to the Conservatives. The shift to the left in the Labour Party under both Miliband and Corbyn means that the corporate world believes it now has a limited choice.

The Liberal Democrats actually raised record amounts in the five years preceding the election, but it pales into insignificance when compared with the Conservatives. From 2010 onwards, the Conservatives raised £94.9 million; the Liberal Democrats raised £16.9 million. From annual accounts, total expenditure over the last five reported years for the Conservatives was £162.5 million and for the Liberal Democrats £38.5 million. In the election campaign itself, Jim Messina, a former Obama adviser and big hire for the Conservatives, estimated that £30 million was spent by the Conservatives. Approximately £5 million was spent on sending direct mail alone into Liberal Democrat constituencies.

Of course, the solution to this in the long term is reform of party funding. David Laws brokered talks on this in 2012, but the Conservative and Labour participants were never committed to it; both abandoned the process, blaming the other.

DATA GATHERING, POLLING AND TARGETING

Data gathering and polling became a critical part of the campaign. Between August 2013 and April 2015, there were 139 internal quantitative polls in over 73 constituencies. Survation was used to do the fieldwork. Some seats were polled up to four times. Two voting intention questions were used asking about party identity and candidate identity later in the Parliament after all seats had selected. However due to shortage of funds, as much money as possible was directed towards direct mail during the election in key seats, rather than tracking polling during the short campaign. A decision was taken to instead rely on the data coming in through activity in the seats using the Connect Data system. Connect was first developed for Barack Obama's Presidential campaign, and the Lib Dems held the only licence for it in the UK. In Conservative-facing seats, the data were closely watched for "blue switchers", soft conservatives who in the past had voted for the local Liberal Democrats and who understood why the Coalition was necessary and the undecideds.

THE ADVENT OF THE FEAR FACTOR

About three weeks from polling day, all reports from the constituencies showed that even our most staunch supporters were being phoned and warned that, if the seat went Lib Dem, we would end up with a Miliband/Sturgeon government; this included seats we believed were safe

like Cheltenham. We tried a counter argument entitled “BluKip” warning of the equivalent dangers on the right of a coalition of the DUP, the right ring of the Conservatives and UKIP. But UKIP’s poor showing in the polls reduced the severity of that threat. Danny Alexander raised specific fears of £8 billion in cuts to welfare, which at the time David Cameron denied but has, since the election, implemented. But nothing cut through the fear of soft Conservative voters of a weak Labour Party leader in hock to a strong SNP leader. Ed Miliband’s lack of clarity on ruling out a deal with the SNP until the last minute was devastating.

TOO MANY TARGETS?

Targeting seats was part of the strategy. It will remain a point of controversy as to whether or not the party should have written off approximately 20 seats in the first place and concentrated all resource on the remaining 40. Of course that would have meant explaining to a Parliamentary Party and then keeping that team together over a subsequent two-year period.

THE AIR WAR

The leader’s tour was generally believed to be a brilliant operation, run with precision and efficiency by Lena Pietsch. On the first day, there was a handbrake turn from a hospital that bottled out at the last minute, to a nature reserve with hedgehogs. But otherwise Nick Clegg was out on the road, mostly with educators or kids, having great fun. He was happier out campaigning and enjoying the doorstep experience. He had to spend more time than a leader would normally expect in Sheffield Hallam given the significant resource Labour were deploying to target that seat.

Gone were the daily press conferences, but still with us were the daily stories and the demand for them from the media. Our agenda varied from free school meals, mental health issues, increasing paternity rights and shared parental leave. Meanwhile, the Conservatives resolutely stuck to the economy and refused to be drawn into any arguments however hard we tried, for instance on threatened welfare cuts.

THE CLEGG FACTOR AND THE LURE OF THE HUNG PARLIAMENT (INCLUDING THE TV DEBATES)

One assumption post the election has been that, in contrast to 2010, Nick Clegg was an impediment to the party. “From hero to zero”. He was acutely aware of this danger and shared his concerns about this with colleagues.

For the team around him, there was a frustration that he was mostly unseen and unheard, apart from the passive experience of sitting next to David Cameron during Prime Minister’s Questions.

The apology for tuition fees—which was then comedically set to music, the weekly appearances on the LBC radio talk show answering all questions with replica events on local radio all round the UK and the fated live debates with Nigel Farage in April 2014 were all part of the effort to reintroduce Clegg to the voter. None really shifted the dial. However, his appearances during the “Short Campaign” meant more people switched to the Lib Dems citing the leadership of Nick Clegg than switched to other parties.

It was impossible to overcome the issue of “trust” which had been such a strong part of the pitch in 2010. The tuition fees decision was perceived to have broken that trust, and nothing could fix it. Had it not been tuition fees, it is possible something else totemic would have been used, such as the health reforms, with the same outcome.

CONCLUSION

The mistakes around tuition fees before and during Government, the failure to reform the voting system and the significant struggle to convince anyone that the Lib Dems were the bedrock of economic stability in the Coalition Government meant this election was always going to be hard. The best hope was always going to be to focus all possible attention on those undecided voters and soft Conservatives in key Lib Dem-Tory marginals. That, combined with a long-standing tradition of activism in the party, was key. The model became the Eastleigh by-election victory in February 2013, but the danger was that Eastleigh was a false positive. Lib Dems were active but were outflanked by the levels of expenditure from the Conservatives.

The flaw in many election campaigns is to run it on the basis of the previous one. The Liberal Democrats will examine in detail the 2015 campaign, but the context is unlikely to happen again, ever.

It is possible to argue that the polling won it for the Conservatives, for suggesting Labour and Tories were neck and neck. That the media won it for the Conservatives by focusing on SNP power in a hung parliament. What is fact is that the Conservatives' expenditure was able to capitalise on this context. A combination of factors lost the Lib Dems many seats, particularly in the South West. But such a theory is impossible to prove without a re-run of the election with more accurate polling.

There is a darker conclusion, which is that pluralism in UK politics will never be possible under the current electoral system. In a future election where there is no conclusive result, will any smaller party take the "Clegg option" again when contemplating the test of the "survival election" that will surely lie ahead?

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CHAPTER 13

A Polite Insurgency: The UKIP Campaign

Gawain Towler

One sign that things are changing in British politics is that the United Kingdom Independence Party is present in this volume, contributing a chapter to the post-election *Political Communications* series, something that has never happened before. The plates are shifting.

To start with, a couple of observations about our campaign. I'd like to point out one thing, we didn't have a battle bus despite how the excellent TV comedy *Ballot Monkeys* portrayed us. No such thing existed in our campaign. I think that points to something that I think is very important to the UKIP campaign overall and that is surely a simple question of resources. In her chapter, Olly Grendon talks about how the Tories outspent the Liberal Democrats by such a large margin. Well, at the risk of being lowliest than thou, we had a mere one and a half million to play with.

Go to the night of the election itself and it was astonishing for those of us in the purple corner in that it was deeply bittersweet. We were having a phenomenal night. The first few numbers that came in from Sunderland with UKIP vote shares all in the mid- to high twenties were amazing. The numbers, the sheer weight of people who had voted for us in the General

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Election was astonishing. And yet obviously it was also massively disappointing: only retaining Douglas Carswell's seat in Clacton and failing to gain any seats. Meanwhile, we saw the courageous Mark Reckless losing his seat in Rochester. So it was a very odd feeling that night. How could we not be pleased with 3.9 million votes? How could we not? With the resources we had, with the campaign capacity we had. And yet, and yet, we didn't make those breakthroughs that we would have liked to have done, and which until the last few weeks the polls had been predicting.

There are various reasons for the election outcome, some of which have already been mentioned in the other chapters covering the parties' campaigns. But you've got to remember that this was all in the wake of the 2014 European election, where astonishingly UKIP had managed to win an election, a national one. It was the first time either the Tories or Labour had not won a nationwide contest for over 100 years. After that, most of the pundits, most of the wise, most of the greats and most of the good were very happy to say "well, you know UKIP do well in the Euros and do dreadfully in national elections. Last time, in 2010, they've dropped back down to three per cent. Nothing to see here. Move along. European elections are their thing. Westminster elections are certainly not their thing". Obviously, I don't know if you recall the promise and bet of Daily Telegraph columnist Dan Hodges who had to run down Whitehall stark naked having bet that UKIP would not achieve more than 6 per cent in the Westminster election. Well obviously, the projected collapse did not happen and his projected run has yet to happen and I hope everybody will be there when it finally does (it did happen, months later and but Mr Hodges remained partially clothed).

But one has to look at other figures. Compared to the previous three elections, we were building from a very low base. But this time, we saved 550 deposits. Of the deposits we lost, 47 were in Scotland. We didn't win a single deposit in Scotland, yet we're slowly, slowly growing there too. In Northern Ireland, we lost 11 deposits, and in London, there was a smattering, but that was about it. Five years ago, we only saved 100 deposits, the five years previous to that, it was 35 deposits. That slow growth across the country in all parts of these islands apart from, as I say Scotland, but we'll get there, has been a remarkable progression. We could see that growth, and I think people first realised that UKIP existed apart from in these "strange" European elections that nobody takes any notice of and nobody votes for, in the 2013 County Council elections. And suddenly

there was this great wedge of UKIP county councillors dotted around the country and that was very, very odd to these seasoned observers.

What we have experienced, we've described in a little way as being a "Lib Dem approach" to things and that is community activism. We don't have the resources. We don't have the media clout. We don't have the financial backing to do anything other than be grassroots and online campaigners. Currently, just before the election campaign started and now again post-election, we're looking at less than 20 full-time staff for the party as a whole. Yes, the MEPs have a couple of members of staff, but UKIP—rather than people who are paid through the European Parliament and therefore unable to be active during campaigns because it's against the law—is a very small, very tight operation and we can only do so much. So the growth of our membership across the country upwards, not quite but almost up to 50,000, has had a significant impact on our ability to get out our message.

Now when it came to looking at the campaign itself, obviously our ultimate Unique Selling Point is the Europe question. The opening of the borders with the Eastern European countries with such wildly differing GDP levels has had a significant impact on the support that UKIP has been able to garner. In her chapter, Olly Grender talks about being an "insurgent" in government. Well we're certainly not in government, but we're certainly looking like insurgents. And that "Mr Smith comes to Washington", that outsider voice that the SNP were also able to pick up very well, this slightly insurgent perspective also has a great depth of appeal. However, as the campaign wore on, it became clear that, whilst we were confident in a few of our target seats, things were not going as well as we'd liked and we then saw a divergence of the campaign into essentially Thanet (for our leader Nigel Farage) and the country at large (for everybody else).

There was a very, very door-by-door grass roots campaign operating in Thanet South. We had an astonishing number of public meetings. There were these lovely claims from people saying "we've never seen that Farage bodge down in Thanet". Well that's largely because most of the stuff he was doing, wasn't publicised. It wasn't dragging the press around. It wasn't having that sort of normal almost "Benny Hill style" carry on as he walked down the street and he'd got this crowd of people waving their hands behind him which I have seen on numerous occasions. But every single Council Ward had its own public meeting to which only people in

that Ward were invited and the press generally were not. The numbers responding were very, very good. Witness also the number of people spoken to, and there has been polling done on the amount of contact with electors in not just Thanet but also Thurrock and a couple of other of our target seats. Our outreach and our ability to get on people's doorsteps was very, very good in that small, limited number of constituencies.

Outside a small number of seats, just by quarts and pint pots there's no way we could provide the amount of effort that certainly our activists would like to have seen us do. But I think that on a broad case, I agree with some of the things that have been expressed by other party representatives in this volume, in that much voting is done in people's heads before the campaign starts. There's only so much one can do during a campaign. But you cannot stuff up. I think the largest single thought in our head was "don't make a pig's ear of this". Don't do something phenomenally stupid and we'll probably get away with what we're trying to do. That adage of not stuffing up is made more complicated by our lines of command and control in UKIP and the feeling that we regard ourselves as a classical liberal party and that means that, unless somebody is malicious, they should have the right to say and believe that which they do. As long as they subscribe to the major aspects of UKIP policy that is. So the ongoing story that "you've got a bunch of loons on your side" is an entertaining media narrative and meme and, though the numbers are tiny in comparison to the sheer numbers of candidates we have out there, we certainly have our more variegated members.

Thus, whilst UKIP for the first time in a General Election campaign did get a fair whack of media coverage, let's put it this way, it wasn't talking about our policies. We were told no, you can't complain, we've given you acres of space in the BBC this week. I'll give an example, where my Wednesday was taken up with a city council candidate in Bristol. Not a Westminster candidate. Nobody was talking about the council elections, but oh yes, let's bring up this council candidate in Bristol who gloried under the name of Johnny Rockhard and his porn empire. A minor porn empire. Okay, so we gave you lots of coverage because one of your council candidates was a porn star! And then the next day, we had some Labour candidates accused our candidate in one of the Southampton seats of the archaic, historical crime of electoral treating. Yes, he was handing out sausage rolls to children. And that was the next day. Well, you can't complain about the amount of coverage you're getting. You're getting lots of coverage. Yesterday, it was porn stars. Today,

it's about trying to bribe the electorate with sausage rolls and jam tarts. It's a different sort of coverage that UKIP get, put it that way. And it plays into the general feeling that our people are different, odd, peculiar and strange. And therefore, to a certain extent, not to be trusted.

We had to suck this treatment up. We don't have the power to pick up the phone to senior editors and say "Oi!". We don't have that sort of influence or control. It's just not something we can do. And it became apparent that the little we try to do to try and get what we would regard as a fair play from the media, talk about our policies, talk about what we're actually trying to achieve, is perceived as whinging. And if it's something that UKIP has actually achieved we were getting comments like "you're ordinary, you're normal, you're like us. You're not like those chaps up in town". And yes, if that means you have slightly obscure views that aren't the accepted ones on the agenda of the political establishment and elite and then so be it. We can live with it. We hear much worse things in the institute and the pub. But people don't like to see whinging, and our attempts to try to make this playing field a little bit more level—that is to say, yes we are getting coverage but it's about a sausage roll man and not about (say) our health policy—was perceived to be whinging. And then there became this feeling that UKIP that had been historically gung-ho, pretty chilled about the world, get on with it. Okay, the slings and arrows come in our direction, they just bounce off. There began to be a feeling that we were getting thin skinned. We were making complaints where complaints were just pointless and not necessary. And that did start to damage us. But I think that the most important thing, and it has been touched on elsewhere here, is I think everybody will admit that the campaign run by the Conservatives was very, very effective.

I do not believe personally that a UK chief strategist would have run the Conservative campaign as Mr Crosby did. I think his commission was to get the Tories elected and didn't he do well. One has to congratulate him on that. However, look at what he has done by making such a big deal about the Scottish Nationalists and the Labour–SNP possibility and creating this astonishing fear in middle England around the threat of SNP success. All that effort was taken to win the referendum, to keep the UK together and the focus of the Conservative campaign was the most astonishingly nationally divisive campaign I have ever seen. And I truly do not believe that any Brit could have run that campaign in that way, with absolute disregard to the union of the UK. But we should congratulate him, he did well, he did a brilliant job. We saw, and as Olly Grendon also

describes here, that in the last week we saw people who were not just “possibles” but were confirmed voters coming up to us in seats, in our target seats, basically saying, “look we do agree and we voted for you last year in the Euros and we’ll vote for you again but this SNP thing, this Sturgeon woman, what’s she going to do to the country? What are they doing to do with Labour? I just don’t trust her and we’re going to have to vote Tory”.

And there was a very clear illustration of the impact of the “fear campaign” in the Thanet results. Nigel Farage not winning in Thanet South was obviously hurtful to us and annoying and all the rest of it. But people were telling us on the doorstep “we can’t vote for you in Westminster but don’t worry the full council was up in Thanet. We will vote for you at council level. Don’t worry about it, we’ll do that”. UKIP swept the board in Thanet District Council. For the first time, we now run a second-tier local authority. And we won it heavily, by a long, long way. Indeed, in other councils in various parts of the country, we were very successful and saw very good results. So I think that the proof of this “fear campaign” of the Tories, and very effective though it was, can be seen here, in our UKIP experience.

A couple of final thoughts. I think Labour may need to look far more closely than has been suggested at the impact of the UKIP vote, particularly in “old” Labour seats. I believe the depth of resentment amongst people who had formerly always regarded themselves as Labour voters is a little bit deeper and stronger than some have suggested. I really do. I think there’s a lot more to it than many have stated. It is not surprising to me that, of the successes we had in places like Doncaster, one of the council seats that we picked up there was in Hatfield the village which was home to, until the last couple of weeks, one of the last deep mines in the country. These people aren’t old Tories who are voting for us, and we’re winning council seats in places like this. These people are deeply disappointed. They don’t think that UKIP are going to make up Doncaster Council, but they’re still voting for us in significant numbers to give us some seats. I think that, as I’ve tried to explain, as you see from just the saving of deposits over those three elections, the growth of UKIP will continue. And it will continue in the North and it will continue in the largely Labour areas.

One straw in the wind I think as we go forward is the impact of UKIP in Wales. In two recent elections, in the Westminster and in the Europeans, we’ve beaten Plaid in Wales—despite the fact that Leanne Wood said you couldn’t be Welsh and vote UKIP. And if you look, again the UKIP

strength is in the Labour heartlands, in the valleys, in the old coal mining areas. In the old industrial areas, as people who believed and had been taught by their grandparents and their parents that Labour was the voice for them. It just isn't any more. And they're looking to, in large numbers now, UKIP as an effective voice for those people who feel they've been completely abandoned by the Westminster model.

CHAPTER 14

For the Common Good: The Green Party's 2015 General Election Campaign

Judy Maciejowska

CONTEXT

The 2015 election was always going to be a huge test for the Green Party. Having pulled out all the stops in 2010 to get Caroline Lucas elected to Brighton Pavilion, we knew we had at least, to repeat the trick and save her seat, or risk setting ourselves back by ten years. Caroline had only a slim majority—just 1250 votes—and Labour had her seat in their sights. We also needed to build on that success, by getting more people working alongside her in Westminster, and making some real dents in the establishment of governance.

There was a lot going in our favour, not least the welcome change to fixed-term parliaments, from elections called by the incumbent prime minister, so doing away with the guessing game that previously hung like the sword of Damocles over the activities of political parties. Also, the Liberal Democrats—our ballot-box rivals in many places—were draining support, as the star that had shone so brightly for them in 2010 was fading with their damaging Tory-led government coalition. Furthermore, we had just fought a successful European Election campaign, gaining our first

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seat in the South West, our membership was rising, and opinion polls were putting us on about 6%, level pegging with the Liberal Democrats.

But there were also challenges. The success of the South West's European campaign masked the disappointments in two other regions—North West and Eastern—where we had hoped to do well. And UKIP's simple, albeit contrary message, was appealing not only to anti Europeans, but also to those voters who felt disillusioned by the political status quo, the natural left-of-centre, "fed-up-with-the-lot-of-them" voter, with whom Greens needed to engage. The ubiquitous "first-past-the-post" voting system—the ugly fly in the ointment of our much vaunted democracy—is a massive hurdle for any third party to overcome, so it is essential for Greens to get ourselves into the top two positions in any constituency for a chance of winning the seat on the day.

There were also structural gaps in the party's management. With the membership growing fast—the only party to be enjoying such a rapid rise at that time—a new senior management team had been employed into administrative and campaigning roles. In addition, there were fewer than a dozen full-and part-time paid staff; the party relied on the generosity of volunteers, both at local and national levels, to decide on and implement its activities. This was especially so in the case of the National Elections Coordinator, an executive post that been vacant for several months in 2014, following the illness of the young incumbent. I was asked to put myself forward for election because of my experience running the 2010 campaign. I had recently moved from London to Devon, where I had been working on the South West's successful election to the European Parliament, whilst also rebuilding a sixteenth-century farmhouse and smallholding, so managing the party's general election campaign wasn't high on my agenda. Clearly however, this was going to be a vital year and I was assured that the new senior staffing structure would lighten the load, so I accepted the nomination and took office in September 2014.

STRATEGY

Brighton Pavilion and Bristol West

The objectives of the campaign were clear from the start. It was absolutely imperative that we save Caroline Lucas's Brighton Pavilion seat and increase her majority. Caroline had been a supremely good MP, but there were other challenges in the constituency. The Green Party had been

running a minority administration on the council, and councillors had been coping with the very difficult task of balancing a budget. Although canvassing feedback showed that residents were genuinely sympathetic to the Green councillors' dilemma, the Labour opposition were relentless in their media propaganda. Furthermore, Labour had decided that Brighton Pavilion was to be one of their primary Westminster targets, putting massive resources behind their campaign to oust Caroline Lucas. So it was vital that we gave Brighton Green Party the tools they needed to counteract the relentless negativity emanating from the massive Labour machine.

But one MP, however good, cannot alone make the social changes that Greens envisage in a sustainable world. We needed to put support into other constituencies where local parties were achieving good results, and where previous elections had already shown promise. We also needed to build capacity for future elections. In Bristol West, the Liberal Democrat MP was struggling to save what had been a comfortable majority over Labour in 2010, when the Greens had lost their deposit. But the local party had been working hard, building steady support over several years, gaining seats on the council and serving in the cabinet of the independent Mayor. We had also observed considerable support amongst Bristol voters during the May elections to the European Parliament, when Molly Scott Cato took the region's seat from the Liberal Democrats. So, all the indications showed us that Bristol West would be our next primary target, whilst a handful of other seats—Norwich South, Liverpool Riverside, Sheffield Central, Oxford East and Solihull—were picked out for support and growth for future elections.

Candidate Numbers

One of the difficulties of being a small party was that we have been unable to stand candidates in as many seats as we would have liked. In 2010, with a membership of approximately 11,000, we contested just over 54% of seats. The fact that many thousands of people in England and Wales were unable to cast a Green vote was a huge disappointment, not only to our supporters but also to those party activists who see the election cycle as the showcase of the Green programme. First-past-the-post makes contesting elections a risky and expensive business for local parties, whose priorities are, very appropriately, their local council chambers and communities. But there is a compelling case that once a voter puts a cross in the box

marked “Green Party”, they are very likely to do so again; we needed to build that grassroots support if we were to progress from local authority to Westminster level of government.

So it was decided to contest 75% of all parliamentary seats. In September 2014, this seemed like an insurmountable task, but membership was growing and enthusiasm was high, as we set about working with local parties to help their selection process, and provide additional training and advice. Our two biggest concerns were ensuring selection was conducted democratically, according to our internal regulations, and helping local parties fundraise for the deposits. As it turned out, the former was by far the biggest problem, as membership began to soar and the smaller local parties grew more excited about the prospect of presenting a really different agenda from that which was on offer from the three main parties.

In order to stand for parliamentary elections, the Green Party regulations state that members must have joined the party at least a year before polling date. They must then be nominated by ten members of their local party and the nomination put to a full ballot of all members in the constituency. Furthermore, if no women come forward during the initial opening of nominations, the local party must reopen nominations to encourage women to apply. If any proposed candidate does not meet the criterion of one year’s membership, their nomination needs to be approved by the party’s Regional Council—the national body that, amongst other things, makes sure things are done properly—and the National Election Agent. If approved, the application goes back to the local party and the nomination can proceed in the usual way.

Under normal conditions, this system was laborious, but it worked well. But as new members joined, local parties’ enthusiasm to hit our 75% target grew eagerly. The Regional Council was becoming overwhelmed by applications from hundreds of wonderful people all wanting to do their bit by being a Green candidate in their constituencies. A cut-off date for applications needed to be applied, to give time for each application to be scrutinised and still go through the local selection ballots. By the time of nominations closing on 9 April, and after much burning of midnight oil, for the first time, the Green Party in England and Wales contested 93 % of seats—535 candidates, whilst our colleagues in Scotland contested a further 38. Of those 535 in England and Wales, 38 % were women and 62 % were men.

Curiously, for a party with several strong women in leadership roles, and with the rule that ensured women the opportunity to come forward

for selection, men are still more inclined to stand for elected office than are women. Although in the end, the Greens had more women candidates than any other party—the SNP were nearest with 36%—there is more to be done in all parties if we are to present a truly representative platform to the electorate.

THE GREEN SURGE

Membership growth was turning into a massive phenomenon. For several years, we had seen only a gentle rise from about 12,000 in 2010, to about 16,000 at the time of the 2014 European Elections. But then things started to take off.

Natalie Bennett had been elected leader two years earlier on the promise that she would work with local parties, helping them with campaigning and building membership levels across the country. Sticking to her word, Natalie spent months visiting all local parties, supporting their campaigns and attending public meetings in small villages and big cities alike. Meanwhile, a popular disillusionment over an out-of-touch political class was fomenting throughout the country. Fuelled largely by the decisions of the broadcasters not to include the Green Party in the proposed leadership debates, and angry at the exclusivity of their proposals, the public began to turn to us. In September 2014, our membership tipped over 20,000; 22,000 in October; 25,000 in November and 30,000 by Christmas 2014. Then came January.

Discussion about the Leadership Debates had begun in October. The broadcasters' announcement that they would include the leaders of the three main parties and UKIP (who had gained two MPs in recent elections) but exclude the Greens was greeted with derision from many quarters, not least David Cameron, uncomfortable about appearing alongside UKIP's Nigel Farage, whose flamboyant style would likely eclipse that of the prime minister. Cameron would only join in if Natalie Bennett could be included too, presumably because Natalie would be a counterbalance to Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg.

The negotiations toed-and-froed for weeks, but still the Green Party was excluded. The public were getting rattled, seeing this as just another fit up by the establishment to exclude any opposition to the cosy white male status quo. In November, an online petition with 260,000 signatures was presented to the BBC, and a December ICM opinion poll showed that 79% of the population wanted the Greens included. As the New Year

advanced, people were joining the party in throngs, with 15,000 signing up on one day in January. We released a poster showing Natalie Bennett and Caroline Lucas alongside the words “What Are You Afraid Of, Boys?”—an antidote to the grey-suited men who were dominating both the air waves and politics. The poster went viral in hours, and members continued to flock to our support. By the end of the month, we had four times more members than a year earlier, more than the Liberal Democrats and more than UKIP. No longer could the broadcasters argue that we should be excluded because we were too small.

In February, the broadcasters agreed a new format for televised debates that included leaders of the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens—all women—as well as the men from the four other parties. Finally, the mould was broken, but the Green Surge continued, and by Election Day, we had over 67,000 members, making the Green Party the third largest UK-wide party.

THE CAMPAIGN THEMES AND MESSAGES

Of course, preparations for an election campaign do not begin six weeks before polling day. The welcome change to fixed-term parliaments meant that all parties knew five years earlier the precise date by when all preparations needed to be ready. Nevertheless, things seldom go to plan, as Harold Macmillan once famously observed, “events” can blow one off course. But there are some projects that repeat election after election, and can be planned several months ahead. One of the biggest of these is production of the manifesto—the document that few voters read, but which is scrutinised by journalists, non-governmental organisations and political pundits. In the Green Party, the drafting of this crucial document is managed by the Policy Development Coordinator, and by the time I took office she had appointed the writers, Brian Heatley, a retired civil servant, and Andrew Dobson, Professor of Politics at Keele University, both very experienced and knowledgeable in policy and politics—they had also written our 2010 manifesto—so I knew we were in good hands. The manifesto production would take many months, as some policy details such as higher education funding, national insurance contributions and childcare provision needed additional research and approval by the Spring Conference.

Meanwhile, we were deciding on the main messages that we wanted to get across for the campaign. For several years, we had been perceived as a “single issue party”, concerned only with environmental matters and ignoring social issues. Though, a brief glance at our comprehensive policy

programme reveals that this is very far from the case; sustainability and ecology—the philosophical foundation of the Green Party—encompass all life on earth and the fragile web of nature that holds it together, and our policy lexicon attempts to address that. So although we had begun to explode the single issue myth in recent years, we needed in 2015 to present our programme on the big social issues like the NHS, housing and the cruelty of the government's austerity measures. We also needed to ensure our messaging was relevant in our target constituencies, Brighton Pavilion and Bristol West, where austerity and public service funding were cutting deep into the lives of the poorest people.

So we chose “For the Common Good” for the campaign headline, and the six themes of Housing, the NHS, the Economy, Transport, Education and Climate Change, as those to be promoted on leaflets, billboards and social media. We knew from our canvassing returns that these were already well-liked, and by expanding our policies on, for instance, bringing the railways back into public hands, bringing in a wealth tax or ending the privatisation of the NHS, we were able to present a very popular programme that consistently led the field on the polling site “Vote for Policies”.

OFCOM, THE MEDIA AND “EVENTS”

In January, the communications regulatory body, Ofcom, released its initial draft paper on the major political parties and their entitlement to airtime, including Party Election Broadcasts. Their criterion for deciding which were the “major” parties was based on electoral support in the 2010 elections and later local elections. Ofcom’s proposals stated that the Green Party was not a major political party and should not therefore be given airtime equivalent to Labour, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats or UKIP. The Green Party protested loudly, pointing to our position in opinion polls and our rising membership, and accusing Ofcom of failing democracy by preventing an alternative politics to be put to the electorate. Nevertheless their final report, released in March, stuck by the view that the Green Party was not a major party, and would not, therefore, be allocated additional airtime in the form of Party Political Broadcasts or Party Election Broadcasts.

This decision defined much of the campaign for the Greens, as it meant that the broadcasters were not obliged to give our spokespeople equal coverage to, for example, UKIP, who gained greatly from the decision. It also meant that we were more reliant than ever on social media and local

activists to promote our candidates and policies. But, the BBC and other broadcast media were bound to give us what they perceived to be coverage proportional to the support that was building in the polls and social media.

Although we have a panel of specialist spokespeople, the national media were only interested in the party leader, Natalie Bennett or the MP Caroline Lucas, and the heavyweight journalists were not pulling any punches for the smaller party's representatives. Natalie's national media appointments were coming thick and fast, whilst she was also travelling up and down the country helping local parties and smiling for their local cameras. Her energy and dedication to the membership was extraordinary, but the pressure of work was beginning to take its toll, as the inevitable winter colds and flu took hold.

At our February meeting of the party executive, Natalie sat slightly back from the table, saying she had another sore throat and did not want to give anybody a cold. I asked her if she was okay, and in her customary jovial way Natalie replied, "Oh yes, it'll pass—busy week ahead, so it has to!". We were launching the campaign three days later.

The launch went well, and then Natalie was asked to go into LBC studios for an interview with Nick Ferrari. The interview went very badly as, struggling with a cold, Natalie's mind went blank. Ferrari, who must have seen she was unwell, stuck the knife in deep and turned it. Twitter and the newspapers referred to Natalie's performance as "excruciating" and a "car crash interview". But in characteristic style, Natalie released a public apology to the membership, and continued with her engagements. Clearly, the public warmed to her humble admission that she had underperformed, as another 2000 joined the party.

A week later, there was a moving postscript to these events. We were gathered at the ACC Centre in Liverpool for our spring conference. As delegates were taking their seats for the first plenary session, Louisa Greenbaum, the Conference Organiser, was at the microphone, welcoming newcomers and giving out general domestic notices, whilst Natalie and Caroline Lucas quietly made their way to the rostrum in the background. Now, unlike some parties, Greens do not do stage managed displays of artificial applause and have little patience for hierarchy or political celebrity. But ten days after her mauling in the press, 700 conference goers simultaneously broke into a spontaneous five-minute standing ovation for Natalie. If she had been in any doubt that the members were on her side, she was certainly reassured by those five minutes.

THE FINAL WEEKS

At 4.00 p.m. on 9 April, nominations closed for anybody wishing to stand for election to Parliament. As a candidate or campaign manager, this is a nail biting deadline for me. I am always worried that a sponsor may have given their details wrongly, nominated more than one candidate or made some other small but unreparable mistake on the nomination form. But I wasn't a candidate this time around so needn't have worried, as 535 Green Party candidates and their agents were all formally accepted by their local returning officers. The "short" campaign was underway, with four weeks to polling day.

Because we had only been allocated a slot for one televised election broadcast, we knew it had to be an attention grabber. For the 2014 European elections, we had hired Creature of London to produce a satirical broadcast that had attracted wide acclaim, so we called on Creature again to come up with something equally arresting—they did us proud! The five-minute video was called "Change the Tune" and featured actors representing David Cameron, Nick Clegg, Ed Miliband and Nigel Farage as members of a boyband singing and dancing in harmony, giving the impression that the leaders of the four other parties were all looking and sounding the same. The broadcast was televised on 9 April, and it is fair to say that some people—mainly supporters of other parties—were baffled by it, but it did not matter. We had released it the night before on social media where it had gone viral, with more 800,000 views by polling day.

The campaign manifesto, *For the Common Good*, was launched at the Arcola Theatre in East London on 14 April, on the same day as Labour and the Conservatives released theirs. Natalie Bennett was joined by Caroline Lucas on the platform, and they talked about our plans for public services, the NHS, housing and transport, as well as the scandal of the austerity cuts that were causing such hardship amongst those in most need. They also explained the link between our social policies and the environmental core of all our messaging. Natalie pointed out that at the first of the leadership debates a week earlier, she had been the only leader who had mentioned climate change, although each of the other parties all professed to recognise the danger to humanity if it was ignored. Caroline talked about the anticipated outcome, if polls were to be believed, of another hung parliament, and the important role that Green Party MPs would play under such circumstances. We would work with parties that shared our vision, she said, on a case-by-case basis. This might include the SNP,

Plaid Cymru and Labour or Lib Dem MPs who wanted also to end austerity and cut Trident. We would not, however, consider working with the Conservative Party or with UKIP.

The second of the two main leadership debates took place on 16 April. This was a debate between opposition party leaders, so there was no David Cameron or Nick Clegg. Instead Natalie shared the platform with the four leaders of the non-government parties, Labour, SNP, Plaid Cymru and UKIP—two men in grey suits and ties, and three women looking bright and sounding like a new style of politics. As the 90-minute debate progressed, the differences became even more apparent, with the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon, Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood and Natalie Bennett all reaffirming their parties' willingness to work together in a progressive alliance of those parties who shared a common vision, in order to keep the Tories out of government. Labour's Ed Miliband refused, convinced instead that he would form the next government in his own right.

It was also this debate that produced one of the more memorable images of the campaign, with what the press later called “the group hug”. At the end of the debate, when the leaders would normally have been shaking hands, the three women, Natalie Bennett, Leanne Wood and Nicola Sturgeon met in the middle of the stage smiling and hugging. This surely augured well for a new style of politics.

The Results and Beyond

Of course, we soon learned that none of the predictions were accurate and the Tories won a small but overall majority on 7 May. The losers were undoubtedly the Liberal Democrats, with the Labour Party also doing poorly. The Green Party's results were a mixed bag.

