CAMPAIGN LEARNING AND PERSUASION:
AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY
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The Aims and Research Design

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I. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES
This project has two main aims. The most important is to understand how and under what conditions people learn about public affairs from the news media and party election broadcasts. This part of the study uses experiments within the context of the next British general election campaign to monitor learning about the government’s record and party policies following exposure to news stories in newspaper, television and the Internet and in election broadcasts for the major parties.

Moreover the project seeks to test and refine the findings derived from the authors’ previous experimental study of the 1997 UK general election. That study (Sanders and Norris, 1998) examined the connections between exposure to television news and changes in party preferences. It showed that British voters’ views of the Conservative and Labour parties were strongly affected by “positive” television news images and stories but unaffected by “negative” news. This evidence contrasts sharply with experimental evidence from the United States, where “negative” media messages appear to have the most impact on public opinion (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995). We wish to establish whether the “asymmetric” pattern that we observed in 1997 was a consequence of the particular circumstances of that election or whether it connotes a continuing pattern in British electoral behavior.

These overall aims reflect our belief that any effective research proposal should raise issues that are theoretically important, practically relevant, and potentially do-able.

Theoretical insights
Understanding how people acquire political information and are persuaded in their political preferences provides insights into cognitive processes and the influence of the news media, issues that are of intrinsic theoretical interest. These matters have long been central concerns in many social science sub-disciplines including the fields of cognitive psychology, education, and political communications, as well as in studies of electoral behavior and public opinion. Perennial disputes about the ‘rationality’ of voting decisions relate to how far the public is assumed to have a sound understanding of the government’s past record and accurate knowledge of where the parties stand on the major issues of the day. Continuing controversies in political communications relate to how far the news media and parties are believed to function effectively as a public forum to inform and persuade citizens during election campaigns.

Policy relevance
Equally important, understanding the process of political learning and persuasion provides potential insights that can help illuminate many practical policy issues. There is widespread concern that the public, especially young people and minorities, are disconnected from the political process. Insights into political learning can help guide how to improve civic education in the school curriculum. Knowing how people learn about the government’s record and about party policies can help party managers can get their message across more effectively to connect with voters.
Perhaps most importantly, insights into these issues have significant implications for the appropriate regulatory framework for communications within election campaigns. We know that British campaign communications are being transformed by two important structural developments: the rapid rise of the Internet, currently reaching about one fifth of the British population, and the switch from broadcasting to a fragmented multi-channel television environment with the growth of satellite, cable, broadband and digital channels (see Norris et al. 29-34). As discussed in the Neill report (1998:174-83), these developments raise fundamental questions about the current role and function of party election broadcasts, the legal regulation of campaign coverage on the Internet, and indeed the broader civic functions of public service broadcasting requirements for terrestrial channels. The assumption in Europe has always been that radio and television campaign broadcasting needed to be regulated as a public utility because of limited competition and access. If the public comes to learn about elections and public affairs equally effectively from a far wider range of electronic media, as Britain moves towards a multi-channel TV environment and as there is a process of technological convergence between the printed press, broadband television and the Internet, then this has important implications for broadcasting regulators, for political parties and for British democracy. Some of the consequences of these major developments in campaign communications can be understood by examining the conditions under which the public learns and is persuaded about parties and policy issues during the campaign, and the role of different media outlets in this process, in the context of British elections.

Methodological innovation

Lastly, the research design uses an experimental design because we consider that this is the most feasible method of measuring the effects of political learning and persuasion. Cross-sectional surveys are the most common way of exploring the influences upon voters but they can say very little about the causal effects of exposure to different varieties of message. Panel surveys are more useful but also limited in measuring media exposure. Experiments allow the analyst precisely to control the specific messages that respondents see and hear, for example exposure to a particular news story or a party political broadcast, and to measure ‘before’ and ‘after’ shifts in attitudes and behavior. This enables the researcher to make relatively strong statements about the causal effects of exposure to messages.

Many experiments are limited because they rely upon small groups of student respondents and it is difficult to generalize from these results to the general population. As with our 1997 study, we intend to use a large cross-section of the public that is broadly representative of the population of Greater London. This combination of an experimental design with a broad cross-section of the public allows us to draw causal inferences that have application well beyond the particular population that we include in our experiments. The experimental design will extend our insights into the use and limitations of this important methodological tool in the social sciences, a method rarely applied in British political science although increasingly popular in the United States. The methodological innovations conducted by the authors in the 1997 election has
helped to persuade colleagues in other countries like Norway and Canada to incorporate similar experimental methods into national election studies.

