



Did the Media Matter? Agenda-Setting, Persuasion, and Mobilization Effects in the British General Election Campaign

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Did campaign communications contribute towards changes in voter preferences in the 2005 UK general election through priming, persuasion and mobilization effects? And, if so, which communication channel proved most influential? To examine this topic, *Part I* summarizes the literature on the impact of campaign communications and develops the theoretical framework. *Part II* discusses the data and indicators, drawing upon the 2005 pre–post campaign British Election Study (NatCen) to compare the impact of exposure to mass media channels (newspapers and party political broadcasts on television), people-intensive channels (the effects of local party contact activity) and new technology channels (campaign information available on the Internet). *Part III* analyses the results, focusing upon pre–post campaign changes in issue salience, perceptions of government competence, and vote participation among those using these different communication channels. In *Part IV* the conclusion summarizes the main findings and considers their implications.

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Introduction

Scholars continue to debate the effects of media coverage of election campaigns on voting behavior and political attitudes. The most sceptical perspective suggests, at least by omission, that journalistic coverage exerts *minimal effects* on electoral choice. For example, the most comprehensive analysis of the 2001 UK election, by Clarke *et al.* (2004), compares rival theories of issue-based voting models. They examine the impact of local party communications, but the study excludes any explicit analysis of the role of the news media in this process.¹ The ‘campaign’ in this study is conceptualized as the direct role of local party contact activity on voters, thereby omitting to examine the way that parties communicate indirectly with the majority of electors via TV news studios and the press, as well as via party websites, blogs, email, and the Internet. Indeed, although there are many studies of party communication



strategies and the contents of election coverage, the more general neglect of studying media effects on voting behavior reflects the traditional approach in the British literature. In the United States, by contrast, a more common view in much contemporary research suggests that media coverage of election campaigns exerts an important *reinforcement role* in voting behavior, mainly through the process of crystallizing pre-existing political predispositions. Hence for Gelman and King (1993), the campaign ‘enlightens preferences’ with news coverage providing information about party policies and economic performance, giving citizens reasons to support their prior voting choices. This reflects a far older tradition derived from *The People’s Choice* (Lasarsfeld *et al.*, 1948). Other scholars go even further in asserting that campaign communications can have a direct impact on electoral behavior, with the potential *agenda-setting* effects altering public priorities about salient issues, *persuasion* effects (especially of waverers and the undecided) shaping party images and voting preferences, and *mobilization* effects on citizen participation indirectly determining levels of party support and electoral turnout (Johnston *et al.*, 1992, 2004; Holbrook, 1996; Norris *et al.*, 1999; Campbell, 2000). In this regard, campaign communications are thought to alter voting behavior and electoral outcomes in ways that differ from that predicted by the ‘fundamentals’, such as social cleavages and the performance of the economy.

Are the agenda-setting, persuasion and mobilization effects of political communications evident in the 2005 UK general election campaign? Initial analysis of voting intentions recorded in the opinion polls confirms that voting preferences did alter during this campaign. Some of the apparent shifts are due to survey error, but there is evidence of real changes in party fortunes (Crewe, 2005; Wlezien and Norris, 2005). Figure 1 illustrates support for the three major parties during the final month of the polls in the last three general elections. In the 2005 campaign, the Conservative share of the vote fell from 35% at the beginning of the period to 32% at the end (see Table 1). During the same period, the Liberal Democrat share rose from 20 to 22%. Meanwhile, overall vote preferences for the Labour party hardly wavered from the start to the end. This contrasts with the trends observed in 1997 and 2001, when the leading party at the start of the campaign consistently lost ground during the final month. Of course, the shift in voting intentions during the 2005 campaign was not that large in percentage points and nor did it alter Labour party control at Westminster or even the rank order of the parties. Nevertheless, simulations by Wlezien and Norris (2005) suggest that the change in voting intentions registered in the opinion polls from the start to the end of the campaign was sufficient to cost the Conservatives 38 seats, 23 of which went to Labour and 14 of which went to the Liberal Democrats.² In effect, without the campaign (for example if the election had been held on 1st April rather than 5th May), Labour’s majority would have been a mere 18 seats or so, providing

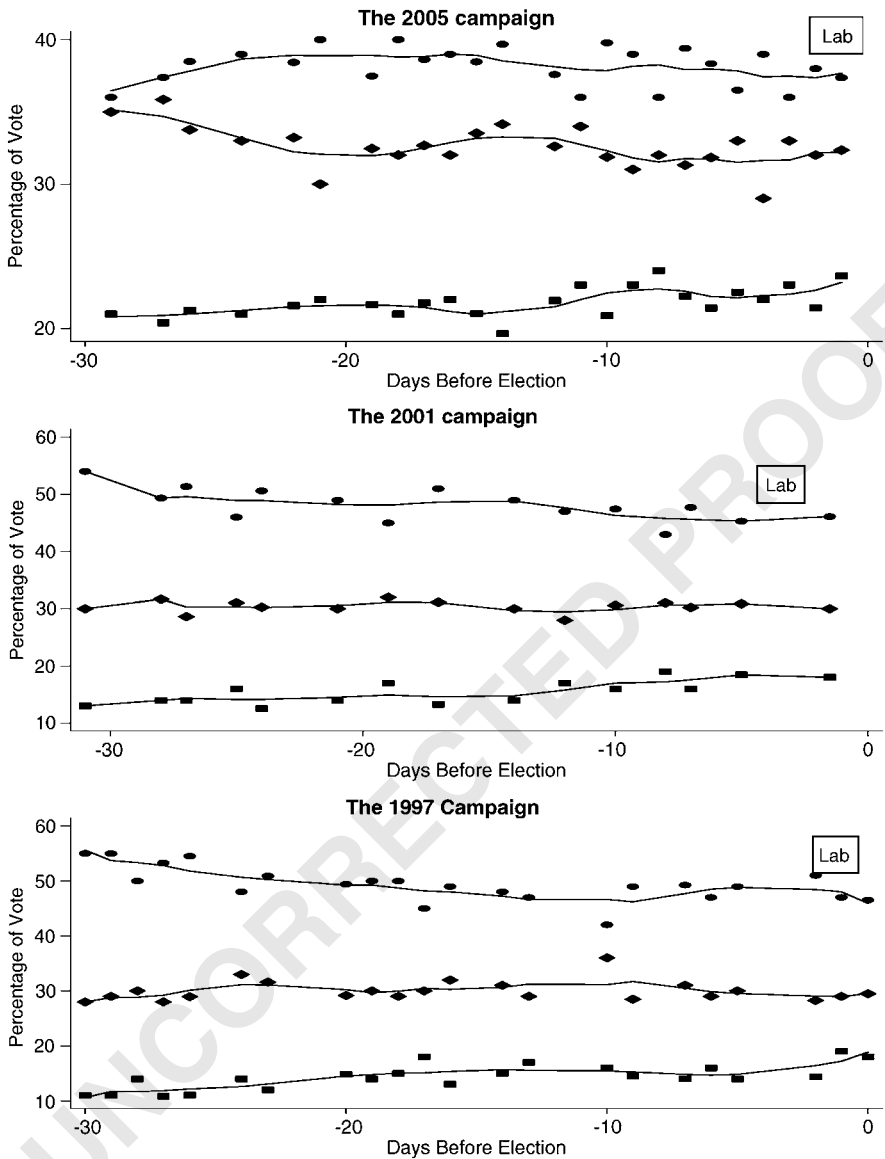


Figure 1 Voting intentions during UK general election campaigns. *Note:* Voting intentions for the major parties recorded in the published opinion polls, smoothed trends using lowess. *Source:* Wlezien and Norris (2005).