A total of 1,157,613 people had voted Green, just under 4% overall, 2% higher than 2010 and by far the party's strongest result in a UK General Election; we saved 24 % of deposits, as opposed to six in 2010, and came second place in four constituencies: Bristol West, Liverpool Riverside, Sheffield Central and Manchester Gorton. And of course, Caroline Lucas and the wonderful team in Brighton Pavilion out-performed the huge Labour onslaught and re-elected Caroline with an increased majority of 7967.

There were other pleasing results too. Bristol West increased their vote share from 3.8% in 2010 to 26.8%—a whopping rise of 23.0%. There were other constituencies too, that produced unexpected results, like the Isle of

Wight where our vote went from 1.3% in 2010 to 13.4% this time around, and Manchester Gorton where we came second, increasing our vote from 2.4% to 9.8%.

But on 8 May, we still had only one MP. More than a million people had voted Green Party, had wanted more Green MPs and had demanded a different style of politics from the same old, same old. Yet the out-dated, anti-democratic, first-past-the-post electoral system gave them just that—same old, same old. Of course, it was not just Green Party voters who were outdone by the antiquated system; UKIP's 3.8 million votes only produced one MP, yet the Scottish Nationalist returned 56 MPs with only 1.5 million votes, whilst the Liberal Democrats' returned just eight with 2.5 million.

The press and broadcast media, almost in unison, condemned the system, and if there is one thing which UKIP and the Green Party can agree on, it is that first-past-the-post must go. A few senior members of both Labour and the Conservatives are also beginning to recognise the injustice of the current way in which they are elected, but much work still needs to be done to persuade them to put democracy before their own interests.

Meanwhile, in the Green Party, we are working on plans for the next round of elections: the Mayoral contests in some of our big cities, and regional assemblies in London and Wales, where proportional systems give Greens a real opportunity to turn votes into seats. 2020 will come around fast, and there is much work to do in building more support for the next general election.

PART III

Media

CHAPTER 15

The Media Campaign: The Issues and Personalities Who Defined the Election

*David Deacon, John Downey, James Stanyer,
and Dominic Wring*

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the General Election, there had been considerable speculation over what impact the growth of support for what had previously been labelled “other” parties would have on its outcome. Allied to this, there has been growing interest in a parallel development relating to the fragmentation of mass media audiences and what potential impact this might have on politics among other things. But despite these trends, a two-thirds majority nevertheless supported the two largest parties in 2015 and did so after an election whose agenda was influenced by the television and press coverage that millions of these voters still relied on as key sources of relevant information. This chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the news media through identifying and exploring the personalities and issues that were reported in the press and on television. Consideration will be given to the amount of time and space devoted (or not) to the different policy areas as well as the attention given to the more prominent

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campaigners involved including those belonging to various parties. The discussion will also compare the coverage provided by the rival media platforms and, in particular, how the traditionally partisan press reporting of the election differed to that of the broadcasters.

Loughborough University Centre for Research in Communication and Culture conducted content analysis of campaign news coverage following procedures developed and refined since the first such project was undertaken during the 1992 General Election. The sample included mainstream media reports that appeared during each weekday (i.e. Monday to Friday inclusive) during the campaign between 30 March and 7 May. For television, every election-related item found in these bulletins or programmes was coded for *Channel 4 News* (7 p.m.), *Channel 5 News* (6.30 p.m.), BBC1 *News at Ten*, ITV1 *News at Ten*, BBC2 *Newsnight* and Sky News 8–8.30 p.m. For the press, all campaign news items found on the front page, the first two pages of the domestic news section, the first two pages of any specialist election section and the page containing and facing the papers' leader editorials in *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror*, *The Sun*, *Daily Star* and *Metro* were analysed. Every news item in the sample was manually coded.¹

WHOSE NEWS? THE STOPWATCH BALANCE

“Stopwatch balance” is a measure that refers to the relative prominence of the different political parties in terms of the news media coverage received (Norris et al. 1999; see also Deacon et al. 2006). There are two indicators of this, specifically how much direct quotation time—or space in the guise of the printed word—was devoted to spokespeople from the rival camps. Furthermore, there is the related issue as to the frequency with which different party representatives appeared in media reporting. Broadcasters gave Labour and the Conservatives, the two major parties vying to take office, similar levels of access. Despite their marked decline in the polls, the Liberal Democrats received the next most exposure. Figure 15.1 does, however, underline the extent to which the broadcasters responded to the rise of what were once collectively labelled “others”. By doing so, they gave unprecedented prominence to these parties during a national campaign. UKIP and the SNP, in particular, received considerably more coverage than they had ever achieved in past general elections. This underlined both parties' ascendancies and their ability to capitalise on the momentum afforded them by, respectively, the previous year's votes in the EU elections and Scottish Referendum on Independence.

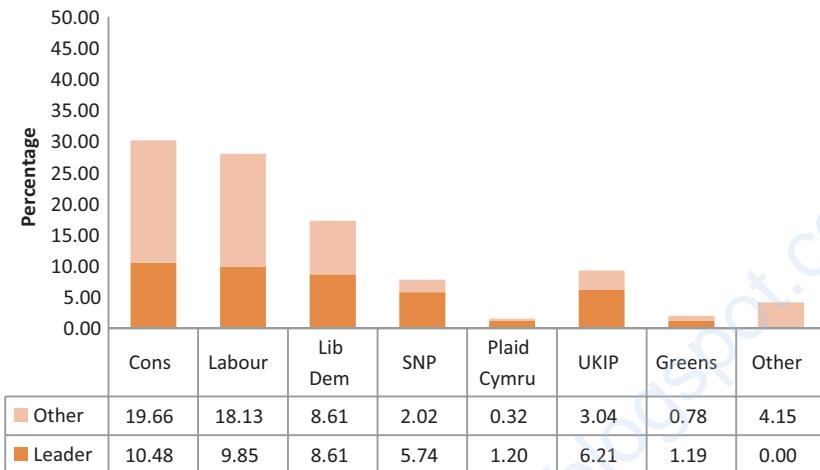


Fig. 15.1 Quotation on television by leader and other party representatives (seconds)

When the broadcasters introduced face-to-face debates between the rival prime ministerial candidates for the first time in 2010, it made an already increasingly presidential campaign even more preoccupied with the rival individual leaders. 2015 once again saw televised encounters of this kind but now with a more diverse range of participants (Beckett 2016). Most likely because of this, there was a marked tendency of the broadcast coverage to focus on the leaders of the other parties at the potential expense of their colleagues. Nigel Farage and Nicola Sturgeon dominated in terms of the direct quotation time devoted to representatives of their respective parties. This pattern was repeated with the Greens and Plaid Cymru. These parties' minimal presence, although an improvement on their showing in the 2010 campaign, meant there were relatively few direct quotes from either Natalie Bennett and Leanne Wood. By contrast treatment of what had hitherto been called the three major parties differed in terms of the quotation time exclusively devoted to each of their individual leaders. David Cameron and Ed Miliband accounted for around a third of their respective party shares while Nick Clegg was responsible for approximately half of the Liberal Democrats.

British broadcasters are legally obliged to report on politics and current affairs in an impartial way. The figures demonstrate the extent to which there was parity in the TV news treatment of the two largest parties,

although Cameron was more likely to be directly quoted than Miliband. Television news bulletins also attempted to reflect the more fluid, fragmented nature of electoral politics to the extent that representatives of the Liberal Democrats, the SNP and UKIP received approximately a tenth or more of all TV appearances by campaigners (Table 15.1). By contrast, newspapers are under no obligation to provide balanced coverage of the rival parties (Deacon and Wring 2016), but it is noteworthy that the number of print media appearances followed a broadly similar pattern to those of the broadcasters. Here, the two major differences between newspaper and TV coverage related to the treatment of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. These disparities might be in part by the partisan inclinations of the press but also the changing electoral dynamics. Indeed, there is an intriguing parallel between the extent to which representatives of the two major parties appeared in newspapers compared with their actual vote share: the Conservatives lead Labour by around 6.5% on both measures. The equivalent figures for television showed little difference. By contrast, the broadcasters gave greater prominence to the Liberal Democrats than the press where appearances by the party's spokespeople were more comparable to those of their UKIP and the SNP counterparts.

The disparity between print media appearances by Labour and the Conservatives representatives was reflected in the likelihood of them being directly cited in press coverage (Fig. 15.2). But aside from this, it was interesting how broadly comparable were the levels of quotations attributed to members of the other parties in both TV and newspaper reporting. As with the figures for broadcasting, representatives from UKIP and the SNP featured more prominently in press coverage than they ever had before in

Table 15.1 Frequency of appearance by party

| <i>Party and vote in General Election (%)</i> | <i>Television (%)</i> | <i>Newspaper (%)</i> |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Conservative 36.9 | 27.90 | 37.50 |
| Labour 30.4 | 28.90 | 31.80 |
| Lib Dem 7.9 | 15.10 | 10.00 |
| SNP 4.7 | 11.10 | 9.00 |
| Plaid Cymru 0.6 | 1.60 | 0.50 |
| UKIP 12.6 | 9.70 | 8.30 |
| Greens 3.9 | 1.90 | 1.30 |
| Other parties 3.0 | 3.80 | 1.60 |

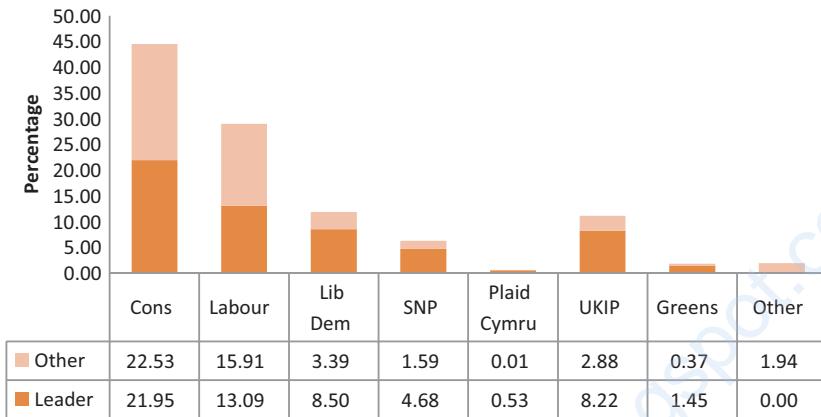


Fig. 15.2 Quotation in newspapers by leader and other party representatives (words)

a national election. And as with TV, it was Farage and Sturgeon who were by far the most likely to be directly cited in newspaper reports. On the rare occasions, they were directly cited, Plaid Cymru and the Greens were overwhelmingly represented by their leaders. For the major parties, the coverage devoted to Labour and the Conservatives was as likely to feature words attributable to other spokespeople as it was the leader himself. Cameron, Miliband and Clegg did nonetheless feature more prominently in press rather than TV reports as quoted representatives of their respective parties. But there was also a greater disparity in terms of the words attributed to Conservative spokespeople when compared to their Labour counterparts.

THE PARTISAN PRESS: DIRECTIONAL BALANCE

The term “directional balance” refers to the partisan nature of news coverage (Norris et al. 1999). The analysis considers not just the allegiance of the relevant media but also the scale and changing nature of this form of journalism. Consideration of media partisanship inevitably leads to an increased focus on print rather than broadcast news because, as has already been acknowledged, newspapers can and most do make their electoral preferences known during campaigns (Deacon and Wring 2002). Traditionally, these titles have sought to play an agenda-setting role in advance of polling day and 2015 was no different. Printed news items were measured according to whether and how they had any positive

or negative implications for the seven parties represented in the series of broadcast debates. Some reports made reference to and were therefore duly analysed for more than one party. Certain news items did explicitly support or criticise particular politicians. But the analysis also provided a broader measure of the extent to which newspapers chose to report and comment, with overt references, on issues and developments that had positive or negative implications for the parties concerned (Fig. 15.3).²

The Conservatives were the only party to receive a consistently favourable press for the duration of the campaign. Table 15.3 demonstrates the extent to which print media treatment of UKIP tended to be more negative up until the final weeks when this evened out into being positive albeit by only a fraction. The only other party to experience favourable newspaper coverage during the campaign was the SNP, but this was restricted to the opening week. This can be largely explained by the confident display by the then much less-known Nicola Sturgeon in the opening televised leadership debate of 2 April. Thereafter, the “threat” posed by the Nationalists was a constant

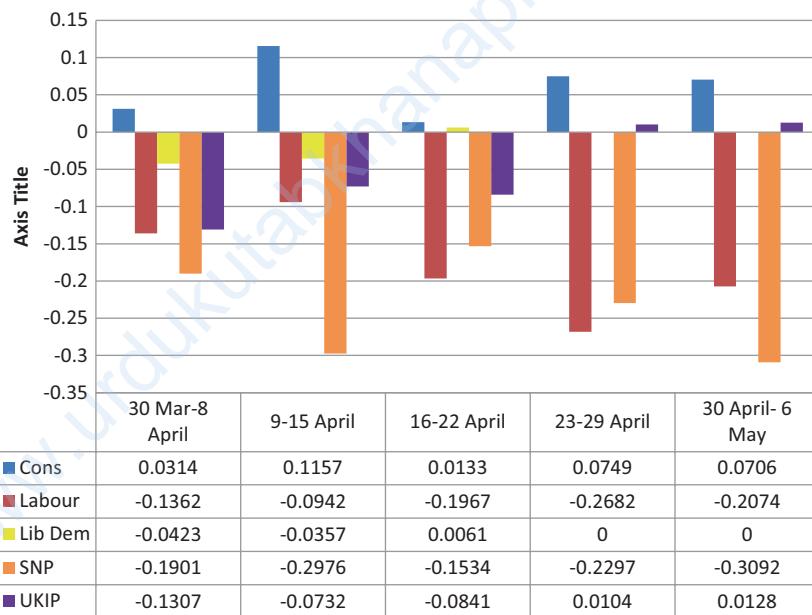


Fig. 15.3 Positivity versus negativity in newspaper coverage of parties (average scores)

theme in newspaper reporting of the election, and this was reflected in the party's highly negative scores for the subsequent part of the campaign. The SNP's likely Labour partners in a potential coalition government received similarly harsh print coverage in the ensuing weeks. In sharp contrast to the other parties, as well as their own performance in the 2010 election, the treatment of the Liberal Democrats was largely indifferent and reflected their increasingly marginal status.

Figure 15.4 uses the same data reviewed in 15.3 but weighted according to the various newspapers' respective circulations.³ Through making this adjustment, it is possible to see how the Conservative advantage in terms of editorialising is magnified due to the greater combined reach of

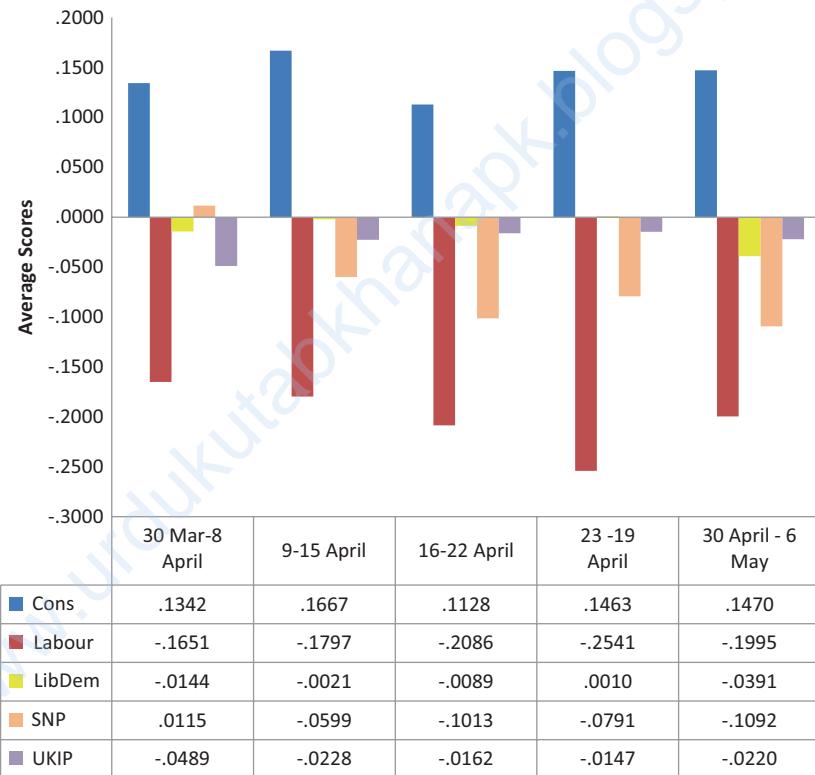


Fig. 15.4 Positivity versus negativity in newspaper coverage of parties (average scores weighted by circulation)

their media supporters' print titles. Moreover, on these revised figures, the only other party to receive a beneficial score during the campaign was the SNP and again in the first week. As has been noted, this was primarily because of Sturgeon's highly regarded performance in the opening televised debate. However, with the revised results for the first week, her party's print coverage is now only slightly more positive than negative. In the ensuing month, the SNP received a consistently hostile press that peaked in the closing week of the election, albeit in a less extreme way according to the adjusted figures incorporating circulation data. Rather, it is unquestionably Labour that receives the more negative press coverage when the reach of that various newspapers is considered along with their editorial stances. The same analysis confirms that it was the Conservatives alone who received the only consistently positive print media treatment. By comparison, there were relatively limited judgements of the other parties. Print evaluations of the Liberal Democrats and UKIP were, in overall terms, more even handed, although they still tended towards the negative albeit by a modest margin.

MEDIA DEBATE: THE ISSUE AGENDA

Various themes and issues were discussed and debated over the course of the five-week campaign. Table 15.2 compares TV and print media coverage of them. The long-acknowledged tendency of the news media to report on so-called electoral process issues was again a feature of this campaign. Both print and television journalism gave copious attention to the so-called horserace dimension to the election. Whereas the 2010 campaign had been to some extent dominated by the first-ever debates and speculation over the likely impact of "Cleggmania" on the outcome, in 2015, this kind of reporting concentrated on the potential make-up of another coalition government. Here, journalists were mindful of the consistent pattern of successive polls indicating no single party appeared to be sufficiently ahead to form a government on its own (Wring and Ward 2015). This intensified media interest in the rival party strategies in anticipation that one or other politician might make a decisive intervention that could change the dynamic of the entire race.

The most prominent substantive policy debated during the General Election was the economy. The issue was the top one for both print and TV and reflecting the debate over the success or otherwise of the Coalition's austerity measures implemented over the lifetime of the last Parliament.

Table 15.2 Coverage by issue (30 March–7 May 2015)

| Television | | | Newspaper | | |
|------------|-----------------------------|------|-----------|-----------------------------|------|
| Rank | Issue | % | Rank | Issue | % |
| 1 | Election process | 45.9 | 1 | Election process | 44.5 |
| 2 | Economy | 8.1 | 2 | Economy | 10.5 |
| 3 | Constitutional issues | 6.2 | 3 | Taxation | 6.5 |
| 4 | Taxation | 5.4 | 4 | Standards/corruption/sleaze | 3.8 |
| 5 | Employment | 4.4 | 5 | Constitutional issues | 3.7 |
| 6 | Immigration/migrants/race | 3.7 | 6 | NHS | 3.7 |
| 7 | NHS | 3.5 | 7 | Immigration/migrants/race | 3.5 |
| 8 | Business | 3 | 8 | Europe | 3.4 |
| 9= | Social security | 2.4 | 9 | Employment | 2.9 |
| 9= | Europe | 2.4 | 10 | Business | 2.6 |
| 11 | Housing | 2.3 | 11 | Social security | 2.3 |
| 12 | Defence | 2.2 | 12 | Housing | 2.2 |
| 13= | Standards/corruption/sleaze | 2.2 | 13 | Defence | 2.2 |
| 13= | Women's issues | 2 | 14 | Women's issues | 1.4 |
| 15 | Media | 1.1 | 15= | Education | 1.1 |
| 16 | Education | 0.9 | 15= | Media | 1.1 |
| 17 | Higher/further education | 0.7 | 17 | Arts/culture/sport | 0.7 |
| 18= | Environment | 0.6 | 18 | Public services | 0.7 |
| 18= | Arts/culture/sport | 0.6 | 19 | Transport | 0.6 |
| 20= | Foreign policy | 0.5 | 20= | Higher/further education | 0.5 |
| 20= | Transport | 0.5 | 20= | Health (other than NHS) | 0.5 |
| 22 | Information technology | 0.5 | 22 | Environment | 0.4 |
| 23 | Northern Ireland | 0.4 | 23 | Crime/law enforcement | 0.3 |
| 24 | Public services | 0.3 | 24 | Foreign policy | 0.3 |
| 25 | Local government | 0.1 | 25 | Farming/agriculture | 0.2 |
| 26= | Health (other than NHS) | 0.1 | 26= | Information technology | 0.1 |
| 26= | Crime/law enforcement | 0.1 | 26= | Local government | 0.1 |
| 26= | Rural affairs | 0.1 | 27 | Rural affairs | 0 |

Notes: Percentages = (number of themes/total number of themes)*100. Up to three themes could be coded per item. Percentages are rounded.

The proposed maintenance or modification of this central tenet of policy became a major theme of the campaign. The closely related topic of taxation also featured prominently as the next most high-profile substantive issue in press coverage as well as being the fourth on TV. Across both media sectors, the other most significant policy area was constitutional affairs, a category relating to the substantial amount of interest in the post-devolution situation. Here there was particular concern, more so in

TV than newspaper coverage, with the Scottish dimension to this issue and how this might help further reshape the political landscape. Print and broadcast reporting did nonetheless give similar prominence to the National Health Service and immigration, issues that had both been subjects of considerable and protracted debate in the last parliament. By contrast, there was markedly less coverage of several major areas of policy debate, most notably relating to education, crime, the environment and foreign affairs.

The contentious issue of Europe, a category distinct from “foreign policy”, made the top ten for both print and broadcast sectors, although it received more attention from the newspapers than TV. A more marked disparity was in the coverage devoted to “standards/corruption/sleaze”, a major category in the previous election following the revelations in the *Daily Telegraph* that provoked the expenses’ scandal involving politicians. In 2015, the press collectively made much more of alleged misdemeanours involving leading and more obscure politicians than did their TV counterparts. More broadly speaking, the prominence of the economy, tax and constitutional affairs over the NHS and immigration arguably helped the development of a Conservative narrative that suggested the Coalition had started to make the necessary fiscal policy reforms that could be jeopardised by a Labour government “propped up” or even dictated to by the SNP (Cowley and Kavanagh 2016).

THE PERSONAL TOUCH: PROMINENT CAMPAIGNERS

By far, the most prominent personalities in the General Election were David Cameron and Ed Miliband, the most obvious rival candidates for the premiership. Given the polls were indicating the election was too close to call, the next three top-ranked individuals were the leaders of the parties perceived to be the most likely to enter a coalition government with either Cameron or Miliband (Table 15.3). Despite his party’s decline in the polls, Nick Clegg still enjoyed the third highest profile in terms of media appearances. This was in part explicable in terms of the Deputy Prime Minister being a possible partner for both Labour and the Conservatives. The next most prominent candidates, Nicola Sturgeon and Nigel Farage, were potential coalition allies for Miliband and Cameron, respectively. Aside from the renowned campaigners Mayor of London Boris Johnson and former Prime Minister Tony Blair, the other figures who appeared in the top ten did so largely because of the importance of their portfolios in

Table 15.3 “Top Twenty” by appearance

| <i>Rank</i> | <i>Individual</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>Party</i> |
|-------------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|
| 1 | David Cameron | 15.0 | Conservative |
| 2 | Ed Miliband | 14.7 | Labour |
| 3 | Nick Clegg | 6.5 | Lib Dem |
| 4 | Nicola Sturgeon | 5.7 | SNP |
| 5 | Nigel Farage | 5.5 | UKIP |
| 6 | George Osborne | 3.8 | Conservative |
| 7 | Ed Balls | 2.5 | Labour |
| 8 | Boris Johnson | 1.7 | Conservative |
| 9= | Jim Murphy | 0.9 | Labour |
| 9= | Tony Blair | 0.9 | Labour |
| 11 | Russell Brand | 0.9 | Anti-Conservative |
| 12 | Natalie Bennett | 0.9 | Greens |
| 13 | Michael Fallon | 0.8 | Conservative |
| 14 | Alex Salmond | 0.8 | SNP |
| 15 | Samantha Cameron | 0.7 | Conservative |
| 16 | John Major | 0.6 | Conservative |
| 17 | Leanne Wood | 0.6 | Plaid Cymru |
| 18 | Grant Shapps | 0.5 | Conservative |
| 19 | Danny Alexander | 0.5 | Lib Dem |
| 20 | Jeremy Hunt | 0.5 | Conservative |

Note: Percentages = (number of appearances of individual/total of all individual appearances)*100

this particular campaign. While the rivals for the Chancellorship George Osborne and Ed Balls came in at sixth and seventh, Labour’s leader north of the border Jim Murphy also merited a place because of the intense speculation over the political and electoral significance of Scotland.

The importance of the Scottish issue, together with the SNP’s status as a likely power broker in any hung parliament scenario, was underlined by the former First Minister Alex Salmond’s prominence in the campaign. Salmond was, however, a distant second in terms of him being a media representative for his party. As has already been acknowledged, successor Nicola Sturgeon used this, her first major campaign as head of the SNP, to establish her own credentials. By successfully doing so, Sturgeon was by far the most prominent female politician in what was a decidedly male-dominated election. If it had not been for the presence of the three party leaders, there might have been even less news coverage devoted to women. It is noteworthy that the only female representative of either of the two major parties in the top 20 for media appearances was the prime

minister's wife Samantha Cameron. Mrs Cameron thereby received more attention than her Labour counterpart Justine Miliband not to mention Theresa May and Yvette Cooper. May and Cooper, the two most senior female politicians in their respective parties, had themselves been touted as potential future leaders and so the negligible coverage afforded them was instructive. Moreover, both were also eclipsed by the media attention devoted to Russell Brand, the celebrity turned campaigner who was ranked just outside the top ten for appearances.

CONCLUSION

The considerable and at times feverish speculation over the uncertain outcome of the election led to considerable media reporting of "process" stories. Many of these related to the rival campaign tactics, the motivations of the strategists involved and the constant stream of polling figures suggesting the race was a near enough dead heat between the two major alternatives. There was also far greater journalistic interest in various parties that had previously been largely marginalised or even ignored as fringe elements in past elections. This media campaign would be different for the attention the traditional agenda-setting TV and print news paid to the SNP and UKIP. Both parties, like the less high-profile Greens and Plaid Cymru, benefited from their inclusion in the broadcast leadership debates. Encouraged by these set piece events, the coverage devoted to the other parties was highly presidential in that their leaders were the politicians by far the most likely to be seen and heard in reports of their respective party campaigns. Overall, the individuals highest ranked in terms of media appearances were the leaders of the five parties who received the most votes.

The amount of direct quotations from and the frequency with which parties were reported highlighted a difference in the media coverage. Whereas there was relative parity between Labour and the Tories on television, there were contrasts in the press in terms of both appearances and quotations by campaigners that cumulatively worked to the advantage of the Conservatives. The General Election was, of course, no longer just a competitive race between two or even three rivals, and the traditionally partisan print media devoted increasing attention to the other parties. Much of this coverage was unflattering. With the exception of the *Express* newspapers, UKIP received a consistently negative week on week press. And, after a brief honeymoon period following Nicola Sturgeon's debut in the leadership debates, the SNP was subjected to increasingly hostile print media coverage.

It is intriguing to question whether the reporting of the campaign might have been different if the polls had more accurately reflected the eventual result. But given the continuing reverberations from the 2008 crisis, it was to be expected the economy would be a major theme in media reporting of this election. It turned out to be the most significant substantive issue in both press and TV coverage with the closely related matter of taxation not far behind. Constitutional affairs or, more precisely, the significance and future of Scotland proved another key theme of the campaign. In this way, the news media focused on issues that helped reinforce the importance of campaign messages being promoted, in very different ways, by both the anti-austerity SNP and the incumbent Conservatives. Other matters were relegated lower down the journalistic agenda including the NHS and immigration, two key policy areas that were respectively central themes of the Labour and UKIP strategies. Several others were conspicuous for the lack of media attention devoted to them despite their perceived political importance.

Given how it would soon come to dominate the post-election agenda, Europe proved not to be the major news story it had threatened to become prior to the campaign. Furthermore for a topic that so comprehensively helped to undermine the Liberal Democrats, university top up fees was a somewhat neglected controversy in this election. The broader subject of education did not merit much more media attention despite significant government reforms during the last parliament. Similarly, other major areas of contemporary policy debate such as the environment, crime, transport and foreign policies were comparatively marginal issues. The topics that were primarily reported, together with those that were not, perhaps augmented and thereby gave most impetus to the strategies being pursued by the Conservatives and SNP, the two parties that gained most when the votes were counted.

NOTES

1. This research was funded by a grant from the British Academy/Leverhulme Trust. For further details and information, see: <http://blog.lboro.ac.uk/general-election/>. Ensuring inter-coder reliability between researchers is an essential aspect of any project involving content analysis and especially in large-scale projects such as this. For the results of any content analysis to be deemed reliable, there needs to be a high level of agreement between two or more coders when coding the same news item. This research ensures such

- levels of reliability are achieved through a number of measures: using post-doctoral researchers and doctoral students working in the CRCC whose research concerns the media; providing rigorous coder training prior to the analysis; conducting a close monitoring of coders during the campaign and conducting reliability tests and addressing any areas of weakness these expose.
2. If an item mainly or solely focused on positive matters for a party, it was given a value of +1. If it mainly or solely focused on negative matters for a party, it was assigned a value of -1. Items where there was no clear evaluation—or where they contained positive and negative issues in broadly equal measures—were coded as zero. Items where no reference was made to the party were excluded from the calculation. Measurements of this kind are not straightforward as there is a risk that subjective opinion might influence perceptions of whether any given news item is seen as positive or negative. Two inter-coder reliability tests were conducted to check the robustness and consistency of these measures. The press-related data had by far the higher level of confidence, and for this reason, are the sole focus of this part of the report.
 3. Positive or negative ratings were weighted according to the circulation of each individual newspaper. For example, a positively ranked article in the *Sun* was scored as 1×1.858 , whereas a positive *Independent* ranking was only worth 1×0.058 (n.b. *Sun* circulation in March 2015 was 1.858 million and for *The Independent* the equivalent figure was 58,000).

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Broadcasting

CHAPTER 16

The Broadcast Journalist's View

Michael Crick

For many broadcast journalists, almost as much as for politicians, the passage of time is measured in five-year chunks. General elections are the broadcasters' Olympic Games or World Cup, the climax of years of preparation. The intense events of April and early May one year in every five can make TV careers and radio reputations, or break them. And afterwards, just as with some of the political leaders, key players in political broadcasting often move on.

The British General Election of 2015 promised high excitement for TV executives and their audiences. The political stage had been invaded by several new parties and a handful of new charismatic figures, including three women who were barely known to the British public. More than a quarter of the 650 constituencies faced genuine contests, a higher proportion than in any other recent election. Nationally, the result was still in doubt right until 10 p.m. on polling day, before a night of drama which almost nobody had forecast.

Speaking personally, the 2015 election was by far the most compelling and exciting of the eight campaigns I've covered as a professional journalist. Yet many of my broadcast colleagues felt short-changed and cheated. On the one hand, they felt manipulated and controlled by the traditional

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parties, deprived of regular set-piece material, yet in practical, logistical terms the advent of new parties made the election significantly harder to cover.

In the run-up to 2015, it wasn't just the emergence of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) as an important player which changed the game, but also the extraordinary success of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in Scotland, and the sudden surge for the Green Party in the latter half of 2014 and early 2015, to the extent that they seriously challenged the Liberal Democrats in many opinion polls.

In terms of regulation, the most significant development was the declaration by Ofcom in March 2015 (confirming a previous proposal) that, for the 2015 election in England and Wales, UKIP should be regarded a "major party" (see Chapter 17). This ruling was binding on all broadcasters outside the BBC, including ITV, Channels 4 and 5, BSkyB and commercial radio. It meant that in England, commercial broadcasters had to treat the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats and UKIP as the four major parties. In Wales, the major parties were those four plus Plaid Cymru, but in Scotland, Ofcom's "major parties" remained the same as before—the traditional three plus the SNP.

The BBC is not regulated by Ofcom when it comes to elections, but abides by its own guidelines. These apply significantly looser rules, but the BBC recognised that good journalism and fairness meant they, too, had to treat UKIP as a major player for the first time.

UKIP's arrival made election coverage significantly more complicated. What's known in the business as "3-party sync" had been replaced by "4-party sync" (or "5-party sync" in Wales)—"sync" being the old-fashioned jargon for sound on video. We'd come a long way from the days when broadcasters simply included just one Labour voice and one Conservative, and they were the only two parties who fought many constituencies.

And then there was the question of the Greens, to whose views many broadcasters were rather more personally sympathetic than they were to UKIP. On most major issues—austerity, Europe, defence and immigration—the Greens offered a very different perspective to all the other major parties (in England at least—in Wales, Plaid held similar views to the Greens on these matters). It was tempting to include a Green voice simply to stretch the range of debate.

Arranging a studio discussion with four or five players in one place at the same time is much harder than fixing up three, especially if one of

the players doesn't want the newcomer to appear (which was often the Conservative attitude towards UKIP). The advent of these new parties seems to have had the effect of reducing the number of multi-party discussions on programmes such as *Newnight*, *Today* and *Channel 4 News*. It was much simpler to conduct traditional, one-on-one interviews instead, and balance out the airtime given to each party over the campaign as a whole.

Despite the fact that more seats were up for grabs than ever before, and scores of constituency polls by Lord Ashcroft and others gave a map as to which seats were in play, there were probably fewer TV and radio reports in 2015 where each of the major players in a constituency was actually given a voice. Broadcasters found it too difficult in a day to rush around speaking to four different parties. It left little space to talk to voters as well, and also get a feel for the locality. Here again BBC staff had a significant advantage over commercial broadcasters, since BBC guidelines specified that if one had a contribution from one party in a particular seat, one didn't necessarily need contributions from all the major parties in the constituency, but merely "parties which have demonstrated substantial support in that area".

Where broadcasters did systematically visit constituencies, such as with Katie Razzall's seaside tour of films for BBC *Newnight*, or the *Today* programme's schedule of visiting "100 seats in 100 days", they almost always ignored candidates and their parties, and spoke to other local people instead, such as businessmen, fishermen, cafe-owners, parents and the unemployed. Razzall says her bosses asked her to "go and find local characters and real people", and that she only spoke to the parties for background information, not on-camera interviews.

