

All Spin, No Substance? The 2001 British General Election

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Pippa Norris

Elections today are commonly thick with charges that party campaigns are all spin, presentation and photo-ops, not substance, policy, and debate. And that the news media's coverage of campaigns focuses excessively on controversies, celebrities, and the horserace. These electoral sins by politicians and journalists, it is believed, fuel voter apathy and public disinterest. Some of this reaction represents a widespread nostalgia for a mythical golden age when citizens earnestly debated political issues in town hall meetings, candidates enthusiastically shoe-leathered local doorsteps, and newspapers ran long editorials on the virtues of the Gold Standard or the Macedonian question.

The June 2001 British election campaign was no exception. Afterwards, the conventional wisdom was that most people were fed up with spin and soundbites; Gallup polls reported that three-quarters of the public wanted the government to place greater emphasis on practical achievements and less on presentation¹. The basic difficulty facing headline-writers seeking to engage their readers, particularly for the mass-circulation red-top tabloids, was that the campaign seemed managed and the outcome pre-ordained. After 1997 produced a remarkable 179-seat Labour majority, the Conservative party always faced a mountain to climb to return to No. 10, given the scale of their wipe-out, although William Hague certainly hoped to recover marginals like Torbay and Richmond Park from the Liberal Democrats, and Bristol West and Wimbledon from Labour. Yet the position of the parties in the opinion polls remained becalmed throughout the Blair government: month after month the major polling companies (Gallup, MORI, ICM and NOP) reported that Labour enjoyed a substantial lead of 15-20 points, the Conservatives struggled behind at about 30%, while the Liberal Democrats trailed at around 13%. Prior to the campaign, the only serious blip in the chart occurred during the fuel protest in October 2000, where the Labour lead suddenly dipped, but it recovered again shortly afterwards. The foot-and-mouth crisis in spring 2001 created further uncertainty, as the daily news depicted fiery pyres emitting black smoke, angry farmers and empty villages in the vales and dales, causing the long-anticipated May campaign to be delayed by a month. But even this, along with rail chaos and floods, did not seem to perturb the Labour juggernaut. Under the Blair government, Britain had enjoyed a boisterous economy, and in the two budgets prior to the election Gordon Brown, the 'Iron Chancellor', loosened the purse strings of his budget, injecting substantial sums into social protection: NHS, education, and pensions.

The Party Campaigns

The long-anticipated election campaign kicked off when Tony Blair visited the Palace on 8th May, but the mood of the country seemed to be fractious and impatient to get it all over with. The widespread national sentiment, perfectly encapsulated by the Sharron Storer episode in Birmingham when she berated the Prime Minister about health services in front of the cameras, was one of annoyance that

public services like hospitals, schools and railways had failed to improve under Labour, and may even have deteriorated further, and yet, recalling 18-years of Conservative rule, unwillingness to give the Tories another chance. The public felt that Labour had been given a massive 179-seat parliamentary majority in 1997, which the government had squandered by excessive caution and lack of ambition, particularly by following Conservative spending plans on the public sector for the first two years of their administration. During the campaign William Hague often set the headlines, by an aggressive campaign focusing on 'saving the pound' for the duration of the next parliament, having stricter control of asylum-seekers, and cutting taxes by 8 billion pounds. But it was a campaign on the wrong issues, preaching to the dwindling band of core Conservative sympathizers, but failing to reach out towards the majority who opted for better public services, even at the price of tax hikes. Moreover it was a resolutely old-fashioned campaign, ignoring the modern paraphernalia of opinion polls and focus groups, media management, and professional advisers, in favor of soap-box gut oratory in public meetings up and down the country, simplistic negative party political broadcasts, and 'Common Sense' sloganeering. In the last week of the campaign, the reappearance of Mrs. Thatcher (the 'Mummy Returns', in her own words) sent a frisson of chills up and down the spines of Labour and LibDem voters, reminding them why they were not voting Tory after all, although delighting the Conservative faithful and the sketch writers. In contrast Labour's Millbank used its usual smooth operation, with Gordon Brown resolutely sticking to the planned 'grid', with the issue de jour of schools and hospitals, hospitals and schools, even when others felt that more excitement needed to be injected into events. There were a couple of noteworthy wobbles, most spectacularly eggs and the 'Prescott punch', a novel way of greeting potential voters, the Sharron Storer harangue, and similar moments when members of the public managed to break through the cordon sanitaire surrounding Labour politicians to land an effective verbal jab or punch, often on radio and television programs when leaders faced live audiences. Blair's shirt-sleeved speech launching the campaign at a girls' school, St. Saviour's and St. Olaph's was also widely seen as an own goal, epitomizing the need to lock the spin-masters away in a cupboard for the duration of the election. But, despite critiques and minor wobbles, Labour remained on message for most of the campaign, dominating the center ground of British politics. For the Liberal Democrats, Charles Kennedy ran an energetic low-budget, no-frills campaign, traveling up and down the country, and presenting an alternative platform strategically slightly left of Labour on taxes and spending.