**Table 1** Opinion polls during the 2005 election campaign

	<i>Date</i>	<i>No. of polls</i>	<i>Labour lead</i>	<i>Con</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Lib Dem</i>	<i>Other</i>
Week 1	April 1–7	9	1.7	35.1	36.8	20.4	7.7
Week 2	April 8–13	10	4.5	33.6	38.1	21.3	7.0
Week 3	April 15–21	11	5.8	32.8	38.6	21.3	7.0
Week 4	April 22–May 1	15	5.2	32.4	37.6	22.3	7.8
Week 5	May 1–4	6	5.0	32.5	37.5	22.5	7.5
Change weeks 1–5			+3.3	–2.6	–0.7	+2.1	–0.2
Actual result	May 5 2005		2.9	33.1	36.0	22.6	8.3

Source: Crewe (2005), Table 5.

Note: Excludes the Populus/Times and BES rolling polls. Fieldwork dates in the week-by-week comparisons refer to the first day of fieldwork.

a very different parliamentary base for the government and the opposition. In this regard, at least, the campaign mattered for the outcome in 2005.

The questions that arise are whether campaign communications contributed directly and indirectly towards the erosion of Conservative voter preferences during the 2005 UK general election and, if so, whether people-intensive, the mass media, or new technological communication channels proved most influential in agenda-setting, persuasion or mobilization? To examine this topic, *Part I* summarizes the literature on the impact of communications during election campaigns and develops the analytical framework for classifying channels of communication and for analyzing these types of campaign effects. *Part II* discusses the data and indicators, drawing upon the 2005 pre–post campaign British Election Study (NatCen) to compare the impact of exposure to mass media channels (newspapers and party political broadcasts on television), people-intensive channels (the effects of local party contact activity), and new technology channels (campaign information available on the Internet). *Part III* analyses the results, focusing upon agenda-setting (pre–post campaign changes in issue salience), persuasion (perceptions of government performance and leadership competence), and mobilization (voter participation and attention to the campaign) among those using these different communication channels. The conclusion in *Part IV* summarizes the main findings and considers their implications.

The Impact of Campaign Communications on Voting Intentions

One way to understand the role of campaign communication is to distinguish the main components, as outlined schematically in the analytical framework presented in Figure 2. In this understanding, the general context is set by the

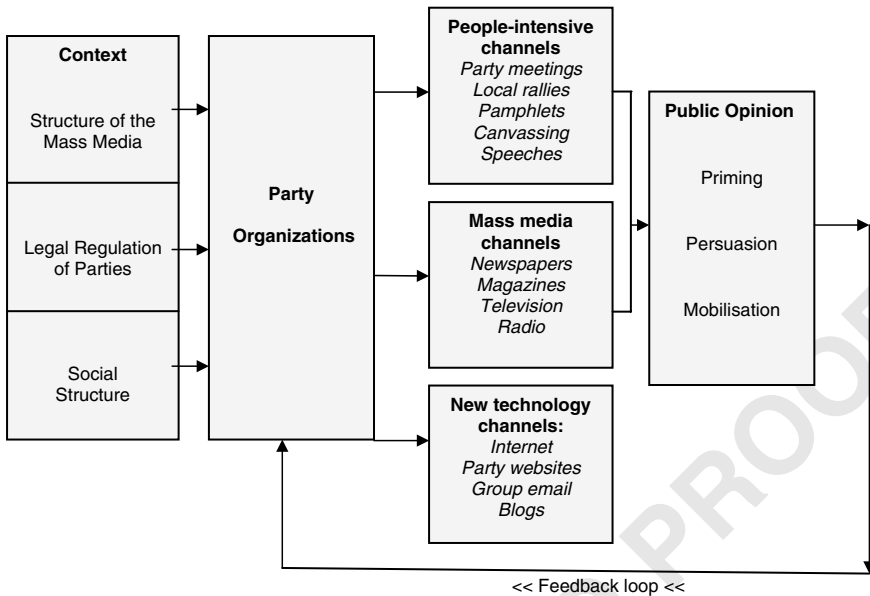


Figure 2 Channels of party campaign communications.

structure of the mass media in any political system (e.g. the range of public and private television stations available on terrestrial, cable, and satellite channels, and the number and partisan affiliations of major national newspapers), the legal regulation of party and candidate activities during campaigns (including financial ceilings on expenditure and regulation of political advertising), and the social structure (such as levels of public access to the Internet and cable TV).

Channels of communication

Within this context, in Britain national party organizations (including candidates, leaders, and professional campaign managers) develop their strategic campaign communication plans, including which citizens they seek to target and what key messages they hope to convey. Parties have three primary channels available for communication with the electorate: people-intensive, the mass media, and new technologies.

People-intensive forms are exemplified by traditional party rallies and leadership speeches, party canvassing and candidate pamphlets, and face-to-face discussions on doorsteps, shopping centers, and town hall meetings. The local party campaign used to be regarded by many commentators as a rather



quaint or old-fashioned ritual, of marginal importance to the national outcome in the television age. An extensive literature has documented the erosion of party membership, in Britain and elsewhere, for example, the number of Labour party members has shrunk by half from 407,000 in May 1997 to 200,000 in May 2005 (Webster, 2005). If this process has reduced the number of core activists as well as passive members, it should have reduced the capacity of parties to utilize grassroots campaigns (Mair and van Biezen, 2001; Scarrow, 2001; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002). Despite these trends, a series of recent studies by Whiteley and Seyd (1994), Johnston and Pattie (2003), and Denver and Hands (1997), among others, suggests that the contact activity of local parties during British general elections continues to play an important role, using research based on surveys of party agents, surveys of party members, and patterns of local campaign expenditure and aggregate constituency results.³ In the United States, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) argue that interpersonal or face-to-face political communications, exemplified by doorstep canvassing and meet-the-candidate events, are important for campaigns, especially for mobilizing core activists engaged in early primaries and caucuses. People-intensive channels may be expected to prove particularly important where the public has come to mistrust news conveyed in the mass media and to be cynical about partisan messages in political advertising, as well as in low-tech campaigns, such as those fought for local and state races.