The picture was slightly different with regional TV stations, many of whom still feel a strong sense of obligation to cover all the significant constituency contests within their patch. And the new challenge from UKIP and the Greens meant they could visit parts of their regions which had suddenly become proper contests for the first time, and could no longer be dismissed as safe seats.

But accommodating UKIP and the Greens in broadcasts was made difficult by both parties' lack of charismatic big-name performers. The UKIP leader Nigel Farage spent much of the campaign in the seat he hoped to win, Thanet South, and there were perhaps only four or five other UKIP names who came near to Farage's broadcast skills—Suzanne Evans, Patrick O'Flynn, Paul Nuttall, Diane James and Stephen Wolfe. The problem

seemed to be exacerbated by tensions between Farage's personal team and the media office at UKIP Headquarters, and by tensions over the potential succession to Farage.

The Greens were even more short of well-known, accomplished broadcasters. The official Green leader Natalie Bennett had been badly burnt by Nick Ferrari on his LBC radio phone-in programme in February when the presenter questioned her about housing. Seemingly unsure of Green Party policy, she stumbled and there were long silences. Many listeners described it as "embarrassing" to hear; Bennett herself blamed it on having a bad cold, though also spoke of having a "brain fade". The Greens' real star performer, the former leader, Caroline Lucas, was often unavailable during the 2015 campaign because she spent much of her time in Brighton, fighting to retain the party's only Westminster seat.

The problem was especially acute in the regions where UKIP and the Greens were very weak organisationally. ITV in the West Country held several regional debates without a UKIP voice simply because the party couldn't provide anyone to represent them. Both new parties were new to the business: they seemed bewildered by the level of response required in a national election, and simply didn't have the staff or political voices to feed the huge broadcasting appetite to hear from their representatives.

At national level, beyond the set-piece leaders' debates and other events, broadcasters were left with very little in their daily diaries compared with the past. Until 2005, each campaign day had begun with each of the parties holding a half-hour press conference, usually in London, and often chaired by each leader. And sometimes they'd hold a follow-up press conference in the afternoon. This would give all journalists a daily opportunity to engage with leading politicians, and most senior members of the Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet could be expected to appear every few days. But daily press conferences were effectively ditched in 2010, with the excuse that the parties needed to concentrate on that year's big innovation, the three-way TV debates. Despite the much reduced programme of TV debates in 2015, and a longer campaign period, press conferences didn't really return. (This reflected David Cameron's premiership, which quickly abandoned the habit of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, between elections, of holding a substantial press conference in Downing Street almost every month). UKIP, the most traditional party in campaign methods, tried a few press conferences, and there were occasional others by the main parties, but by 2015, they were pretty much dead. Gone was a

substantial daily source of broadcast material, and the possibility of party leaders being directly challenged by sudden new developments, or embarrassing questions for which they hadn't prepared.

Almost dead too are evening rallies at which party leaders in the past would deliver long, detailed speeches, and unveil new policies or lines of attack on opponents. Again UKIP were the half exception, and Nigel Farage held traditional public meetings in several UKIP target seats. Instead, most party leaders by 2015 had adopted the American practice of speaking several times during the course of a day, delivering the same five- to ten-minute speech in different places, followed perhaps by a few questions from a sympathetic, hand-picked party audience, and maybe also a few questions from reporters.

Both the Conservatives and Labour tried to control broadcast coverage of their campaigns to a degree not seen in the previous seven campaigns I've experienced. The three biggest broadcasters, the BBC News, ITV News and Sky News, had small teams (reporter, producer and cameraman/editor) on each leader's bus, but with the Tories and Labour, these buses might only be taken to a few of the events attended by the leader each day. These TV teams found themselves frustrated in the limited material they were offered—similar events, involving similar speeches in front of adoring audiences and a complete lack of tension or spontaneity. There was little scope for independent journalism, and a risk of "going native". (The Conservatives even supplied reporters on their bus with quite lavish food.) The teams on the bus got little access to the leader himself, and often found it difficult to get their film reports accepted by the editors of the main evening bulletins.

Outside TV reporters who tried to gain access to the leaders' campaigns were often cold-shouldered, or directed to one specific event. The day before polling day, for example, I was sworn at angrily by a senior Labour official when I turned up, without warning, at an Ed Miliband event in Pudsey in West Yorkshire. "You're not welcome", the angry Labour official shouted, before proceeding to call me by a name which rhymes with my surname. We captured most of this on camera, and broadcast it that night. Within minutes of the incident, other journalists were relaying the exchanges on Twitter, and a more senior Labour official realised he could only calm things down by letting us into the meeting and agreeing that Ed Miliband would take a question from me (though he didn't really answer it).

I'd long learnt that Ed Miliband hated to be ambushed by reporters. Perhaps, he felt it made him look undignified as a potential Prime Minister, but he also feared the unexpected question. For all Labour's jibes about David Cameron being "chicken" about facing Miliband in TV debates, Miliband declined to be questioned by Jon Snow of *Channel 4 News*—the only case, I think, of a major leader failing to take part in the rounds of major interviews conducted by senior broadcasters. The programme's producers believed this decision stemmed from a hard interview Snow gave Miliband at the 2014 Labour conference, after the Labour leader had famously failed to include the issues of the deficit or immigration in his memorised leader's speech.

On the day of my altercation in Pudsey, the editor of *Channel 4 News* wrote to the Labour Party to complain, accusing them, half tongue in cheek, of behaving like Zanu-PF in Zimbabwe. This prompted a long detailed reply from Labour's broadcasting officer Matthew Laza setting out why the Labour Party was not, in fact, like Zanu-PF. His email ended with a warning that *Channel 4 News* would have to improve its behaviour, especially since Labour would be in power within 36 hours.

Much more politically significant perhaps was the Conservatives' response to a film *Channel 4 News* broadcast about how David Cameron's father Ian (who died in 2010) had kept some of his wealth off-shore, on the island of Jersey. It looked hypocritical at a time when the Government pledged to crack down on off-shore tax arrangements, though the programme was careful to include Downing Street's response that David Cameron had paid full tax on his inheritance, and did not himself have any assets off-shore. The item nonetheless provoked great fury in Number Ten, where they believed it had been deliberately timed—seven days before polling day—to damage the Conservatives. Cameron's Communications Director Craig Oliver told the programme that the broadcast would not be forgotten, and that there would be severe repercussions. Coincidentally or not, it was revealed four months later, through a photograph of a document being carried by an official in Downing Street, that ministers were considering plans to privatise Channel 4.

David Cameron and George Osborne, too, also went to huge lengths to avoid "doorstep" ambushes by broadcasters. When my *Channel 4 News* team arrived unannounced at a factory in Lowestoft which Osborne was visiting, we were told: "You're not supposed to be here". It was an event purely for local and regional media, an Osborne adviser said. "Why can't we come in?" I persisted. "You're not ashamed of what you're doing, are you?" Again Osborne's team had to relent and admit us.

The big exception to this drive for control was Boris Johnson, a former journalist who would happily talk to the media for hours. The Conservative Mayor of London was much more relaxed, comfortable within his own skin, not worried he was about to make a huge election-losing gaffe. Miliband, Cameron and Osborne rarely met the general public either—genuine members of the public, rather than party supporters who'd been contacted by email, text message and phone a few hours before, and urged to go along to the speech they were making. The fear, of course, was that the leaders would be embarrassed by another Sharon Storer, the woman who berated Tony Blair about the NHS in 2001, or Gillian Duffy who famously confronted Gordon Brown over immigration in 2010. It all meant a lack of spontaneity, and pretty dull coverage, at least when it came to the leaders.

The parties were also careful to keep us away from other senior figures. Every evening we would be told merely about what Cameron and Osborne were doing for the Tories the next day, or Miliband and Ed Balls for Labour. It meant that the Home Secretary Theresa May and the Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond barely featured in reports of campaign activities, and the same was true of nearly every other senior Labour figure. Most of the Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet were probably more absent from the airwaves than their counterparts in any previous election since TV era of elections began in 1959.

Nor was there much of a role for past leaders. John Major, who might have been a formidable campaign asset for the Tories, made just one contribution—a speech in Solihull. Tony Blair intervened just twice for Labour, while it wasn't until the end of the contest that Gordon Brown tried to help rescue Labour in Scotland.

2015 wasn't a great year for innovation in TV coverage. The only small novelties were regular party-by-party predictions of the precise result. Sky News almost permanently ran a latest forecast box in the top left corner of the screen, akin to the latest score in a live football game. *Newsnight*, with the help of Chris Hanretty of the University of East Anglia, also did a nightly prediction—"Newsnight Index"—and, like Sky, their forecasts were based not just on the huge number of national polls but also on the scores of constituency surveys which featured in 2015 for the first time. Given the inaccuracy of these TV forecasts (like every other prediction), these are probably innovations Sky and *Newsnight* would prefer to forget.

Nor did 2015 feature many great moments in terms of question and answer sessions, heated confrontations with the public or unexpected

gaffes. The biggest story obtained from an interview was in David Cameron's exchanges, early in the campaign, with the BBC deputy political editor James Landale (standing in for Nick Robinson who was recovering from cancer). He only wanted to serve two terms, Cameron revealed, and wouldn't fight another election. It was perceived to be a gaffe at the time, though in the end didn't seem to do Cameron any harm.

It was predicted early on that 2015 would be the first "fully social media election", though this is arguable. In 2010, Mumsnet, the website for mothers, had secured web-chat discussions with the three main party leaders, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg, each taking questions from Mumsnet followers. These events generated great coverage in the press, and 2010 was even called the "Mumsnet election", as each party was seen as paying especial attention towards young parents, and issues such as education and health. Indeed, David Cameron did Mumsnet web chats three times in 2010, and they generated considerable follow-up in the conventional media.

Yet in 2015, despite considerable effort, Mumsnet failed to secure either Cameron or Miliband, though they got Nick Clegg, Nicola Sturgeon, Natalie Bennett and several other senior politicians. In the long term, though, as the younger generation increasingly get their information about news and politics from the internet, it is inevitable that future elections will involve the parties directing their attention towards websites which appeal to particular groups of voters.

One of the most popular web channels among young people, BuzzFeed, which has a small team of political reporters, did get interviews with all the main party leaders. Another popular news site, Vice, made no secret of its left-wing leanings and outright hostility towards UKIP in its online films. Features broadcast by Vice included "Disgraced UKIP councillor of the week", and "We Filmed at UKIP's Insane Party Conference"—not the kind of material which would satisfy the regulators of mainstream TV channels.

Perhaps the most symbolic and intriguing broadcasting development of 2015 came in the final few days. Late one night towards the end of April, Ed Miliband was photographed arriving at the flat in London's East End of the left-wing comedian Russell Brand. The Labour leader had agreed to do an interview for Brand's daily web programme *The Trews*.

It was a gamble for Miliband—an obvious appeal to younger voters who form the bulk of Brand's audience, though it was clearly a problem that Brand had long denounced the election as an exercise, urging his followers

not to vote or even register to vote. “Russell Brand is a joke”, said David Cameron, “and Miliband is a joke for seeing him”. Miliband did at least decline the invitation to conduct the interview on Brand’s bed, and managed to avoid any gaffes in the half-hour recording (which was split in two and broadcast on different nights in the final days of the campaign). But nor did Miliband say anything memorable—apart from occasionally lapsing into Brand’s East End tones (which the comedian subsequently mocked). A few days later, Brand publicly endorsed Miliband. The overall effect was probably negligible, though for some reason, Brand later claimed to have “ruined” the 2015 election.

Indeed, despite predictions, there was no single social media event which had a telling effect on the campaign, as some had predicted. We didn’t even see anything akin to Emily Thornberry’s “white van man” tweet on the day of the Rochester by-election in November 2014, when the Shadow Attorney-General tweeted a picture of a white van outside a house displaying two St George’s flags, with the caption “scene from Rochester”. Such was the outcry on social media that Miliband sacked Thornberry from his front bench.

By the 2050 election—perhaps well before then—it may be impossible to distinguish between TV and radio output, newspaper reports and material generated by the social media. For the first 35 years of British broadcasting, from the foundation of the BBC until the late 1950s, almost no coverage of elections was legally permitted on radio and television, beyond the party broadcasts which the main parties were allowed to produce themselves. Since 1959, broadcasters have been allowed to report campaigns and analyse the issues involved, but only with tight regulation, designed to achieve balance, impartiality and a level playing-field (at least for the major parties). If the multi-party politics of 2015 become a permanent feature in the twenty-first century, and traditional broadcasting and newspapers become blurred and merged into the world of digital media, the tight controls which governed the broadcasting of elections for almost 100 years may no longer be sustainable.

CHAPTER 17

Regulating Broadcasting During the 2015 General Election: The Ofcom Perspective

Adam Baxter

INTRODUCTION

Elections matter. They provide the opportunity for citizens to choose their political representatives. By extension, how politicians communicate with the electorate clearly matters too. Blumler and Gurevitch, writing over 35 years ago, characterised political communications as essentially a triadic relationship between parties, broadcasters and voters: “A democratic political communication system is a three-legged stool. And it can be improved only if all the interests at stake—those of the political parties, the broadcasters, and the voters are better served” (Blumler and Gurevitch 1979: 218). It is worth asking whether this is still the case given the many different forms of digital communication that have grown up that can bypass the role of the broadcaster. Some commentators have pondered whether 2015 was truly a social media election (see e.g. Anstead 2015). New forms of digital communication no doubt mattered. But it was clear leading up to the General Election, judging by the protracted “debates about leadership debates” and public interest concerning which political parties the Office for Communications (“Ofcom”) should consider to be a “major

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party”, many people still anticipated that linear broadcasting would still matter in 2015. We at Ofcom strove hard to ensure our broadcasting rules were fit for purpose ahead of the General Election and served the interests of citizens.¹ This chapter lays out how we tackled that challenge.

WHY DOES OFCOM GET INVOLVED IN ELECTIONS?

In the area of elections, Ofcom regulates all commercial² television and radio broadcasters. Parliament has placed duties on Ofcom in two main ways in relation to elections.

Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs)

There is a long-standing ban³ on advertisements of a political nature on television or radio in the UK. It has been argued that allowing political advertising in the broadcast media would give an advantage to the best financed candidates or parties. PEBS are, therefore, designed to offset the differential ability of parties to attract campaign funds. This free airtime is provided prior to elections (and also on a seasonal basis outside election campaigns⁴) and allows qualifying parties an opportunity to deliver their messages directly to the electorate through the broadcast media.

To help maintain the effectiveness of this system, Parliament, through section 333 of the Communications Act 2003, has charged Ofcom with the duty of making rules regarding the allocation, length and frequency of PEBS and identifying the broadcasters that are required to transmit PEBS. We achieve this through our rules on Party Political and Referendum Broadcasts (“the PPRB Rules”) (Ofcom 2016).

These rules evolved from the system which existed for 50 years when PEB allocation was managed through an informal body, the Committee of Party Political Broadcasting, which comprised of the main political parties and broadcasters. Following responsibility for PEBS passing to the Independent Television Commission and then onto Ofcom, we introduced the first version of the PPRB Rules in October 2004. In 2015, PEBS for the General Election had to be broadcast by regional Channel 3 services (ITV, STV and UTV); Channel 4; Channel 5; Classic FM; Talksport and Absolute Radio AM.

Editorial Coverage of Elections

Separately, Parliament requires Ofcom to develop rules with respect to broadcasters' wider editorial coverage of elections. We therefore have the Ofcom Broadcasting Code ("the Code"). In particular, election law⁵ requires Ofcom to adopt a code of practice with respect to the participation of candidates at a parliamentary or local government election in broadcast items about the constituency or electoral area in question. This obligation is reflected in a number of statutory instruments with respect to broadcast items covering other categories of elections.⁶ In each case and, as with the PPRB Rules, before drawing up such a code of practice, we must have regard to any views expressed by the Electoral Commission. We therefore have rules in Sections Five (due impartiality)⁷ and Six (elections and referendums)⁸ of the Code (and in particular Rules 6.8 to 6.13 on constituency coverage and electoral area coverage in elections).

In the area of elections, we have an Election Committee which is a delegated committee of the Ofcom Board. Its role is to adjudicate on disputes between broadcasters and political parties in relation to the length, frequency, allocation or scheduling of PEBs; and complaints about due impartiality in programmes where a substantive issue is raised and where the complaint, if upheld, might require redress before the election period ends.

In performing all our duties in the area of elections, we have to balance broadcasters' and political candidates' right to freedom of expression, consistent with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights against the various statutory and Code obligations. However, whilst our rules limit to some extent broadcasters' editorial freedom, the concept of due impartiality⁹ in Ofcom's Code is deliberately flexible. By contrast, other countries may take a more prescriptive approach. For example, in French Presidential elections, there is equality of treatment in terms of the broadcasting airtime given to different candidates.

THE OFCOM LIST OF MAJOR (LARGER) PARTIES

The obligations we place on broadcasters through our PPRB Rules and Section Six are framed by reference to Ofcom's so-called list of major parties. Since 11 March 2016, the list has been known as the list of larger parties¹⁰. This list reflects the fact that some political parties have a significant level of electoral support, and number of elected representatives, across a range of elections within the UK or the devolved nations.

In the area of PEBs, our rules set out minimum requirements:

- Each major (larger) party should be offered *at least* two PEBs, with the actual number of PEBs being a matter for the broadcasters having regard to the circumstances of the election and evidence of a party's past electoral support and/or current support.
- Non-major (larger) parties can automatically qualify for at least one PEB if they are contesting one-sixth or more of the seats in a nation in a General Election.
- Broadcasters are required to consider offering further PEBs if evidence of a party's past electoral support and/or current support at a particular election or in a relevant nation/electoral area means it would be appropriate to do so.

In the area of broadcasters' own editorial coverage of elections, Ofcom's role is to review compliance with the Code on a post-broadcast basis. Rule 6.2 of the Code is a rule applying to broadcasters' editorial coverage across an election campaign, and requires that:

Due weight must be given to the coverage of larger parties during the election period. Broadcasters must also consider giving appropriate coverage to other parties and independent candidates with significant views and perspectives.

The rules covering broadcast coverage of candidates talking about their constituencies which applied in 2015 differed significantly from the strict legal requirements that existed until repealed¹¹ in 2000. In 2015, broadcasters had to offer the chance to take part in a broadcast item about a constituency to candidates of the major parties (Rule 6.9 of the Code) and other candidates in certain circumstances (Rule 6.10).¹² However, unlike the situation until 2000, if candidates refused or were unable to participate, the item could nevertheless go ahead.

In 2015, the fact that a party was not on the list of major parties did not mean it was prevented from receiving PEBs during the election, and if a party was on the major party list, it did not automatically receive the same number of PEBs, or exactly the same amount of editorial coverage, during the election campaign as other major parties. These were primarily matters for the relevant broadcasters to determine at their discretion.

HOW DID OFCOM PREPARE FOR 2015?

Since Ofcom came into being in 2003, the relative position of the various political parties had been relatively static. The 2010 General Election was widely described as the closest General Election in many years resulting in a hung Parliament and a coalition UK Government for the first time since World War Two. Following 2010, we ensured our rules suitably reflected the growing fragmentation in UK politics. In 2013, we committed to reviewing our list of major parties on a periodic basis to ensure it has been responsive to changes in the political landscape. Our first review¹³ of the list was held ahead of the May 2014 elections. Following a public consultation and an analysis of the relevant evidence of past electoral support and current support, we added the UKIP to the list of major parties but just for the purposes of the European Elections, and in England and Wales only.

Opinion polls ahead of the 2015 General Election indicated an even closer election result than in 2010. In late 2014 and early 2015, the Great Britain-wide opinion polls were suggesting: the Labour and Conservative parties neck and neck in the polls; Liberal Democrat support falling away quite dramatically; support for UKIP growing to approximately 15% in the polls; the Green Party growing from a low base to approximately 6% in the polls and that the SNP might become the third largest party in Parliament after the election.

It was against this backdrop that we conducted a review¹⁴ of the list of major parties ahead of the elections taking place in May 2015. In drawing up our proposals, we took into account factors such as the electoral performance of parties (including the numbers of elected candidates and the overall percentage of vote received) over a range of elections over at least two electoral cycles, and levels of current support as evidenced in opinion polls in the four different countries of the UK. Having considered all the evidence, we published our consultation in January 2015 proposing that: there should be no changes in the existing list¹⁵ of major parties; UKIP should to be added to the list for the 2015 elections only in England and Wales only; the Green Party (and Scottish Green Party) should not to be added to the list across the UK; and Traditional Unionist Voice should not to be added to the list in Northern Ireland.

Our proposals provoked a substantial amount of public and press attention, and we received over 7400 consultation responses, mainly from Green Party supporters disagreeing with our proposals about the Green Party. This amount of attention showed the continuing importance that many place upon broadcast coverage of elections.

Many respondents said the Greens deserved being a major party based on a comparison with the Liberal Democrats in terms of opinion poll support, numbers of party members and other factors (such as the Green Party having more support amongst the young). However, we were not persuaded by these arguments. For example, these respondents appeared to put little or no weight on the strong performance of the Liberal Democrats in the 2010 General Election, and the correspondingly weaker performance of the Green Party in that General Election. When considering opinion poll data, although the Green Party exceeded the Liberal Democrats in a few opinion polls, this was not the case when considering average opinion poll figures. Given that total party membership of all UK political parties remains a very small proportion of the total electorate, we did not consider that party membership totals were a robust indicator of wider support for the various parties across the electorate at large. In addition, we did not consider it would be appropriate to place any extra weighting on the amount of support the Green Party may have been receiving from 18 to 24 year-olds. This was because any increased level of support amongst young voters would have been reflected in an increase in the party's overall polling figure, given that polling organisations ensure their survey samples are weighted to reflect the distribution of the different age groups across the population.

Many respondents wrongly thought Ofcom played some role in preventing the Green Party from taking part in broadcast leaders' debates. However, Ofcom had no role in determining the structure, format or style of the broadcast leaders' debates that took place in 2015. The SNP and its supporters argued that it should be a major party across Great Britain because of its likely performance in May 2015 and its increased number of party members. However, it was not appropriate to add the SNP to the list of major parties across Great Britain because the SNP exclusively fielded candidates in Scotland, not England and Wales. The fundamental purpose of a PEB is to allow people who may vote for that party to hear its views; viewers in England and Wales were not able to vote for SNP candidates.

In March 2015, we confirmed that the existing list of major parties remained unchanged, but we added UKIP to the list in England and Wales for the purposes of the General Election and English local (and mayoral) elections taking place in May 2015.

THE 2015 CAMPAIGN FOR OFCOM: THE CALM AFTER THE STORM

The special rules applicable to election programming set out in Section Six of the Code came into force when Parliament was dissolved on 30 March 2015. Given the political situation, we expected broadcasters to give appropriate editorial coverage to non-major parties, given that there were a greater range of potential voices competing for coverage. In addition, opinion polls were indicating that no party would win an overall majority and a number of parties (including those from the different nations of the UK) might have had some role in forming the next UK Government.

However, after the acute attention focused on Ofcom and its rules in the lead up to the election campaign, the 2015 General Election was notable for how quiet it was from a regulatory point of view. We received 427 election-related complaints during the period 30 March to 7 May 2015, of which 280 were out of Ofcom's remit because they related to BBC licence fee funded services. This compared with the 2010 campaign when we received 1168 election-related complaints, of which 122 were about BBC licence funded services. Other comparisons between 2015 and 2010 are informative.

In 2010, certain issues attracted a lot of attention from audiences. Given that that was the first campaign to see broadcast leaders' debates, these proved controversial amongst viewers. A total of 671 people complained about the Sky News debate on 22 April 2010, when Adam Boulton referred to a story in The Daily Telegraph about Nick Clegg. Complainants considered that Adam Boulton's comments showed bias against the Liberal Democrats, because he made no such personal references to David Cameron or Gordon Brown. Other notable causes of audience disquiet in 2010 were the 133 complaints Ofcom received about an advertisement for the savoury paste Marmite, where this product was being promoted in the form of a spoof. Complainants objected to what they considered to be critical references to the British National Party in the advertisement. We also received 34 complaints about news coverage of the "Bigotgate" row where Gordon Brown's confidential comments were broadcast in which he labelled one female voter, Gillian Duffy, as being "bigoted" for her comments about immigration.

During the election period in 2015, there were some events that elicited concern from audiences: 81 people alleged bias against UKIP in the BBC's leaders' debate on 16 April 2015. We also had 20 complaints complaining

about right-wing bias in the BBC leaders' *Question Time* special broadcast on 30 April 2015. However, all these complaints were out of our remit because they related to BBC programmes. By contrast, the most complaints we received about a single non-BBC broadcast during the election period were the 12 complaints we received about the ITV leaders' debate on 2 April 2015.

Most audience-related complaints in 2015 were about a programme broadcast before the start of the election period: Channel 4's *Cameron and Miliband Live: The Battle for Number 10*. Although not a leaders' debate in the true sense of the word, this featured both David Cameron and Ed Miliband being separately interviewed by Jeremy Paxman and then (separately) answering questions from a studio audience. A total of 460 people complained to Ofcom about this programme not being duly impartial, especially in its treatment of Ed Miliband. However, because this programme was broadcast just before the beginning of the election period, we considered the programme under our due impartiality rules as opposed to our more detailed election rules. Our view was that both leaders were well able to robustly get their views across in this programme and we did not pursue these complaints.

The broadcast leaders' debates in 2015 did not raise the levels of concern that the three leaders' debates had done in 2010. This may have been because viewers were more familiar with this form of programme. In 2015, the four debates were spread out over a period of five weeks,¹⁶ compared with three debates spread over two weeks in 2010. As a result, their effect on the campaign may have been more diluted. Unlike in 2010, when there were three debates featuring three party leaders, 2015 saw a range of different formats being used. As well as Channel 4's *Cameron and Miliband Live* ..., on 2 April 2015, ITV broadcast a debate which featured not just the leaders of the Conservative Party, Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, but also the leaders of the Green Party, Plaid Cymru, SNP and UKIP. In addition, on 16 April 2015, the BBC broadcast a debate featuring all these leaders with the exception of the two parties in the UK Government, the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats. Finally, there was a BBC leaders' *Question Time* special broadcast on 30 April 2015 which featured David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg.

Ofcom did not receive any complaints from the political parties about the election debates in 2015. This may have been due to the fact that some parties that had not participated in the debates in 2010 were included

in 2015. By contrast in 2010, Ofcom had to convene our Election Committee to adjudicate on complaints¹⁷ from Plaid Cymru and the SNP who objected to their omission from the first leaders' debate broadcast in 2010.

A consistent theme in 2015, as in 2010, were audience objections to the coverage of different parties in individual news bulletins. Some individuals would object if different parties did not receive equal amounts of time in particular bulletins or some parties did not feature at all. However, Ofcom's rules do not require broadcasters to give equal coverage to all parties (including all major (larger) parties) in any given election campaign. Nor does the Code prevent broadcasters from covering non-major (larger) parties during election campaigns. Nor, with the exception of broadcast items featuring candidates discussing their constituencies, does every party have to feature in every broadcast item. All these issues are matters for broadcasters' editorial judgement as long as they give due weight¹⁸ to the major (larger) parties and are duly impartial between all parties over the campaign.

Ofcom did take some regulatory action during the election. In total, we recorded seven breaches of the Code, but these were largely technical contraventions. Five cases involved small-scale television and radio broadcasters serving ethnic communities who broadcast discussion and analysis of election issues whilst polling stations were open on 7 May 2015.¹⁹

Lastly, what about PEBs? Many commentators question their significance in modern elections, but they form a backdrop element to any campaign. Table 17.1 shows the allocations of PEBs across the UK by the various Channel 3 broadcasters (ITV, STV and UTV) in 2015.

A key element of continuity was the allocation across England of PEBs for the Conservative Party, Labour Party in the 5:5:4 ratio which had remained unchanged since the 1992 General Election. One party that received press coverage just for qualifying for a PEB was Cannabis is Safer Than Alcohol (CISTA) which stood four candidates in Northern Ireland to qualify²⁰ for a PEB on UTV. The party was campaigning for a royal commission on drug law reform and is an example how small parties can take advantage of the opportunity of unmediated access to broadcasting airtime during an election. There was no example of a PEB dominating the campaign as some have done in the past, such as the *Jennifer's Ear* broadcast in 1992 or the *Kinnock: the Movie* broadcast directed by Hugh Hudson in 1987. One broadcast which did create some discussion on social media was the Green Party's PEB broadcast which lampooned

Table 17.1 Party Election Broadcast allocations by Channel 3 services in 2015

| <i>Party</i> | <i>England</i> | <i>Wales</i> | <i>Scotland</i> | <i>N. Ireland</i> |
|--|----------------|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Conservative | 5 | 4 | 4 | 1 |
| Labour | 5 | 4 | 4 | – |
| Liberal Democrat | 4 | 4 | 4 | – |
| Scottish National Party | – | – | 4 | – |
| Plaid Cymru | – | 4 | – | – |
| UKIP | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Green | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| British National Party | – | 1 | – | – |
| Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition | 1 | 1 | 1 | – |
| Socialist Labour | – | 1 | – | – |
| Democratic Unionist (DUP) | – | – | – | 4 |
| Sinn Féin | – | – | – | 4 |
| Ulster Unionist (UUP) | – | – | – | 4 |
| Social and Democratic Labour Party | – | – | – | 4 |
| Alliance Party | – | – | – | 3 |
| Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) | – | – | – | 2 |
| Workers Party | – | – | – | 1 |
| Cannabis is Safer Than Alcohol | – | – | – | 1 |

David Cameron, Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage as being members of a boyband because of their alleged similarities. However, perhaps this broadcast did not have the significant effect the Green Party wished because, as one commentator put it, “the people impersonating the party leaders don’t remotely resemble the party leaders they’re impersonating” (Petridis 2015).

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

Although we have seen a return to majoritarian government, evidence suggests a multi-party system may be here to stay. Ofcom has received criticism for its list of major (larger) parties. Some have argued that the list should be scrapped as it hinders broadcasters’ editorial freedom. Against this it could be argued that: The list is simple and straightforward and provides a degree of certainty for broadcasters. Without a list, broadcasters might be more open to challenge from parties. This might have a possible chilling effect on election coverage, especially amongst small broadcasters. Given the large number of elections across the UK on an annual basis, without a list, broadcasters would have to devote resources to regularly

reassessing party support. Now that the clamour of the 2015 campaign is behind us, Ofcom will be keeping its election rules under review to ensure flexibility and responsiveness to the developing politics of the UK.

NOTES

1. One of Ofcom's principal duties, as laid out in Section 3(1)(a) Communications Act 2003, is: "to further the interests of citizens in relation to communications matters".
2. In the area of due impartiality, accuracy and elections, Ofcom has not regulated BBC services funded by the licence fee, which are regulated on these matters by the BBC Trust. However, it is widely expected that from 2017 onwards, Ofcom will be granted such powers under the terms of a new BBC Charter and Agreement.
3. Unlike the USA, where the Federal Communications Commission sets rules requiring that broadcasters give equal access to candidates in terms of political advertising.
4. In the form of Party Political Broadcasts.
5. Section 93 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended).
6. See SI 2007/236 National Assembly for Wales (Representation of the People) Order 2007 regulation 67; SI 2010/2999 Scottish Parliament (Elections etc) Order 2010 regulation 64; SI 2004/1267 European Parliamentary Elections (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2004 regulation 60; SI 2004/293 European Parliamentary Elections Regulations 2004 regulation 65; Northern Ireland Assembly (Elections) (Amendment) Order 2009 regulation 3.
7. See https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0024/86307/bc2015-07-section_5_due_impartiality.pdf.
8. See https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/86309/bc2015-08-section_6_elections_and_referendums.pdf.
9. The Code lays out the meaning of "due impartiality" as follows: "'Due' is an important qualification to the concept of impartiality. Impartiality itself means not favouring one side over another. 'Due' means adequate or appropriate to the subject and nature of the programme. So 'due impartiality' does not mean an equal division of time has to be given to every view, or that every argument and every facet of every argument has to be represented."
10. See https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/24048/larger-parties.pdf.
11. By section 144 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

12. Candidates of non-major parties and independent candidates had to be given the opportunity to take part in such items if those candidates had evidence previous significant electoral support (i.e. election results) and/or evidence of significant current support (i.e. opinion polls).
13. See <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/consultations-and-statements/category-2/major-political-parties-2014>.
14. See <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/consultations-and-statements/category-3/major-parties-15>.
15. The major parties before the 2015 elections were: the Conservative Party; the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats across Great Britain. Additionally, the SNP and Plaid Cymru were major parties in Scotland and Wales, respectively. The major parties in Northern Ireland were: the Democratic Unionist Party; Sinn Féin; the Social Democratic and Labour Party; the Ulster Unionist party and the Alliance Party.
16. From 26 March to 30 April 2015.
17. See <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/how-ofcom-is-run/committees/election-committee> Ofcom did not uphold the parties' complaints.
18. Under Rule 6.2 of the Code.
19. Rule 6.4 of the Code prohibits broadcasters from discussing and analysing election issues whilst polls are open.
20. Under Ofcom's PPRB Rules, a non-major (larger) party can qualify for one PEB if it is contesting at least one-sixth of seats in a nation.

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CHAPTER 18

Election Debates: The Less Than Smooth Path to TV's Big Campaign Events

Ric Bailey

The spirit in which debates were set up for this election could not have been more different from how it was in 2010, when they had been a first for the UK, transforming the campaign and—for a while—placing political conversation at the focus of the nation’s attention. This time, public position-taking, political game-playing and a lack of consensus between the parties meant that, only a month before the 2015 campaign began, nothing was settled. Yet despite the shenanigans, the electorate ended up being particularly well-served by four big TV events, using complementary formats and aiming to scrutinise a range of party leaders which reflected the changed electoral landscape of the UK. More than 21 million people saw something of them—only a million or so fewer than tuned in at some stage to the debates in 2010. More than a quarter of those who saw them—and two in five younger viewers—claimed they helped in deciding how to vote. But if anyone had thought organising them second time round would be a shoo-in: well, don’t say we didn’t warn you.

It was widely accepted in 2010 that debates were now bound to become a permanent fixture. Even critics who disapproved had grumbled that we were stuck with them; enthusiasts felt they had breathed new life into politics,

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galvanising public engagement in the election—and that they must be here to stay. Those of us who helped set them up, though, were never so optimistic that things would be as straightforward again. There was certainly evidence from elsewhere pointing to a bumpy ride. The USA, after its impactful first encounters between a perspiring vice-president and a telegenic young senator, had to wait another decade and a half for the next bout, when Ford and Carter were the candidates. Australia witnessed how Bob Hawke—full of enthusiasm for debates as opposition party leader—went on to be a prime minister who blocked them. Canada started debates in 1968—but then had none for more than a decade, followed by another gap. Debates are seldom a done deal until they’re live on the air.