II: THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ever since the earliest studies of mass propaganda in the 1920s, and the pioneering work of the Columbia school in the 1940s, a long tradition in cognitive psychology, communication studies, public opinion and political behavior has explored how citizens learn about public affairs, in particular how they acquire information about political issues from the news media and how they are persuaded by party messages during election campaigns. But what and how does this process work, and under what conditions do election campaigns have these effects? In particular, we explore three questions:

?? What impact do different types of media have on political learning for different types of voters?
?? What influence do party election broadcasts have on party preferences?
?? What effect does positive or negative television news have on party preferences?

1. The Impact of the Type of Media on Political Learning For Groups Of Voters

The central theoretical framework for understanding political learning developed by this project, building on the work of Dalton (1984), is that the acquisition of knowledge is affected by two main conditions: the type of voter and the type of media.

The classification of voters, drawing upon Dalton (1984), is based upon two dimensions: the strength of partisanship and the prior level of cognitive awareness. The strength of partisanship was measured by the standard BES survey item gauging how far people identify with parties. Cognitive skills were measured by combining education (representing skills) and political interest (representing civic involvement). In combination these measures provide a fourfold typology of the electorate (see Figure 1). Building upon this simple classification, we expect each of these groups to respond differently to the opportunities for learning and persuasion from political communications during election campaigns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Voters</th>
<th>Low cognitive mobilization</th>
<th>High cognitive mobilization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weak partisanship</td>
<td>Apoliticals</td>
<td>Deliberators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong partisanship</td>
<td>Ritual Partisans</td>
<td>Cognitive Partisans</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deliberators are characterized by high cognitive mobilization but weak partisanship. As such, they can be expected to be functionally independent of party cues and most likely to learn from materials presented to them by the news media and by the Internet during the election. This group is predicted to have the skills to cope with complex arguments presented through ‘objective’ or ‘balanced’ journalistic formats, characteristic of television news and the broadsheet press, and to be most open to processing a wide range of sources of information available from the Internet.

Cognitive partisans also have high cognitive skills to process information but as sympathizers with one of the parties they are more likely to take their cues from sources such as party political broadcasts, from the partisan broadsheets (such as the Guardian or Telegraph), and from party web pages, rather than from television news.

Ritual partisans, as loyalists, are less likely to learn from the campaign but they also take their cues from partisan sources such as party broadcasts as well as from the tabloid press such as The Sun or The Mirror newspapers.

Lastly apoliticals are the group least informed about public affairs but also most resistant to political communications in all forms, most particularly party political broadcasts, political news in the broadsheet press and political resources on the Internet.

The theoretical relationship between the type of voter and the type of media that flow from this understanding, and therefore the core hypotheses about learning tested in our experiments, are set out schematically in Figure 2:

In practice, the classification of the ‘type of media’ is relatively straightforward within the context of British general election campaigns. The experiments drew on materials from television news, broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, the Internet, and election broadcasts by each of the major parties. To control for the type of issue, the study selected functionally equivalent stories covering the same issues across all media (as discussed later under ‘methodology’). We selected important campaign issues including taxation and spending, the Euro, asylum seekers, and child care, then showed each different experimental group comparable party broadcasts, newspaper stories and television news stories, as well as similar stories available via web pages.
Figure 2: Core Hypotheses about Political Learning Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Voter</th>
<th>Television news (Group 1)</th>
<th>Broadsheet Newspapers (Group 2)</th>
<th>Tabloid Newspapers (Group 3)</th>
<th>Internet (Group 4)</th>
<th>Party broadcast (Groups 5-7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deliberators</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Partisans</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritual partisans</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apoliticals</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Very Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The Impact of PEBs on Party Preferences

We are interested in examining the conditions for persuasion as well as learning; hence our dependent variables include measures of changing party preferences. To extend our previous work, we wanted to examine the impact of party election broadcasts (PEBs) and party websites, as well as the news media.