Nevertheless, despite the revisionist emphasis on interpersonal communications, few scholars would discount the role of *media channels*, which provide an important opportunity for party organizations to reach a far wider audience among the electorate, however, as well as providing a channel to reach less partisan voters. The traditional mass media is understood in this framework to include national newspapers and magazines, television and radio news, and party election broadcasts (PEBs). Parties devote considerable campaign resources in the battle to dominate the airwaves and headlines, from their morning news conferences and policy launches through leadership meet-and-greet events to early evening rallies. At the same time, media channels are usually mainly indirect, with journalists, editors, producers, and commentators acting as gatekeepers for party messages. The chief exception remains the PEB, where politicians continue to control unfiltered messages that reach a considerable audience (Pattie and Johnston, 2002).

The newest channel for campaign communications, emerging since the mid-1990s, arises from developments in *communication and information technologies*, including party websites, news websites, group email, and political blogs. More than half the adult population in Britain (56%) now has regular access to the Internet and three-quarters have mobile phones, with growing capacity to use mobiles for online services (Curtice and Norris, 2004). The effect of using these technologies for campaign communications is expected to differ from



traditional forms of exposure to the mass media, even when people are accessing online news, because these technologies are far more individualized for users' preferences as well as being interactive two-way channels. Debate continues to surround the impact of these technologies on election campaigns, with their functions for activities such as fund raising and networking continuing to evolve over successive contests (Schwartz, 1996; Davis and Owen, 1998; Hill and Hughes, 1998; Davis, 1999; Kamarck and Nye, 1999). The adoption of interactive technologies symbolizes a return to some of the more localized and 'horizontal' forms of party communication that characterized traditional people-intensive communications. This includes the development of political discussion user-groups on the Internet, internal party Intranets, interactive political sites used by community associations and policy advocacy networks, the political use of email or list-serves to mobilize and organize, as well as activist web-logs. All these are similar, in some important regards, to some of the interactivity and targeted forms of communication characteristic of face-to-face party meetings, canvassing, and local party newsletters.

Types of communication effect

Obviously the process of campaign communications and its impact can be studied from multiple perspectives (McLeod *et al.*, 1994). Cultivation accounts emphasize that habitual exposure to the mass media – particularly television – gradually shapes broad conceptions of social reality and the meaning of an election campaign (Gerbner *et al.*, 1994). For example, due to the 'balance' rules that determine the total amount of television news coverage each party receives during and outside of election campaigns, viewers may come to perceive Westminster politics as a competition among three main parties in England (and four in Scotland and Wales), thereby depressing any potential electoral support for the fringe parties. Symbolic images of the role of parliament, the ideological position of parties, and the perceived threats of crime or terrorism can all be expected to be influenced by long-term meanings conveyed by the mass media. However, cultivation studies emphasize the way that people gradually acquire their perception of social reality over their lifetimes, so this approach is inappropriate to monitor any short-term impact that could be expected to flow from a specific election campaign, especially one that proved relatively routine and uneventful. Social learning approaches emphasize the knowledge gains that can be derived from following events in the campaign and, although the incremental gains may be small, they may be sufficient to allow citizens to connect issues to parties (Popkin, 1991). Again this is an important aspect of media effects, but learning effects are probably best analyzed using experimental methods (Norris *et al.*, 1999; Norris and



Sanders, 2003). This study focuses upon examining the direct effects of communication in the 2005 British general election through priming, persuasion, and mobilization processes, all of which can be expected to impact voting choice.

Agenda-setting effects, one of the most commonly studied aspects in political communication, are understood as a process which emphasizes the importance of certain issues, so that the public's agenda comes to prioritize some policy areas over others (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Semetko *et al.*, 1991). During the first 2 weeks of the 2005 British election campaign, for example, when the news media devoted extensive coverage to Michael Howard's speeches on immigration and refugees, this may have generated greater concern about this issue among the public (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005). The classic idea of agenda-setting effects suggests that parties and the news media are not trying to alter voter's attitudinal predispositions *per se*, for example, perceptions of Labour strength on the welfare state and Conservative competence on defense, so much as shift the priority of these concerns in the public's mind. Parties are seeking to emphasize their areas of greatest strength, so that the campaign battle is fought on home turf.

Alternatively, with *persuasion* effects campaign communications during the election may have altered people's attitudes towards certain policies, the performance of the government, or the competence of leaders, thereby changing people's evaluation of parties and their voting choice. For example, during the campaign the *Guardian* and *Independent* become increasingly critical of the Labour government, especially on the conduct of the Iraq War and Britain's intervention in the American-led coalition, and if this coverage influenced their readers, this could have switched some Labour sympathizers towards the Liberal Democrats (Bartle, 2005).

Mobilizing effects focus on the way that campaigns function to activate citizens, so that party supporters turn out on polling day or voters participate through discussing politics with friends, colleagues, and neighbors (Newton, 1997; Brynin and Newton, 2003; Bromley and Curtice, 2006). Communication processes may also serve to depress activism, for example, if parties emphasize negative messages to discourage their opponent's supporters from casting ballots, and if news headlines focus attention on stories about sleaze and government failure (Sanders and Norris, 1998).

Which of the available channels of communication – people-intensive, mass media, or new technology – are most effective for generating agenda-setting, persuasion, and mobilization effects? The relative importance of each of these main channels remains unclear from the research literature. Despite the extensive literature exploring the agenda-setting thesis, in the United States and elsewhere, empirical studies of previous British election campaigns have failed to establish a consistent link between the issue agenda covered in television and



Q6 newspaper headlines and the public's top issue concerns (Miller, 1991; Curtice and Semetko, 1994; Norris, 1998). In the 1997 campaign, for example, despite extensive news headlines about Britain's membership of the EU, the public's main concerns remained focused on the social agenda of health and education (Norris *et al.*, 1999, 126–127). Even if there is a long-term link, for example, if coverage of dramatic events such as 9/11 and the London bombings raised public worry about terrorist threats, it is not clear that a significant net change in the public agenda occurs during the relatively brief official campaign, let alone that any change can be attributed to communication channels. For example, during the 2005 election, analysis of the issue agenda based on ICM campaign polls (with closed-ended questions) suggested little shift in the public's main concerns occurred during the course of the campaign, although the issue of education rose in salience while immigration dropped slightly (Wlezien and Norris, 2005, Table 2).