In 2010, in the UK, the planets were in alignment: with an incumbent PM on the ropes and an opposition far from certain of victory—both thought they had something to gain; the broadcasters were acting in concert for the first time and, perhaps most important, public opinion was sensing that after the crisis of MPs’ expenses, politicians had to explain themselves rather more than in the past. But there was a reason why the UK was so late in coming to televised election debates: if either of the two main parties did not really want them to happen, it was not too difficult for one or other to put a spanner in the works and still emerge—in terms of political capital—relatively unscathed. If you think debates are going to harm your electoral prospects, why on earth would you actively co-operate to make them happen?

That was the lesson from half a century of failed attempts to bring TV debates to UK elections—and the success of 2010 did not change that underlying political reality. Of course, it changed the stakes: the public was more likely to want to keep debates once they’d started, more likely to notice if they weren’t there and more likely then to look for someone to blame. But though public service broadcasters would like to think debates are now a crucial part of the transparency of politics, a vital tool for electors scrutinising those who seek power, even, perhaps, self-evidently central to the good working of democracy (oh, and—let’s be honest—pretty good television as well), we should never fool ourselves into thinking the world stops turning without TV debates.

2015 was not like 2010; obvious perhaps, but the changes in the political landscape meant that the attempt to make debates happen again was always going to face more testing hurdles. The three-party Westminster dynamics had slipped out of sync: coalition had brought two of the three 2010 participants into government together, with only one of them

seeming to benefit; UKIP had gone from a party which succeeded only in European elections into a force establishing itself across all fronts, at least in England and Wales; and the Scottish referendum result seemed to drill a sink-hole into Labour's heartlands, allowing the SNP to ascend into the political stratosphere.

But there are two simple truths about debates in the UK, which stand out from the barren history of 50 years without them—starting when we looked across at Kennedy and Nixon confronting each other in 1960, up until the moment they finally arrived here in 2010. First, on the whole, incumbent PMs don't want them (unless they're fairly sure they're going to lose the election—Jim Callaghan in 1979, John Major in 1997, Gordon Brown in 2010); usually, they fear it grants an equality to their main opponents, allowing a Leader of the Opposition to appear prime ministerial (Harold Wilson's reason for refusing to appear with Ted Heath in 1966), or to risk changing perceptions when they believe the public has low expectations of a rival (Thatcher–Kinnock, Blair–Hague). They also sometimes worry that debates expose the underlying inequality between the parties at the election: an opposition just has promises, an incumbent has an actual past record to defend.

The second simple truth is that any party, in government or opposition, which is confident of winning—typically, but not necessarily, because it is well ahead in the polls—will resist attempts to jeopardise its position through the unpredictability of debates (Blair in 1997 and 2001, Thatcher in 1979 and—curiously—Major in 1992). Of course, no blame can be attached to a party strategist who puts a higher priority on victory than on whether a TV programme takes place or not. Now, to these traditional and largely politically neutral factors, there is an added element with a more variable impact on the two largest parties: money. One of the motivations for cash-strapped Labour in 2010 was that debates were a way of reaching the electorate without cost to the party—an important leveller with the better funded Conservative campaign.

This understandable self-interest, often evident in both those who support and oppose debates, is normally clothed, naturally, in nobler arguments. Opponents insist our system is not presidential (Thatcher; Major—1992 only; Blair); television cheapens the democratic process (Douglas-Home in 1964: “a sort of Top of the Pops contest”; more recently characterised by Andrew Roberts as the “Simon Cowellisation” of elections); the UK is different because every week, there is the scrutiny of Prime Minister's Questions in the Commons (the clue to the flaw in this

argument being in the one-sided title). Equally, parties keen on debates taking place will be more inclined to talk about democratic benefits and not the coincidence of their own advantage.

So where did David Cameron fit into this pattern? He was, in 2005, as opposition politicians tend to be, an enthusiast for debates. In a head-to-head BBC *Question Time* programme during the contest with David Davis for the Tory leadership, Cameron made a point of answering the first question by saying that if he won, he would expect to have a debate with the prime minister at the next election. Soon after Gordon Brown replaced Tony Blair as PM, Cameron offered to “pay for the taxi to take him to the studio. ... In fact, I’ll even drive the cab!”. Following the Obama–McCain debates in 2008, Cameron asked Brown if he agreed that “the time had come for such election debates in Britain”. This enthusiasm for debates marked him out from other leaders who had rather hedged their commitments: Cameron was saying it himself on the record and there’s no evidence that he didn’t mean it. When opposition leader Tony Blair, in 1997, responded to John Major with an apparently enthusiastic: “any time any place”, it carried rather less weight because it was filtered through a spokesman; Alastair Campbell’s diary of the same time quotes Blair’s more candid private view: “it is really all balls that it would improve democratic debate”.

During the discussions which led to the 2010 debates, therefore, there was no doubting David Cameron’s commitment. Some Conservatives, though, were less convinced it was a good strategy: they felt that giving equality to the Liberal Democrats was a blunder always likely to damage the Tories more than Labour (a factor which had weighed heavily at previous elections). Others pointed to the opinion poll lead—not so great as Labour’s in 1997, but still sufficient, they thought, not to be put at risk. Yet throughout, Andy Coulson, Cameron’s main negotiator in 2010, never gave the impression that his man was anything less than fully supportive, not only about the principle of debates, but also in pushing for them to happen during the campaign.

So how was it that, by 2015, a party leader who had been so enthusiastic about debates now seemed the least keen? Well—see above—that’s the normal difference between being Leader of the Opposition and being PM. But how and why did David Cameron reposition his attitude to debates? Immediately after the 2010 encounters, he said: “Why on earth didn’t we have these things before? ... I think we will have them in every election in the future and I think that it is a really good thing for our

democracy". Ironically, his only post-match quibble had been that there were too many rules—many of which, of course, his own negotiators had spent six months insisting on.

There were suggestions, however, that Cameron had not really enjoyed the experience, and by the end of 2012, there had been a distinct change of tone. An image of those first debates which had previously been in the background began to take centre stage in an emerging Conservative narrative: that the debates had “sucked/squeezed the life/oxygen” out of the campaign. Few would argue with the claim that the debates had dominated the 2010 campaign—and perhaps too much. Days of anticipation beforehand, days of analysis afterwards—and the fact that they ran across three consecutive weeks of the campaign left little room for much else. The broadcasters themselves—whilst delighted with their impact—always insisted that debates should not become the only form of scrutiny or election programming; they had to battle hard, for instance, to insist on keeping the more traditional one-on-one long-form interviews with party leaders. Part of the impact of debates, though, was that they had been so long coming—it was always unlikely the rest of the media would obsess quite so much second time around.

But even if debates were dominant, the overwhelming consensus in 2010 was that they had energised the campaign and had engaged people in the election in a way that had been conspicuously absent at least since 1997. The broadcasters always firmly rejected the suggestion that just because they had played such a central role in the campaign, debates had, therefore, “squeezed” out its life. On the contrary, they had “revived” interest.

The Sucked Oxygen argument did rather depend on a somewhat rose-tinted view of what election campaigns had been like before. Did debates really sweep away an era of invigorating morning press conferences forensically testing the minutiae of each party’s policies, followed by days on the battle-buses mingling with ordinary voters in constituencies the length and breadth of the country, ending up each evening with speeches to packed town halls, inspiring the electorate to form patient queues outside polling stations? No, quite. Campaigns had become dull and unengaging. The evidence of the 2010 debates was of a new level of interest, especially among younger and first time voters, as well as the “marginally attentive”—the sort of voter who would barely have noticed any other sort of election coverage.

The broadcasters kept on trying to remind anyone who'd listen just how much impact the 2010 debates made: two thirds of the people who would go on to vote had seen something of them; more than half of 18 to 24 year olds who watched became more interested in the campaign—nearly three-quarters of them said they'd learnt something about the parties' policies. Astonishingly, around 90% of those who watched said they'd then discussed the debates with friends or family.

According to Jay Blumler, one of the researchers and a veteran observer of elections, "the youngest voters, those aged 18 to 24 years old, seemed almost to have formed a special relationship with the Prime Ministerial debates", going on to say that "exposure to the debates was something of a learning experience. ... What (the debates) may have bolstered is the confidence of viewers in their grasp of what, broadly, the competing parties stood for and of what their leaders were like". What better ambition could there be for public service broadcasters (and politicians, come to that) in an election?

Far from squeezing the life, sucking the oxygen or any other emergency medical calamity to be visited on the campaign, the evidence would suggest the debates transfused new blood into it. In those circumstances, the broadcasters felt it was their obligation to push as hard as they could to replicate that engagement in 2015. Their watchword first time round had been "simplicity": three parties, three broadcasters, three debates. The first challenge to this formula came not from the politicians, but from a fellow broadcaster; Channel 4, who in 2010 had been limited to a debate between prospective Chancellors, were now clear they wanted a piece of the main action. When the three originals—BBC, ITV and Sky—appeared before the House of Lords Communications Committee in February 2014, as it enquired into election debates, it was made clear that Channel 4 would be welcome and the broadcasters would again do their utmost not to let any of their differences be used as a hindrance. But there's no doubt it was a potential complication: four broadcasters did not mean there would be four debates and despite the camaraderie and co-operation, no broadcaster could afford to be entirely selfless. Nevertheless, at a fairly early stage, it was agreed that if there were still to be three debates, Channel 4 and Sky would be partners for one of them. It meant that they would have first call on the potential knock-out bout—a two-header between Cameron and Miliband. It's worth recalling that a year out from the election this was the contest David Cameron seemed to favour most. An apparently well-sourced piece—indeed, sounding like the horse's mouth—by Matthew

d'Ancona in *GQ* magazine said: "At least one of the general election debates, Cameron believes, must be between himself and Miliband—and nobody else ... a straightforward battle between the two men who have a chance of being prime minister after the election: that's him and Ed".

Significantly, that was just before the European elections. The progress of UKIP, at least in England and Wales, was also becoming a significant factor in rendering the 2010 formula unrepeatable. So long as it was a party which performed well in European elections, but nowhere else, then the accepted rules of engagement meant UKIP was not yet, for general elections, really in the big league (or as Ofcom puts it—a "major party"). That had begun to change in 2013, when UKIP started to win council seats in substantial numbers and to come second in every parliamentary by-election—a run unbroken until they were actually winning them. By 2014, their consistent standing in the opinion polls (not forgetting that reflects voting intentions for a general election) was establishing them as having substantially more support than the declining Lib Dems. So when the European Parliament elections did take place in June 2014, UKIP's performance, though spectacular (the first party other than Labour or Conservative to win a UK-wide election in more than a hundred years), it was not so surprising, given the supporting evidence from across the political landscape.

The broadcasters consider these matters through slightly different mechanisms, though in the end, they're all looking at the same basic evidence of electoral support when they decide how that should translate into air-time—not just for debates, but all election coverage. They look at actual votes across a series of elections in each nation of the UK, and they also take account of other relevant and robust evidence, such as long-term and consistent trends across different but credible opinion polls. Using that evidence, they then make editorial judgements which must be transparently fair and consistent. In the modern, devolved UK, however, that is often far from straightforward and the very tangle of complication provides a fertile environment for anybody who wants to strangle the idea of debates. There simply is no useful mathematical formula which will deliver perfect and mutually acceptable symmetry to all the parties and all parts of the UK. Broadcasters have to make judgements—and those judgements have to be independent of party political interest or influence. By definition, some—even all—of the parties will sometimes be unhappy with those judgements and cry foul. The noise of that dissent doesn't necessarily mean the broadcasters have made the wrong judgement.

The Conservatives had made it clear that they did not want to sit down and discuss debates until the autumn of 2014. This was a similar timescale to 2009–2010 and not in itself a reason to think there would be difficulties—a governing party does not come across as being unreasonable saying it's too busy governing. Although David Cameron had signalled that he did not want debates to be so dominant, the broadcasters were confident that the fixed-term parliament had already given them a way of avoiding such a repeat. One of the biggest problems of timing in 2010 was that no-one—except the incumbent—knew the date of the election until it was called, so the dates for debates were hypothetical until the very last minute. For 2015, because everyone knew in advance the length and dates of the campaign, the space between debates could comfortably be doubled—two weeks in between each instead of one. Surely that was sufficient to allow some “oxygen” into the rest of the campaign?

The hints of doubt, however, had solidified into something of a rewritten history of what actually happened in 2010. A week after Lynton Crosby took over responsibility for election strategy for the Conservatives, in November 2012, the party chairman, Grant Shapps, told the Times he “had very mixed feelings about the leaders’ debates last time round”. Well after the event, Shapps has since been rather more candid about what he meant, confirming that David Cameron had indeed been “slightly freaked” by his 2010 experience of debates, which had put him off doing them again. The following month, the PM himself, addressing a lunch of Westminster journalists, launched the “squeezed/sucked” argument; having said “I haven’t made my mind up exactly, but I am in favour of these debates”, he continued: “My reflection on last time was that they did take all the life out of the campaign”. What emerged over the following two years was the suggested cure for preventing the life being taken out of the campaign: election debates should not take place … erm … during the election campaign.

This was something which the broadcasters could not sign up to—again, the clue was in the name...but more importantly, the whole point of debates—to engage the electorate—was always a delicate balancing act: commission too much too soon and television can have the opposite effect from that desired and risks turning people off the election. Labour had a more technical political objection to such a timetable: earlier dates would either mean debating before its manifesto was published, or it would be forced to reveal its hand early, giving opponents the chance to pick off policies using the pre-purdah advantages of Whitehall incumbency.

By October 2014, the broadcasters knew they had to kick-start the process. Unlike 2010, however, from now on, much of the story was played out in public—not the ideal environment for building trust, making compromises and reaching agreement. When the broadcasters published their first proposals, they saw it as a basis for setting out the new realities as much as it was a formula with prospects for agreement. Instead of the 3:3:3 template of 2010, this time they bid for 2:3:4—in no particular order, but with the dates of 2 April, 16 April and 30 April 2015 being fixed by the broadcasters for the programmes. Recognising UKIP's new status, Nigel Farage would take part in one debate. The cat duly landed among the pigeons.

For some, the subsequent sight of the Conservatives riding into battle on behalf of the Green Party was rather peculiar. David Cameron insisted that if one “minor” party—UKIP—was included, then so should the other—the Greens. The broadcasters’ careful consideration, backed later by Ofcom, was that UKIP was no longer a minor party and that, based on precisely the same consistent criteria, the Greens were some way short of being comparable. And yet politically, of course, Cameron had a reasonable case: UKIP was seen largely as a threat to the Conservatives, and the Greens were more likely to take votes from Labour and the Liberal Democrats. It is not difficult to see why it had to be both or neither from his perspective—but it was difficult for him to make that self-interested case openly. So the PM’s argument seemed to many a somewhat faux-altruistic case for the Greens. They, of course, could not have been more delighted and so began an effective and self-fulfilling campaign for their inclusion.

But it was an important principle of their independence and impartiality that the broadcasters would not negotiate with any party the inclusion or exclusion in debates of any other party. That could not be appropriate. In any case, the idea that the whole conundrum ought to be sorted out simply by adding the Greens to the mix—that 2:3:5 would crack it—was, at best, optimistic; either sabotage was the real motive or this was a classic case of Westminster forgetting other parts of the UK existed. The broadcasters were quite clear that they could not invite the Greens, with their relatively low support largely confined to England, to a UK-wide debate which did not include the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, who, crucially, were competing for votes there directly with the big UK parties.

The broadcasters had said from the beginning that they would continue to look at the evidence—and they meant it. There were joint meetings with the four invited parties attempting to set up a sensible process, but it was fairly clear by the turn of the year, if not before, that the first proposal was a dead duck. Politics, however, was also on the move. The

Greens had based their argument to participate not on comparisons with UKIP, as David Cameron did, but on claiming that they were overtaking the Lib Dems, in votes and polls. It was true they'd beaten them at the recent European election—but their analysis of opinion polls was somewhat selective. And of course, the Greens were conveniently ignoring what the broadcasters could not—that the Lib Dems were a party of government with more than 50 MPs in the House of Commons and thousands of councillors across the country: on our metric, still a larger party.

When the broadcasters made their first pitch, in October 2014, a more detached study of polls had suggested the Greens were around 3 to 4 percentage points behind the Lib Dems. But the row over their exclusion—as they privately admitted afterwards—was very good for the Greens. Not only did their membership soar, but by the New Year, they really were snapping at the heels of the Lib Dems. At the same time, something extraordinary was happening in Scotland. Far from being crushed by a no vote in the referendum, the SNP, with their new leader, were burning up the polls and heading for 50% support. These were very different circumstances to 2010, when the broadcasters argued that the combination of UK-wide debates between the big three UK parties, complemented by separate debates in the devolved nations, was a reasonable and impartial proposal, a formula tested when the SNP unsuccessfully took the BBC to court in Edinburgh two days before the final election debate. By 2015, Scotland and the rise of the SNP was a large part of the UK story, so including Nicola Sturgeon in the UK-wide debates now made sense. Having accepted that in Scotland, whilst Plaid Cymru could not point to any similar growth in Wales, it now had a reasonable case to be included too. By deciding to invite both nationalist parties, the broadcasters ensured that their preferred line-up of seven parties would give all voters in England, Scotland and Wales a chance to see the leaders of all the electorally significant parties competing for their votes.

And so the broadcasters came back with a new proposal. Once the gates were open to parties beyond those with the very highest levels of support standing candidates across Great Britain as a whole, then it was a different ball-game: two seven-headed debates, plus a single head-to-head for Cameron and Miliband. By now, the broadcasters felt the need to deploy what muscle they had. Deliberately avoiding the awkward verbification “empty-chairing”—and they never had any intention of literally setting out a chair or a podium as a symbol of non-attendance—the broadcasters made it clear the debates would go ahead on the dates already set. It was another important principle of independence and impartiality that no single party is able to veto a programme by refusing to turn up. Which is easily said.

And for the multi-party debates, a principle that can be stuck to. A two-headed debate, however, is not much of a debate with only one head. From being the preferred format twelve months earlier, a straight Cameron-Miliband debate had now become a no-go area for the Conservatives.

There was a new complication: hitherto, the very different party political structure of Northern Ireland meant that, with no meaningful overlap between the big parties who voters can choose from, no-one had seriously suggested that anything other than separate debates was an appropriate approach. But the inclusion of the SNP and Plaid Cymru had given the DUP cause to fight for equal treatment. For the broadcasters, the issue was clear—inviting one party without including the other larger Northern Ireland parties would be an obvious breach of impartiality (unless the debate was not actually broadcast there, which made no sense). Seven party leaders were manageable—up to 12 were probably not. Furthermore, it would distort any debate to the extent that voters in England, the overwhelming majority, would witness a contest in which more than half the parties represented were not on their ballot paper—hardly ideal for engaging the electorate.

At the beginning of March, less than a month from the start of the campaign, Downing Street made a “final offer”: a single 90-minute debate, before the formal campaign, with at least seven parties. The DUP complication was embraced and there were suggestions that the PM was stepping in to “unblock the log-jam”, saving the broadcasters, who had caused “chaos”. Gary Gibbon, Channel 4’s political editor, assessed Downing Street’s approach thus: “Mr Cameron and his team have played games ever since the process began ... the tactic has been to keep trying to paint the whole process as chaotic while quietly trying to make sure it was as chaotic as possible”. More recently - and now freed from the constraints of party chairmanship - Grant Shapps has acknowledged that there was some truth to this: “We played these arguments endlessly actually to the advantage of politicians basically dodging having to do the debates”.

At the time, a stand-off ensued; The broadcasters wrote back: “in the end all we can do ... is to provide a fair forum for debates to take place. It will always remain the decision of individual leaders whether or not to take part. The debates will go ahead ... open to all the invited leaders right up to broadcast”.

The atmosphere of the 2015 discussions was now clearly very different to 2010, when the politicians and the broadcasters had worked through problems and come up with solutions. So, with the campaign barely a fortnight away, there was a sharp shift in approach, with some banging of heads. What emerged involved compromises, of course—and it certainly did not end the rows: first, a two-header of sorts, between Cameron

and Miliband, before the campaign started, which, though they actually appeared separately, subjected the would-be PMs to both an iconically aggressive interviewer and the uncertainty of real voters; next, the seven-header, including the PM, which retained the principle that debates should happen during the campaign proper and demonstrated that such a formula—calmly and expertly chaired—is both practical and highly watchable; plus, an opposition leaders’ debate which established that governments cannot dictate all the terms of who appears on air; and finally, a Question Time format, first successfully used back in 2005, with the leaders appearing separately, but bringing a reminder to everyone that it is voters who are the stars of the show.¹ Alan Schroeder, the chronicler of US debates, was in Leeds to witness Cameron, Miliband and Clegg face the Yorkshire audience a week before polling day and found himself wishing that “American campaigns included equivalent opportunities for sharp, sceptical questioning by informed citizens”. It may not have been a debate as such, but, says Schroeder: “Ultimately that did not matter—the people in the audience got the job done, candidate by candidate”.

So the outcome of the unhappy process trying to repeat the success of debates in 2010 was that, for the electorate, television still managed to make a reasonable fist of getting its job done too: a range of formats to scrutinise the leaders; a way of recognising that party politics around the UK was changing and—crucially (for broadcasters at least)—establishing the principle that debates *will* happen at election time, because the interests of voters must trump those of politicians. The broadcasters had not been pushed off their original schedule of programme dates in the campaign period through April.

What’s more, detailed research into the 2015 experience, by Stephen Coleman, appears to reinforce the lessons of 2010’s debates, concluding they “performed a crucially important civic role, reaching sections of the population least likely to be touched by the rest of the campaign”. The significant impact on the young and the less engaged was underlined. Before the inevitable reshaping of history starts again for 2020, therefore, it’s worth holding on to one thought: big TV events, whether they are debates or other more audience-focussed formats (preferably both), still form the anchors of national election campaigns; draped around them are the broader and the more local conversations—on social media, in the pub, round the breakfast table, in local schools or church halls, as well as on the rest of the media. It’s all these together which dictate how much engagement the electorate has in the vital job they are asked to do every

five years. At the very least, the 2015 struggle did preserve the not unreasonable ambition that, at election times, people who are deciding whether and how to vote should be able to see those who aspire to govern set out their political wares and submit themselves to proper scrutiny.

NOTE

1. *Question Time* finds its audience members by inviting people to apply who are already interested and want to put themselves forward: they are then balanced for an appropriate range of political views and party support. Debates, however, normally ask a polling company to find appropriately representative samples of ordinary voters. The former, of course, is more likely to be engaged and informed.

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CHAPTER 19

The Election Debates in 2015: The View from the Living Room

Claire Emes and Josh Keith

INTRODUCTION

The 2010 General Election saw the introduction of debates to a UK election campaign for the first time, with the leaders of the three main parties engaging in a trio of televised events during the final few weeks of election campaigning. Parties and pundits alike were eager to understand who had performed well, which messages had cut through and what impact this would have on the wider election campaign. Five years later, the political landscape and media environment may have shifted—resulting in a different debate format—but the desire to understand “the view from the living room” could be considered even greater than before.

In 2015, the perceived rise of the UK Independence Party and the after-effects of the 2014 referendum on Scottish Independence called into question the three-party setup used for the 2010 debates. After drawn-out negotiations between the broadcasters and the UK’s major political parties, discussed in detail by Ric Bailey (see Chap. 18), it was finally agreed that televised debates would again take place. The shape of these debates was very different from those of 2010, with agreement eventually being

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reached that just two formal debates would take place. The first of these, a seven-way “Leaders’ Debate” between the leaders of the Conservative Party, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, UK Independence Party, Green Party, Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru, took place on 2 April 2015, was hosted by ITV, and took place in Salford, Manchester. The debate programme drew an average audience of 7 million (BBC News 2015b). The second debate, the so-called “Challengers’ Debate”, took place on 16 April 2015 and was hosted in Westminster, London, by the BBC. This debate included just the five opposition leaders, excluding the leaders of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, as members of the outgoing coalition government, and drew an average audience of 4.3 million (BBC News 2015a).

In addition to the televised debates, the leaders of both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party took part in televised leader interviews, with Jeremy Paxman, on 26 March 2015, whilst *BBC Question Time* on 30 April saw the leaders of the Conservatives, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats taking questions from a studio audience.

THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT 2010–2015

It was not just the political landscape that altered between 2010 and 2015, we also witnessed a fundamental shift in the way the general public use technology, consume media and, consequently, engage with politics. Smartphone ownership amongst the British public grew from 20% in 2010 (Ipsos MORI 2010b), to 72% at the time of the election in 2015 (Ipsos MORI 2015e), allowing people to access information when and where they liked. Over the same period, we saw a near doubling in the proportion visiting social networking sites; up from 33% in 2010 (Ipsos MORI 2010b) to 59% in 2015 (Ipsos MORI 2015e). With two-thirds of people now accessing the Internet via their mobile phones, demand for immediacy in all aspects of life was rising.

These technological advances and the nature of the televised debates in 2015 posed a number of challenges—and opportunities—for broadcasters and pollsters alike. There was a need to understand both people’s immediate, visceral reactions, as well as the wider role of the debates in the election campaign as a whole. Caroline Lawes and Andrew Hawkins of ComRes, in the 2010 edition of this book, explored the shift in voting intention evident amongst both viewers and non-viewers in the immediate aftermath of the 2010 debates (Lawes and Hawkins 2011). The impact

of both the *reporting* of the debates on non-viewers, as well as the *direct* influence of the debates on viewers, was evident. The technological and behavioural changes since 2010 meant that in 2015, with a multitude of ways to engage with the debates, their potential to impact viewers and non-viewers alike had only grown larger.

There was also a need, not just to *analyse* people's immediate reactions to the debate, but also to *cater for* 2015's "real time" culture by providing some form of "in the moment" feedback during and shortly after the debates, alongside the more considered and ongoing investigation into their wider impact.

APPRAISING THE 2015 DEBATES WITH MIXED METHODS

To provide a holistic view of voters' engagement with, and reaction to, the debates, we employed a range of complementary methods:

- The 2015 "worm"
- "In the moment" focus groups
- Live Twitter analysis
- The BBC *Election Uncut* Community

The 2015 "Worm"

The 2010 General Election campaign had seen not only the introduction of the televised debates themselves, but also, at Ipsos MORI, the introduction to the UK political scene of our simple but effective measure of voter engagement, the Ipsos MORI "worm" (Ipsos MORI 2010c). Commissioned by the BBC, we recruited a group of 36 undecided voters, with a broad demographic mix based on gender, age, social grade and ethnicity, as well as voting behaviour. Each voter was tasked with watching one of the three leaders, and providing their reactions as they watched the debate unfold live. Participants used voting pads to indicate to what extent they liked what they were hearing from the leader throughout the debate. This was then graphically represented in the form of three traces or "worms"—one for each leader—illustrating visually the leaders' "high" and "low" points according to undecided voters.

In 2015, the BBC was keen to repeat this analysis, but the nature of the debates, with seven and five leaders respectively, made tracking attitudes to individual leaders difficult to achieve. In addition, the more structured nature of the debate, with leaders taking turns to answer a series of

questions, would have resulted in the participants regularly waiting several minutes before the leader they were rating was engaged with the debate again. Crucially, it would also be harder to visually represent, with seven “worms” difficult for viewers to follow. So in 2015, rather than have voters watch and rate just one leader, we asked the whole audience to provide feedback throughout the debate. We recruited a slightly larger audience of 50, undecided, voters (again broadly reflective of political opinion) from across England, Scotland and Wales to watch each of the debates and they all used their keypads to rate whoever was speaking at any point in time. This produced a single “worm”, tracking fluctuations in sentiment depending on the topic being discussed, and the leader speaking. The “worm” illustrated *how* viewers were reacting during the debate but not *what* they were thinking or *why*—so to support the 2015 “worm”, during each of the debates, we also ran “in the moment” focus groups with six to seven additional undecided voters at the same location as the “worm” audience. This allowed us to instantly delve into why people were reacting in a particular way during the debate and “diagnose” the “worm” movement.

In 2010, the “worm” trace was overlaid onto clips of key moments, which were used to aid the analytical discussion on BBC News at Ten *after* the debates. The 2015 “worm”, however, was also broadcast live on the BBC News Channel, offering viewers the opportunity to watch the debates with or without the live “worm” trace. The live “worm” was the source of its own debate about the possible social influence effect of the “worm” on viewers’ experience and interpretation of the leader debates, in particular the potential to influence judgement of who “won” the debate (Davis et al. 2011). There was also a more light-hearted discussion about the “worm” on Twitter, with some viewers seeing it as an unnecessary distraction, whilst others felt it added colour to the debate. One Tweet suggested that the debate could have been made more interesting by linking the “worm” to a trap door beneath each leader to be opened when the “worm” trace hit a low point, perhaps something to consider for 2020!

Live Twitter Analysis

The aforementioned rise in the use of social media presented both fresh challenges and opportunities for politicians, commentators, and pollsters alike during the 2015 General Election campaign. Elsewhere in this volume (see Chap. 24), Steven Ginnis and Carl Miller undertake a detailed examination of the role of Twitter in the Election campaign, highlighting

how social media has gone some way to changing the nature of political debate in Britain. As part of an ongoing project funded by Innovate UK (Ipsos MORI 2015f), along with the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM) at Demos, Ipsos MORI conducted live analysis of the discussion on Twitter during both debates using a new form of social media analysis based on natural language processing.

Twitter analysis gave us access to hundreds of thousands of views and opinions during the course of the debate, with our work alone analysing 370,000 Tweets during the 2 April Leaders' Debate. However, it is crucial to remember that, despite the *volume*, Twitter is far from *representative* of the views of the population as a whole. For example, we know that 75% of Twitter users are under the age of 45, and 69 % are in social grades ABC1 (Ipsos MORI 2015e). Indeed, looking at political conversations specifically, the research conducted as part of our *Road to Representativity* project highlighted the challenges with using Twitter to understand political conversations. This research showed that 33% of Tweets about Cameron and Miliband over two weekends in the build-up to the General Election came from just 1% of Twitter users, highlighting the comparatively small number of contributors this conversation actually represents, above and beyond the challenges with the representativeness of Twitter users generally (Miller et al. 2015). Nonetheless, used alongside other techniques, it served as a useful measuring stick for the performance of the respective leaders during the debates.

BBC Election Uncut Online Community

Ipsos MORI was also commissioned by the BBC to host an online community of voters to discuss a range of issues throughout the General Election campaign. The *Election Uncut* community of c.2000 adults, aged 18–75 across the UK, presented the opportunity to have a closer relationship with voters, engaging with them regularly from March 2015 to beyond polling day. This allowed us to explore their experience of the campaign, their attitudes to voting and the key issues determining how they vote. Crucially it allowed us to probe into how attitudes developed throughout the course of the election campaign. Whilst the primary focus of the community was not solely the debates, it provided an incredibly useful forum to explore people's expectations and reactions to these debates—throughout the campaign. We were also able to discuss with *Election Uncut* community members the extent to which the debates had helped them decide how to vote.

Members were invited to take part in a range of activities across the weeks of the campaign, including surveys, forums, journals, and online focus groups (Ipsos MORI 2015c). We tracked engagement with, and reaction to, the televised debates through regular online surveys, and also hosted a live online discussion group. Over 150 members contributed to the “real time” discussion during the seven-leader debate on the 2 April.

WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THE DEBATES?

The run up...

In February 2015, before the debate formats had been agreed, an Ipsos MORI poll (Ipsos MORI 2015a) showed that two in five (37%) GB adults expected that the TV debates would influence their vote. At the start of the campaign, a similar proportion of the *Election Uncut* Community members thought that the TV debates would be *important* in helping them decide who to vote for (44%). However, in the hours before the 2 April Leaders’ Debate, the expectation amongst members of the community engaged in a live online focus group was that the seven-leader format could erode the potential of the debates to further their understanding of any of the issues that mattered to them, and even reduce the opportunity for meaningful debate to happen.

The debates...

Perhaps unsurprisingly, and in line with similar findings during the 2010 debates (Ipsos MORI 2010a), we found that *positive* messaging was popular with voters; all leaders tended to see their ratings rise when they spoke positively about things they wanted to achieve, whether it was building more houses, delivering free education, or job creation. People reacted badly when the leaders were seen to be squabbling, or to be taking a negative standpoint. The lowest point during the 16 April “Challengers’ Debate”, according to both the “worm” and our Twitter analysis, was when Nigel Farage turned on the studio audience, criticising it of being “too left wing”. Adversarial moments also offer an opportunity for those wishing to distance themselves from “Punch and Judy” politics, such as Nicola Sturgeon intervening with an attempt to discredit the “old boys’ network”. This evokes comparisons with Nick Clegg’s ability to position himself as something of an outsider in the 2010 debates, boosting his ratings when doing so.

It was a case of the usual suspects when it came to the big topics discussed, with the NHS, the Economy and Education all featuring prominently in the first debate; they were topping the Ipsos MORI/*Economist* Issues Index at the time (Ipsos MORI 2015b) and continued to be seen as the most important in determining votes throughout the run-up to polling day (Ipsos MORI 2015d).

There were some easy wins for all leaders, none more so than defending the free nature of the National Health Service (NHS), and dismissing privatisation. However, unlike in 2010, the issue of immigration did not end up being a key battleground—our “worm” analysis showed no leader really made much headway on this topic. In the second debate, it was the issue of housing that seemed to offer the challengers the opportunity to score points, especially when talking about house building. Looking back on the debates post-election, it is also interesting to note the positive reaction of the “Challengers’ Debate” audience to the final question of approaches to negotiating a possible coalition.

Despite not being present for the second debate, Cameron and Clegg did not escape the clutches of the “worm”, with Twitter analysis reacting markedly when their lack of attendance was noted. They were effectively “empty chaired” by Twitter, with there being 8318 Tweets about David Cameron during the course of the Challengers’ Debate, with the majority of these (67%) classed as “Boos”.