News Coverage

How did the news media react to the campaign? The broadsheet newspapers all produced their usual 4-page worthy election special supplements every day, littering buses up and down the land, some suggested, but including solid commentary and analysis for election aficionados. After the initial launch, the redtop tabloids tended to bury the election in the middle pages, facing sliding sales by readers bored by the politics. Sales of the dailies during the campaign were down on the previous month at *The Times*, *Telegraph*, *Express*, *Mail*, *Mirror* and *Sun*, and only slightly up at the other papers. There were similar falls in the Sundays too. The only exception was the 'Prescott punch' on 18th May that everyone loved (except,

perhaps, the recipient, Craig Evans) for injecting some human interest and uncertainty into a predictable and managed contest. In contrast to previous elections, this time the partisanship of the British press swung, following the lead of their readers in the polls, towards Labour (see Figure 1). Among the redtops, the faithful *Mirror* was joined by *The Sun*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Star* and *Daily Record* in telling readers to vote Labour. *The Guardian* backed Blair, while *The Independent* remained agnostic. *The Financial Times* gave its unequivocal vote to the Labour party, as it had in the previous two elections. The FT also broke the story that the Conservatives were planning a £20 million tax cut, not £8 million as initially announced, sowing confusion and disarray as the Tory camp tried to defend its budget plans during the first week of the campaign. And *The Times*, for the first time in its history, also gave an endorsement to Labour, albeit grudgingly. Among the Sundays, Labour was supported by *The Observer* and the *Sunday Mirror* (enthusiastically), the *Sunday People*, the *Sunday Express*, *The News of the World*, *The Sunday Times* (as 'the least worst party'), while *The Independent on Sunday* ('vote tactically') remained just that, and only *The Sunday Telegraph* and *The Mail on Sunday* came out in the Conservative corner².

Television news pulled out all the public service stops as usual, with the BBC generally devoting the first 10-15 minutes of the evening news at 6pm and at 10pm to coverage of events for each of the parties, like daily speeches or rallies, then moving to other items, before returning back for another 5-10 minutes for more reflective or thematic items about the election, for example on policy differences over Europe or taxation. The heavyweight interviewers also punched their weight, notably John Humphrey's' interview confronting Tony Blair over the Vaz affair on Radio 4's Today program, and Jeremy Paxman's relentless pummeling of William Hague for BBC2's Newsnight. Other noteworthy television coverage during the campaign included BBC1's Panorama broadcasting a remarkable lengthy critique of the Labour record on the Sunday before polling day, as well as regular solid performances commenting day-after-day by Andrew Marr for the BBC, by Adam Bolton for Sky News, by Jon Snow for Channel 4 7'Oclock news, and by John Sargeant for ITN's News at Ten. Unfortunately, given the sheer tedium of the campaign, viewership figures subsided. Some felt that, given the polls, the real battle on election night was between David Dimbleby presenting the BBC1 operation and his younger brother, Jonathan Dimbleby, heading the ITV one. The audience for the election night programs peaked at about 11pm, with the BBC trumping ITV's operation as easily as Labour trounced the Conservatives. The election websites provided by all the broadsheet newspapers, as well as the BBC and ITN sites, produced an excellent service, with broadband video news, special all-singing, all-dancing graphics, and more information easily available about the results than ever before; the BBC site registered a substantial surge of online users.

After the campaign the content analysis of election coverage by the daily press conducted by Echo Research on 4,230 articles throughout the campaign revealed some interesting patterns³. The analysis confirmed that overall Labour had received the lion's share (48%) of newspaper coverage, compared with 37% for the Conservatives and 15% for the Liberal Democrats, almost uncannily reflecting their average share of the vote in the campaign opinion polls (see Table 1). Labour had also been more successful than others in securing 'party driven' stories, or setting the agenda. Nevertheless the tone or

direction of coverage towards each major party showed a slightly different pattern. Echo Research classified all newspaper election stories based on a 100-point favorability scale. The study found that 26% of all the stories about Labour were favorable, while 39% were unfavorable, producing a net negative balance (-13). The net balance for the Conservatives (-25) was even worse for them, suggesting that their newspaper coverage was highly critical. But in contrast the Liberal Democrats – the one major party that gained support during the campaign according to the national polls – enjoyed far more favorable than unfavorable coverage, producing a net positive balance of 10. On television, while similar precise figures are currently lacking, the overwhelming impression was that the Liberal Democrats received balanced or positive coverage, with remarkably little negative news⁴. We cannot say with any certainty at this stage whether the tone of news coverage for the Liberal Democrats directly contributed towards their rise in the campaign polls, but this does seem like one reason, at least, for this phenomenon.

Echo Research also compared the major issues that featured in the press coverage of each party during the campaign with the public's issue concerns, as measured by MORI polls (see Table 2). The study found that issue-based press coverage of the Labour party focused overall on the NHS, Europe, education, income tax, the economy, and public services, in that order. Health care (ranked first) and education (ranked second) were among the topics that the public said were most important to them. Press coverage of the Liberal Democrat also emphasized the issues of hospitals and schools. The issues which the Labour and Liberal Democrats were seen to talk about were therefore broadly in tune with the public's priorities and core concerns. In contrast, the top issues in the overall coverage of the Conservative party focused on Europe, income tax, and immigration/asylum, which featured far lower down the public's agenda, as, respectively, 10th, 5th and 9th. In short, the Conservative party may have achieved headlines by campaigning resolutely against the euro, as the core of its platform, but this was not an issue that strongly engaged the average member of the public. A few, yes, but not the vast majority of the British public during a general election campaign.