Many studies commonly focus exclusively upon one or another communication source, rather than comparing a range of channels. As a result, models assessing the impact of people-intensive local campaigns, such as canvassing, are commonly under-specified by failing to consider the independent effects of exposure to the national mass media and the Internet.⁴ Similar limits are evident in the study of political advertising in Britain. For example, Pattie and

Table 2 Change in the public's issue agenda

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Pre-campaign</i>	<i>Post-campaign</i>	<i>Change</i>
Immigration	4.7	14.0	9.3
EU/EURO	2.2	7.3	5.1
Law and order	10.1	14.1	4.0
Economy	4.1	7.7	3.6
NHS	14.7	16.9	2.2
Taxation	1.9	1.8	–0.1
Environment	1.6	1.7	0.1
Standard of living	1.2	1.1	–0.1
Pensions	2.2	2.0	–0.2
Education	6.8	6.5	–0.3
Unemployment	2.3	1.9	–0.4
Iraq war	7.3	5.0	–2.3
Terrorism	5.6	2.1	–3.5
Other	15.7	10.6	–5.1
Asylum seekers	19.6	7.3	–12.3

Source: British Election Study 2005 Pre–Post election panel survey (NatCen) Weighted by PANWTGB.

Note: Q 'As far as you're concerned, what is the single most important issue facing the country at the present time?' The table lists all issues mentioned as 'most important' by at least 1.0% of respondents in either the pre- or post-campaign waves.



Johnston (2002) examined the impact of PEBs in the 1997 campaign and found these channels help a party to project their leader's qualities and, to a lesser extent, to improve voter's perceptions of the party image. Overall they reported that the impact of PEBs proved limited in other areas, for example, in persuading voters about major issues or altering voting intentions. However, even where some limited effects are found, it remains difficult to evaluate their substantive importance, for example, how much effort parties should invest strategically in advertising, as the research did not examine the relative importance of PEBs compared with, for example, newspaper coverage, or TV news. In other studies, television news is often assumed to be the primary way that most citizens acquire information during the campaign, as commonly reported in surveys when people are asked directly about where they learnt about the election (see, e.g., the series of Independent Television Commission (subsequently OfCom) surveys reported in Gunter *et al.* (1994); also see Libbey and Towler, 2002). Nevertheless, even if television news remains the most popular source for finding out about parties and policy issues, cited far more often than being contacted directly or turning to online resources, this does not mean that this is necessarily the most *influential* source for altering voting choice. Self-reported assessments of the most important media source remain unreliable, as electors may not be aware of the range of influences shaping their political orientations and perceptions. The predominance of broadcasting channels is challenged both by the revisionist view emphasizing the importance of traditional local party campaigns, and by the rise of the Internet, as more and more people gain online access and as viewership for terrestrial television news and as readership for national newspapers gradually erodes. The two most comprehensive comparisons of the range of communication channels in British campaigns focused upon the 1987 election (Miller, 1991) and the 1997 general election (Norris *et al.*, 1999). Since then, much has changed in election communication processes and the mass media, for example, in 1987 the Internet did not exist, and a decade later, this technology was only a faint blip on the computer screen for most people.

Evidence and Data

To examine the evidence for the contemporary impact of campaign communication effects, we can draw upon the 2005 British Election Survey (BES), a panel survey of a representative sample of the electorate contacted before the start of the official general election campaign and then again after polling day. The pre-campaign data were gathered by in-person CAPI interviews carried out in February and March 2005. Survey fieldwork was conducted by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen). The post-election data was also based on face-to-face surveys using similar procedures.

The pre–post total re-contacted sample involved 2,959 respondents. Data was gathered by in-person CAPI interviews and the analysis was weighted using the panel weight for Britain. The reported vote was also subsequently checked and validated against the official records.⁵

Details of all variables and coding conventions are given in Appendix A1. Communications channels are classified according to their use and also their direction (which party). In terms of media channels, the BES included items monitoring readership of daily newspapers and specific papers were reclassified into categories, following Bartle’s (2005) classification, based on their editorial endorsements of the Labour or Conservative parties during the 2005 election. The BES also monitored whether people saw a party political broadcast during the campaign, and, if so, from which party or parties, although the BES did not gauge exposure to television news or indeed more habitual patterns of media use, asked in previous BES surveys. To compare an indicator of the newer technological channels, the BES asked people whether they used the Internet for election information. For the people-intensive channels, the BES monitored whether people reported being contacted before the campaign, or canvassed, knocked up on election day, or phoned by a party during the campaign and, if so, for which party. This information was summed to form a 4-point party contact scale. If the respondent was canvassed, the main party was classified.

The pre–post panel design allows us to monitor *agenda-setting effects* measured as changes in the public’s issue concerns, utilizing an open-ended question about the ‘most important issue facing the country’. *Persuasion effects* are analyzed through pre–post switches in voting intentions, by changes in evaluations of leadership competence, and by shifts in perceptions of government performance on six major policy issues. *Mobilizing effects* are gauged by changes in attention to politics and by voting participation. In all cases, the multivariate models control for the standard social and demographic factors, which are expected to influence political attitudes, voting behavior, and patterns of media use, including age, gender, ethnicity, education, social class, income, and the respondent’s left–right ideological location. The operationalization of these variables is listed in Appendix A1. Series of regression models were checked and confirmed to be free of problems of multicollinearity and heteroscedasticity.

Several important limitations to the analysis should be noted. The study focuses upon short-term effects, defined as those occurring during the period of the 5-week official election campaign running from 1st April to 5th May 2005. This is the critical period for British election campaigns, with the most intensive get-out-the-vote canvassing operations and the most extensive political coverage in the news media. Parties spend millions trying to reach the electorate during this period. In the BES survey conducted prior to the start of the official contest, less than half the British electorate (48%) reported that



they had decided how to vote, leaving considerable potential for campaign communications to determine the outcome. Nevertheless, the period of the analysis means that the study cannot take into account the role of communication processes and political developments occurring during the ‘long campaign’ in the 12-month run up to the election, nor the cumulative influence of habitual attention to certain mass media such as television and radio news and current affairs. The electorate had been bombarded with campaign material well before Mr Blair went to the Palace. The limited time period means that any effects that are detected are likely to underestimate the overall impact of political communication processes.

The context of the election also proved relatively uneventful and fairly low key, with most commentators predicting the return of another Labour government, albeit with a closer result than in 2001 (Butler and Kavanagh, 2005). There were few, if any, unexpected ‘shocks’ arising from crisis events, breaking stories, or unpredicted kaffuffles occurring during the official campaign that might be expected to suddenly alter the smooth running of the party campaigns and therefore public perceptions of their policies, leaders, or government competence. The contest was also ‘more of the same’ rather than a change election. Even the policy changes that were introduced in the official manifestoes generated only a modest shift in the ideological location of the major parties; the 2001–2005 period was in marked contrast to, say, the sharp ideological move evident as new Labour moved towards the center in 1987–1997, or the rightward swing that occurred in 1974–1979 among the Conservatives under Mrs Thatcher (Bara, 2005). Given the type of contest, any short-term effects from campaign communications are expected to be relatively modest and indeed a comparison of the pre–post results showed few substantial shifts in public opinion, for example, in issue priorities or leadership images, irrespective of the impact of campaign communications. As noted earlier, however, even limited vote switching can still have an important impact upon party fortunes and the seat outcome at Westminster.