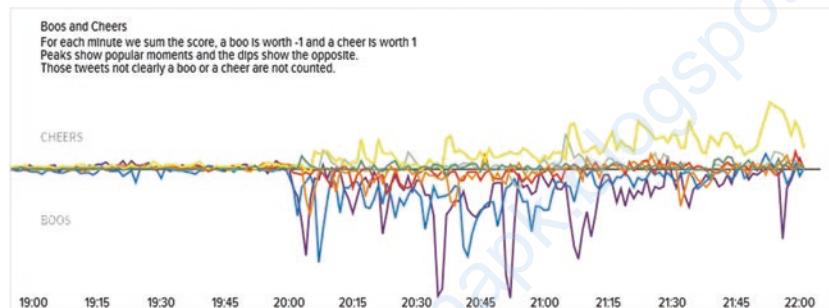
There were some surprise performances, notably from Nicola Sturgeon. Ahead of the first Leaders’ Debate, fewer than one in ten of our Election Uncut community members expected Sturgeon to be the top performer (9%) but she performed extremely well across all of our various audience assessments. She achieved the highest sustained ratings amongst the “worm” audience and scored an almost unprecedented “Cheers to Boos” ratio in our live Twitter analysis—with 83% of Tweets about Nicola Sturgeon being classed as positive (a much higher figure than any of the other leaders achieved during the debate, see Table 19.1 and Fig. 19.1).

This positive reaction to Nicola Sturgeon was echoed in our post-debate surveying on the Election Uncut community—with the SNP seen to have had the *best week*, following the debate, and as Table 19.2 below shows, Nicola Sturgeon seen to have *done best overall, given the best answers to the questions, and come across as being most trustworthy*.

Table 19.1 Overall Twitter reaction to leaders during the first televised debate

| | David Cameron (%) | Ed Miliband (%) | Nigel Farage (%) | Nick Clegg (%) | Natalie Bennett (%) | Nicola Sturgeon (%) | Leanne Wood (%) |
|----------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| “Cheers” | 32 | 47 | 40 | 48 | 64 | 83 | 66 |
| “Boos” | 68 | 53 | 60 | 52 | 36 | 17 | 34 |

Source: The Telegraph, CASM, Qlik, DEMOS, University of Sussex and Ipsos MORI (Miller 2015)

**Fig. 19.1** Live dashboard during the ITV Leaders' debate

IMPACT...

Despite all the attention the televised debates garnered, the viewing figures were substantially down on the 2010 debates. That said, the wider discussion across traditional and digital media means that they will have reached many of those who did not watch them live. Certainly amongst our *Election Uncut* online community members, the debates were seen to dominate both the *best* and *worst* moments of the election campaign. Whilst not everyone will remember or be conscious of the impact the debates may have had on them, around one in five members (18%) *said* that the TV debates had *influenced the way they voted*. Two-fifths of members (40%) reported that they had decided how to vote more than 6 weeks before the election, and 18% said that they made up their mind in the final 24 hours before polling day. With the debates just one of a plethora of campaigning tools available to the parties, not to mention other potential influences on voters, it is impossible to isolate the precise impact of the debates on voting behaviour.

Table 19.2 Comparative performance of leaders in the first televised debate

| | <i>David Cameron (%)</i> | <i>Ed Miliband (%)</i> | <i>Nigel Farage (%)</i> | <i>Nick Clegg (%)</i> | <i>Natalie Bennett (%)</i> | <i>Nicola Sturgeon (%)</i> | <i>Leanne Wood (%)</i> |
|--|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
| ...did best overall? | 14 | 13 | 9 | 5 | 2 | 40 | 1 |
| ...gave the best answers to questions? | 16 | 13 | 13 | 8 | 3 | 26 | 2 |
| ...came across as being most trustworthy? | 14 | 13 | 8 | 8 | 6 | 17 | 6 |
| ...best understands the problems facing Britain? | 21 | 16 | 15 | 8 | 4 | 9 | 1 |
| ...is this most capable? | 33 | 14 | 4 | 4 | 1 | 16 | 1 |
| ...is most out of touch with people like you? | 25 | 18 | 22 | 5 | 5 | 7 | 2 |

Source: Ipsos MORI/BBC Election Uncut Online Community

Base: 1156 online community members aged 18–75 who watched the debate, fieldwork 3–6 April 2015

Q. Which leader, if any do you think...?

As in 2010, the 2015 televised debates undoubtedly played their part in the General Election campaign, with one of their main roles seeming to be in providing a platform for the leaders of the smaller parties to impress, Nick Clegg in 2010 and Nicola Sturgeon in 2015. However, it is unlikely they had a significant impact on the outcome of the election.

It seems highly likely that televised leader debates (of some form) will be part of the 2020 election campaign. We can also expect to see yet more changes in the way the electorate engages with politics and election campaigns over coming years as technology continues to change people's behaviour. The challenge for researchers and broadcasters is to try to keep pace with this, and find ever quicker and more accurate ways of measuring the interaction with, and the impact, of events such as these televised debates.

Taking techniques that are already being applied to understanding consumers' relationships with brands in the private sector, there is great potential for the application of observational, behavioural and neuro science techniques to help us better understand what is driving voter behaviour—

and it is likely these will play more of a part in 2020. These techniques will help us move beyond a reliance on reported behaviour, to help us get a truer picture of how the electorate interacts with politicians, and political parties, during the course of an election campaign.

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Print and Social Media

CHAPTER 20

Reporting the Election

Joe Murphy

“What would you like? We’ve got Haribo and KitKats or you could have fruit.” Opting for a banana and some Starmix to go with my early morning coffee, I settled into a leather seat on David Cameron’s battle bus in a state of confusion. It wasn’t the eclectic breakfast served by perma-cheerful press officers that baffled me, but the fact that the bus was virtually empty.

Where were the journalists? As the Union Flag bedecked (although Spanish-built), Irizar coach purred from Westminster towards a factory floor in Enfield for a speech and interview, it was virtually empty. There was the Press Association man, who had heard Cameron’s stump speech so many times he could recite it while asleep, and a few hacks like me who had been invited on board for a day or two for colour and interviews.

Many times the 2015 general election has been compared with the contest between John Major and Neil Kinnock in 1992. There is certainly a striking likeness in the result: a surprise Tory victory against a Labour leader who suffered a severe image problem. But there were many more differences—and the disappearance of the old-fashioned battlebus after many decades of faithful service was one of them.

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I will remember 2015 not so much for the stories—although the 10 p.m. drama of the exit poll will never, ever be forgotten—but as the election when newspapers and broadcasters found their traditional means of scrutinising, challenging and testing the would-be leaders under greater threat than ever before. Cabinet ministers seemed to have been put under house arrest by Lynton Crosby, they gave so few interviews. For all the bigger parties, caution was the watchword, which meant more stage-managed events and fewer press conferences.

Back on Cameron's luxury coach, I nostalgically contrasted it with the first battlebus I joined: Neil Kinnock's in 1992. It was more like boarding a busload of mixed Spurs and Arsenal supporters. About 20 or so combat-ready journalists—tabloids, heavies, TV and radio—spent thousands of pounds of their companies' money to travel in convoy with the Labour leader's scarlet Rover for the entire campaign. A week before it began, I asked an experienced reporter from the *Express* what to expect. "Well, we spend three weeks sticking our legs out and wait for Kinnock to trip over them," was the reply. When the Labour leader took off in his election plane (which we inevitably dubbed Hot Air Force One) we occupied the rear half. We stayed in the same hotels, toured the same hospitals and company HQs (where we had unfettered freedom to chat with staff and managers), ingratiated ourselves with him in fag breaks and then battered him daily at press conferences in far-flung cities.

It was a gruelling trip, with a few fights and lots of tantrums, but it produced real scrutiny. We devoted hours on the bus to reading Labour's manifesto cover to cover and thinking up questions on subjects as obscure as the Bank of England "corset" of the 1970s (an outstretched leg that Neil satisfactorily stumbled upon). The competition was intense, not least to justify the cost. Ultimately we did our job of putting the would-be PM and his manifesto to the test. John Major and Paddy Ashdown, incidentally, subjected themselves to exactly the same ordeal on their own buses.

However, joining the Cameron bus in April felt like being taken prisoner in a pleasant, floating padded cell. There was no media pack, as such, because reporters and feature writers drifted in and out. Without continuity or pack competition, the drilling into the manifesto was not deep. It was a strictly invitation-only vehicle, which meant we were guests rather than there by right, mere passengers being taxied between photo opportunities and interviews. Moreover, some sections of the press were never invited on board and naturally accused the Conservatives of allocating seats only to "friendly" faces—something Kinnock could certainly not have been accused of. Cameron joined the bus himself for his final

push, a round-the-clock tour of Britain. Amusingly, he was dropped off at the Celtic Manor near Newport for a few hours' sleep, while miserable hacks had to kip on the bus in a layby. At 6 a.m. next morning, the yawning media were decanted to a muddy farmyard devoid of other people to watch a refreshed Cameron meet the rustic owner. Comically, the prim Tory press officers still insisted on erecting a tape barrier for the few reporters to stand behind.

Colleagues who climbed aboard Ed Miliband's battlebus report that it was much more like Cameron's than Kinnock's, with lots of empty seats and temporary guests. Actually, Labour had two buses—one for Ed, the other for journalists. Unfortunately, they did not always go to the same places, which made things awkward for the travelling journos and photographers. Once, Miliband got into a row during a stop-off at a Sikh temple in the Midlands—a controversy that came as a shock to reporters who were supposed to be shadowing him because they had not even been told about the visit, let alone allowed to watch it. Their bus simply detoured it: perhaps Miliband's image-makers thought a photograph of him in a red head-covering at a temple would be a problem.

Nick Clegg gets the award for keeping with the traditional battlebus. The Liberal Democrats charged a whopping £10,000 for a ticket on the Clegg Express but in return gave a real travelling press pack daily access to the deputy prime minister, who travelled on board for much of the time, and unfettered opportunities to ask questions. Amusingly, the bus broke down once, forcing hacks to run to the Tube to get to an event. Clegg was a bit desperate, which probably encouraged him to take more risks. It is surely the only explanation for why he agreed to read out "mean tweets" about himself for the *Sun*'s website, including a claim he had "scrotal skin at the back of his neck" (Google it, the video is simply extraordinary.) Let us hope Tim Farron maintains this fine democratic tradition.

The vanishing battlebus is not something most voters would know about or care about. But they should. They should also mourn the demise of the early morning election press conference—once a daily staple of every campaign, where bleary-eyed political correspondents could grab an on-the-run breakfast of Ginger Nuts and stewed tea while grilling their putative government.

In all the previous elections I covered, from 1987 onwards, this is how most days started: the media circus would gather at Labour HQ at, say, 8 a.m., move en masse to the Tories at 8.45 and then stagger to the Lib Dems at 9.30. These three press conferences usually involved a senior minister or shadow minister and the campaign chair. They would make a

presentation on a policy, but after listening to the official spiel journalists could bring up anything they liked. It was grown-up politics, with grown-up politicians actually being allowed to speak about their briefs. And for all the alleged “control-freakery” of the New Labour years, the format still survived into the 2010 campaign, albeit less frequently.

In 2015, proper press conferences were simply killed off. Sometimes events appeared on TV that resembled press conferences, but they actually involved mixed audiences of supporters and reporters, with each taking turns to ask questions. At the UKIP manifesto launch, the *Telegraph's* Christopher Hope was actually jeered by the audience of Kippers when he asked about the lack of black faces in the manifesto, an ugly bit of intimidation. Ed Miliband frequently exhorted his audiences not to heckle journalists. David Cameron tended to stage Q&As on factory floors where the nervous workforce could be relied upon not to embarrass the boss by asking awkward questions. Such mongrel events—half rally, half Q&A—do not allow the steady, repetitive, drumbeat of questions that a proper press conference allows to build up, which is vital to getting beyond the politician’s protective layer of blandishments or dissembling.

Much was made of David Cameron’s refusal to debate head-to-head with Ed Miliband. Less has been made about how few members of his Cabinet gave heavyweight TV interviews. Adam Boulton, Sky News’s legendary former political editor and now star interviewer, tells me this was the first election in his TV career where he interviewed no Cabinet ministers, with the honourable exception of Michael Gove. And while it may be understandable that Ed Miliband boycotted the *Sun* during the campaign, why did he refuse to be grilled by Channel 4’s Jon Snow? In all cases the answer is the same: nobody dared take any risks.

While these old familiar campaign milestones were obliterated, the better-funded political parties were turning to new ways of talking to voters directly, beyond the gaze of TV, radio and press. Labour made more use of social media such as Twitter (with mixed results). The Conservatives stepped up the level and sophistication of their direct mail, creating personalised messages for the tiny minority of voters in key target seats. Senior Conservatives believe this micro-messaging was extremely successful, so we can expect other parties to copy them next time. No wonder a grateful Mr Cameron knighted Sir Lynton Crosby, the man who masterminded the electoral water-into-wine miracle of transforming a 37 per cent vote share into an overall Commons majority and a place in his-

tory. A senior member of Jeremy Corbyn's shadow cabinet recently told me: "We have to buy into these techniques before the next election. But it will be expensive."

For the regional media, the clampdown on access to ministers was Draconian. One regional political editor says it was the first election campaign where every request he made to interview a Cabinet minister was rebuffed by Conservative HQ. I believe the regional journalistic lobby at Westminster is hugely important to the democratic process as they represent cities, towns across and communities who have different concerns to Fleet Street editors. But in stark contrast to the "localism" and devolution debates raging at Westminster, local papers were frozen out by the governing parties.

"We talked to all the top Labour people, who opened themselves up to intensive questioning," says Rob Merrick, the highly respected lobby correspondent for several regionals including the *Daily Echo* in Southampton and the *Northern Echo*. "That was in stark contrast to the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats who, despite our regular requests, failed to make ministers available to undergo the same level of scrutiny." This should set alarm bells ringing for those who believe in local accountability. Things have already changed since I pitched up at Westminster in 1989 for the *Leicester Mercury* and *Coventry Telegraph*. In Margaret Thatcher's day, ministers held lobby briefings before every announcement, which meant young shavers like me representing the provinces could ask questions as freely as the giants of the BBC and ITN. Now these Q&A sessions are rare, replaced by scripted TV clips. The twice-daily briefings by the prime minister's spokesman for the Parliamentary Lobby are currently a last bastion of real access for local journalists, but there are constant rumours that Whitehall would love to cut them back.

Does any of this matter? It does, because the techniques that succeed during elections have a nasty tendency to be imported into government when they win. So expect fewer press conferences in future and assume ministers will be discouraged from giving interviews or writing articles without permission from No. 10. Downing Street is also trying to revive the dreadful idea that ministers should keep No. 10 informed if they lunch with a journalist.

After signing up as Ed Miliband's adviser, the US campaign strategist David Axelrod remarked: "I've worked in aggressive media environments before but not this partisan." It is certainly true that there was less Fleet Street support for Labour than at any time since 1992 when the FT memorably swung behind Kinnock.

Relations between Labour and the *Sun* were particularly toxic after hostile coverage. Miliband's office boycotted the paper, by refusing to give it access to the leader or advance notice of speeches. An aide to Miliband told a journalist on *The Times* paper: "I wouldn't take your bone marrow even if I was dying." The *Daily Mirror* and the *Guardian* backed Labour but the Conservatives enjoyed twice as much support from the press. The *Daily Mail* issued a how-to guide to "keep out Red Ed" by tactical voting. *The Times*, the *FT*, and the *Evening Standard* all supported the Conservatives, while the *Independent* called for another Tory-led coalition. However, the *Daily Express*, once a Tory buttress, backed UKIP.

There were the usual complaints that Tory HQ gave favourable access to friendly papers and programmes. The *Guardian* made a front page protest about this after one of the most charming events of the campaign, when Cameron and Boris Johnson visited a children's nursery in Surbiton. The Tory pair dipped their hands in blue finger-paint and struggled comically over a jigsaw. The TV images and rich material for colour writing were simply fabulous. "If in doubt, wedge it in," Cameron japed with Johnson as they scratched their heads over the jigsaw. The event showcased the sharp eye for imagery of Cameron's comms director Craig Oliver, an ex-BBC executive.

The *Guardian* complained that its writer Marina Hyde was penned outside while the *Mail*, the *Sun* and the *Telegraph* were given ringside seats inside the nursery (as indeed I was, reporting for the *Standard*). Brilliant *Times* sketch writer Ann Treneman was also corralled in the car park and her sketch the next day mocked how Tory officials refused to tell her where Dave and Boris were heading, forcing her to play sleuth in taxis across south London. "Why was I being banned from watching Boris and Dave finger-paint?" she asked, adding: "Welcome to the world of campaign control freakery." Hyde went on the attack big time—saying the secrecy was "not so much on a need-to-know basis as a we'll-decide-who-needs-to-know basis."

In reply to these charges, the Conservatives point out that a nursery full of innocent little tots is no place to unleash a pack of ferocious reporters, so a "pool" of TV and writers is the only practical way of accommodating the media. To this, those excluded comment that a pool is also more easily controlled.

There was no Sharon Storer moment in 2015. She will be recalled as the partner of a cancer patient who famously upbraided Tony Blair in 2001 about the state of the NHS. In the brave world of risk-free campaigning,

the Tory and Labour leaders were shielded from “real” people. A typical Cameron visit involved a photocall in a hi-viz jacket or a speech in shirt-sleeves on the shopfloor of a company. Ed Miliband, amusingly, carried a lectern everywhere to convey a more prime ministerial image—even once to address damp supporters in a muddy field. Nick Clegg was bravest at meeting ordinary members of the public but, as previously noted, he had the least to lose.

In my experiences of reporting the speeches and skirmishes of 2015, Labour were outclassed in the media war. Its dedicated personnel struggled to turn the intellectual ramblings of Ed Miliband’s inner circle into plain text. One incident summed it up: I was listening with growing bafflement to a cryptic private briefing on an upcoming Miliband speech that I was keen to turn into a page lead. But as the spin doctor blathered away, I realised I had not a clue what he was on about. Eventually I resorted to my secret weapon in such cases, which is to ask The Jonathan Powell Question: “What do you expect the headline to be in tomorrow’s *Evening Standard*?” Usually, it elicits a pithy summary, but instead my briefer froze and mumbled in panic and embarrassment: “Er, umm, Ed Miliband is a dynamic young Labour leader.” He made his excuses and left, clearly with no more idea than I did what Ed wanted to convey to the masses. The speech never even made a paragraph in the *Standard*. By contrast, the Tory media strategy—essentially repeating the dread phrase “long-term economic plan”—was simple, repetitive, utterly tedious and very effective.

Even the most cunning media management goes gloriously wrong in the heat of an election battle, creating the most wonderful and silly stories. Cameron forgot the name of his football team. Miliband accidentally revealed he had two kitchens at his North London home. For much of the campaign we hoped some sliver of chaos would break the stalemate in the polls. Instead, a political earthquake in Scotland travelled through tectonic plates to raise dust clouds as far south as the Home Counties.

The extraordinary success of Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish National Party was the biggest story of the General Election. The media, even the Scottish media, took a long time to be convinced even though polls from November 2014 onwards suggested the 46 per cent who voted for independence in the referendum would turn nationalist with their Westminster vote. “I would say the Scottish media, like the whole of Scotland, did not accept these figures,” says Torcuil Crichton, Political Editor of the *Daily Record*. “The stats were coming back but people were

saying, ‘yes, but it cannot happen in reality’.” The big breakthrough for Sturgeon in the national media came with her revelatory performance in the first TV debate on 2 April.

Negotiations over the TV debates were much more fraught than in 2010, firstly due to Cameron’s secret determination to avoid a head-to-head with Miliband, and secondly because of the emergence of minor parties. In 2010, Sky News led the way in announcing the debates and then strong-arming the parties into taking part. Cameron, with everything to gain, had been keen, while Gordon Brown, with nothing to lose, was persuaded. This time the broadcasters naively believed that Cameron would feel honour bound to do it again or, failing that, would be terrified of being branded a coward. They reckoned without Downing Street’s cold blooded judgement that few voters would be swayed by the cowardice charge, while a bad debate would be a disaster.

The broadcasters’ second mistake was to form a grindingly inefficient committee that spent too long wrangling about which channel would host the first of the many debates they blithely anticipated. The BBC and Sky both wanted the big head-to-head that in the end never happened. ITV bid for a four-way with Nigel Farage, dreaming of a new drama in which the outspoken UKIP leader would publicly defenestrate the Prime Minister. They all failed to see the warning signs from No 10, where Cameron was insisting the Greens take part, a silky masterstroke that opened a Pandora’s Box of extra negotiations. It was the BBC that suddenly proposed adding the SNP and Plaid Cymru because they feared a challenge under their charter obligations (which came anyway from the excluded DUP) and landed the broadcasters with the format they wanted least of all—a seven-way debate.

The outcome was a disaster for snappy broadcasting, but a triumph for Cameron and Sturgeon. It was bad news for Miliband who saw his most feared foes, the Greens and SNP, given a platform to beat him. The drama was summed up in a single TV cutaway when Sturgeon turned her guns on the Labour leader: the cameras cut briefly to the Conservative leader who was laughing in glee.

Sturgeon became a national star that night, as Clegg did in 2010. Crichton, whose paper is historically close to Labour, said the SNP leader’s makeover was key to her successful final charge. “TV news and tabloid newspapers are led by pictures and there’s no doubt that Nicola Sturgeon was winning the image war. She presented a fresh image and her photograph sailed into the paper day after day. While the text and headlines may

have been balanced or even pro-Labour, the imagery was predominantly pro-SNP. It meant that Scottish Labour and Lib Dem MPs were no longer fighting on their records and achievements—they were all fighting against Nicola Sturgeon who, ironically, was not even up for election.” The SNP stopped putting actual candidates up for interview. It was all Nicola from then on.

For all the advance talk of 2015 being the “social media election,” the no-shows in this election were in my opinion the much-vaunted internet revolutionaries. Twitter certainly intensified and speeded up the news cycle, but its most memorable contribution was the Milifandom. Does anyone still remember the Green Party commercial on YouTube featuring party leaders as a boy band?

Ed M went “mockney” with Russell Brand, hoping the approval of social media would trump the disapproval of the Tory-leaning press. Instead, Twitter was divided but everyone remembers the Fleet Street mockery of him for adopting Brand’s speech mannerisms in a cringe-making interview. Ed should have learned from Nick Clegg’s attempts to bond with another celebrity political commentator, Joey Essex.

Raymond Chandler once wrote some classic notes on what makes a good detective story. “It must baffle a reasonably intelligent reader,” he wrote. But, he went on, “the solution must seem inevitable once revealed.”

On this basis, the 2015 election story was a perfect “who’ll do it.” No one predicted the outcome with confidence. Most expected a hung parliament, including the senior mandarin who invited me to his office on Election Day itself to explain how the civil service would cope with a deadlocked parliament. Instead it turned out to be Colonel Blue, in the Cabinet Room, armed with an overall majority. Funnily enough, scores of pundits now act as though they guessed all along. Chandler would have loved it.

CHAPTER 21

Pink Buses, Leaders' Wives and “The Most Dangerous Woman in Britain”: Women, the Press and Politics in the 2015 Election

Emily Harmer

INTRODUCTION

The ways women are represented in the news, if they are featured at all, is important for what such coverage tells us about the gendered nature of society including whether and how female participation in politics is being reported. Furthermore, news media accounts provide invaluable insights into the ways in which newspapers and television journalism constructs and potentially shapes perceptions of female roles at various levels within the democratic process. The presence or absence of women, including politicians, in the news reports is important because it allows citizens and voters to conceive of politics as more than just a male-dominated arena that is by definition likely to be more remote to female concerns and interests. Challenging this imbalance in media coverage is a factor in engaging and thereby further emancipating women (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996).

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Formal politics has, of course, historically been dominated by men, and women have only relatively recently been elected to the UK Parliament in significant numbers. The 1997 General Election proved to be a watershed campaign in this respect. However, in order for women to be effectively represented in the political domain, they must also be adequately represented in the public discussion of current affairs that takes place in news reporting. How female politicians are depicted by the media sends out and reinforces important messages about their place and role in society. Consequently, if women are absent or marginalised in “hard” news programming, this reinforces their marginal status within the wider democratic process.

It is not only important to ensure that women politicians are visible in media coverage of campaigns but the tone of that coverage is also crucial. Previous research confirms that women politicians often receive differential treatment in news reporting. Norris (1997) found that female political leaders from diverse backgrounds and countries were framed in three main ways. First, they were portrayed as breaking through social convention and this was viewed as having positive affects for all women. Second, they were framed as political outsiders whose rise to power was seen as unexpected and their political experience was often downplayed. Lastly, they were heralded as agents of change who could potentially change traditional ways of doing politics. Ross argues that this has negative consequences because women candidates are thus required to square an impossible circle where they have “to be both as rough, tough and aggressive as men, but to also make politics a more conciliatory and ‘nicer’ process at the same time” (Ross 2002: 152).

Female politicians believe that their outward appearance dominates any media coverage they receive to the detriment of their substantive political messages (Ross 2002). Ross compared the experiences of female politicians from the UK, Australia and South Africa and revealed common experiences. Many highlighted the attention that was paid to their age, clothing and make up and how this was linked to the evaluations they receive from news media. Van Zoonen (2006: 291) notes that this type of coverage is difficult for women politicians because “it confines female politicians to notions of femininity which are not easily transposed to the political field”.

Historically, female politicians in the UK have struggled to achieve much visibility in electoral coverage (Harmer 2013). Margaret Thatcher was an exceptional figure and not just in terms of the way she was represented. Rather, the pattern of coverage tended to resemble and arguably reinforce the marginalisation of women as recognisable political actors. And even in

1997, when a critical mass of well over a hundred women MPs were elected to the House of Commons for the first time, they experienced the kind of media-led scrutiny of them as a group not afforded to their male counterparts. It is some time on since the election of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister and the largely Labour-led initiative to increase women's representation within parliament. It is useful to reflect on what, if anything, has changed in this time as regards media treatment of the female politicians. This chapter will do so by considering how women were portrayed in the 2015 General Election campaign. It will do so by comparing the respective treatment of key figures, most obviously the most prominent female leaders and representatives, with their male counterparts. Furthermore, the discussion will broaden the analysis by considering media representations of other significant women, most notably "the leaders' wives", who have come to enjoy a role and significance in contemporary politics if judged by their appearances in recent elections.

SEEN BUT NOT HEARD? FEMALE POLITICIANS

The dramatic and unanticipated conclusion to the 2015 election provided a moment of uncertainty in what was otherwise a fairly boring and predictable campaign (Wring and Ward 2015). The media coverage of women in the campaign was also rather predictable, with men dominating proceedings, as is the established norm. Of the top 20 most prominent individuals in the national media coverage, just four of these were women: Nicola Sturgeon (fourth highest profile); Natalie Bennett (12th); Samantha Cameron (15th); and Leanne Wood (17th) (for more details on this, see Chap. 15). The prime minister's wife's appearance in the list and absence of any Conservative (or Labour) women underline the significance attached to her in terms of the party's communications strategy. This reflected aspects of the Conservatives' approach in the previous election five years before when "SamCam" was regularly seen and heard in news reports and other features. By comparison, the appearances of the other three women in the top 20 was recognition of their respective parties' growing importance as potential power brokers in the aftermath a closely fought election that many commentators were predicting would end in another hung parliament. These female leaders also benefited from increased exposure afforded to them courtesy of their sharing a stage in televised debates with their male counterparts. These broadcasts presented the women with a much greater platform than which they were used.

Nicola Sturgeon was the most experienced of the three women leaders going into the debates, having been Deputy First Minister of Scotland since 2007 and then First Minister since autumn 2014. However, her lower profile amongst English voters and commentators meant that her strong performance in the encounters seemingly took the national press by surprise. Some detractors questioned her right to even participate with Richard Littlejohn arguing: “I still for the life of me can’t understand what Nicola Sturgeon was doing centre stage in the televised leaders’ debate, given that she isn’t even standing in this election and her party isn’t fielding any candidates outside Scotland” (Littlejohn 2015). Given the widespread speculation that there would be another hung parliament, which in turn was a consequence of the growing fragmentation in support for what were once the three major parties, there was heightened interest in candidates from the other parties. Furthermore, their female leaders’ presence demonstrated these organisations were not averse to gender equality and, particularly in the case of the Greens, had a long-established record of women holding the most prominent role.

In contrast to their rivals, the larger parties’ apparent unwillingness to promote their own female spokespeople as media representatives underscores the striking imbalance in national media coverage of all individual political actors. Consequently in print and broadcast news coverage of the election, just 15.2% of all politicians mentioned were women. Senior frontbench women politicians like Theresa May and Nicky Morgan (then Secretaries of State) and Shadow Cabinet members Harriet Harman and Yvette Cooper were largely absent from media coverage of the campaign. This did not go unnoticed by some observers. *The Guardian* provided an active commentary on the lack of prominence given to leading women during the election with Anne Perkins remarking: “if you look at the air war between the main parties, this is a campaign run by men, for men. The relentless media focus on the leaders means it will look like that for as long as the main parties are led by men” (Perkins 2015). An obvious exception to this was the focus on Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon who, though not—as has been noted—a candidate, was the female politician who had the most media exposure, although much of this was far from favourable (Deacon and Wring 2016).

Following Sturgeon’s emergence as a (or even the) perceived “winner” of the first seven-way broadcast leaders’ debate, she became a prominent campaign personality. The First Minister was compared with various female political figures, not all of them flattering. For example, the *Daily*

Mail's columnist Richard Littlejohn labelled her an “Angela Merkel wannabe” (Littlejohn 2015). There were also the perhaps inevitable comparisons with Margaret Thatcher, thereby underlining the limited framework that the British press have for understanding the role of women in politics. The *Daily Mail* claimed that “like Mrs T, the SNP leader transformed her image from that of a dowdy egghead into a glamorous, power-dressing imperatrix—emphasising a mixture of elegant feminine charm and steel” (Deerin 2015). This double-edged comment demonstrated how women in power are seemingly expected to be both traditionally feminine whilst also being strong and decisive actors in a highly masculine working environment. The preoccupation with Sturgeon further manifested itself in articles about her family and childhood that also focused on her image change. Several commentators made references to her hair cut and clothing choices in ways they would not of her male counterparts and rivals. So, for example, Sturgeon was described as wearing a “svelte burgundy suit and nude power shoes” (Letts 2015a) during one campaign event, whilst coverage of the leaders’ debate noted “her stilettos and new hairstyle” (Deerin 2015).

The more politically significant impression of Sturgeon conveyed by her media antagonists was her portrayal as a threat. The SNP leader was a: “merciless operator, this one. She’d do to Ed Miliband what Mongolian chefs do to mutton: kebab and speed-broil him in the flames of her flashing eyes” (Letts 2015a). The most explicit manifestation of this was the *Daily Mail's* now infamous front-page headline suggestion that Sturgeon was now the “most dangerous woman in Britain” (Chapman 2015). And although what were widely perceived as her successful performances on the campaign trail threatened some media commentators, others dwelt on her effectiveness and competence. Sturgeon was described as “self-assured and poised” (Deerin 2015) and capable of “command[ing] the airy Chamber before even saying a word” (Letts 2015a).

Most serious media commentators agreed that Sturgeon was a good campaigner who had steered her party towards success in a relatively short period. Some also perceived her to be a departure from traditional politics, reflecting the “agent of change” frame noted by Norris (2007). Zoe Williams, in the *Guardian* asked: “What if she’s not out to embarrass Miliband? What if she’s actually on the level? What if she is genuinely worried about the entire nation, not just the bits in her purview? What if she’s trying to build a real alliance, based on a shared belief in social justice and humanity’s innate generosity?” (Williams 2015). Although Williams’

commentary was not seemingly meant to be detrimental, it was loaded with the assumption that women can transform the very nature of politics by doing things differently, which has been observed in other contexts (Norris 1997). This can place an undue burden on women candidates which they often find difficult to live up to, especially when contending with a highly partisan press.

Sturgeon's fellow women leaders received much less media attention, although this was still more than their counterparts in the larger parties. Where they did feature, their portrayal tended to be closer to the long-established tradition of trivialising the political significance of women in news coverage of politics. The more marginal status of Bennett and Wood was actively reinforced by the tone of the media reporting. In his discussion of the leaders' debate, the *Daily Mail*'s Quentin Letts dismissively referred to them as "Natalie and the Welsh one" (Letts 2015b). By contrast, the Prime Minister and UKIP leader were mentioned using their full names or surnames. Other comments were more overtly sexist. Richard Littlejohn echoed his *Mail* colleague's condescending approach to the Plaid Cymru leader by calling her "that dopey bird from the Welsh nationalists" (Littlejohn 2015). Quentin Letts was similarly offensive, making derogatory comments about Wood's accent: "And Who On Earth was that Welsh woman? Had she walked in from a recording of Gavin and Stacey?" (Letts 2015b). Green leader Natalie Bennett fared little better and was labelled by Letts as "Richie Benaud in drag" and the "Sydney Sheila" (Letts 2015b).

Whereas in previous campaigns newspapers had featured a number of personal profiles of less well-known candidates from across the political spectrum, there were comparatively few of these in 2015. A rare example of this, from *The Guardian*, featured interviews with a number of independents about their motivations for standing. One of these, Suzie Ferguson, a candidate in Reading West, was portrayed as keen but ultimately naive because she "sees no reason why she can't conjure an election win from little more than a pile of self-designed posters (she can't afford fliers) and an impressively energetic manner" (Addley and Quinn 2015). Fringe women politicians' struggle to gain credible media recognition appeared to be part of a large problem. This was reinforced by some of the imagery used in relation to the reporting of more established candidates. Hence, in several news items there was a tendency to use photographs of women to add colour to the reporting. The only written mention of these same candidates was in the images accompanying the captions.

A prime example of how female politicians could be used for decorative purposes came in the final week of the election, *The Times* (2 May) featured a photomontage of campaigners to accompany the various news stories about the dramatic BBC1 *Question Time Leaders Special* debate as well as Labour's economic record. Whereas the substantive content of these articles featured male politicians, the imagery was all female. Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson was seen cuddling a dog electioneering in the Borders, whilst Liberal Democrat candidate for Gordon Christine Jardine appeared on an escalator in Aberdeen, and Bristol Tory Charlotte Leslie was seen posing next to her car. But once again it was the striking portrayals of the female leaders by sections of the press that revealed much about representations of women politicians and arguably prominent women public life in more general terms. A cartoon in *The Sun* on 20 April depicted Ed Miliband as James Bond with Natalie Bennett, Nicola Sturgeon and Leanne Wood all dressed in revealing red dresses and draped over the Labour leader in a most suggestive fashion. The accompanying caption read "The Scarlet Sisterhood" and simultaneously conjured up ideas about sexually available women and political "Reds". This misogynistic imagery was published with a comment piece by the paper's veteran political commentator Trevor Kavanagh in which he likened Sturgeon to an animal: "Usually fierce Nicola Sturgeon looked doe-eyed as she bowed and pounced on Mr Miliband like a spider in sight of her prey" who "may wear high heels and a skirt, but the eerie silence from noisy ex-leader Alex Salmond proves she eats her partners alive" (Kavanagh 2015). Wood and Bennett did not escape this opprobrium. Both leaders were portrayed as dangerous as well as grotesque, with the "gurning Green Aussie Natalie Bennett and Welsh Socialist Leanne Wood, wearing a lethal smile".

