

BRITISH ELECTORAL STUDIES: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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Given the current position of the parties in the polls, the next British general election promises to prove a stimulating contest. If the result produces a Blair government, as many anticipate, we will need to explain the transformation of Labour's electoral support and whether this is based primarily on a rejection of the old Conservative government, or a positive conversion to 'New Labour'. If the election produces a minority Labour administration, or even a fifth successive Conservative victory, this could produce a political crisis with significant implications for the future of British party politics.

Interest in the outcome is reflected in the resources which will be devoted to analysing the result. The next British general Election represents an exciting opportunity for political science since it will be the first covered by a related series of multimethod studies. This paper describes the different components which are in the process of being planned, and the opportunities to learn more by contacting any of the collaborators.

The next British general election will be accompanied by the following major studies, among others:

- *THE BES CAMPAIGN PANEL STUDY
- *THE BES POST-ELECTION CROSS-SECTION SURVEY
- *THE SCOTTISH ELECTION STUDY
- *THE ETHNIC MINORITY ELECTION STUDY (DECISION PENDING)
- *THE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA

*THE EXPERIMENTAL AND FOCUS GROUP STUDY OF TELEVISION NEWS

*THE BRITISH REPRESENTATION STUDY OF MPS AND PPCS

*THE BRITISH ELECTION PANEL STUDY (BEPS)

*THE NUFFIELD GENERAL ELECTION STUDY (BUTLER AND KAVANAGH)

THE BES CAMPAIGN PANEL SURVEY

The next British Election Study will be conducted by CREST (Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends), an ESRC Research Centre based at SCPR (Social and Community Planning Research) and Nuffield College, Oxford. The study team comprises Anthony Heath (Nuffield), Roger Jowell (SCPR), John Curtice (Strathclyde), Pippa Norris (Harvard), Geoff Evans (Nuffield), Katarina Thomson (SCPR) and Alison Park (SCPR). The BES is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in collaboration with the Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

The campaign panel survey will be a major innovation designed to measure short-term influences on voting behaviour. The panel will be recruited from around 3,500 respondents included in the spring 1996 round of the British Social Attitudes Survey. Respondents will be reinterviewed by telephone in three subsequent waves.

The campaign panel study is planned to contain questions on voting intentions, political trust and efficacy, political issues, media use, knowledge of party policies, economic evaluations, political competence, party image and party leadership. These items will be repeated in successive waves. Those interviewed on any one day during the campaign will be a random sub-set of the respondents to allow a 'rolling thunder' analysis of change on a daily basis.

WAVE I in May 1996 measured attitudes and knowledge, among other things, in advance of the 'long campaign'.

WAVE 2 will occur during the first fortnight of the official election campaign. The interview will be 15 minutes long and contain about 60 questions.

WAVE 3 will be undertaken during the second fortnight of the campaign, repeating Wave 2.

Lastly WAVE 4 will occur immediately after polling day, with a brief (5 minute) interview.

POST-ELECTION CROSS-SECTION STUDY

The BES post-election cross-section survey (along the usual BES lines) will also be conducted by the BES team listed above. Selected by probability sampling methods from the Post Office Address Files, 4,000 people from throughout Britain (including a booster sample of c. 1,000 Scots) will be interviewed face-to-face using laptop computers (CAPI). Respondents will also be given a self-completion supplement.

The principal purpose of the regular cross-section study is to measure long-term change in electoral attitudes and behaviour. The BES builds on surveys of the electorate undertaken at each of the last nine general elections, a period of some thirty years, and the data collected form an invaluable long-term research resource. As a result around two-thirds of the 60-minute questionnaire will be taken up by items that have been asked in the series of previous BES surveys since 1963.

In addition to continuity, the BES cross-section is planned to develop innovative items designed to tap into themes which emerged as priorities for development from the consultation exercise, from the ESMAC committee, and from current developments in party politics, including new items on:

- *party leadership and party images
- *economic evaluations
- *taxation/spending 'tradeoffs'
- *economic insecurity & life histories
- *locality and constituency campaigning
- *political trust, confidence and 'sleaze'
- *national, regional and ethnic identities
- *constitutional reform
- *turnout and registration
- *revision of the 'issue' questions to reflect shifts in party policies

These items are in the process of being designed in consultation with the user community.

The self-completion supplement will focus on questions designed as part of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), a cross-national study of major democracies.

THE SCOTTISH ELECTION STUDY

The Scottish Election Study will be conducted jointly by the University of Edinburgh's Unit for the Study of Government in Scotland and CREST. The team comprises David McCrone, Alice Brown and Paula Surridge (all at Edinburgh) and Katarina Thomson (SCPR).

The Scottish Election Study funds a booster sample of about 600 extra people, interviewed as part of the BES cross-section study. This means that there will be about 1,000 Scottish respondents in all. All will answer the British BES questionnaire plus an extra 10-minute module containing question designed for Scotland.

The Scottish Election Study will examine the political impact of economic behaviour and expectations; differential disillusionment with the political process, parties and leaders; and the relationship between national and class identities, as well as tapping into the heated debate about devolution, including monitoring public opinion towards referendum issues.