An important distinction is commonly drawn between the unmediated messages which parties or candidates use to communicate directly with voters, like posters, leaflets, newspaper advertisements and party election broadcasts, and mediated messages filtered via journalistic gatekeepers like newspaper reporters and television commentators. Party election broadcasts are often assumed to be as fairly unimportant in British elections, and indeed their abolition was discussed by the Neill committee, but there are many reasons why these unmediated messages may still be expected to play an important and distinctive role in election campaigns, particularly for reinforcing partisan sympathizers.

Like the news media, party broadcasts are assumed to inform voters and influence party preferences, although there are few previous studies in Britain testing their effects and the analysis of BES evidence has been hindered by the difficulties of disentangling the causal direction of any relationship from cross-sectional surveys (see Blumler and McQuail 1968; Scammell and Semetko 1995; Norris et al. 1999:62-67; Tedesco 2000).

A substantial literature is available analyzing what people learn from political advertising in America, drawing upon surveys, focus groups and experiments (see, for example, West 1993; the recent review in Thurber 2000), and there is a large body of market research on the effects of commercial advertising (see Neuman 2000). Yet it is difficult to know how far we can generalize from the American literature to other contexts because we may be in danger of
comparing apples and oranges. US findings are based on the experience of repeated exposure over an extended period using 30 or 60-second ads for particular candidates, and voters lack partisan cues when participating within party primaries. In contrast, the regulation of British general elections allows a strictly limited number of 5-10 minute single-exposure party broadcasts.

We therefore tested the impact of PEBs from each of the three major parties on changes in party preferences. Our expectation was that partisans (both cognitive and rituals) will be reinforced in their voting preferences, but we would not expect a major shift in these preferences as a result of exposure. In contrast, we would expect the party preferences of deliberators and apoliticals would be largely unaffected because they would be inclined to discount information derived from a partisan source.

3. The Effect of Positive and Negative News on Party Preferences

Finally, as noted in the introduction, we sought to replicate a set of hypotheses derived from our earlier experimental study of the effects of television news on persuasion. These hypotheses suggest that the effects of positive and negative television news on voters’ party preferences should be asymmetric. In particular, *ceteris paribus*:

H1a: Exposure to positive news about the Conservative Party should increase voters’ support for the Conservatives.

H1b: Exposure to positive news about the Labour Party should increase voters’ support for Labour.

H1c: Exposure to negative news about the Conservative Party should not affect voters’ support for the Conservatives.

H1d: Exposure to negative news about the Labour Party should not affect voters’ support for Labour.

III: RESEARCH DESIGN, DATA AND METHODS

The most effective way to explore these issues is via experiments that can monitor under what conditions people learn from the campaign in response to controlled stimuli. The research design for this project replicates the methodology developed by the authors in earlier studies, with the results presented in two previous books. *On Message* examined the role of campaign communications during the 1997 British general election (Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell and Semetko 1999). This work has subsequently been extended in a new study, *A Virtuous Circle*, comparing the role of political communications in post-industrial societies (Norris 2000).

1. Measuring Learning and Persuasion

Political Knowledge

Many of the debates about whether citizens know enough to cast an informed vote are due to different ways of conceptualizing and measuring ‘political knowledge’. There are three broad views in the literature. The so-called ‘civics
test” approach, associated most recently with Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), assumes that voters need a general understanding of the rules of the political game, information about the major policy proposals of the main contenders for office; and familiarity with the government’s record. The main problem with this approach is that the majority of citizens appear to fail the test most of the time. In contrast, the “relativist” approach acknowledges that people have a limited reservoir of political information, but suggests that this is sufficient for people to cast a meaningful ballot (Zaller, 1993; Sniderman et al., 1992; and Popkin, 1994). Relativists argue that cognitive short cuts, such as ideology or ‘schema’, reduce the time and effort required to monitor candidates and to allow a reasoned choice with imperfect information. In this view, citizens are capable of making good low-information decisions because the costs of keeping fully informed are high, whereas the rewards for engaging in politics in contemporary democracies are low. The difficulty with the relativist approach is that the cognitive shortcuts that voters use in order to arrive at decisions may be based on factual inaccuracies – on “false knowledge”. A third approach, derived from the work of Lupia and McCubbins (1998), focuses on the importance of “practical knowledge”. In this view, citizens simply need to acquire sufficient information, primarily from the news media, for them to be able to estimate the probable risks and benefits of their electoral decisions. People need practical knowledge – in domains that matter to them – in order to connect their political and social preferences to the available electoral options.