Nicola Sturgeon's prominence in the campaign as the most high-profile woman was a consequence of her being the leader of a party that was widely perceived to have the best chance of holding the balance of power in the event of another hung parliament. She thereby became a target for media critiques. Many of these observations were gendered in nature. *The Times* published a cartoon two days before polling day, entitled "Labour pains", which satirised the much-discussed potential alliance between Labour and the SNP (and the royal birth of the new Princess Charlotte) by portraying Sturgeon posing outside Number Ten cradling her baby, Miliband (Brookes 2015). The SNP leader also appeared in several images that "othered" her in a different way. A number of examples portrayed her as the mythic Loch Ness Monster. The *Independent* deployed this trope

a number of times; one usage showed the monstrous Sturgeon wrapping her body around Ed Miliband’s small rowing boat as he attempted to escape (21 April 2015). The *Times* cartoonist Peter Brookes used another animal, a tartan clad rodent resembling Disney character Minnie Mouse, to represent the First Minister trampling all over a hapless Miliband.

RELATIVE PROMINENCE: THE LEADERS’ WIVES

If female politicians were largely marginalised in news coverage of the campaign, one group of women did receive noticeable amounts of media attention. These were the relatives of the most prominent candidates or more precisely the wives of the major leaders. A total of 81.2% of the coverage devoted to this category of actor focused on women and most of this related to the spouses of the Prime Ministerial rivals. The 2010 campaign had represented a key milestone in the visibility of the party leaders’ families with the various spouses collectively receiving a higher proportion of newspaper coverage than women politicians as a whole (Harmer 2013). Had it not been for the three female leaders’ presence in 2015, this trend might have been repeated. But this election once again confirmed the apparent significance of the leaders’ partners to the rival campaigns and was interpreted by some observers as an important reason for the lack of coverage devoted to women politicians from the major parties. Anne Perkins of *The Guardian* remarked that “the wives have been weaponised. Samantha Cameron has been in South Thanet trying to shore up the Conservative vote against Nigel Farage. Miriam González Durántez has been out backing the Lib Dems’ female MPs” (Perkins 2015).

Previous research has shown that the leading British politicians, who have been predominantly male both before and after the advent of universal suffrage, have often relied on their wives to help them campaign for votes and longer than is sometimes realised (Harmer 2016). In recent elections, what has changed has been the volume of media coverage afforded these women during the campaign period. In 2015, for instance, Samantha Cameron was the 15th most prominent person in all printed and broadcast reporting. This meant the Prime Minister’s wife had the fourth highest profile amongst the women campaigners. Only the three female party leaders were more prominent and in an election where, as has been noted, their parties had particular reason and cause to expect greater attention. But, unlike them, Mrs Cameron’s coverage was, for the most

part, highly favourable. "SamCam", as she had become known within the popular press, had enjoyed a positive media reception during numerous engagements she had undertaken in the previous five years whilst resident at Downing Street. This now continued in campaign mode.

At the beginning of the formal election campaign, the *Daily Mail* did a two-page spread which consisted of an interview with her and her husband in their Number Ten home, complete with five photographs showing them eating lunch with their family and getting the children ready for school. This was clearly part of an attempt to humanise the Prime Minister and offer voters some insight into his private life. In her highly personal interview with the *Mail*, Samantha Cameron touched on a number of issues, including the death of her late son Ivan. Although her husband had spoken publicly about his child on several occasions, Mrs Cameron had rarely commented on their tragic loss (Doyle and Carroll 2015). Ed Miliband's wife Justine was interviewed in the *Daily Mirror*, where she talked about her family life and how she had got to know her husband (Wynne Jones 2015). The various party leaders' wives were frequently photographed on the campaign trail visiting soup kitchens, taking cookery lessons and partaking in religious ceremonies in support of their husband's political ambitions. They were also pictured delivering leaflets on visits to a number of marginal constituencies. For example, Nick Clegg's wife Miriam González Durántez was seen campaigning alongside a number of female Liberal Democrat candidates, claiming to be "passionate about encouraging more women to enter politics" whilst out on a visit with minister Jo Swinson (Fisher 2015).

The year 2015 was in some ways a re-run of 2010 with noticeable and conscious media recognition as to the campaigning significance of the leaders' partners, although they were arguably less prominent this time. The *Daily Mail*, a newspaper popular with older women readers, once again ran a column "Wives Watch" by one of its most prominent commentators, Jan Moir. Moir's feature had been responsible for some of the most negative coverage of the leaders' spouses during the 2010 campaign. This time the column regularly derided the wives' campaigning efforts as well as their clothing choices. For example, Moir stated that "Samantha Cameron, Justine Miliband and Miriam Clegg [sic] proved once more they are the ones who wear the trousers, in more ways than one" before going on to describe their outfits in unnecessary detail given that they were pictured. The journalist claimed that the women were all wearing "ordinary high street clothes and nothing that hints at their secret, massive wealth" in

order to present themselves, and thereby their husbands, as ordinary and in touch with the concerns of the wider electorate (Moir 2015).

If Moir and the *Mail* features were bordering on the gratuitously insulting, other media commentators shared a similar disquiet with the strategic use of spouses for electoral benefits. Zoe Williams of *The Guardian* objected to “the way they (the male leaders) parade their wives around and put their babies in dispatch boxes, all to seem more ‘human’; the one human trait that would make them seem real—self-awareness—is utterly forbidden” (Williams 2015). A more conciliatory piece in *The Times* suggested that “intense scrutiny of leaders’ spouses—from poring over their careers to analysing their clothes” might be actually unhelpful to those women concerned who after all are not politicians because it “often draws ire” (Fisher 2015). In contrast, the partners of the female party leaders were largely absent from the campaign coverage aside from one or two items. The *Sunday Mirror*, for example, sought to attack Natalie Bennett by drawing attention to some comments he made on his blog about sexual offences (Moss and Warburton 2015). Nicola Sturgeon’s husband, SNP Chief Executive Peter Murrell, was also barely mentioned despite being a political activist. It is perhaps unsurprising that female leaders are less keen to highlight their personal relationships given the gendered risks of highlighting their private lives for political gain. Van Zoonen (2006) argues that reminding voters of their relationship to the private sphere can undermine their ability to appear as serious and credible politicians.

THE WOMEN’S CAMPAIGN? COVERAGE OF VOTERS

In previous elections, women voters have featured in marginal but distinct ways. A common trope since 1997 was for target voters like Worcester Woman and “cybermums” have been much speculated about in terms of their voting intentions (Harmer and Wring 2013). This election does not seem to have followed in that tradition. No specific female target group received particular attention by the media. As Campbell and Childs (2015) have demonstrated, despite this lack of symbolic voter, the main parties all devised policies which were designed to appeal to women voters, albeit in rather traditional areas such as childcare and violence against women. News coverage focusing on gendered policy issues was practically non-existent; however, women did make up 46.8% of all ordinary people who were featured in the news coverage, demonstrating that they did

have a significant presence. Unlike the previous election, there were also no "Gillian Duffy" style interventions of women on the campaign trail, the closest example being businesswoman Catherine Shuttleworth, who tackled Miliband over Labour's economic record on the BBC's leaders' *Question Time* special. It was later revealed that despite telling producers she was an undecided voter, Shuttleworth had "signed a small business letter organised by the Conservatives and set up her own company alongside a man who is now a Tory MP" (Pitel and McKay, 2015). She gave an interview to the sympathetic *Daily Mail* strongly denying that she was a "Tory plant" (Stevens 2015).

Another omission from the coverage was any discussion of the Labour Party's pink bus campaign. The campaign aimed to send women politicians to speak directly to women voters in the constituencies. When it was announced in February, it received a good deal of publicity, much of it negative, which focused on the colour and whether this approach was patronising rather than recognising the importance of attracting women voters for all political parties (Campbell and Childs 2015). Although it had been much derided in the press prior to the short campaign, it received very little attention in the press or on television. One rare mention came from the *Guardian* describing it as having a "shocking pink hue, helium-filled balloons and all-female team, travelling on Labour's pink bus can feel more like being at a hen party than on the campaign trail" (Topping 2015), reinforcing old stereotypes about the relationship between women and the public sphere.

Although such gendered references to women voters were more explicit in the print media, one incident on the campaign trail which elicited a similar response from TV news came in the wake of Miliband's surprise encounter with an enthusiastic group of women celebrating a hen party in Chester. Nicola Braithwaite, the bride and legal aid lawyer, approached Miliband on when his campaign bus stopped outside their hotel and the results were shared on social media. In a discussion about the use of social media in the campaign, *Channel 5 News'* Matt Bardet subsequently used this as an example of why social media allows politicians to bypass traditional journalists by remarking that "in fairness to that hen do, they're not going to ask much about the deficit, are they?" (*Channel 5 News*, 6.45 p.m., 22 April 2015), ignoring the fact that Braithwaite had reportedly asked Miliband about cuts to legal aid during their brief encounter and instead choosing to stereotype these citizens as frivolous and unengaged.

There were a few news items which attempted to personalise the election by including the views of ordinary voters, although these were not as prevalent as in previous elections. These tended to be featured in popular tabloid newspapers. For example, the *Daily Mirror* gave some readers the chance to question Ed Miliband about his manifesto commitments. A total of eight people were included, three of them women. One of the women asked about employment opportunities, but the other women asked questions about traditionally feminine policy areas like the NHS and social security (Thompson 2015). Such items were few and far between and tended to give fairly brief overviews of the political priorities of ordinary women. *The Guardian* was the main critic of this lack of focus on women in the campaign coverage, claiming that there ought to be more focus on women and their political priorities, calling for “a campaign around women’s issues” because “what might be called a women’s campaign, there is almost no sign at all” (Perkins 2015). The lack of speculation about a specific set of women voters marks the end (or at least a hiatus) of a trend that dates back to the 1997 election. This is most easily explained by assuming that the political strategies of the main parties did not identify a key type of floating voter this time. Another way of accounting this dearth of attention to the political views of ordinary women could be the fact that, for the first time, there were three women party leaders who were thrust into the spotlight by the somewhat surprising decision to include them in the 2015 version of the televised leaders’ debate.

CONCLUSION

The 2015 campaign then offered a mixture of “business as usual” in terms of the numerical marginalisation of women in the news coverage and at times the sexist tone of much of the coverage, but there were also slight differences from recent campaigns, such as the lack of a group of symbolic voters and the emergence of three women party leaders. Nicola Sturgeon was by far the most prominent woman in the campaign coverage, exacerbated by her potential “kingmaker” status in the much anticipated hung parliament that never came. She was also undoubtedly prominent given her seamless display of competence in the leaders’ debates and on the campaign trail in general. Sturgeon’s dominance meant that other women politicians failed to make much of a mark on the campaign.

Although Nicola Sturgeon received a great deal of positive coverage, there were also examples of negative press coverage which emphasised her gender in a number of ways, which goes to show that even reasonably well-known women politicians can be subjected to stereotypical assumptions. The continued interest in the wives of politicians demonstrated not only that the personalisation of political campaigning is still thriving but that this is a gendered process which is not as easily exploited by women politicians who may wish to play down family commitments to appear more focused on their public role. It is clear that 100 years after women gained the right to vote and stand for parliament women; they still struggle to shake off assumptions about their role in the public sphere and make a significant impact on the news coverage of the political process.

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CHAPTER 22

Othering Ed: Newspaper Coverage of Miliband and the Election

Ivor Gaber

INTRODUCTION

There is nothing new about Britain's largely right-wing press attacking the Labour Party in general, and its leader in particular, during an election campaign—but in 2015 it was different by a significant degree. The personality of the leader of the Labour Party assumed even greater significance than usual in light of the opinion polls suggesting a close finish and, as a result, the Conservative campaign focussing relentlessly on the possibility of a “deal” in which a minority Labour Government would be propped up by a rampant Scottish National Party (SNP) group of MPs. In particular, the Tories sought to portray Labour as a party led by a "weak" Ed Miliband dominated by the SNP leader, Nicola Sturgeon, whose media image was anything but weak.

, Leadership was particularly important because first, se the onslaught on Ed Miliband, the Labour leader, did not just begin at the start of the campaign, or even 12 months before, but almost from the moment in 2010 when he was elected Labour leader. Second, because the attacks bore a disturbingly personal and unpleasant tone. Third, because whereas in the past, virulent anti-Labour campaigning,

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as opposed to argued opposition, had largely been confined to the tabloids and the mid-market papers, in 2010 one of the so-called quality papers—the *Daily Telegraph*—joined in. And finally because many thought that in an age of the Internet, social media and 24-hour news, such campaigns, last seen in the UK during the 1992 election, were now a thing of the past, but 23 years later, the “Tory Press” was back—red (or should that be blue?) in tooth and claw.

PRESS PARTISANSHIP

The importance of party leaders as a symbol of both positive and negative campaigning has long been recognised; as Heffernan puts it: “Leaders are increasingly the personification of their parties” (Heffernan 2006). And, hence, the partisan British press has always made attacks on party issues a central focus of their election coverage—and not just in support of the Conservative side. Traditionally (and certainly in 2015) the Conservatives have usually had by far the majority of newspaper support. If measured by circulation they enjoyed exclusive endorsements from three dailies with nearly four million sales between them (see Table 22.1). By contrast, the two Labour-supporting newspapers’ combined circulations were just over a million. The difference in press support is not just a quantitative one: Table 22.1 also includes details of the strength of each title’s endorsement of their chosen party. The *Daily Mirror* has always been robust in its support of Labour and has not held back from personal denigration of Conservative leaders—in 2015 its focus was on David Cameron as “the posh boy”—out of touch with ordinary Britons but the *Mirror*, or other occasionally Labour-supporting papers, such as the *Guardian* or the *Independent*, have never traded in the vulgarity and sheer nastiness displayed by some of its Conservative competitors in 2015. One of the most infamous examples of this was the eve of polling day editorial produced by *The Sun* headlined: “SAVE OUR BACON: Don’t swallow his porkies and keep him OUT”. The now notorious front-page was illustrated with an image of the Labour leader struggling to eat a bacon sandwich and continued: “This is the pig’s ear Ed made of a helpless sarnie. In 48 hours he could be doing the same to Britain” (*The Sun* 2015). (

But in an age of online media and falling press circulations, should it be a matter of any importance if the press launch a sustained campaign against the Labour leader? It is being argued here that it does, for two crucial reasons. First, because although newspaper circulations have been

Table 22.1 Press support

| <i>Title</i> | <i>Declaration</i> | <i>Circulation (000s)</i> |
|------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| <i>Daily Mirror</i> | Very Strong Labour | 882 |
| <i>Daily Express</i> | Very Strong UKIP | 438 |
| <i>Daily Star</i> | No declaration | 420 |
| <i>The Sun</i> | Very Strong Conservative | 1858 |
| <i>Daily Mail</i> | Very Strong Conservative | 1631 |
| <i>Daily Telegraph</i> | Very Strong Conservative | 486 |
| <i>The Guardian</i> | Moderate Labour | 176 |
| <i>The Times</i> | Moderate Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition | 394 |
| <i>The Independent</i> | Weak Liberal Democrat–Conservative Coalition | 59 |
| <i>Financial Times</i> | Weak Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition | 212 |

Source: adapted from Deacon and Wring 2016

falling dramatically over the last decade, readership (which includes online readership) has not. According to the National Readership Survey (NRS), 94 per cent of UK adults read a national newspaper or magazine at least once a month in print or online. The *Daily Mail* is the most-read national newspaper in both print and online with some 29.5 million readers per month according to the NRS (Ponsford 2015).

Even voters who do not see a national newspaper on a regular basis find it difficult to avoid screaming headlines and billboards. And that relates to the second factor, for despite what many broadcasters, bloggers and others claim, newspapers still play a key agenda-setting role in the national media. Just one example during the campaign came when the *Daily Telegraph* ran a front-page story claiming that 103 business leaders were opposed to Labour's economic plans. This story did not just form part of the BBC's election coverage following publication of the paper but dominated its broadcast and online election coverage for an entire 24-hour news cycle.

BEFORE MILIBAND

There is a long history of Conservative-supporting newspapers attempting to smear Labour and its leaders in search of electoral advantage, going back to the *Daily Mail*'s 1924 publication of a forged letter alleged to have been sent by Soviet leader Grigory Zinoviev to the nascent British Communist Party, suggesting that a Labour victory would

hasten revolution in the UK. Between then and the election of Michael Foot in 1980, the Conservative-supporting press's attacks on Labour were robust but rarely vicious. Foot's election unleashed a new tone into British politics, mainly led by the *Sun* which, under Rupert Murdoch's proprietorship, had switched from being a Labour-supporting paper to one of Margaret Thatcher's most enthusiastic cheer-leader.

Foot was mocked for his appearance and dress-sense with headlines such as: "DO YOU SERIOUSLY WANT THIS OLD MAN TO RUN BRITAIN?" (despite the fact that Foot at 70 would have been eight years younger than Ronald Reagan who had left the White House a few years previously). Michael Foot's wife claimed to have discovered a memo to photographers working for the *Sun* that the paper was only interested in pictures of Foot if they showed him "falling over". They also played up the theme of his alleged weakness in dealing with left-wing extremists from the Militant organisation that had infiltrated Labour (Horrie and Chippindale 1990).

After Foot's defeat in the 1983 election, he was succeeded by Neil Kinnock who, following Murdoch moving his four papers—the *Sun*, the *News of the World*, *The Times* and the *Sunday Times*—to non-union premises at Wapping in East London, was forced to boycott his papers resulting in lasting hostility from the Murdoch press. Amongst other sobriquets he came to be known as the "Welsh Windbag", probably not a moniker that was intended to be deliberately racist but it did remind people of his origins, and some commentators have suggested that this stirred anti-Welsh sentiment amongst a section of English voters. As the writer Jan Morris observed: "In England it is open-season still for Welsh-baiting. The Welsh joke flourishes. The Welsh language is still an object of derision. Scoundrels still 'welsh' upon their creditors, and to this day Lord Kinnock is calumniated as the old Welsh windbag" (Morris 2009). The writer Robert Harris described the campaign against Kinnock as "one of the most poisonous campaigns of vilification ever waged by the British press" (Thomas 2005 : 105). All of which led the *Sun* to coo after the result was declared that "IT WAS THE SUN WOT WON IT". Whilst such claims are notoriously difficult to prove, subsequent polling showed that 40 per cent of respondents cited their opinions of Kinnock as one of their reasons for not voting Labour.

There was something of a hiatus in the attacks on the Labour leadership when John Smith took over—he was the very model of a respectable establishment figure and gave the press little to get their teeth into. Following Smith's death in 1994, Tony Blair won the Labour leadership and the truce turned into a love-in. Guided by his media gurus Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell, Blair travelled to Australia to pay homage at the Murdoch court

and this eventually led to the *Sun* declaring, prior to the 1997 election, that it was now backing Tony Blair—Blair not Labour. Under Blair the traditional anti-Labour press virtually disappeared he won three elections with even the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* moderating their anti-Labour coverage, indeed the *Mail's* editor, Paul Dacre, found in Gordon Brown, almost a soul-mate. Not that this helped Brown a great deal when he led Labour in 2010, and although the hostility unleashed on him, particularly by the *Sun*, did not reach the levels of abuse suffered by Labour leaders in the past and to come, that election was a reminder that the anti-Labour gene of much of the press had not been neutralised.

MILIBAND IN THE CROSS-HAIRS

However, the speed and virulence of the attacks on Ed Miliband, when he assumed the Labour leadership late in 2010 was astonishing, and whilst this chapter is not suggesting that the most important reason for Labour's defeat was Miliband's poor personal ratings, it clearly had a significant impact (Green and Prosser 2015). The attacks on Ed Miliband started almost as soon as he announced his decision to challenge for the leadership of the Party following Gordon Brown's resignation after losing the 2010 election. The favourite was Ed's brother David and much of the press portrayed Ed's challenge as something akin to *lèse-majesté*—denying his brother his rightful crown. But, ironically, given subsequent events, it was the *Mail on Sunday* no less, that appeared to boost Ed's chances when their Political Editor, Simon Walters, wrote that Ed's supporters “claim he is more relaxed and attractive than Brother David, renowned for posing with a banana and his weird facial expressions” (Walters 2010). This observation is particularly ironic given that “weirdness” was one of the themes that came to dominate press attacks on Ed Miliband. But there were other (arguably more important) themes to the anti-Miliband campaign that overall contributed to a process of “othering”—suggesting that Miliband was an outsider and not an appropriate person to be elected to lead the country. These themes included that he was:

- weird (just referred to)
- lacking in “normal” morality—he “betrayed” his brother and was reluctant to marry the mother of his children
- controlled by union “barons” without whom he would not have been elected and also, latterly, by Nicola Sturgeon, who was represented as potentially pulling the strings of a future minority Labour Government

- a Hampstead intellectual and Jewish (sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly) and
- an extreme left-winger, dubbed “Red Ed”

This latter charge was, in itself odd, in that to most observers it was patently not the case that Miliband was an extreme left-winger, a view that appeared to be shared more generally and, according to the British Election Study, formed no part of his eventual electoral demise (Green and Prosser 2015). “Red Ed” never became part of the popular discourse but, notwithstanding, the right-wing press, the *Sun* and the *Mail* in particular, continued to use it with increasing regularity as Table 22.2 demonstrates—culminating in the months leading up to the 2015 election when the phrase was mentioned in 98 separate articles in the *Sun* and the *Mail*, an average of almost twice a day.

Interestingly, the first use of the phrase “Red Ed” can be traced back to the non-Tory-supporting *Guardian*, and is probably attributable to Labour’s former spinmeister Peter Mandelson. In an article in September 2009 by the paper’s then Political Correspondent, Allegra Stratton, Mandelson offers an on-the-record briefing on Labour’s forthcoming election strategy. Later in the article, Miliband is quoted as dismissing suggestions from some trade union leaders that he might contest the party leadership; Stratton writes: “he [Miliband] dismissed notions he was the union’s ‘Red Ed’”. Perhaps this was a coincidence, but it is certainly the first public use of the term.

Table 22.2 Mentions of “Red Ed”, 2010–2015

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015* | Total |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| <i>Sun</i> | 112 | 103 | 76 | 113 | 115 | 182 | 701 |
| <i>Mail</i> | 48 | 35 | 50 | 140 | 196 | 188 | 657 |
| <i>Telegraph</i> | 26 | 29 | 41 | 69 | 26 | 18 | 209 |
| <i>Guardian/Observer</i> | 59 | 29 | 11 | 47 | 23 | 39 | 208 |
| <i>Times</i> | 44 | 27 | 25 | 51 | 17 | 11 | 175 |
| <i>Express</i> | 23 | 30 | 7 | 19 | 9 | 22 | 110 |
| <i>Independent</i> | 18 | 10 | 15 | 26 | 7 | 19 | 95 |
| <i>Mirror</i> | 25 | 30 | 1 | 12 | 7 | 6 | 81 |
| <i>Star</i> | 19 | 3 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 5 | 43 |
| Total | 374 | 296 | 233 | 479 | 407 | 490 | 2279 |
| <i>Monthly average</i> | 31 | 25 | 16 | 40 | 34 | 98 | 35 |

From that point on, for the *Mail* and the *Sun*, it was open season, at least until 2012 when the campaign (if that is what it was) appeared to be running out of steam, with the average monthly number of articles containing the moniker, across all the press, dropping from 31 in 2010 to 16. But this was to change as Labour started to overtake the Conservatives in the opinion polls and Miliband seized the political initiative by proposing to freeze energy prices. In September 2013, just days before he was due to address the Labour conference, the *Daily Mail* launched an extraordinary attack on him, by traducing his late father, Ralph Miliband, a distinguished academic, in an article headlined THE MAN WHO HATED BRITAIN with a sub-heading—RED ED’S PLEDGE TO BRING BACK SOCIALISM IS A HOMAGE TO HIS MARXIST FATHER (Levy 2013). Running across two pages, journalist Geoffrey Levy fulminated (no other word quite captures the tone) against Red Ed and his “revolutionary” father. Levy painted a picture of a bitter Marxist revolutionary who “hated Britain”. In the 2000 words of the article, a mere ten are devoted to the fact that Ralph Miliband spent three years in the Royal Navy fighting for Britain, and the fact that he was a volunteer is entirely omitted. Instead, the reader is presented with a Svengali-like figure exercising an influence from beyond the grave over his son. Levy wrote “how passionately he (Ralph Miliband) would have approved today of his son’s sinister warning about some of the policies he plans to follow if he ever becomes Prime Minister”.

The article—coming after the Leveson Inquiry had exposed the ubiquity of unethical behaviour amongst some sections of the press—caused a furore with both the leaders of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties distancing themselves from it, as did most other newspapers—with the notable exception of the *Sun*. But the disapproval only seemed to encourage the *Daily Mail* to new heights of vituperation. They allowed Ed Miliband a half-page response but accompanied it with an editorial describing Miliband’s article as “tetchy and menacing”. As the weight of political and public opinion gathered momentum, the *Mail* started thrashing around for justifications for their attacks on Miliband’s father. At one point they linked their Miliband campaign to proposals to reform press regulation that the Labour leader was supporting, opining that, “If he [Miliband] crushes the freedom of the Press, no doubt his father will be proud of him from beyond the grave”.

This fury around the *Mail*’s attack on Miliband’s father continued for a number of weeks, involving the newspaper in some odd contortions. These included reprinting the “Man Who Hated Britain” article a few days after

its original publication and even republishing the editorial justifying their stance on consecutive days. The stream of abuse aimed at both Ed and Ralph Miliband was unceasing and, to most political observers, wildly out of touch with the reality. For example, under a leader article headlined AN EVIL LEGACY AND WHY WE WON'T APOLOGISE, the paper wrote: "Indeed, his son's own Marxist values can be seen all too clearly in his plans for state seizures of private land held by builders and for fixing energy prices by government diktat. More chillingly, the father's disdain for freedom of expression can be seen in his son's determination to place the British Press under statutory control".

All of which begs the question why did the *Mail* launch such a tirade? The obvious answer is that, in terms of political stance, the paper had now placed itself well-to-the right on the political spectrum and, although the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government was not to their taste, the paper's absolute priority appeared to be doing "whatever was necessary" to prevent the formation of a Labour Government. But there is another broad aspect of the demonisation campaign, which was that by characterising Miliband as "Red Ed", the *Mail* and other Conservative-supporting newspapers, sought to establish the narrative that the Labour Party, after the years of Blair and Brown, was now becoming more left-wing again.

The *Daily Mail* has an influence that outweighs even its impressive readership numbers. This is because it has come to occupy a unique space in the political and media landscapes of the UK, it having managed to convince journalists and politicians alike that somehow it represents the authentic voice of "middle England". One of the BBC's leading news presenters, Robin Lustig, recently asked "Who cares what the *Daily Mail* thinks and does?" and answered his own question thus: "Just about the entire political leadership of Britain, that's who—because they believe that the paper somehow has a mystical insight into the deepest thoughts of British voters, that it taps into the veins of the national psyche, and that to ignore it is to ignore the instincts of the British people" (Lustig 2013). And the BBC's Economics Correspondent at the time, Robert Peston, criticised his own colleagues at the BBC for being too willing to take their lead from the news agendas of the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph* (Brown and Deans 2014).

But despite the ferocity and intensity of the "Red Ed" campaign by the country's two biggest selling newspapers, what is perhaps most noticeable is its lack of success. Anecdotally, this author can observe that it was rare indeed, in fact if ever, to hear the "Red Ed" moniker being used in any

public or private space, other than inside the newsrooms of right-wing newspapers. But beyond anecdote there is the polling evidence indicating that the British public did not buy into this campaign in any significant way. Indeed, in July 2014, with the 'Red Ed' campaign in full swing, YouGov asked a representative sample the following: "Some people talk about 'left', 'right' and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. With this in mind, where would you place each of the following...?" In answer to the question about the party leaders 34% saw David Cameron as "very or fairly right wing" yet only 30% classified Ed Miliband as "very or fairly left wing". Six months later YouGov asked the same question and public opinion showed no signs of moving with Miliband's left wing score remaining at 30% (YouGov 2014).

Perhaps the *Mail* and the *Sun* were misled into thinking that they could repeat the apparent success of the campaign by the right-wing press in the 80s to marginalise the Labour Party by branding it as "loony left" (Curran et al. 2006). That campaign focused on a number of Labour-controlled local authorities—many in London—that had come under the political control of party members who were generally more left wing and younger than their predecessors. These authorities adopted a range of policies that, at the time, were viewed as "extremist" but, for the most part, are now very much part of day-to-day contemporary politics. These included commitments to feminism, anti-racism, gay rights, disability rights and environmentalism.

The media campaign against the "loony left" councils rapidly engulfed the party as a whole. It was based on a number of "case studies" of council initiatives—most of which, on investigation, proved to be fallacious. Haringey, under the leadership of one of Britain's first black MPs Bernie Grant (inevitably dubbed "Barmy Bernie"), was a particular bête noir (to coin a phrase) of the right-wing press. Amongst Haringey's alleged "crimes" were the "banning of black bin liners" and the introduction of "politically correct" coffee. The truth of the matter was that green bin liners were found to be better value for money and "PC coffee" was in fact "fair trade coffee".

The "loony left" campaign was a classic example of the media process of framing, defined by one of its pre-eminent exponents, Robert Entman (1993), as the process by which the media "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the

item described”. In the case of the “loony left”, as certain policies became identified with the left, the press (followed by the broadcasters) honed in on those councils that were advocating such policies. This led to a process of amplification in which freelance journalists and political opponents sought to draw the media’s attention to other councils that appeared to fit the “loony left” frame.

So pervasive was this framing that eventually the Labour leadership itself began to use it to characterise its own activists. Patricia Hewitt, for example, who at the time (1987) was Chief of Staff to the Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, wrote in a memo (that rapidly found its way into the national media) stating: “It’s obvious from our own polling, as well as from the doorstep, that the ‘London effect’ is now very noticeable. The ‘loony Labour left’ is taking its toll; the gays and lesbians issue is costing us dear amongst the pensioners” (Shaw 1994 75).

FRAMING MILIBAND

This pattern of reporting of the “loony left” represented a successful attempt by sections of the press to frame this group as “other” both because of their political views and because they were, or at least symbolised, ethnic minorities, gays, lesbians, the IRA and other “out” groups. The campaign against Miliband by the *Mail*, not just the “Red Ed” aspect, provides a classic case study of “othering”.

The first way that the *Mail* characterised Miliband as the “other”, and the one that is most dramatically illustrated by the “Ralph Miliband offensive”, was in seeking to represent Ed Miliband as almost literally “alien”. In the immediate weeks following publication of the Ralph Miliband article, the *Daily Mail* carried seven articles that reminded readers that Ed Miliband was Jewish. As *Guardian* journalist Jonathan Freedland (2013) pointed out there was more than “a whiff of anti-Semitism” about the *Mail*’s coverage: “there are familiar tunes, some centuries old, which are played again and again. An especially hoary trope is the notion of divided allegiances or plain disloyalty, as if, whatever their outward presence, Jews really serve another master besides their country. Under Stalin, Jews, especially Jewish intellectuals, were condemned as ‘rootless cosmopolitans’ (another euphemism) lacking in sufficient patriotism. The *Mail*’s insistence that Miliband Sr. was not only disloyal but actively hated his country fits comfortably in that tradition”.

Of course, the *Daily Mail* was careful to avoid the obvious bear traps—the article was written by a Jewish journalist, and one of their senior Jewish executives was wheeled out on television to protest that he had found more anti-Semitism (albeit under the cover of anti-Zionism) when he worked at the *Guardian* than he ever had experienced at the *Mail*. Nonetheless, with the *Mail* identifying Harold Laski and Eric Hobsbawm—both Jewish—as particular friends and influencers of Ralph Miliband (and both described as defenders of Stalinism), it is not difficult to make the case that father and son were being framed as “alien”. And, as if to underline the point, in a leader column headlined AN EVIL LEGACY AND WHY WE WON’T APOLOGISE, the *Mail* commented, “We do not maintain, like the jealous God of Deuteronomy, that the iniquity of the fathers should be visited on the sons”—wording redolent of the ancient accusations of the blood libels that have been levelled against Jews over the centuries.

A related way that the *Mail* framed Miliband’s “otherness” was to emphasise his background as the son of a Hampstead intellectual who lived a life very different from that enjoyed by the average Labour voter. In the weeks following the Ralph Miliband article, the same seven articles that identified Miliband as Jewish also reminded readers that he grew up in Hampstead—a part of London associated with wealth, intellectuals and European émigrés (mostly from Jewish backgrounds). These references to place were a continuing part of the “other” narrative that emphasised Miliband being an intellectual and (presumed) elitist. The fact that he attended not an elitist private school but the local comprehensive was put into the mix with headlines such as THE FINISHING SCHOOL FOR LEFT-WING POLITICIANS and ED’S DAYS AT THE ETON FOR LEFTIES. But the headline that encapsulated both senses of the Ed Miliband “other” was the following: IN HAMPSTEAD PARLOURS, INTELLECTUAL APOLOGISTS FOR STALIN LIKE RALPH MILIBAND’S GREAT FRIEND ERIC HOBSBAWM AND HIS TUTOR HAROLD LASKI LOVED TALKING IN ABSTRACTIONS AS MILLIONS DIED IN HORROR.

The second aspect of “otherness” employed by the *Mail* was that of characterising Miliband as a “Marxist” throwback to the seventies, wedded to a doctrine of state intervention and in hock to the “union barons” who had helped get him elected. This frame was facilitated by the electoral arithmetic that saw Miliband winning the Labour leadership largely on the basis of the greater number trade union votes he

secured against his brother,. This in turn provided an umbilical link to the notion that Ed Miliband was a left-winger who symbolised a return to the “bad old days” of the seventies; in the words of the *Mail*’s headline writers: REVEALED: HOW THE UNIONS GOT RED ED IN A HEADLOCK, THE SPECTRE OF RED ED’S THOUGHT POLICE and the one that required no subsequent article: BACK TO THE BAD OLD DAYS: FIXING ENERGY PRICES. GRABBING LAND FROM PROPERTY FIRMS. BOOSTING MINIMUM WAGE ... RED ED REVIVES 70S SOCIALISM.