THE ETHNIC MINORITY STUDY

Shamit Saggat (Queen Mary and Westfield College, London University) has received partial funding from the Commission on Racial Equality for a study of ethnic minorities in the next election, and further support is currently being sought from the ESRC.

If fully funded, the study will break new ground by providing the first academic survey of ethnic minority voting behaviour and political attitudes. The booster sample to the BES would be drawn by oversampling respondents in areas of high ethnic minority concentration. The study would allow the comparison of white and non-white voters across the range of BES questions, including some specifically designed to measure attitudes towards racial politics and ethnic identity.

THE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA

Margaret Scammell (University of Liverpool) and Holli Semetko (University of Amsterdam) will be carrying out the content analysis of the media coverage during the official general election campaign, funded by the ESRC.

The study will monitor BBC1's Nine O'Clock News, ITN's News at Ten, and SKY evening news along with a representative sample of the national daily press (The Sun, Daily Mirror, Daily Mail, The Independent, The Guardian, The Times and in Scotland two major tabloids and one broadsheet).

The content analysis will cover all stories mentioning British politicians or political parties, including the stories placement, type, subject, actor, sources, direction, and visuals. The study will allow comparison between the 1996/7 and the 1987 and 1992 elections, and the coding scheme will be designed to allow daily comparison with public opinion trends monitored in the BES Campaign Panel Survey.

In addition the study will also be conducting interviews with party elites (Scammell) and media elites (Semetko). Observation with television journalists at ITN will also be conducted to understand the constraints within which news is produced.

Funding is currently being sought for a comparable detailed study of the Scottish media by a related team at Edinburgh University.

THE EXPERIMENTAL AND FOCUS GROUP STUDY OF TELEVISION NEWS

David Sanders and Pippa Norris have been funded by the ESRC to study the effects of television news on agenda-setting and party balance in the next general election. To break new ground in Britain, this study will replicate the experimental design pioneered by Shanto Iyengar et al. in the US to see whether manipulating the contents of the news will influence the public's issue agenda and/or partisan preferences.

The twelve assemblage experiments will monitor these effects by varying the contents of the news for different groups in terms of the type of issue, the direction of coverage, the type of presentation, campaign timing, the type of voter, and repeated reinforcement.

Focus groups will be used to monitor reactions in more depth among some of the participants, and the discussion will be recorded and content analysed. The experiments will take place in the early evening among the London public during the official election campaign.

The pretest and post-test questionnaires will contain some of the identical items to those used in the BES Campaign Panel Study, to allow comparisons. The coding scheme for open-ended questions and the focus group discussions will be identical to that used for the content analysis of the media.

THE BRITISH REPRESENTATION STUDY

The Nuffield Foundation has funded the British Representation Study, a survey of prospective parliamentary candidates and MPs. Directed by Pippa Norris, and conducted in conjunction with Joni Lovenduski, Anthony Heath, Roger Jowell, John Curtice and Lucy Peake this includes items on the political background, experience of selection, political attitudes and social background of candidates for all major parties. The results of the survey will be supplemented by some longer telephone interviews of candidates.

The results will monitor changes among the parliamentary elite since the British Candidate Study in 1992. The data will also allow mass-elite comparisons since it includes identical questions asked of the public in the BES cross-section survey.

THE BRITISH ELECTION PANEL STUDY (BEPS)

The British Election Panel Study, directed by the CREST team, examines medium-term change in a panel of about 2,000 members of the electorate, with surveys every year since 1992. The panel is based on the 1992 BES. The study monitors the behaviour and attitudes of the electorate in local, European and general elections, and changes in public opinion during the electoral cycle.

THE NUFFIELD GENERAL ELECTION STUDY

Lastly, in the Nuffield series started in 1950, there will be the regular study of the campaign resulting in The British General Election of 19.. produced by the indefatigable David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, and published by Macmillan.

THE PROCESS OF CONSULTATION

In order to help involve the academic and practitioner community in the BES studies a Consultation Meeting was organised by the ESRC in early May 1996, and colleagues were invited to submit proposals for developing specific themes. The results of this meeting are a process which will continue as the survey instruments are being developed. Colleagues who would like to become involved in any of these projects should contact the collaborators (see list at the end).

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS

The range of studies will be matched by the wide range of publications devoted to the next election. This includes, among others, the special issue of Parliamentary Affairs involving many members of the EPOP community, which will be forthcoming as a book, Britain Votes, edited by Pippa Norris and Neil Gavin, published by OUP. Anthony King will be editing another volume of Britain At the Polls (Chatham House) while as mentioned earlier David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh will produce The British General Election of 19.. (Macmillan).

The EPOP/Political Communications post-election conference at Essex is being planned by Ivor Crewe and Brian Gosschalk, and they hope to produce the Political Communications (CUP) volume, and there may also be a special issue of the British Elections and Parties Yearbook (Frank Cass). Lastly other thematic books are planned based on these studies.

CONTACT DETAILS:

Colleagues who are interested in learning more about these projects should contact any of the following for further details.

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