Lastly, this study relies upon the British Election Study survey, the primary data set available to monitor political attitudes and voting behavior in this country. The two-wave panel sample, re-interviewing the same respondents before and after polling day, is designed to monitor campaign effects. Even so, this method is not ideal at measuring the full impact of campaign messages, and experimental designs offering more precise control of the type of political messages are better instruments for this purpose. The two-wave panel survey allows us to monitor the net impact of any ‘before’ and ‘after’ changes, such as the flow of the vote, but this instrument was insufficiently sensitive to report the dynamics of any day-to-day fluctuations in party image, leadership popularity, or voting intentions occurring during the campaign. Again this systematic bias arising from the survey design leads to an underestimation of the total flux that

may arise due to campaign communications, which are occurring on a day-to-day basis, as suggested by rolling polls.

Priming, Persuasion, and Mobilizing Effects

Agenda-setting effects

To start to explore the effects of campaign communications, did the public's issue agenda shift from the start to the end of the campaign and, if so, was this change consistently related to use of different communication channels? Ever since the early-1970s, the 'agenda-setting' function of the mass media has become one of the best known and most widely discussed types of media effects. The news headlines are believed to shape the electorate's issue priorities (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Semetko *et al.*, 1991).

The 2005 BES monitored the 'most important issue facing the country' using identical open-ended (unprompted) questions in the pre- and post-campaign surveys. Table 2 shows the net change registered in the public's issue agenda. The results indicate that among all issues, the public started the campaign with the greatest concern about the National Health System (a perennial issue in British elections), law and order (crime), and asylum seekers. During the campaign, public concern rose most sharply about the issues of immigration, the European Union/euro, and law and order. These are all policy areas where the Conservative party has traditionally been perceived as strongest, and the issue of 'controlled immigration' also featured heavily during the first 2 weeks of the campaign, both in Michael Howard's speeches and in media coverage (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005). The presence of the British National Party and the UK Independence party on the far right may also have heightened the salience of immigration. At the same time, this change may have been a framing effect more than a radical shift in public priorities, as concern subsided most on the related but distinct issue of 'asylum seekers'. There was also a more modest rise in concern about the economy and the NHS, where Labour remained stronger. By contrast, however, public concern about the Iraq war, regarded by many as Blair's Achilles heel, appeared to diminish slightly during the campaign, along with worry about terrorism.

Did those paying closest attention to different forms of campaign communication differ in the change in their issue agendas? Agenda-setting theory suggests that media headlines are expected to alter the public's policy concerns. The messages conveyed by PEBs or by party activists through doorstep canvassing are intended to play a similar role. To examine this issue, we can focus upon analyzing whether those who paid attention to alternative channels of campaign communication were particularly prone to alter their view of the most important problem from the pre- and post-waves. Responses



to the ‘most important problem’ question were therefore recoded as consistent or inconsistent across the two waves. Binary logistic regression models were used which enter the standard range of social characteristics predicting use of different channels of campaign communications and then indicators of exposure to the people-intensive, media, and Internet channels, where the change in the issue agenda is the dependent variable. Contrary to the media agenda-setting hypothesis, the results indicate that none of the uses of campaign communications generated a significantly greater propensity for the public to alter their issue agenda. As Miller (1991) found in the 1987 campaign, and as was confirmed a decade later in the 1997 election (Norris *et al.*, 1999), the issue agenda followed by the media in their daily headlines, by parties in their daily press briefings, and by the public, appear to operate independently during British general elections, without the gradual convergence predicted by agenda-setting theory.

How do we explain the divergent findings in the UK and US? Compared with the year-long campaign in the United States, it may be that the shorter period of the official campaign in British general elections is too limited to allow much change in the public’s concerns and priorities, especially in the absence of any catalytic events operating as an external shock. It also remains possible that more systematic changes associated with media channels were underlying these aggregate patterns, for example, if readers of Conservative tabloids which played up issues of immigration or crime were likely to regard these issues as more important after the campaign, although this proposition cannot be explored here using the BES due to the limited size of the sample of readers of specific newspapers who emphasized specific issues. We can conclude that stronger claims made by agenda setting theory – that the media determine, not what the public thinks, but what they think about – are not evident in the 2005 British general election campaign.

Persuasion

Any persuasive effects could relate to many alternative indicators of party popularity. This study focuses upon three which are often regarded as the most important: net shifts in perceptions of the government’s policy performance on a range of important policy issues, changes in evaluations of leadership competence, and also switches in voting intentions.

Government performance

Clarke *et al.* (2004) concluded that during the 2001 election, valence politics dominated, meaning that the outcome was strongly shaped by the public’s evaluation of the managerial competence of the main parties in handling major



issues of concern. In this argument, valance rather than positional issues have come to the fore in Britain following policy reforms in the Labour party and their shift under Tony Blair's leadership towards the center ground in Westminster politics. Any closure of the ideological gap between Labour and the Conservatives on many major policies, notably the shared consensus about the need to combine effective economic performance with effective investment in social policies, means that the electorate may now place greater emphasis on the best team of leaders to deliver these goals.

Perceptions of the government's performance was evaluated in the BES pre- and post-campaign surveys in terms of six major issues, namely crime, the number of asylum seekers coming to Britain, the National Health Service, the risk of terrorism, the economy in general, and the level of taxation. Evaluations of the government's handling of each of these issues were monitored using five-point scales contained in each survey. The overall results shown in Table 3 indicate that the net effect of the campaign was to reinforce public approval of the Blair government's handling of these major issues: their mean evaluations improved slightly and consistently across the board. It is striking that their performance evaluation strengthened on their 'homeland' issues, such as the NHS and the economy, as well as on the issues emphasized most heavily by the Conservative campaign, such as asylum seekers and taxation. It appears that Howard's hard-line focus criticizing the government's position on the issue of asylum seekers may have backfired, by unintentionally reinforcing approval of the government's handling of this policy. This interpretation would be consistent with the observed erosion of Conservative support during the campaign, noted earlier.

Was the improvement in the government's evaluations similar across use of alternative channels of campaign communications? Table 4 presents the results of OLS regression models which enter the standard range of social

Table 3 Change in the public's perception of government competence

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Pre-campaign</i>	<i>Post-campaign</i>	<i>Change</i>
The number of asylum seekers coming to Britain	0.93	1.14	+0.21
The level of taxation	1.73	1.93	+0.20
The National Health Service	1.79	1.98	+0.19
Economy in general	2.46	2.60	+0.14
Risk of terrorism	2.15	2.25	+0.10
Crime in Britain	1.68	1.75	+0.07

Source: British Election Study 2005 Pre-Post election panel survey (NatCen) Weighted by PANWTGB.