The third aspect of the *Mail*’s “othering” of Miliband was to portray him as representing a “rejection” of traditional family values (something the *Daily Mail* sees itself as championing). This can be found in two separate but linked narratives. First, in Ed Miliband’s decision to challenge his older brother for the leadership of the Labour Party, despite the fact that, in terms of public office, Ed was clearly the junior partner. The *Mail* honed in on Ed Miliband’s supposed fraternal “betrayal” with headlines such as: ED MILIBAND STILL ‘RACKED WITH GUILT OVER BEATING HIS BROTHER ’ and WIFE WHO STILL CAN’T FORGIVE BROTHER-IN-LAW ED’S BETRAYAL. From the other side of the fraternal trenches was a piece headlined: TREACHERY AND A VERY BITTER WIFE. Miliband also “betrayed” the *Mail*’s notion of family values by his apparent reluctance to marry the mother of his children, encapsulated in an article headlined: SO WILL HE NOW MARRY THE MOTHER OF HIS SON? (AND WHY ISN’T HE ON THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE) which carried the stark statement that “Ed Miliband is the first major political leader in British history not to be married to the mother of his children”.

The final aspect of the Labour leader’s “othering” was his supposed oddness, signalled, not so much in headlines, more in asides. Andrew Pierce, one of the most constant “Red Ed” chirrupers, noted that Miliband “could solve the Rubik’s Cube in one minute 20 seconds, one-handed, as a young boy”, another example came in an article headlined THE WEEK THAT PROVED RED ED IS TOTALLY OUT OF TOUCH WITH THE BRITISH PEOPLE, in which Miliband is castigated for reportedly ordering a “Britvic orange” when drinking in Strangers’ Bar with his fellow Labour MPs which, according to the paper, “elicited groans all round”; or finally in a diary item that noted how Miliband “has an increasing habit of wagging his (remarkably long) forefingers at the Government benches. He could almost conduct an orchestra with those digits.”

ET TU *TELEGRAPH*?

This aspect of the othering of Ed, not just by the *Mail* but by other conservative-supporting papers, was arguably more successful as polling figures highlighted the public doubts his “prime ministerial” qualities. Since being elected to the Labour leadership Miliband consistently trailed Cameron on the crucial personal traits of, in terms of pollsters’ questions, “He is a natural leader” and “He is charismatic”. According to YouGov, Miliband’s personal ratings remained doggedly in single figures on these characteristics throughout his time as Labour leader, whilst Cameron was in the 20s and high teens, and even Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg was ahead of Miliband on these key traits. Hence, the “othering” of Miliband was an attempt, conscious or otherwise, to keep these negative perceptions about Miliband in the public eye and to that extent it can claim to have achieved some success. In particular the notion that in some undefined way Miliband was “weird” did seem to have had some public resonance. A YouGov poll for the online news site *Buzzfeed* found that 41 per cent of respondents thought Miliband either “very weird” or “somewhat weird”. However, it should be pointed out that using a highly charged phrase in a political poll is an almost guaranteed way of getting a “shock result” since respondents tend to react more strongly to such words; unprompted it is unlikely that such a high figure would have been recorded. And it is also worth pointing out that Miliband was only just ahead of Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, whom 34 per cent of respondents dubbed “very weird” or “somewhat weird”—a result that casts some doubts on the overall finding, given Clegg is a leader often perceived to be comparatively normal for a politician. But nor can it be denied that the press did play a prominent role in promoting the notion of Miliband as “weird” and was not just the Conservative-supporting tabloids. For, as Table 22.3 illustrates, whilst the *Mail* remained marginally ahead in the “Miliband is weird” stakes, it was very closely trailed by *The Times*, the *Telegraph* and not far behind, perhaps surprisingly, the *Guardian* and *Independent* leaving the *Sun* trailing in their wake. A strange finding, almost, dare one say, weird.

The *Daily Telegraph* indulged in far less personal abuse than the *Mail* and the *Sun*, but the ferocity of anti-Labour rhetoric and tactics was particularly striking. Until it was taken over by the Barclay brothers, the

Table 22.3 Press descriptions of Ed Miliband

| Newspaper groups (all sources) | Mentions of 'Miliband' & 'weird' since 2010 leadership contest |
|--|--|
| <i>Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday</i> | 133 |
| <i>The Times/Sunday Times</i> | 132 |
| <i>Daily/Sunday Telegraph</i> | 130 |
| <i>Guardian/Observer</i> | 87 |
| <i>Independent/Independent on Sunday</i> | 80 |
| <i>Sun/News of the World/Sun on Sunday</i> | 40 |

Telegraph rightly prided itself on the separation between its news coverage from its comment and features. Despite being a strongly Conservative-supporting newspaper, the *Telegraph's* political journalists were always proud of their independence and, with some justification. In 2009, the paper broke the story of MPs expenses scandal and revealed wrong-doing by Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat politicians alike. But this rigorous editorial independence appears to have been gradually whittled away, since the Barclay Brothers took over.

Just one month before the election campaign got underway, their Chief Political Commentator, Peter Oborne, resigned in spectacular style by writing a 3000-word article on the Open Democracy website detailing his reasons for resignation. The immediate cause was the paper's suppression of stories about corruption at the HSBC bank, a major advertiser in the paper. Oborne wrote: "The *Telegraph* has long been the most important Conservative-leaning newspaper in Britain, admired as much for its integrity as for its superb news coverage. ... It has long been famous for the accuracy of its news reporting". It was not the suppression of news as such that would have caused him disquiet but the highly distorted nature of its coverage which saw no distinction between news and comment. In his article, Peter Oborne wrote: "A free press is essential to a healthy democracy. There is a purpose to journalism, and it is not just to entertain. It is not to pander to political power, big corporations and rich men. Newspapers have what amounts in the end to a constitutional duty to tell their readers the truth." (Oborne 2015)

During the six weeks of the election campaign—from 30 March to 7 May—the *Daily Telegraph* carried 53 stories whose headline contained

the word “Labour”. Of these, just one could be classified as positive and a further one as neutral, all the remainder were hostile. And it was not just the hostility per se but the fact that, in their priorities, they were clearly following the priorities of the Conservative campaign. Of the 53 headlined articles, 18 were about the economy or taxation and 12 about Scotland; direct attacks on Labour or Ed Miliband accounted for a further 13. By way of comparison, the *Guardian* during the same period ran 86 stories with the word “Conservative/s”, “Tory” or “Tories” in the headline. Of these 86, 16 were neutral and 5 were actually positive. And there was also a far greater range of topics covered—12 were about the economy, 10 about the Tories’ campaigning tactics, 9 about the Liberal Democrats and 7 about Scotland—given that Labour was seeking to highlight the health service and, to a lesser extent education, one can hardly claim that the paper reflected the Labour Party’s campaign agenda.

There were two other aspects of the *Telegraph*’s campaign against Labour that were noteworthy. First, in what later turned out to be direct collusion with Conservative headquarters, the paper gathered together, and then published, two separate front-page leads. One contained the signatures of 103 business leaders who signed up argue that a Labour government would “threaten jobs and deter investment”. A subsequent front-page was based on a letter, apparently signed by 5000 small business leaders (many of whom subsequently sought to distance themselves after publication) - both, it was subsequently revealed by the *Guardian* to be Conservative Party initiatives. the *Guardian* reported that the draft letter for small businesses had been on a members’ section of the Conservative Party’s website for a number of weeks and that the original author the letter was one “CCHQ-Admin”, in other words Conservative Campaign Headquarters (*Guardian* 2015).

The *Telegraph* also caused a few eyebrows to be raised when, in an unprecedented move, the editor, Chris Evans, sent a mass email to readers on its own database and told them to vote for the Conservative Party. Evans wrote to both subscribers and non-subscribers alike who had ticked “agree to receive marketing messages by email from Telegraph Media Group”. He asked them: “Do we continue under the Conservatives with the open, enterprise-led economic approach that has underpinned our prosperity for nearly 40 years? Or do we revert to an old-style, ‘government-knows-best’ culture championed by the most left-wing Labour leader for a generation?” (*Independent* 2015a).

The *Telegraph* was not the only paper whose election coverage bore the mark of its proprietor's political prejudice. According to reports back in February 2015, three months before the election, Rupert Murdoch had visited London and instructed his editors to be more aggressive in their attacks on Labour and more positive about the prospects of a Conservative Government. He warned them that a Miliband Government would try and break-up the Murdoch press empire (*Independent* 2015b).

This "fear" of Miliband is one of the yet-to-be-told stories of the 2015 election. Most of the British national press—with the exceptions of the *Guardian*, the *Independent* and the *Financial Times*—had rejected the findings of the Leveson Inquiry into press standards and had set up their own regulator, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). The newspapers that had signed up to IPSO were all anti-Labour, with the exception of the *Daily Mirror*, and their natural antipathy to the Party was heightened by their resentment towards Miliband for calling for the Leveson Inquiry in the first place and subsequently for helping through Parliament the proposals for setting up a regulator, independent of the press. In addition, Labour's election manifesto included a commitment to protect press plurality by restricting ownership and promised to implement the Leveson-recommended independent press regulator. In previous elections (with the exception of 1983), Labour has always stood back from "taking on" the press—in 2015 they did not and arguably this contributed to the levels of hostility they encountered. Author Peter Jukes, in his account of the trial of Murdoch executive Rebekah Brooks on charges of phone hacking, suggests that the hounding of Miliband was directly related to the prominent role he played in calling for the Leveson Inquiry and the implementation of its findings. He quotes a senior *Sun* journalist saying: "You've made it personal about Rebekah. We'll now make it personal about you"—and so they did (Jukes 2012).

CONCLUSION

So—one is inclined to ask—what difference, if any, has all this anti-Labour coverage made in terms of recent political history? One could argue very little, based on the fact of the past 70 years since the end of the war, Britain has experienced 30 years of Labour Government, despite the lack of electoral support from the majority of the press. However, roughly half that time was accounted for by the period of New Labour which the Conservative press found less threatening; and

as for the other periods of Labour Government, neither Attlee nor Wilson had the same levels of personal abuse heaped upon them as did Messrs Foot, Kinnock and Miliband.

Whenever it is suggested that newspapers are able to influence the outcome of an election, the riposte is either, from the Press, that the British public is far too sensible to be influenced by a few headlines or, from the academy, that there is no substantive evidence to back up this claim. Whilst the first argument is unprovable, and probably untrue, the second line of argument has merit. As in most social science observations, absolute proof is hard to come by, but there are indicators that newspapers do have some electoral impact. As Brynin and Newton (2003) note, “in the absence of clear evidence of media persuasion, some studies have maintained that newspaper reading can reinforce existing political preferences”. British political behaviour is increasingly being seen as in terms of “valence politics” (Clarke et al. 2004)—in which perceptions of political competence are seen as a key attribute of parties and leaders and hence an important determinant of electoral success. When this is combined with the high levels of media penetration in Britain, Brynin and Newton (2003) argue that this gives the media in general, and the partisan press in particular, an important role in determining electoral outcomes, which they substantiated in their analysis of the 2005 election campaign when they found a small but significant relationship between perceptions of leadership as measured by the British Election Study and press coverage.

Similarly in 2015, the British Election Study found that negative perceptions of Ed Miliband also played a small but significant role in damaging Labour’s electoral performance; and part of the explanation, if not a large part, must be attributed to the press coverage he received (this in the absence of any other relevant variables). However, this is not to argue that had the attacks on Miliband been less intense, then Labour might have won—that is unlikely and certainly not something that any social scientist could demonstrate. But from the broader perspective of the functioning of British democracy, it cannot be healthy for the body politic—particularly given the high levels of political disengagement—for personal abuse to play such a significant role in the coverage of an election.

During his successful campaign for the Labour Party leadership, Jeremy Corbyn called for a new way of doing politics, less adversarial and “kinder” as he put it (Wintour 2015). His call clearly struck a chord amongst the thousands of younger people who joined the Labour Party and then voted for him, twice. It might perhaps been hoped that such a call might also

have struck a chord with the media but, as the highly negative coverage of Corbyn's leadership has itself demonstrated, such an aspiration clearly fell on deaf ears. As far as the Conservative-supporting press was concerned, it was back to "business as usual".

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CHAPTER 23

The Social Media Campaign: Mobilisation and Persuasion

Darren G. Lilleker and Daniel Jackson

This was the fifth UK General Election campaign in which the Internet has played a part, and given the proliferation in social media use since 2010, many commentators expected it to play a key role, and yes, some predicted it would be the first social media election (e.g. BBC 2015; Channel 4 2015). But whereas in previous elections such claims may have been comfortably dismissed as hype, we might argue that there was some substance to them this time around. There are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, because of the sheer reach of social media, with well over half of the UK population using social media in 2015, compared to 34% in 2010 (Channel 4 2015). Social media now matches TV when it comes to consuming news and has risen considerably in reach since 2010 (Newman et al. 2015). The 2015 Reuters Institute Digital News Report showed that half (49%) of under-35s use social networks like Facebook and Twitter to access news, compared with around a quarter (26%) four years ago (Newman et al. 2015). Furthermore, Newman argues that “the web itself has changed fundamentally over the last five years—with a new emphasis on mobile, social and visual media”. Here, the ubiquity of smartphones and tablets has made them the primary gateway for information

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and news about politics in 2015 for many people, with reportedly more than half of traffic to online election stories from such devices (Newman 2015). Equally significant is the growth in social discovery, where users are accidentally exposed to political content through the activities, recommendations and preferences of their social media network. Of course, much of the content which circulates on social media may be remediated from major news outlets and the big news brands, but this also makes social media news feeds a battleground for NGOs, pressure groups and, of course, political parties.

Another reason for taking social media seriously as a key election battleground in 2015 was the money being spent on it. If following the money is a good barometer of the perceived effectiveness of a campaigning tool, then 2015 was a breakthrough year for Facebook. With comfortably the biggest campaign budget, the Conservative Party led the way here, reportedly spending £100,000 a month on Facebook ads by February 2015 and an estimated £1.2 million over the 12 months leading up to election day. The bulk of this money was being spent on collecting vast amounts of voter data—particularly in the key marginals—and then delivering micro-targeted Facebook ads to target voters (see Anstead 2015). The strategy was spearheaded by former Obama strategist Jim Messina and drawing on data supplied from research funded by Lord Ashcroft, the aim being to squeeze the choices of voters who preferred a Conservative government over Labour and bombarding them with messages to reinforce the idea that they must choose between the two. In this sense, micro-targeting is entirely in line with what the major parties have increasingly been doing in recent elections through huge canvassing databases such as Mosaic, which integrates consumer research data to attempt to determine the interests and attitudes prevalent within a household and so can be used to create targeted e-mails and direct mailshots (Fisher et al. 2011). The strategy focused on spending money on delivering targeted messages—delivered over phone, leaflet and increasingly in 2015, Facebook which in itself has 30 million users in the UK.

In this sense, it should therefore be apparent that considering social media in isolation of other media is increasingly misplaced. From a campaign perspective, social media is now deeply integrated into party campaign strategy. This is because election campaigns are highly professionalised and strategic in their design and execution. In practice, the professionalisation of election campaigning sees parties using the entire hypermedia environment, mainstream news outlets, social media as well

as face-to-face forms of communication. While hypermedia campaigning (Howard 2006) and the exploitation of every medium and communication technology explain campaign communication strategy, the strategic design of a party election campaign draws heavily on lessons from the world of corporate marketing (Lilleker et al. 2006). Key policy promises, key campaign messages and the design of communication as well as the selection of a medium is tailored to maximise the impact on potential supporters (Lilleker 2013).

While we may see contemporary election campaigning as highly strategic and professionalised, does this mean that it is engaging, mobilising or even inspiring? In this chapter, we explore the use of social media, alongside other “mundane” Internet tools such as e-mail, by UK political parties for campaigning purposes during the 2015 general election. With particular focus on mobilisation and persuasion, we examine some of the continuities and changes that 2015 brought compared to previous elections in terms of the online campaign. Firstly, we document party attempts at gamification and micro rewards as a means of mobilising supporters, including how the parties emulated campaigning groups such as Avaaz and 38 Degrees in terms of fundraising through e-mail. Then we examine how the parties used social media in 2015 to mobilise and persuade. Here, we ask to what extent do parties exploit social media through posting and responding to the comments of their followers? Do parties gain a significant following, and what kinds of followers emerge in terms of their behaviours? Then, what links can we make between online voice share and electoral success?

Our chapter reports data from two sources. Firstly, data on social media use by parties and the stratification of user behaviour were provided by SoTrender, a data-gathering and analysis company. The data reported cover the six-week period of the UK election campaign, including Election Day itself, 26 March 2015 to 7 May 2015. The data record the number of items posted by the political parties and the number of shares, likes and comments each item earned. As such, our focus in this chapter is the online activities of the *parties*, not candidates.

The second data source is a specially commissioned survey performed by Opinium research during March 2015, which asked respondents about their online and offline political participation, including social media-based activism as well as the forces of mobilisation. The survey, to a representative sample of the UK population, gained 2037 valid responses. The Opinium survey data are used to explain the links between forms of

participation, and the extent that parties and other political organisations mobilise their supporters to undertake both offline and online forms of participation.

CAMPAIGNING ONLINE: THE JOURNEY TO 2015

While election campaigns in the UK have become increasingly sophisticated, strategic and professionalised in the last 30 years, when it comes to the adoption of digital technologies, UK parties have been relatively slow to innovate. While simple websites appeared for the 1997 election, these were populated with shovelware—essentially, content created for offline campaign materials such as leaflets—which was reconfigured for online distribution. The evolution of the political party websites, from huge spaces with an archive of press releases and information to lean campaign-oriented machines, took considerable time (Lilleker et al. 2016). Similarly, parties' adoption of mechanisms to encourage greater engagement and interaction was a slow and halting process. E-newsletters, for example, were widely used by parties but were criticised for being simply informational and offering no means for feedback (Jackson and Lilleker 2007). As parties have adopted social media, it was suggested that even up to the last election, they occupied a space between the informational web, Web 1.0, and the interactive web, Web 2.0 (Lilleker and Jackson 2011). The party space of Web 1.5 sees the utilisation of social media platforms, with many options open to their followers and visitors to interact with one another and, theoretically, the party. But parties invariably eschew interacting themselves and largely invite visitors to donate or sign up rather than involving them in the campaign (*ibid.*).

The campaign of Barack Obama in 2008 demonstrated the value of a more relational approach and had some impact on the conduct of campaigns in the UK in 2010 (Lilleker and Jackson 2011). Here, the three major parties, Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats, each created an intraparty space for supporters to connect with one another and become involved in small tasks related to the campaign, though these remained geared more towards donating than campaigning. These developments gave some hint that campaigns might become more inclusive and interactive, though they did not have the same impact as that of Obama. The Obama campaigns, building on developments within the Democrat Party (Kreiss 2012) and broader progressive movement in America (Karpf 2012),

sought to empower online political activists and channel their activism into supporting his campaign. Analysed from a relationship marketing approach, this involved converting those whose interest was piqued into firstly latent and then connected supporters, bringing them into the Obama social network, and then encouraging them to be brand advocates and then active campaigners (Lilleker and Jackson 2014).

The broader trend here lies in the shift in repertoires of political participation among citizens witnessed in many western democracies. Broadly speaking, it is driven by partisan dealignment (see Evans 2003) and disengagement from electoral politics (Hay 2007). In practice, these processes have led to a move away from “traditional” forms of participation such as attending political meetings, election canvassing or writing to one’s MP towards more non-conventional forms of participation, such as signing an online petition, boycotting certain brands or sharing a political story on social media (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). While this shift in participation predates social media, the affordances of digital technologies are permitting shallower, effortless forms of engagement often referred to as clicktivism (Morozov 2012) but which might also act as a pathway to greater engagement with civic society (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2010). The key, it seems, for political campaigners is to use these changing political participation repertoires to their advantage, and moreover, to meld the old and new forms of participation by facilitating clicktivists to engage with parties and their campaign in offline settings too.

In the UK at least, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have led the way in harnessing the low-threshold forms of activism that social media offers, but we are seeing political parties campaign and communicate increasingly like NGOs. A small but important aspect of this is extending a campaign’s reach by making everything shareable. Through network effects, the act of sharing via social networks can act as a powerful endorsement and increase the number of people who might see communication from the campaign, often through accidental exposure. Content that is liked or shared also gives the campaign access to user data—an increasingly valuable commodity in contemporary campaigns (Anstead 2015). Therefore, while there are normative debates on whether liking or sharing is simple and meaningless clicktivism or evidence of a deeper engagement (Morozov 2012; Lilleker 2015), either way the actions are useful for the organisation whose content is clicked.

MOBILISING THROUGH E-MAIL AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The 2015 contest witnessed a continuation of the move towards harnessing the power of social networks to mobilise existing supporters and draw in new ones. Party websites largely conformed to a template of a splash screen encouraging visitors to sign up and leave data on their interests, as well as donating to or joining the party, backed up by a range of manifesto-style pages outlining policy and personnel (Ridge-Newman and Mitchell 2016). Beyond party websites, one innovation—led by the Conservatives—was to introduce gamification into the campaign. In recent years, gamification has been led by the commercial sector where aspects of gaming—including micro rewards—are applied to motivate consumers to do the promotional work of the company. The Conservative Party tried to emulate this by operating a points scheme, *Share the Facts*. Those who signed up got points when they shared posts, and when others clicked or commented on their posts. Every fortnight the top 20-point scorers on their leaderboard would win a prize (see Jackson 2015). Such an initiative was designed to convert supporters into online active campaigners and to get the key campaign messages out through a credible source—everyday people—rather than solely through the central party machine.

The same could be said for party attempts to communicate to supporters through e-mail. While considered a mundane Internet tool, e-mail is deeply integrated into internal party mobilising practices (see Nielsen 2010) and remains a very important technology for external communication too. This is because it is a push medium: it is intrusive and hard to ignore. It is also easy to evaluate its success through the click-through and other data it sends. E-mail addresses are therefore highly sought after by parties and getting hold of e-mail addresses becomes part of the campaigning strategy itself.

Comparing the party e-mails from 2015 to previous elections, we can see a change in both tone and function. In previous elections, e-mails appeared much like an e-newsletter: a general list of updates, information, persuasive messages, and links; with few if any opportunities to get involved. In 2015, firstly, we saw e-mails personalised—addressed to the recipient by name throughout the e-mail. Then, secondly, e-mails were invariably action oriented. Like the e-mails of campaigning organisations such as Avaaz or 38 Degrees, each e-mail would be social media enabled and have a simple message and call for action: watch a video (then share it), donate (then share), participate in campaigning, sign a petition (and share), indicate voting preferences (and share) or choose from a list of reasons why you are voting (and share). Party e-mails also adopted a range of persuasive techniques borrowed

from the NGO sector to urge supporters to carry out their calls for action (see Jackson 2015).

Taking this e-mail (Fig. 23.1) from the Labour party from the last week of the campaign (30 April 2015) requesting supporters to donate as an example, we see two such persuasive tropes. Firstly, the use of a very precise fundraising figure, implying very clear costings, then the provision of a very short timeframe suggesting an urgency to act.

Daniel,

Through many months of crowdfunding for our campaign, this brilliant community of people has never let us down.

But with just a week to go until the election, Daniel, it's not clear if we're going to hit this final fundraising target. This is our last big push — and the most important fundraising goal of our entire campaign.

If we don't raise the final £39,161 for our Get Out The Vote effort by midnight tonight, we risk handing a last-minute victory to the Tories in the seats where this election will be decided — seats where we know we have enough support to win. Everything depends on how many people we get out to the polls next Thursday.

It's taken us five years to get this far; let's make sure we pull together in these final seven days. Please join the 7,490 people who've donated in the last 48 hours, and help give Ed and our party the strong finish we vitally need:



And Daniel, we can't thank you enough for getting us this far.

The enthusiasm and generosity of everyone reading this email has powered this campaign — from helping us hire more than 100 local organisers to do election-winning work in our toughest races, to making sure our huge team of volunteers has had the resources they need to take our message of fairness to every community in Britain.

Now is the time, Daniel. Either we vote in a Labour government a week today — or the Tories are back in charge.

It's up to us now to make sure our campaign offices, local organisers, and 30,000-strong team of volunteers are equipped to win this election for us on 7 May. Please donate now — we must hit our £205,000 target by midnight tonight:

Fig. 23.1 Labour Party fundraising e-mail

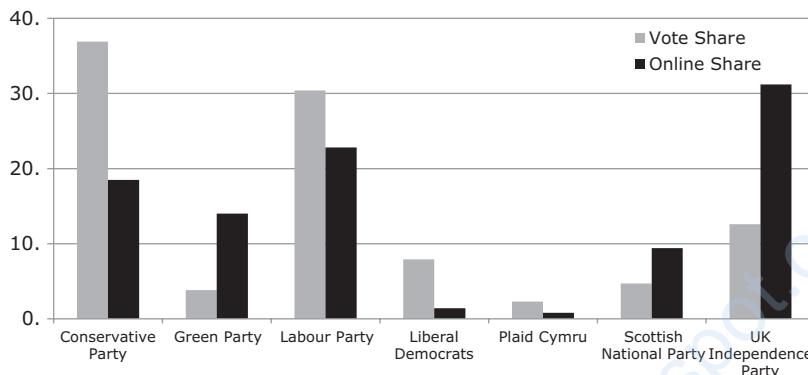


Fig. 23.2 Comparing online support share and vote share (%)

If we don't raise the final £39,161 for our Get Out the Vote effort by midnight tonight, we risk handing a last-minute victory to the Tories in the seats this election will be decided.

Secondly, social norms are then applied, by telling the reader that 7490 people have already donated in the last 48 hours. As Jackson (2015) suggests, this implies that the recipient will not be alone if they donate. Rather, they are following the lead of many others like them, and thus compliance is seen as something normal. The recipient is offered a range of "quick" donation buttons to press, ranging from £3 to £20. For the smaller parties in particular, crowdfunding through e-mail and social media was a clear strategy, though it appeared Labour raised the most money through such means (Mason 2015).

There are two further observations to be made here. The first is how remarkably similar the party e-mails are to those of NGOs—using the same persuasive techniques, focusing on one call for action and making the barriers to participate as low as possible. And the second is how similar the party e-mails are to *each other*. We looked at 49 e-mails during the campaign from Labour (10), Conservatives (11), Lib Dems (10), UKIP (12) and the Greens (6); and there was a remarkable consistency throughout the cases in terms of levels of personalisation, social media connectivity and the types of calls to action. An explanation here comes from the software used by parties and campaign groups. As McKelvey and Piebiak (2014) document, the affordances of political campaign software are shaping campaigning behaviours towards what we see in 2015: increasingly data driven, personalised, targeted, and social media enabled.

While targeted advertising and private communication via e-mail are increasing in importance, social media is a space where parties can increase their reach as their supporters like and share content; therefore creating engaging and shareable content is important. As Table 23.1 demonstrates, all of the main parties were present on social media but there is diversity in the concentration of usage of the differing platforms across the parties. Labour may be accused of over-communicating with their followers on Facebook, by the same token the Liberal Democrats seemed to be using Twitter to an inordinately greater extent than their rivals. Arguably the question of resources, and the notion of normalisation which suggests parties with higher levels of resources maintain a communication advantage across all media (Margolis and Resnick 2000), does not play a significant explanatory role. One of the lower resourced parties, the Greens, produced a far greater number of videos over the course of the campaign. Similarly, Plaid Cymru, who only field candidates in Wales, produced a higher number of tweets than any other party apart from the Liberal Democrats. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest that the concentration on any particular platform is purely an artefact of strategy.

Most parties concentrated on using Facebook as a virtual news feed, combining text reports of policy launches with posters, videos and hyperlinks to news reports. Labour, in particular, concentrated on posters, producing 316 over the campaign, ensuring the availability of content for supporters to engage with and share. The Conservatives were more circumspect perhaps, with a total of 96. All other parties produced around 50 posters apart from Plaid Cymru who also appeared keen to leverage the enthusiasm of their supporters to share their 202 posters (for full data on poster production see Campbell and Lee 2015). The Green Party and Liberal Democrats focused more on videos, both attempting to articulate their policies through this medium as well as building—or in the case of

Table 23.1 Party usage of social media platforms

| | <i>Facebook posts</i> | <i>Tweets</i> | <i>Videos</i> |
|--------------|-----------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Conservative | 183 | 1730 | 42 |
| Labour | 432 | 1436 | 49 |
| Lib Dems | 107 | 4841 | 101 |
| Green | 217 | 901 | 113 |
| SNP | 166 | 1340 | 28 |
| UKIP | 174 | 1451 | 10 |
| Plaid Cymru | 274 | 2070 | 43 |

the Liberal Democrats rebuilding—trust through appearing to be honest and transparent in their communication using leader-focused videos.

A broader observation here is the sheer amount of content created by the parties during the campaign. A collective 343 YouTube videos and 1285 posters (not even taking account of new visual formats like games, lists, gifs, vines, boos, and raw videos) is evidence of their increasing embrace of social, mobile and visual media platforms as a way of communicating key campaign messages. While broadcasters still place limitations on the number of Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs), social media is like the new Wild West in comparison. But again, we would hesitate to consider media platforms as separate spheres. In a hybrid media system, old and new media co-exist, feeding off each other, with content often remediated as it passes through different platforms (see Chadwick 2011). As Anstead (2015) argues, “older formats, such as Party Election Broadcasts, find a second life online, while online phenomenon such as the collecting of tweets or posts by a hashtag to promote a particular idea (e.g., Cleggmania in 2010 or Milifandom in 2015), are elevated by television and newspaper coverage”. Political party posters are now a mixture of big-budget billboard images designed by agencies such as Saatchi and Saatchi, alongside hastily assembled in-house rebuttals to opponents’ claims and semi-amateur assemblages created in Photoshop. For parties, designing content that cuts through the clutter is increasingly hard and, on social media at least, the question is whether a significant proportion of the electorate were likely to participate in the sharing culture parties promoted.

VISITOR PARTICIPATION

Drawing on the data from our survey (Table 23.2) we find, as an overall percentage of the UK electorate, around 17% are willing to share or comment on political material via social media¹. The numbers for actual and projected voting behaviour are consistent with those of other polls, and we find that while 32% engage in none of the forms of participation offered as options, a significant number participate in at least one activity which encompasses both the online and offline environments. Taking discussing politics as an indicator of political interest, rather than using knowledge tests or self-reported interest as a measure, we also find just over half have sufficient interest for political issues to be a topic of conversation.

Table 23.2 Percentage of UK citizens who participate in some form of political behaviour

| | Percentage engaged (N = 2037) |
|--|-------------------------------|
| Voting (have and would) | 68.3 |
| Voting (probably or definite) | 87.1 |
| Signed a petition | 40.0 |
| Taken part in a demonstration | 6.5 |
| Boycotted a company or product | 17.3 |
| Contacted an elected representative | 15.8 |
| Joined/rejoined a political party | 5.9 |
| Followed a party, MP or candidate on social media | 10.1 |
| Followed a non-governmental political organisation (e.g. 38 Degrees) or charity (e.g. Oxfam) on social media | 13.9 |
| Shared political content (e.g. blogs, posters, news pieces) on social media | 12.3 |
| Commented about politics on social media | 16.1 |
| Discussed politics with friends or family | 50.5 |
| Did not participate in any political activity | 32 |

Note: numbers do not add to 100% as respondents could choose more than one option

More worrying for parties is that their cumulative followers are no more than 10.1%. While this can mean that up to 6.5 million are potential followers, in reality the numbers are much lower. In the 2015 general election, the six major UK parties had a total of 1,799,689 followers on Facebook and 822,581 on Twitter (see Table 23.3). Combined with the fact that just under 6% are members of a political party, the data suggest that the current reach of parties on social media remains low. Benkler (2006) has hypothesised, however, that the network effect is the level of a party's support squared. He suggests that if all supporters like or share content and they have a network of up to 500 people, some of who may also like and share party political content, then the reach is accelerated and is exponentially greater than the actual number of fans. Therefore, while we find the actual number of those who directly participate is low, if parties can achieve their goal of harnessing their supporters to extend their reach, there are potential benefits from their use of social media. Little wonder, then, that the parties created so much online content that was designed to be shared through social networks.

When we look at the breakdown of Facebook followers in 2015, the Conservatives and UKIP had significantly more than any other party (see Table 23.3). The Liberal Democrats had a low number considering they

Table 23.3 Support levels and Interactions with Parties at the 2015 UK Election

| | <i>Facebook fans</i> | <i>Facebook interaction</i> | <i>Twitter followers</i> | <i>Retweets</i> |
|--------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| Conservative | 480,955 | 4,171,734 | 157,590 | 282,335 |
| Labour | 304,875 | 8,600,334 | 215,578 | 443,841 |
| Lib Dems | 113,126 | 190,533 | 95,722 | 238,736 |
| Green | 215,955 | 2,638,966 | 137,057 | 222,322 |
| SNP | 203,883 | 1,171,707 | 94,088 | 350,405 |
| UKIP | 462,672 | 6,668,586 | 103,744 | 354,653 |
| Plaid Cymru | 18,223 | 153,743 | 18,802 | 169,855 |

are a national party, with the Greens gaining twice as many followers. It is clear, then, that social media popularity is not wholly reflective of vote share. The figures are also not linked to the levels of output on each platform. Despite producing more than twice the number of Facebook posts than their rivals, Labour did not appear to earn as significant a following as the more strategic and less communicative Conservatives. The pattern for Twitter appears the reverse, with Labour tweeting less than other parties, yet attracting more followers.

A clue to understanding this apparent contradiction can be found by looking at social media interactions, which are more meaningful than looking at followers alone and will be more valued by the parties. Any interaction, whether a like, a share or retweet, or a comment, is likely to show in an individual's news feed and so has a chance of being seen by their network (and thus their network's network and so on); though we recognise that the Facebook algorithm can influence what users see and from whom among those they follow. On Facebook, there are a significant number of likes, shares and comments across party posts and significant numbers of retweets. While there are no clear correlations between the effort, number of posts and interactions, Labour's verbosity on Facebook seems to have paid off with the party earning twice as many interactions as their main rival the Conservatives. Yet UKIP, which only posted 174 times, including "only" 54 posters and 10 videos, gained two-thirds the number of interactions as Labour. Therefore, for significantly less effort, but due to an active and committed following, UKIP were able to extend their reach in a more cost-effective way.

Interestingly, an analysis of election Google searches found that UKIP consistently generated more search queries than all the other parties and their leaders throughout the campaign (Trevisan and Reilly 2015). This

would appear to validate Farage's post-election claims that the party was a social media force that had "suddenly [become] the party for the under 30s", a group that is perhaps best reached online.