The theoretical position that we take broadly follows Lupia and McCubbins’ practical knowledge approach. One aim of our study is to assess how far citizens acquire two general types of practical political knowledge: (i) Information about the retrospective policy record of the government on the important issues of the day (such as whether the level of unemployment or crime has been rising or falling); and, (ii) information about the prospective policy proposals that the major political parties adopt in relation to those issues (such as which party is most in favor of increasing pensions).

Our first sets of experiments seek to find out how far the interaction between type of voter and the type of media influence the practical political knowledge that is acquired.

**Party Preferences**

We also want to measure the effects of persuasion as well as information. We do this by gauging changes in party preferences as measured by three items each represented by a standard BES 0-10 point scale. The use of more than one indicator increases the robustness of the overall preference scale. The measures are (i) the probability of voting for each party; (ii) the extent to which the respondent likes the party, and (iii) the extent to which the respondent likes the party leader.

**2. Selection of Participants:**

In order to examine the effects of news coverage on voters’ perceptions, we are carrying out a series of experiments. We will replicate the ‘pre-post’ experimental design employed in a previous study by the authors on the impact of television news on agenda-setting and party support conducted in the 1997
British general election. Full details of the prior study and results are published elsewhere (Norris et al. 1999; Sanders and Norris 1998) but here we can summarize the main steps in the research design.

We are including about 900 participants in total drawn from the adult population, more than most experimental designs. The experiments will be based in a Greater London location, with participants drawn primarily from Greater London and south-east England. The location will be selected to provide a diverse group of Londoners including managers, office-workers and casual shoppers. Respondents will not represent a random sample of the British electorate, but they are selected using quotas for age, gender and race to reflect the Greater London population in terms of their social background. The generalisability of the results rests not on the selection of a random sample of participants, as in a survey design, but on the way that subjects were assigned at random to different experimental groups. Any difference in the response of groups should therefore reflect the stimuli they were given rather than their social backgrounds or prior political attitudes.

One potential problem of experiments is that participants may alter their own behaviour given the artificiality of the research setting and their perceptions of the aims of the study. In order to counter this, respondents are told that they will be participating in research to learn how people evaluate and understand newspapers, television and Internet news. Prior to the experiment, we will inform respondents (falsely) that we are conducting market research to find out whether people are interested in different stories in the mass media. We will not mention that the news is about the election, which could discourage participation by the politically apathetic. We use a single-shot rather than a repeated design to avoid respondents becoming unduly conditioned by the research process itself.

Fieldwork was conducted from 26th May until 6th June. Participants were asked to complete a short (15-minute) pre-test questionnaire about their media habits, political attitudes, and personal background. They were then assigned at random to groups of 5-15 to watch a 30-minute video compilation of television news, or to read selected newspaper stories, or to read selected party web pages. Respondents subsequently complete a short (15-minute) post-test questionnaire, after which they were paid for their time and given a letter about the purpose of the experiment. Respondents unable to read the questionnaire were interviewed separately on a face-to-face basis by a member of the research team. To reduce the artificiality of the exercise, the atmosphere was designed to be relaxed, with refreshments provided in a comfortable environment. The whole process was designed to last for about an hour for each group. The experiments will be carried out during the middle weeks of the official general election campaign. The aim of this timing was to examine the attitudes of participants who had been subjected to the intensive barrage of political coverage that characterizes an election period.

The compilation of television news stories was chosen to represent a "typical" evening news programme during the campaign. We drew on stories recorded from all the main news programmes on the terrestrial channels in the three
months prior to polling day. The videos were edited to follow the same format. This consists of a "sandwich", with ten minutes of identical, standard footage at the top and bottom of each programme and one of the different experimental video stimuli in the middle "core". A similar process will be followed to select party political broadcasts on the same issues, choosing functionally equivalent broadcasts by the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. Respondents were not be told which video was being shown to which group or even that different videos were being watched by different groups of respondents.

For comparison across media, similar processes were used to select a sample of newspaper stories and a sample of party web sites containing information about the campaign.

3. The design of the experiments

We conducted experiments that controlled for 12 experimental conditions, as described in Table 1 below, using approximately 40-100 respondents in each experimental group. As the table indicates, the first four experimental manipulations involved exposure to different types of media. Experiments 5-7 tested the impact of exposure to each of the major party election broadcasts. Experiments 8-11 replicating the tests we conducted in 1997, were restricted solely to the effects of exposure to positive or negative television news. Because we have already explored these relationships in our earlier study, we consider it legitimate to use a smaller sample size for these manipulations. Lastly, in addition we included a TV news control group shown a typical evening news bulletin with content that is not subjected to any sort of experimental manipulation.