Note: Q. 'How well do you think the present government has handled each of the following issues? Very well, fairly well, neither well nor badly, fairly badly, very badly.' The mean scores on a 5-point evaluative scale (reversed) ranging from 1 'very badly' to 5 'very well'.

**Table 4** Impact of channels of campaign communication on changes in the public's perception of government performance

	<i>Crime</i>			<i>Asylum seekers</i>			<i>The NHS</i>					
	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>			
Read Labour paper	−0.093	0.052	0.073	−0.013	0.046	0.784	0.016	0.053	0.757			
Read Conservative paper	−0.035	0.058	0.553	−0.055	0.051	0.282	0.014	0.059	0.807			
Internet	0.127	0.064	0.049	0.128	0.057	0.024	0.057	0.066	0.389			
Watched Labour PEB	0.022	0.049	0.649	0.041	0.043	0.339	−0.008	0.050	0.870			
Watched Conservative PEB	0.088	0.084	0.295	−0.005	0.075	0.948	0.194	0.086	0.025			
Watched Liberal Democrat PEB	−0.138	0.106	0.195	0.061	0.094	0.519	0.177	0.109	0.103			
Canvassed by Labour party	0.044	0.081	0.589	−0.151	0.072	0.036	−0.068	0.083	0.417			
Canvassed by Conservative party	0.149	0.076	0.050	−0.102	0.067	0.128	−0.103	0.077	0.183			
(Constant)	−0.018			−0.040			0.299					
Adjusted R^2	0.003			0.015			0.015					
				<i>Terrorism</i>			<i>Economy</i>			<i>Taxation</i>		
Read Labour paper	0.058	−0.009	0.287	0.002	0.045	0.964	−0.007	0.021	0.889			
Read Conservative paper	0.046	0.088	0.881	0.037	0.051	0.469	−0.120	0.101	0.712			
Internet	0.194	0.006	0.501	−0.086	0.056	0.126	0.026	0.022	0.056			
Watched Labour PEB	0.029	0.028	0.087	0.168	0.042	0.000	0.054	−0.017	0.033			
Watched Conservative PEB	0.058	−0.009	0.030	0.078	0.074	0.291	−0.007	0.021	0.749			
Watched Liberal Democrat PEB	0.046	0.088	0.956	0.348	0.093	0.000	−0.120	0.101	0.831			
Canvassed by Labour party	0.194	0.006	0.739	0.174	0.071	0.014	0.026	0.022	0.494			
Canvassed by Conservative party	0.029	0.028	0.726	−0.020	0.066	0.763	0.054	−0.017	0.820			
(Constant)	0.175			0.046			0.286					
Adjusted R^2	0.007			0.013			0.007					
No.	2310											

Source: British Election Study 2005 Pre–Post election panel survey (NatCen) Weighted by PANWTGB.

Note: The table presents the results of the OLS regression analysis model (with the unstandardized beta coefficient (B), the standard error ($s.e.$), and its significance (P)). The dependent variables are changes from the pre- to post-campaign panel survey in the evaluations of government performance on each issue dimension, measured by 5-point scales. The models control for age, gender, ethnicity, education, social class, income, and the respondent's self-reported left–right location. The models were checked to be free of the problems of multicollinearity. See Appendix A1 for details of the coding and instruments. Significant communication coefficients are highlighted in bold.

characteristics predicting use of different channels of campaign communications and then indicators of exposure to the people-intensive, media, and Internet channels, where the changes in the government's performance evaluation across these six policy areas are the dependent variables. The results in Table 4 indicate that no single communication mode proved most



influential in persuading electors about the government's competence at handling all of these issues. Use of the Internet was linked to changes in evaluations of the government on crime and asylum seekers. Labour PEBs were associated with improved evaluations on the economy and taxation, while PEBs by the Conservatives may have backfired by strengthening government evaluations on terrorism and the NHS. Overall newspaper readership does not appear to have had any impact perceptions of government competence and the people-intensive channel of canvassing appears to have had little consistent effect on perceptions of government competence across all or nearly all the range of issues. The results suggest that overall the government evaluations became more positive during the election, to the detriment of the main opposition party, but no single channel was solely responsible for this effect.

Leadership competence

The campaign coverage may also be expected to influence perceptions of *leadership competence*, another major factor in shaping voting intentions and party images. The impact of leadership on voting behavior remains under debate, with Bartle and Crewe (2002) concluding that in Britain the effects of the party leaders' perceived personality traits were small. There is no doubt, however, that all parties make great efforts to shape the image of their leader as effective, likable, and a credible future prime minister, all of which are thought to be electoral assets. The Conservative campaign, in particular, placed Michael Howard at the forefront of their activity, with Labour presenting more of a collective partnership between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. The medium of television is also often thought to be particularly important for the transmission of personality traits, where viewers can see leaders directly, rather than newspapers. The impact of campaign communications on changes in leadership image was monitored in the BES by the pre–post evaluation of the competence of the three major leaders using 0 to 10-point scales. The overall impact of the campaign slightly improved evaluations of Blair's competence, strongly boosted evaluations of Charles Kennedy, whereas Michael Howard's ratings slightly declined. The pattern is also consistent with the changes in voting intentions monitored earlier.

However, was any change due to any specific communication channel, such as the role of televised PEBs rather than newspapers or the Internet? The results of the analysis, presented in Table 5, shows that many of the communication channels shaped perceptions of the party leaders, but the positive or negative direction of the effects proved varied, however, and not necessarily in the expected direction given the partisan nature of different channels. For example, reading a Conservative newspaper tended to depress evaluations of Blair, but also Howard. This suggests that, despite official

**Table 5** Impact of channels of campaign communication on changes in evaluations of leadership competence

	<i>Blair</i>			<i>Howard</i>			<i>Kennedy</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Read Labour paper	-0.112	0.102	0.270	-0.171	0.095	0.072	-0.271	0.092	0.003
Read Conservative paper	-0.217	0.115	0.054	-0.230	0.108	0.033	0.067	0.104	0.518
Internet	-0.291	0.127	0.022	-0.228	0.119	0.055	-0.027	0.115	0.816
Watched Labour PEB	0.301	0.096	0.002	-0.204	0.090	0.024	-0.059	0.087	0.498
Watched Conservative PEB	0.346	0.166	0.037	-0.410	0.156	0.008	-0.040	0.150	0.792
Watched Liberal Democrat PEB	-0.159	0.208	0.445	-0.264	0.195	0.176	0.486	0.188	0.010
Canvassed by Labour party	0.177	0.168	0.293	0.101	0.158	0.520	-0.011	0.153	0.941
Canvassed by Conservative party	-0.263	0.148	0.077	0.020	0.139	0.887	0.010	0.134	0.939
(Constant)	0.796	0.235		-0.333	0.220		0.340	0.213	
Adjusted R^2	0.017			0.009			0.006		
No.	2336			2336			2336		

Note: The table presents the results of the OLS regression analysis model (with the unstandardized beta coefficient (*B*), the standard error (*s.e.*), and its significance (*P*)). The dependent variables are changes from the pre- to post-campaign panel survey in the evaluations of leadership competence (each using 0 to 10-point scales). The models control for age, gender, ethnicity, education, social class, income, and the respondent's self-reported left–right location. See Appendix A1 for details of the coding and instruments. Significant communication coefficients are highlighted in **bold**.