The comparatively fewer social media interactions of other parties perhaps hint that their supporters were less committed. This is particularly the case for the Liberal Democrats, who gained the lowest number of interactions beyond Plaid Cymru, whose follower numbers were significantly lower anyway. This fact would seemingly confirm and reflect the toxicity of the Liberal Democrats among younger people compared to 2010. In contrast, SNP and UKIP supporters were possibly driven on by their hostility towards mainstream news media, which drew them towards social media in attempts to counteract what they perceive as mainstream media bias.

Labour, SNP and UKIP led a tighter field for the number of retweets. The Liberal Democrats demonstrate no advantage from their frequency in tweeting, though Plaid Cymru's low but not insignificant number of retweets may suggest they gained some benefit from high usage. Figures for YouTube are highly reliant on single videos and their shareability. In this respect, only one party stood out in 2015. The Green Party boy band parody "Change the Tune" was the only one to genuinely go viral, being viewed by just short of 8 million people² by the day of the election and breaking through into mainstream media attention.

Two-STEP FLOWS—THE VISITOR AS MEDIUM

Our data show that the parties gained varying numbers of total interactions. However, the important question is the extent to which they were unique interactions or whether they are part of a suite of activities performed by highly committed activists, who frequently like, share and comment, and effectively were harnessed to the campaign. The only social media data we can analyse for the extent of individual actions are from Facebook. Here we use the terminology from SoTrender, which classifies those who interact on party profiles. *Occasionals* are users who interact only once, *Likers* only "like" but do so more than once, *Debaters* only comment (an interesting category as these may be as likely to be trolls who post hostile remarks as party cheerleaders showing support), *Writers* not only comment but interact with other users, *Activists* perform all behaviours, liking, sharing and commenting and appear to be advocates for the party.

The highest percentages of visitors fall into the categories of Occasionals, the Lurkers who interact very rarely, or Likers (who only like). However, the positive note here is that around 40% of supporters are serial likers who extend the reach of their respective parties. The number of Debaters (who comment only and may include trolls) may concern some parties, in particular the Liberal Democrats. A previous study noted that the BNP MySpace page housed only negative graffiti, with people joining, typing a post such as “Fascist Scum” then leaving (Jackson and Lilleker 2009). While Debaters will include cheerleaders who post comments such as “Go Ed” on a Labour post following a speech by leader Ed Miliband, they are also likely to include those who posted negative remarks on Liberal Democrat posts about renegeing on the promise to scrap student tuition fees when the party entered into coalition in 2010. Therefore, graffiti-style negativity may prevail for some parties to which there are strong negative associations with some members of the online community. Writers (who comment or publish only) are a minority, and again may include trolls and appear to be highest for Liberal Democrats. Within social media, these “writers” may be highly influential due to being perceived as highly knowledgeable activists within their networks; therefore, a minority of these individuals may be highly important and have an impact on not only remediating party communication but also adding interpretation that leads to a broader shared understanding, positive or negative, within their network (Anstead and O’Loughlin 2014) (Table 23.4).

For all parties, the worrying statistic is that in most cases the percentage of those who are Activists (who like, share and comment and may be ambassadors) is under 2%. The actual number of activists for the Conservatives is a low, but a comparatively respectable 7344 people, the

Table 23.4 Facebook interactions, segmented as a percentage of those performing actions frequently

| | Occasionals | Likers | Debaters | Writers | Activists |
|-------------------------|-------------|--------|----------|---------|-----------|
| Conservative Party | 35.66 | 39.80 | 19.55 | 3.47 | 1.53 |
| Green Party | 42.50 | 41.91 | 11.23 | 3.09 | 1.27 |
| Labour Party | 43.08 | 34.90 | 16.68 | 3.68 | 1.65 |
| Liberal Democrats | 32.72 | 37.01 | 24.72 | 4.40 | 1.16 |
| Plaid Cymru | 43.46 | 43.43 | 9.33 | 2.68 | 1.10 |
| Scottish National Party | 43.48 | 44.43 | 7.69 | 3.46 | 0.94 |
| UK Independence Party | 34.12 | 48.43 | 11.06 | 3.64 | 2.75 |

Liberal Democrats, in contrast, had only 1311 activists. The overall percentages then mask a reality that while the overall numbers are reasonably equal, apart from the number of Debaters, in order to maximise reach you need a large number of overall followers in order to gain a large number of Activists. The highest levels of commitment were demonstrated by UKIP followers, who number 12,705—almost double that of the Conservatives. Hence, when we consider this, we assume that in terms of accidental exposure, Facebook users were most likely to see content from UKIP followed by the Conservatives and Labour and least likely to see content from the Liberal Democrats and smaller parties. However, this hypothesis is largely dependent on the network one chooses. If a person has a tendency towards one party or ideological standpoint—the left for example—and has a large community who also tends to be more leftist, it is equally likely that person will see no posts from UKIP and the Conservatives and rather see only content they agree with, which might be shared from the profiles of Labour, the Green party or SNP (see Sunstein 2007). Therefore, while reach is a goal for parties, even on the digital high street parties may only be preaching to the converted (Norris 2003).

ELECTION OUTCOMES AND ONLINE ACTIVISM

The caveats regarding networks consisting of the ideologically similar, and the power of the Facebook algorithm to filter content, may explain why from a user's point of view, social media is in actuality an ideological bubble that is isolated from the real world. Content from a range of sources may be remediated but it may also be contextualised to fit an ideological position which is shared within a network. By taking the number of followers each party has across Facebook and Twitter as an absolute percentage of the overall total number of followers, so assuming each follower is unique and that the total number represents those with a propensity to engage in partisan politics on social media—an admittedly imperfect but indicative procedure—we gain a sense of the share each party has online. As Fig. 23.1 indicates, UKIP have the highest percentage following overall, followed by Labour, the Conservatives, the Green Party, SNP, and then the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru. Taking the overall vote share nationally, we see that while the Conservative and Labour parties are prominent, their position was reversed, UKIP only gained 14% of the vote as opposed to over 30% of the online share of support and the Greens and SNP also saw an online bias that was not reflected in their vote share.

While the measurement of online share has significant flaws and is for illustration only, the serious point these data make is that independent of the levels of support online—which is an influential factor in the number of activists harnessed to the campaign and the chances of extending reach and gaining accidental exposure to communication—there appears to be no link to the eventual outcome of the election contest.

While there might be no reason to expect any form of correlation between online activity, the levels of support earned and vote share, similar measures have been used when considering the effort expended in constituency campaigning (Denver et al. 2004; Fisher et al. 2011). Therefore, the problem is not with seeking an effect but with the fact that the numbers of activists and the likelihood of reaching beyond those already committed remain slight.

However, if we imagine public opinion as less the sum of individual opinions (Allport 1937) and more as something generated through social interaction, embedded in social relationships (see Blumer 1948), then there might be more that social media can tell us about election results (see Anstead and O'Loughlin 2014). Here, Blumer claims that public opinion measurement should be hierarchical, because *who* holds an opinion does matter, as some voices are likely to have more influence on public debate than others. Such an approach is well suited to analysis of social media share of voice, and the extent that some writers and activists may be extremely influential among their followers or within bounded ideological networks. Thus, it may be that while UKIP and Labour had more support in a quantitative sense online, Conservative online supporters were ultimately more influential.

CONCLUSIONS

In UK elections, the air war, employing mass media, remains dominant, and this tends to be a feature of most European democracies (Lilleker et al. 2015). The ground war, involving doorstep canvassing and getting out the vote, is a feature of the swing seats only, and in 2015 the Conservatives 40/40 strategy targeting 40 seats the party needed to win, and a further 40 the party needed to hold which would guarantee them a majority in parliament. This inequality of campaigning was replicated online with geo-political targeting of voters within the strategically important geographical areas.

Social media therefore plays an intermediary function, somewhere between the mass media campaign which it remediates and a more grass-

roots style where people are empowered to be campaigners; hence there is hybridity on two levels, in terms of content and in terms of ownership. Social media is given significant priority due to potential reach that can be earned via supporters within a two-step flow model of communication. Parties all produce material that is engaging, in the form of videos and posters, and shareable; so there is a strategy which seeks message virality. The parties largely remain in a realm of Web 1.5, in terms of eschewing direct interactions, but they attempted to harness the affordances of Web 2.0, and use the social web dynamics to extend their reach. The challenge they have is that their estimated number of activists is as low online as offline, on average 1–7000 per party. Therefore, while they may be making content that has the potential to go viral, unless they have active supporters keen to promote that content they are largely preaching to the converted. However, accepting the notion of ideological clustering, preaching to the converted and so firming up and encouraging the support of activists may be the best parties can achieve. But even when parties do gain a high number of activists, as UKIP managed in 2015, and when this converts into a modicum of electoral success in gaining 13% of the popular vote, they remain a political irrelevance with a single seat and perhaps some highly demoralised activists.

Yet online activists remain a distinct minority. Online and clicktivist forms of political participation are slightly more commonplace than the traditional acts of demonstrating or joining a party. It would appear that actually they are a component within a suite of participatory actions, though they are largely not driven by partisan affiliation. Hence, parties still struggle to get their messages promoted. This negative observation might underplay the power of the like, however. While hardcore activists are a minority among party followers, never mind Facebook users overall, around 40% of each party's online support base liked or shared content at least once and a further group of 30–40% were serial likers. These people may have been drawn to like content on one or a few specific policy areas, content of a specific type or offering a specific style of message. Hence, further research is required to determine what kind of content earns more shares and likes. The numbers, however, do suggest that all parties, depending of course on the number of supporters they have on social media, are likely to earn some degree of accidental exposure, despite ideological clustering and the Facebook algorithm having some negative impact on them realising this potential. But, perhaps actually content is king on social media.

Despite having a maximum of 357,000 online Green followers including 215,000 on Facebook few were activists. Nonetheless the Party

managed to have a video go viral and earn 8 million views in a matter of a few days. The video was humorous, perhaps appealed to those who agreed that the male party leaders offered little that was distinct, and so had qualities that made it engaging and shareable. However, we should not suggest that there is a “net” effect as a result. Eight million people may have seen the video, they may even have agreed with the message and subsequently added a further like that accelerated its reach around the online network. But, viewing the video did not translate into votes. The Green Party appeared to have plateaued at around 1 million supporters, and although their support base held between the 2014 European Parliament elections and the 2015 General Election, their enhanced viewing figures did not deliver a vote dividend. Hence, while there may have been small numbers converted or saw their support firmed up sufficiently to motivate them to vote, the numbers may have been very small and in the broader scheme of an election fairly insignificant. In some marginal seats, a few votes may have been crucial, but given that voters in those seats were bombarded with tailored advertising, doorstep visits by local and national figures, and experienced all aspects of the campaign jamboree, it would be difficult to attribute any vote to accidental exposure on social media. As with many other campaign tools, it is likely no party would abandon social media in the fear that there was an effect; however, the reality is that much social media campaigning may only reach those already converted and loyal supporters. But these conclusions focus purely on activities within the networks of political parties and not the broader social space which is created within social media environments. If we look beyond the immediate lens of what the parties are doing and look at social media as a space, we may find it to increasingly be the primary space for citizens to conduct everyday political talk (Wright, Jackson and Graham 2016). Through complex patterns of remediation and contextualisation, we might find alternative patterns of influence from which party and media brands may be presented through content but their messages are altered and alternative meanings are offered. If these circulate within networks containing users with largely similar beliefs, known as ideological echo chambers (because they simply reinforce peoples pre-existing prejudices), then social media may play an increasingly important role in providing the fabric for political socialisation, including voter education, deliberation, persuasion, and opinion formation. These highly dynamic and complex processes occur beyond the realms of party profiles but through the sharing mechanisms, and the ability to write comments may be playing an increasingly important role in shaping election outcomes, ones which are largely hidden within the per-

sonalised news feeds of the millions of users that log in and engage within something political.

NOTES

1. No question was asked about liking political content on social media given that we did not differentiate between partisan and non-partisan materials to keep the questionnaire to a reasonable length. Therefore, the interpretation of politics could be fairly wide.
2. While the YouTube video itself garnered “only” approximately 800,000 views by the day of the election, our figure of 7.9 million views contains those achieved via shares (source: Green Party).

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CHAPTER 24

#GE2015: The General Election on Twitter

Steven Ginnis and Carl Miller

INTRODUCTION

The rulebook on winning elections has been changing. Ever since Obama's huge first victory in 2008, it has been clear that elections would be fought in the digital world as well as on the ground and over the airwaves. Four years later, Obama set an example politicians around the world could not ignore. He used his huge digital support—including 23 million Twitter followers and 45 million Facebook likes—to organise over 300,000 offline events and raise \$690 million for his campaign, over half his total. Others quickly followed this example. On the other side of the world, during the Indian election in 2014, Narendra Modi enlisted 2.2 million volunteers using online tools, and engaged with hundreds of thousands of people to crowd-source his party's manifesto.

Closer to home, the online momentum gained by the “Yes” campaign during the Scottish Referendum of 2014 was proof that Britain would not be immune to the rise of digital politics (Ridge 2014; Riddell 2014;

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Miller 2014). Candidates and political parties in the UK faced new challenges to convert the new world of clicks, Tweets and *likes* into the currencies that win elections: volunteers, donations and votes.

The rise of social media platforms does not just change elections for politicians and electoral strategists, of course. Digital platforms also present opportunities for voters. When asked what type of information influenced the way they voted in the Scottish referendum, more people reported that they had used information from social media and other websites (39%) than newspapers (34%) or information provided by either the “Yes” or “No” campaigns directly (30%)(Haggerty 2014). On the eve of the 2015 General Election campaign, a third (34%) of those aged 18–24 believed that something they read on social media would influence their vote, second only to the TV debates. From the public, all of this was met with a mixture of hope and fear. On the one hand, it was hoped that social media platforms would give a voice to those who would not normally take part in politics and break down the barriers between voters, politicians and parties; however, the public remained sceptical and worried that these same vehicles for discussion would make political debate more divisive and more superficial than it used to be (Ipsos MORI 2015a).

Digital platforms also present opportunities for how politics can be studied. In digital form, Tweets can be collected and analysed in large volumes by a growing suite of technology capable of finding patterns and meaning in huge bodies of data. Between 1 January and 6 May 2015, Ipsos MORI and Demos, in partnership with University of Sussex and CASM LLP, used new technology to build algorithms to study the conversations taking place on Twitter.¹

Listening to Twitter is not like a poll, of course. Twitter does not reflect all of society. At the time of the General Election, just 18% of adults had a Twitter account, with users skewed towards younger and more affluent voters (Ipsos MORI 2015c). Not all of Twitter’s users generate content either; some use it just to listen, and those that tend to be loudest on Twitter are even younger than its average user. Moreover, analysis of the conversation generated on Twitter during this election campaign showed that a small number of “power users” sent a large proportion of the Tweets collected. Analysing Twitter is therefore not the same as researching representative public opinion—indeed it is quite the opposite. Instead, this chapter aims to understand the rise of a new, decidedly unrepresentative, but digitally engaged portion of politicians and voters who are using Twitter as a new mode of political engagement and participation in its own right.

TWITTER IN CONTEXT

The sheer volume of discussion about politics on Twitter during the campaign was evidence enough of a new type of political dialogue in the UK. Over the ten weeks of the building up to polling day, Demos collected 7.5 million Tweets that mentioned any candidate—either incumbent Members of Parliament (MPs) or Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs). The dataset included contributions from 740,000 unique accounts, a mix of politicians, media accounts, other organisations (such as charities, pressure groups and, naturally, pollsters and think tanks) and members of the public.

On Twitter, as in offline life, politics is not usually an important part of daily discourse. However, during the election, politics finally became a more popular topic of conversation on social media platforms than entertainment news stories. A comparison of four General Election and four popular entertainment news stories from 20 to 26 April shows that politics had a greater share of the conversation on social media compared with its share of the conversation through traditional news sources. As measured by Election Unspun from the Media Standards Trust, these four general election stories accounted for 28% of all relevant articles in traditional national newspapers; in contrast, these same general election stories provided 61% of the relevant mentions on social media.

Moreover in the final three weeks of the campaign, Ed Miliband and David Cameron each received more mentions per week than popular boy band One Direction² (227,111 in total for One Direction compared to 292,955 for Cameron and 296,609 for Miliband). Admittedly, this was a slow news month for One Direction, and one of the most important in both politicians' careers. Just before the campaign began, news of Zayn leaving the boy band amassed over 470,000 mentions in the UK in one week, dwarfing the 100,000 mentions each received by Cameron and Miliband during the week of the Leaders' seven-way debate (Ipsos MORI 2015b).

Twitter is generally a harsh environment for politicians; commentary on it tends to be far more negative than either the mainstream press or the overall ratings of favourability measures through public opinion polling. Tweets collected during the campaign were eight times more likely to be classed as a “boo” rather than a “cheer” for the candidate or party. As a point of comparison, the Election Unspun project found that the 125,000 online articles published by UK national news outlets between 5 January and 6 May 2015 were only twice as likely to be negative than positive towards a political party (Election Unspun 2015).

POLITICIANS ON TWITTER

Getting online

The British public increasingly expect their politicians to be on social media. A survey of social media users in April 2015³ demonstrated a new level of demand and expectation for politicians to embrace social media platforms such as Twitter: half (50%) of social media users agreed that politicians should use social media to share their views, policies or values (14% disagreed); slightly more (54%) agreed that politicians should reply and engage with people that ask them questions and send them comments on social media (12% disagreed); and 53% agreed that politicians should use social media to gather comments from constituents and reflect them in the decisions they made (14% disagreed).

In line with this public demand, there was a clear push across the political spectrum for politicians to have a presence on social media during the 2015 General Election. Across the 650 seats contested in the UK, 479 MPs and 794 PPCs had Twitter accounts. Labour had the greatest number of candidates on Twitter, though this may be reflective of the strategy chosen by the Conservative campaign to place greater emphasis on targeted Facebook advertising (see Chap. 23) (Table 24.1).

However, a higher number of Labour accounts did not necessarily translate into a greater share of visibility to the electorate. Research conducted at the start of the campaign (Miller 2015a) showed that Conservative Party MPs had 1,487,837 unique followers (i.e., people who followed at least one of their MPs), nearly double the 761,916 who followed a Labour MP and four times the 361,556 who followed a Liberal Democrat MP.

Yet, professional politicians are not particularly powerful, loud or even competent voices on Twitter; and they found themselves rubbing shoulders with other, often more powerful and more popular voices. At the

Table 24.1 Number of MPs and Parliamentary Prospective Candidates (PPCs) with Twitter accounts

| <i>Party</i> | <i>MPs</i> | <i>PPCs</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-------------------|------------|-------------|--------------|
| Labour | 207 | 301 | 508 |
| Conservative | 221 | 179 | 400 |
| Liberal Democrats | 49 | 103 | 152 |
| Green | 1 | 113 | 114 |
| UKIP | 2 | 98 | 100 |

start of the campaign, 2,611,309 different people followed any MP. As a point of comparison, this is roughly a third of the 9 million-strong following of Russell Brand, who had criticised all of the mainstream parties, and called on people not to vote at all (Miller 2015a).

Connecting with Voters

Did Twitter succeed in removing the barriers between politicians and public? Two weeks prior to polling day, close to two-fifths (38%) of social media users reported that they had received content on social media broadly related to politics, with 14% of users reporting that this content had come directly from a political party or politician in the UK (Miller 2016). This reflects a considerable effort by politicians to push their message out over platforms such as Twitter. Over the course of the ten-week campaign, the 1273 candidates with a Twitter account published a total of 630,000 Tweets.

Politicians used Twitter in radically different ways however, and not all saw it as an opportunity to listen to voters as well as to speak to them. A review of 59,179 Tweets posted by incumbent MPs in the lead up to the election (between 28 January and 24 February) found that less than a quarter (23%) of Tweets posted were replies to posts made by other Twitter users. Three in ten Tweets posted by MPs over this period were “broadcast” messages, with MPs often stating their position on local and national issues; and close to half (47 %) of Tweets were re-tweets, where MPs often lent their approval to content posted by the party or fellow MPs. Furthermore, politicians’ willingness to engage with, rather than broadcast to, voters varied greatly. Close to a fifth (89 of 480 MP accounts) of MPs posted zero replies over this period; in contrast, Tim Farron MP was the most engaged of all politicians, with 93 % of his 876 Tweets classed as replies to comments and questions raised by voters, journalists and fellow politicians.

Local versus National Campaigning

Politics remained local, even when it went online. Nationally, 47% of tweeted attitudes about Conservative MPs in general were some form of criticism, scepticism, insult or worse. However, a review of the UK’s 100 closest fought seats revealed a radically different social media discourse to the national picture. Bucking the national trend, Conservatives defending

key marginal seats were as active on Twitter as their Labour counterparts and much more popular. Of the tweeted attitudes from the public about Conservative MPs defending marginal seats, 83% were “cheers”: a mixture of agreement, offers of help, positive stories from the campaign trail and warm responses to appearances on television programmes. This compares favourably to attitudes towards Labour incumbents in closely fought seats, of which just 63% were “cheers”.

The Conservatives’ success in these marginal seats appeared to stem from digital campaigning strategies distinctly different from those adopted by the rest of the party. Senior Tories who used Twitter to broadcast national slogans and messages tended to be met with abuse or criticism. In contrast, Conservatives fighting close races tended to prefer two-way conversations and the discussion of concrete local issues that mattered to people. Dialogues about the Enfield jobs fair and High Speed Rail to Hastings were far more popular on Twitter than national statements about the #longtermeconomicplan or the #growthdeal.

Politicians had to learn new survival tactics. Backbench MPs not only chose to focus on local issues and to avoid mention of their more famous and less popular colleagues. Of the 15,000 Tweets sent by Conservative MPs in February 2015, just 69 mention Cameron; only 286 of the 24,000 Tweets sent by Labour MPs mentioned Miliband. Moreover, Conservative MPs in UKIP target seats mentioned Cameron only five times, Scottish Labour MPs mentioned Jim Murphy, the party’s leader in Scotland, three times more often than they referred to Miliband. Politicians instead focused on the weaknesses of their opponents’ leader. Of politicians’ Tweets about Cameron, 90% came from MPs outside the Conservative Party.

Twitter during the 2015 General Election also changed the relationship between individual politicians and their central political parties. For decades, central party hubs have tried to enforce message discipline on their politicians, carefully selecting spokespeople to talk to mainstream media and choreographing events on the campaign trail. However, with a direct link to voters, and within the chaos of the campaign, central party “message discipline” became more difficult to enforce online. Politicians took to Twitter to break from the national campaign message, and to often craft much more personal messages to the electorate.

While the central Tory strategy was to focus on the economy, a significant number of Conservative candidates refused to let issues of Europe and immigration drop. Some candidates went as far as to use Twitter to directly criticise the Prime Minister, others chose to use Twitter to share

stories and statements striking a harder line on Europe and immigration than their leaders. For example, prominent Conservative Eurosceptic Michael Fabricant posted a summary “of why those of us who want to leave the EU need time to prepare their campaign”, and another candidate shared a story calling for senior Conservatives to be given a free vote on Europe. One Conservative candidate re-tweeted the phase “At last! A crackdown on foreign patients abusing #NHS: Sick visitors from EU cost us £££ a year ... #HealthTourism”, and also: “if you can’t get a doctor’s appointment, blame Labour. If you can’t get a school place, blame Labour. Immigration matters”.

This phenomenon was not unique to the Conservatives. Labour Party candidates also used the platform to distance themselves from their Party’s positions, most noticeably on the renewal of the Trident nuclear deterrence system and Labour’s tougher position on immigration. In other instances, the digital silence of MPs on particular issues also undermined centrally coordinated campaign strategies. For example, of 187,035 Tweets sent by Labour candidates since January, only 118 of them were about the mansion tax.

VOTERS’ USE OF TWITTER

An Imperfect Mass Reaction

The electorate also took to Twitter to discuss the General Election. Twitter formed a new kind of public debate that almost anyone could join. Over ten weeks of the campaign, 655,000 potential voters (i.e., not politicians, journalists or institutions) sent 6,161,000 messages either directly to, or about a candidate. Furthermore, voters also discussed the election away from politicians with friends, family, colleagues and total strangers. As of 23 April, just two weeks before the election, 40% of social media users claimed to have shared or posted political content on social media in the three months leading up to polling day; this broadly matches the proportion of social media users who had received political content (38%), and is more than three times the number who had visited, phoned, written or emailed their local politician in the previous 12 months (12%).

Much of this commentary happened in real time. During the televised leaders’ debate, hundreds of thousands of the four million viewers posted 3000 Tweets per minute during the first televised debate; over the course

of the second debate, 239,000 Tweets either mentioned one of the party leaders or used the debate hashtag to pass comment. The biggest bursts of “boos” and “cheers” in this new dual-screening commentary seemed to map the peaks and troughs collected through the real-time “worm” Ipsos MORI conducted on behalf of the BBC (BBC News 2015), as discussed in more detail by Claire Emes and Josh Keith in Chap. 19. Whereas the “worm” asked a select few (30 participants per debate) to constantly rate what was being said during the programme using a keypad, social media gave a platform to thousands of voices who otherwise would not have been heard. Across both formats of research, the biggest cheers in the second (so-called challengers’) debate arrived when party leaders joined together to criticise David Cameron’s no-show, the biggest boos were reserved for Nigel Farage’s claim that the studio audience was biased (Miller 2015b, 2015c).

Yet despite the volume of conversation relating to the General Election on Twitter, a fairly small number of people—“power users”—dominated the conversation. From late January to early June 2015, Demos and Ipsos MORI collected 1,580,000 Tweets that mentioned either David Cameron’s or Ed Miliband’s official Twitter accounts; the project found that the top 1% of most prolific users sent 518,432 Tweets, 33% of the total; the top 10% sent 1,014,875 Tweets, 64% of the total (Miller et al. 2015).

While there were lots of Tweets, most did not engage with the policies at stake. Despite the vast number of people tweeting their views during the live televised debates, just 11% of these were classified as comments relating directly to policy issues such as education, the economy or immigration. The vast majority of comments related instead to the personality of the leaders, including comments about their appearance, directed criticism, insults or worse.

Evaluating the Role of Social Media

What did voters make of it all? At the height of the campaign, Ipsos MORI asked members of the BBC’s 2000-strong *Election Uncut* community for their views on the role of social media in the election (see Chap. 19 for more details). The discussion identified four different groups of attitudes among voters: “active supporters”, those “disappointed by the evidence”, “passive supporters”, and “opponents in principle”. The *active supporters*

of social media in political debate had had positive experiences of using social media during the campaign. They enjoyed the speed at which news could be shared and believed that social media content was subject to less bias and more honesty than the spin portrayed in traditional media. However, while it appeared to benefit some voters, others were *disappointed by the evidence* they had seen on social media. These voters were concerned that conversation on social media was being dominated by a few loud voices, and that the tendency towards humorous content made it difficult to sustain serious debate:

Active supporter: “I have seen posts from friends and colleagues from all sides of the political spectrum where there has been lively ‘debate’ and where video links have been posted to back up the discussions. It has been quite informative.”

Disappointed by the evidence: “I think it dumbs down the debate when it becomes so casual. It’s very normal for politicians to be slated, our country to be complained about etc. … and social media really provides the fuel for this to happen.”

Those who had little or no direct experience of social media for political debate often fell into two camps. *Passive supporters* believed that social media was the future and a key to giving a voice to voters who might not otherwise share their opinions. In contrast, others were *opponents in principle*, and believed that political debate through social media will always be fundamentally unrepresentative, unhelpful and inappropriate.

Passive supporter: “Many would not stand up in a public meeting to air a point of view, but would be able to do it via social media.”

Opponents in principle: “Social media is full of egotistical, self-seeking people who bend their party line to meet their followers/friends. It is not a true representation of what people think. It is extremely superficial.”

Engagement with the 2015 General Election on social media did not necessarily translate to impact offline. Of those social media users who had undertaken activity related to the General Election by 23 April 2015, around a quarter (27%) reported that their social media conversations had led them to do further research on an issue or topic related to politics. However, 9% said it has led them to change their mind on an issue, and only 6% reported it had led them to join a political party or movement—proportionally small numbers, but still significant given the overall number of people who used social media to engage in politics.

THE POLITICAL TWITTERSPHERE

The experience of any individual on Twitter during the election—the information they saw, the people they tended to talk to and that tended to talk to them—radically varied. A key behaviour on Twitter, and often the way that ideas, messages and beliefs spread between users, is the “re-tweet”. A user that “re-tweets” a message makes it visible to their followers. Analysis of this behaviour (i.e., who re-tweets who) provides an overview of how and where political discussions were taking place within Twitter during the 2015 General Election.

Researchers at Demos created the “political Twittersphere” (Fig. 24.1) to map how information flowed around Twitter during the height of the campaign. In the map shown here, each tiny dot is a Twitter user, whether a politician, newspaper, prominent celebrity or normal voter. The larger the dot, the more that user has been re-tweeted, and thus the louder their voice on Twitter tended to be. Each line between dots represents a link—one of the users re-tweeting something posted by the other.

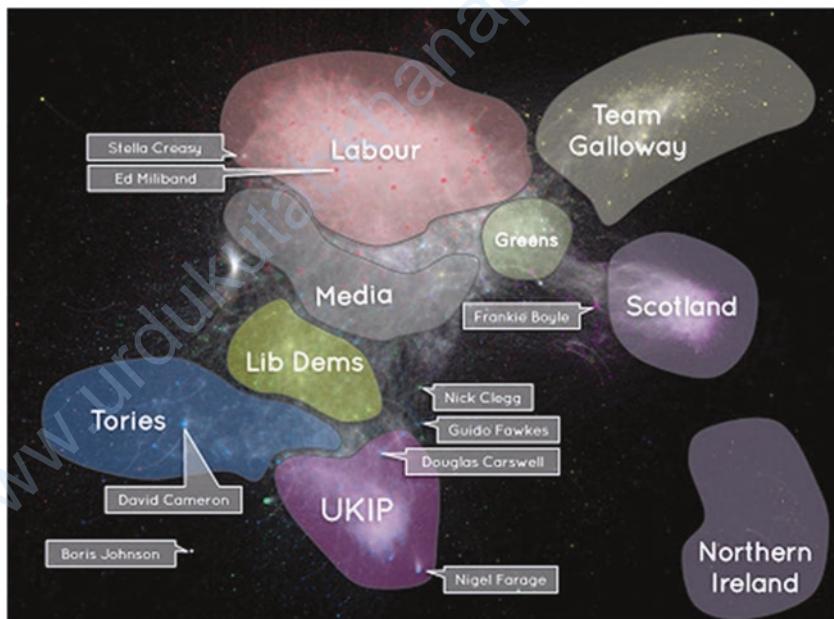


Fig. 24.1 The political Twittersphere. Source: Krasodomski (2015)

The location of each of the dots in the galaxy depends on who they tended to re-tweet during the campaign. Dots that are close together in the galaxy are those Twitter accounts that re-tweet each other or who re-tweet the same groups of people. The stronger the affiliation, the closer they are together. Those that do not have a strong affiliation are set further away from one another.

The map shows that different partisan tribes had formed on Twitter. At the top is a bright, active cluster of Labour supporters with Ed Miliband at its heart. At the bottom were smaller, less active Tory and Liberal Democrat clusters. The Scottish political conversation was notably distinct from the mainstream political conversation, as was “team Galloway”, a large digital following of Respect MP George Galloway, whose members otherwise had little to do with mainstream British politics. Right at the heart of the map sit the media outlets, who tended to share information from politicians across all the parties.

Analysis of the Twittersphere points to a number of important observations about parties, individual politicians and the nature of engagement on Twitter.

- Information flowed, in general, through highly partisan links. Supporters within each cluster would be likely to receive a high degree of information from their favoured party, and little from the others.
- There was considerable overlap between the Conservative and UKIP discussions, as demonstrated by Douglas Carswell’s proximity and ability to attract attention from both clusters.
- As demonstrated by the large and separate cluster that closely follows George Galloway, the volume of support on Twitter does not necessarily reflect penetration into mainstream discussion.
- The party machines are visibly at work: the Conservative Twitter accounts orbit David Cameron; the Labour accounts orbit Ed Miliband; Cabinet members similarly cluster around their leaders, re-tweeting their every announcement, while backbenchers tend to float around the edges. Of particular interest is the Conservative party machine’s obvious cold shoulder to Boris Johnson, who is not closely followed by the party mainstream. Nick Clegg’s position outside of the Liberal Democrat cluster could mean one of two things. Either many non- or less-partisan Twitter users were re-tweeting him, or his own party and followers were not.

- Scottish political commentary is quite separate from the UK mainstream. Though the same goes for Northern Ireland, discussion about or from Welsh MPs does not appear as a distinct cluster. This suggests that the campaign in Wales was more UK-centric and focused on national issues than those in Northern Ireland and Scotland.
- Party leaders are not always the most integral account. SNP MP Pete Wishart is at the centre of the Scottish cluster, while Amina Lone, PPC for Morecambe and Lunesdale, was also an important connector within for the Labour conversation.

CONCLUSIONS

Discussion of the General Election on Twitter was not an indicator of the final result. Despite the vast volume of content generated by it, the General Election Twittersphere represents only a portion of politicians and an even smaller portion of the electorate. Not all politicians had a Twitter account, and around a fifth chose only to broadcast to rather than engage with the electorate.

However, it is clear that social media was an important window into the election for some, especially young, voters. As the vehicle of Twitter became increasingly important, it changed the shape of political debate: politicians were able to break away from Party lines, and engage directly with voters on local issues; equally, the electorate was able to directly challenge potential candidates and pass comment immediately on the campaign. As shown during the televised debates, these public declarations from voters were increasingly reported by the media, in real time, and could not be ignored by politicians.

Moreover, the reach and impact of political conversation on Twitter during the election is far wider than those who chose to proactively generate content. Overall, two-thirds of Twitter users (66%), and half (51%) of all social media users had either received or generated political content in the three months prior to 23 April 2015 (just two weeks before the election). Those choosing not to post chose to listen and absorb instead, using social media to either find information about policies and candidates, or keep themselves informed with developments in the campaign.

Though further work is required to establish whether there is a direct impact on voting behaviour, it is clear from both its recent growth and the 2015 experience that social media will continue to play a crucial role

in elections to come in shaping both the content—and nature—of how politicians engage with the electorate.

NOTES

1. The underlying technology was “Method52”, a social media analysis platform developed by CASM LLP. For more information, see Miller et al. (2015).
2. One Direction, having finished third in *The X Factor* (2010), were arguably one of 2015’s biggest bands, breaking the record previously held by the Beatles with their fifth top 10 debut on the Billboard Hot 100.
3. Ipsos MORI and Demos conducted a survey of 1002 social media users between 17 and 23 April 2015.

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