Table 1: Experimental Groups and Stimulae

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Experimental Stimulae</th>
<th>N.</th>
<th>Knowledge of retrospective policy record</th>
<th>Knowledge of prospective party policies</th>
<th>Level of party support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>TV News</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Newspaper - Broadsheet</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Newspaper - Tabloid</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Internet News</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>TV PEB - Labour</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>TV PEB - Conservative</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>TV PEB – Liberal Democrat</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Negative TV news - Lab</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Negative TV news - Con</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Positive TV news - Lab</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Positive TV news - Con</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Control group</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td></td>
<td>740</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: = test as dependent variables.
4. Pre-Test Questionnaire:
Participants were asked to complete a 15-minute pre-test questionnaire that monitor the following items. The items with an asterisk (*) were repeated in pre and post-tests. The full pre-test and post-test questionnaires are available to be consulted online.

**Media Use:**
- Use of TV
  - Frequency of watching TV
  - Frequency of watching TV news
  - Attention to political coverage
  - Interest in types of TV programmes
- Use of daily newspapers
  - Frequency of reading
  - Type of daily morning newspaper
  - Attention to political coverage
- Use of the Internet
  - Computer and PC ownership
  - Frequency of Internet use at home/work
  - Frequency of use of online news
  - Content areas visited
  - Type of online activities

**Political Attitudes:**
- Likelihood to vote (*)
- Knowledge scales
  - Awareness of social and economic record (*)
  - Placement of party policy scales (*)
- Liking of parties scale (*)
- Liking of party leaders (*)
- Political trust and efficacy
- Direction and Strength of partisan identification
- Political interest
- Vote choice
- Left-right ideology scale
- Issue scales
- Conventional civic activism scales

**Demographics:**
- Age
- Education
- Household income
- Employment status
- Social class
- Ethnic self-identification
- Area of Residency

5. Post-test Questionnaire:
After watching the media stimuli, participants were asked to complete the post-test questionnaire that repeated some of the core items monitoring political knowledge employed in the pre-test (identified above by an asterisk *).
Participants were also asked about a range of new items designed to serve three functions: factual items designed to monitor recall of stories that had just been featured in the news; items designed to serve as 'controls'; and questions designed to deflect attention away from the repeated items. Wherever possible, questions were replicated from existing surveys like the British Election Study, as well as items used in the 1997 experiments, to facilitate comparability across studies.

IV: RESEARCH OUTPUT:

The project will eventually produce three major products:

1. Project Web Site and Executive Report:
The project has established a web site providing information about the project, facilitating links to related research and organizations (like the PSA, EPOP, and Political Communications Sectors of the PSA, APSA and the ECPR). To encourage interactive feedback, selected video stimuli will be made available online along with the pre-test and post-test questionnaires, so that colleagues and students can try the experiment themselves. After the results are analyzed an executive report will be made available on the web site, along with an email list-serve providing opportunities for comment. The report will summarize the key findings and the implications of the results.

2. Datasets:
The experimental data collected in the project will be released for secondary analysis by the user community, made available for downloading online, and deposited with social science data archives within a year of completion of the project.

3. Publications:
The results will form the basis of a series of publications including papers presented at professional conferences like the PSA, APSA, MPSA and the ECPR, as well as articles in professional journals and book chapters.

V: CONCLUSIONS:

Ever since the post-war studies by the Columbia school, the issue of how, why and under what conditions citizens learn from and are persuaded by the election campaign has long been the focus of studies in political psychology and voting behavior.

This project uses experimental designs to see whether exposure to the news media leads to political learning and persuasion. The experimental design of this project will provide significant insights into the impact of newspapers, television news, the Internet and PEBs on political knowledge; the influence of party broadcasts on persuasion; and role of positive and negative news on party preferences; as well as the broader consequences of this process for election campaigns in British democracy.
VI: SELECTED LITERATURE:


Holtz-Bacha, Christina and Pippa Norris. 2001. ‘To entertain, inform, and educate’: Still the Role of Public Television in the 1990s?’ Political Communication. XX(X): XX-XX.