Source: British Election Study 2005 Pre-Post election panel survey (NatCen) Weighted by PANWTGB

editorial endorsements by leader writers, the news coverage in the main pages of these newspapers may have proved critical of both leaders. Those using the Internet for politics also proved increasingly negative towards both the main party leaders. As intended, watching a Labour PEB improved evaluations of Blair (significant at the p.10 level) and depressed evaluations of his main rivals. Watching a Liberal Democrat PEB also had the intended effect, by strongly boosting evaluations of Kennedy (by almost 0.5 points on a 10-point scale), while depressing feelings about his rivals. Being canvassed by a Labour or Conservative supporter had little impact on changing leadership images. The overall analysis suggests that among all the channels of campaign communication under comparison, the Labour and Liberal Democrat PEBs proved to be most strongly related to perceptions of leadership images in the expected direction. Blair's image improved during the campaign, and this may have been as a result of the PEBs. Howard's image became more negative during the campaign, but this effect was evident across all of the main media channels. And evaluations of Kennedy's competence benefited strongly from LibDem PEBs. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the overall percentage shifts in

these images occurring during the campaign were usually only modest, as indicated by the change in mean scores and the limited amount of variance explained by these models.

Vote changes

What about the direct impact of different communication channels on persuading electors to change their voting intentions during the campaign? This, after all, is the acid test of the impact of the campaign and the intended result of all the party's efforts to persuade and mobilize supporters. Table 6 presents the results of the analysis comparing the voting intentions expressed at the start of the campaign against the final vote cast by respondents. Change in voting preferences was monitored most simply by any shift from the pre-to-post wave, including switches across parties, as well as changes among the undecided and abstainers. Table 6 shows that among all of the different communication channels, changes in voting intentions were most significantly related to newspaper readership, use of the Internet, and being canvassed by the Conservative party. By contrast, although we have already observed that

Table 6 Impact of channels of campaign communication on changes in voting choice

	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Read Labour paper	0.290	0.105	0.006
Read Conservative paper	0.255	0.116	0.027
Internet	0.430	0.135	0.001
Watched Labour PEB	0.126	0.099	0.204
Watched Conservative PEB	0.095	0.175	0.589
Watched Liberal Democrat PEB	-0.301	0.236	0.203
Canvassed by Labour party	0.248	0.164	0.131
Canvassed by Conservative party	0.332	0.151	0.028
(Constant)	3.528	0.258	0.000
Nagelkerke R^2	0.159		
Percentage correctly predicted	68%		

Source: British Election Study 2005 Pre-Post election panel survey (NatCen) Weighted by PANWTGB.

Note: The table presents the results of the binary logistic regression analysis model (with the unstandardized beta coefficient (*B*), the standard error (*s.e.*), and its significance (*P*)). The dependent variable is change from the pre- to post-campaign panel survey in the party voting preferences, where 1 was no change and 0 represents change. The model controls for age, gender, ethnicity, education, social class, income, and the respondent's self-reported left-right location. See Appendix A1 for details of the coding and instruments. Significant communication coefficients are highlighted in **bold**.



PEBs shaped perceptions of the leaders qualities, and although parties hope to sway voters through their advertising, these relatively brief party broadcasts do not appear to have altered the final voting choice. Any self-selection bias in viewership patterns, with supporters most likely to watch party broadcasts, may have reduced the ability of PEBs to reach more undecided or wavering voters.

Mobilization

Use of communication channels is commonly regarded as most important for the process of mobilizing voters, particularly for generating attention and turnout. Proponents of the videomalaise school believe that viewing television entertainment generates public cynicism and passivity, weakening civic engagement, including voter turnout (Putnam, 1995). By contrast, however, other studies suggest that attention to newspapers and television news is consistently associated with greater than average propensity towards political activism (Newton, 1997; Norris, 2000; Brynin and Newton, 2003). The *raison d'être* of party get-out-the-vote drives and canvassing during campaigns is to encourage supporters to get the polls. What effect does campaign communication have upon mobilizing electoral turnout and strengthening attention to the campaign?

Attention to politics

The BES monitored attention to politics in the pre- and post-election waves, using a 10-point scale, and we can examine changes in this indicator of civic engagement, which occur from the start to the end of the official campaign. Overall, although many commentators fear that elections turn off electors, in fact, as in previous contests, the blitz of political information during the 2005 campaign served to strengthen attention to politics. Table 7 shows that, contrary to the findings about vote switching, here watching an election broadcast by any of the main parties was consistently related to strengthening attention, with moderately strong effects. For example, watching a Liberal Democrat PEB was associated with a 6% rise in attention during the whole campaign. There have been calls to abolish PEBs in Britain, as an outdated form of communication, which has little impact upon the electorate. Indeed over the years parties have gradually reduced the length of PEBs, not always using the maximum allocation, which is given. Yet, the evidence presented in Table 7, coupled with that already observed for the impact of PEBs on leadership, suggests that election broadcasts can play a more important role in the campaign than is commonly assumed, particularly for minor parties who

**Table 7** Impact of channels of campaign communication on change in attention to politics

	<i>Unstandardized coefficients</i>		<i>Standardized coefficients</i>	
	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Read Labour paper	-0.129	0.083	-0.032	0.123
Read Conservative paper	0.002	0.094	-0.000	0.986
Internet	0.068	0.106	0.013	0.523
Watched Labour PEB	0.317	0.078	0.088	0.000
Watched Conservative PEB	0.403	0.137	0.062	0.003
Watched Liberal Democrat PEB	0.638	0.172	0.076	0.000
Canvassed by Labour party	0.183	0.134	0.027	0.172
Canvassed by Conservative party	0.268	0.124	0.043	0.030
(Constant)	-0.697	0.186		
Adjusted R^2	0.034			
NO.	2549			

Source: British Election Study 2005 Pre-Post election panel survey (NatCen) Weighted by PANWTGB.

Note: The table presents the results of an OLS regression model (the unstandardized beta, standard error, standardized beta, and significance). The dependent variable is the change from the pre- to post-campaign panel survey in political attention (20-point scale). The model controls for age, gender, ethnicity, education, social class, income, and the respondent's self-reported left-right location. See Appendix A1 for details of the coding and instruments. Significant communication coefficients are highlighted in **bold**.

receive relatively little attention in routine political coverage outside of election campaigns.