The Labour Landslide II

The outcome saw Labour coast to victory with 40.7% of the vote, compared with 31.7% for the Conservatives and 18.3% for the Liberal Democrats, producing a smaller Labour lead in the vote share than the bulk of the national polls predicted during the campaign, but another overwhelming landslide of seats. Labour was returned with 413 MPs, a 167-seat majority in parliament, with a net loss of only 6 seats from their historic 1997 victory. After four years in the wilderness, with 166 seats the Conservatives made a net gain of one. The Liberal Democrats moved up to 52 MPs. Despite attempts to make voting easier, for example by wider availability of postal voting, the election did produce record-breaking levels of voter apathy, with 59.4% of the electorate turning out on polling day, the lowest level since the khaki election of 1918. This was down from 71% in 1997 and 77% in 1992. In the aftermath, Jack Straw, (the previous Home Secretary who subsequent became the Foreign Secretary), claimed that it was at least partly the media's fault, by failing to interest the public. Such a judgment seems premature, however.

Given the steady and solid Labour lead throughout the election, and the pervasive mood of unenthusiastic and grumpy resignation that the Labour party should get on with it, rather than faffing cautiously about, so as to get basic public services working again, it seems doubtful if there could have been an electric and exciting campaign that would have sparked public interest. The British Election Study used a rolling thunder design to monitor the pulse of daily shifts in public opinion during the election and the results basically flat-lined: there were no major movements throughout the four weeks⁵. Some over-interpreted the outcome as a signal that faith in British democracy was on the slide. But comparative evidence strongly suggests that voter turnout is closely associated with the level of party competition: in tight races where the major contenders are neck-and-neck then turnout often surges, because casting a vote makes a difference⁶. It seems most likely that if the Conservatives stage a recovery in the next few years, under new leadership, to provide a more competitive race in the next general election, then electoral participation will probably rise again in Britain. If the election result is in little doubt, and if the government remains fairly popular, then no matter how much the media huff and puff in their attempts to interest readers, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the vast mass of the electorate to care. For self-confessed electoral junkies, however, like myself, all in all one can only conclude that overall the news media did a pretty good job in their public service role. Could they have done more? Of course. Could the attentive electorate have learnt what they needed to make an informed judgment about the party leaders and platforms, the key differences between parties on taxes and pensions, on health care and crime, on asylum and the economy? They could. Whether they *did* is another matter.

Table 1: Press Coverage in the British Campaign, 2001

	Total Amount of Coverage (%)	Favorable (i) (%)	Neutral (ii) (%)	Unfavorable (iii) (%)	Balance (i-ii) (%)
Labour	48	26	35	39	-13
Conservative	37	17	40	42	-37
Liberal Democrat	15	27	55	17	+10

Note: The analysis by Eco Research is based on 4280 election articles during the campaign published in all the national daily newspapers from 8 May to 7th June 2001.

Source: Echo Research Ltd. www.echoresearch.com

Table 2: The Issue Agenda in the British Campaign, 2001

Issue	Public Opinion Rank	Labour Rank	Conservative Rank	Liberal Democrat Rank
Healthcare	1	1	4	3
Education	2	3	5	2
Law and order	3	7	6	9
Pensions	4	15	11	6
Taxation	5	4	2	1
Public Transport	6	10	14	11
The Economy	7	5	7	8
Unemployment	8	18	27	29
Immigration/asylum	9	12	3	10
Europe	10	2	1	5

Note: see Table 1. The figures give the rank for the 'most important problem' in the MORI poll of public opinion published in The Times on 7th June and the rank in how much issue coverage of parties was devoted to each issue in the daily newspapers.

Source: Echo Research Ltd. www.echoresearch.com

Notes

¹ Anthony King. 2001. 'Electors fed up with spin and soundbites.' *The Daily Telegraph*. 11 June 2001.

² For comparison with previous British campaigns see Pippa Norris, John Curtice, David Sanders, Margaret Scammell and Holli Senmetko. 1999. *On Message*. London: Sage.

³ I am most grateful to Peter Christopherson at Echo Research for facilitating this data. Details of the coding and results can be found at www.EchoResearch.com.

⁴ This is based on more than mere impression. In an experimental research project, conducted with David Sanders at Essex University, we recorded all the television news programs and searched for negative news about the Liberal Democrats that we could use as an experimental stimulus. Unfortunately, as in the 1997 election, we found almost none and had to abandon that particular experiment. The content analysis of the news from this project is not yet available at the time of writing.

⁵ For details see www.essex.ac.uk/bes

⁶ For comparative evidence see chapter 5 in Pippa Norris. *Count Every Voice: Voter Participation Worldwide* (forthcoming Cambridge University Press) available at www.pippanorris.com.