Vote participation

Campaigns are also meant to play a vital role in mobilizing electors to cast a ballot on polling day, especially among the less interested. To monitor voter turnout, electors were classified according to whether they cast a validated ballot on polling day. Overall 61.7% of those in the sample cast such a ballot. Table 8 summarizes the results of the analysis, which indicate that reading a Conservative newspaper was associated with voting turnout, along with being canvassed by the Conservative or Labour party. Nevertheless, it should be bourn in mind that parties often canvass supporters who are most likely to turnout, so it is not clear from this evidence whether it was selection bias or the process of being canvassed that produced the mobilization effect. By contrast, watching the PEBs – while shaping certain aspects of party support – do not appear to encourage greater voter participation on polling day.

**Table 8** Impact of channels of campaign communication on voting participation

	<i>Unstandardized coefficients</i>		
	<i>B</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Read Labour paper	-0.159	0.102	0.119
Read Conservative paper	0.437	0.126	0.001
Internet	0.216	0.132	0.101
Watched Labour PEB	0.114	0.097	0.240
Watched Conservative PEB	0.213	0.172	0.217
Watched Liberal Democrat PEB	-0.145	0.208	0.485
Canvassed by Labour party	0.453	0.173	0.009
Canvassed by Conservative party	0.593	0.173	0.001
(Constant)	-1.41		
Nagelkerke R^2	0.140		
Percentage correctly predicted	71%		
No.	1999		

Source: British Election Study 2005 Pre–Post election panel survey (NatCen) Weighted by PANWTGB

Note: The table presents the results of a binary logistic regression model (the unstandardized beta, standard error, and significance). The dependent variable is whether the respondent cast a validated vote. The model controls for age, gender, ethnicity, education, social class, income, and the respondent's self-reported left–right location. See Appendix A1 for details of the coding and instruments. Significant communication coefficients are highlighted in **bold**.

Conclusions and Implications

There are many reasons why exposure to different channels of campaign information and communications could be expected to have an important impact on political attitudes and voting behavior. Despite the extensive literature which has developed around this topic in the United States, the focus of much research in recent British general elections has been confined to examining the effects of local party contact activity, rather than comparing the influence of the many alternative channels by which citizens can learn about parties, policies, and candidates. This comparison presents the results of the analysis of the impact of some of the main channels of communication used in the 2005 British general election.

The results suggest that no single channel is the most effective across all indicators; instead, different channels served different functions for the electorate. Hence, the role of PEBs seems particularly important for changes in political interest and perceptions of leadership competence. By contrast, newspaper readership was more closely associated with changes in voting choices and (in the case of Conservative papers) with turnout. The Internet

played a role in evaluations of government performance on certain issues, on feelings of leadership competence, and on voting choice. And personal canvassing by the Conservative party seems to have shaped voting choice, political interest, and voting participation.

Subsequent research needs to consider both a wider range of type of campaign effects, for example, concerning perceptions of the prospective policies offered by each party, as well as retrospective evaluations of the government's record. We also need to explore a wider range of communication channels, notably television news, which was not available in the BES survey, and whether certain types of media effects are stronger among certain sub-categories of voters, such as vote switchers and the undecided *vs* strong partisans. What the results presented in this study suggest are that any simple assumptions prioritizing one communication channel over others, for example, the claim that people-intensive face-to-face communications in traditional party campaigns automatically generate greater effects than exposure to the mass media, or that PEBs are no longer relevant to the modern campaign, appear ill-founded.

Notes

- 1 Many thanks are due to the Principal Investigators of the British Election Study 2005, David Sanders, Paul Whiteley, Harold Clarke and Marianne Stewart, and to the ESRC for supporting the BES survey. These data were gathered by in-person CAPI interviews. Fieldwork was conducted by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) under the supervision of Research Director, Katarina Thomson. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual conference of the Elections, Parties, and Public Opinion group of the PSA (EPOP) University of Essex, 9–11th September 2005.
- 1 The 2001 study only examines impact of attention to the mass media on turnout, not party choice. Moreover, this reflects a systematic bias by the BES team of Principle Investigators; in the 2005 pre–post campaign British Election Survey by NatCen and the BES Internet rolling campaign survey by YouGov, out of over 800 items in each study, not one in either survey monitored attention or exposure to television news.
- 2 To generate these estimates, Wlezien and Norris simulated the voting day results at the constituency level, using Pippa Norris' *British Parliamentary Constituency Database, 1992–2005* at: <http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~pnorris/datafiles/Britain%20Votes%202006%20Resources.htm>. Specifically, the estimate assumed a uniform swing and adjusted the 2005 results in each constituency based on the changes in preferences from the start to the end of the official campaign (see Table 1). This estimate therefore ran the results of the 2005 election as if the outcome was determined by voting preferences recorded at the start of the campaign.
- 3 Also see Pattie and Johnston (2003).
- 4 See, for example, Chapter 8 in Clarke *et al.* (2004).
- 5 Full details about the BES methodology and fieldwork can be found on the BES website at www.essex.ac.uk/bes/2005/

Q3

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Appendix A1

Variables and coding

<i>Variable</i>	<i>BES Q</i>	<i>Coding</i>
<i>Social controls</i>		
Age	tq77	In years
Gender	tq76	Male (1)/female (0)
Ethnicity	aq60	White (1)/non-white (0)
Education	tq82b	Highest educational qualification (18-point scale)
Occupational class	aq58a	R's employment recorded into five-fold categories (10-point scale)
Income	tq84	Self-placement (10-point scale)
Left–right ideological position	bq39a	
<i>Campaign communications</i>		
Read daily newspaper	Bq68a	Yes (1)/no (0)
What paper?	Bq68b	Papers coded as Conservative (Mail, Telegraph, or Express) or Labour (FT, Guardian, Mirror, Independent, Sun, and Times)
Used Internet for election information	Bq73	Great deal/fair amount/not much (1)/not at all (0)
Saw party election broadcast	bq72a	Yes (1)/no (0) What party?
Contacted by party during campaign	ac11a, bq60a, bq70a, bq71a	Four-point scale constructed from reported being contacted before campaign, or canvassed, knocked up, or phoned during the campaign)
<i>Political attitudes</i>		
	Amistot & bq2amisz	Open-ended questions

*(continued)*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>BES Q</i>	<i>Coding</i>
Most important issue facing the country		
Evaluations of government performance	Aq4, bq3	Each issue evaluated using a five-point approve–disapprove scale
<i>Activism</i>		
Attention to politics	aq43/bq60	10-point scale
Reported voting in the 2005 general election	bq12a	Voted (1), did not (0)
How likely to vote in the 2005 GE	aq10a	10-point scale
<i>Voted</i>	VoteVal3	Validated vote

Note: Details of the Blaise questionnaire and the data set for the British Election 2005 Post-Election Wave (August 2005) are available from <http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/> 'aq' questions are from the pre-campaign wave and 'bq' questions from the post-campaign wave.