
NEW CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATIONS

Election campaigning adapts by employing the latest techniques and ideas in effective communications and persuasion. In this respect parties are like businesses seeking to promote their products: one seeks votes, the other sales. In the late nineteenth century the main forms of election publicity in Britain were leaflets, posters and manifestos, which were distributed in the constituencies by party workers. A party's case nationally was largely carried by leaders addressing mass meetings and reports of the speeches in the regional and national press. The creation of a mass electorate, as a result of the extensions of the suffrage in 1918 and 1928, stimulated the parties to use the newly invented cinema and radio. Stanley Baldwin in Britain and Franklin Roosevelt in the USA were among the first political leaders to make effective use of radio in the 1930s.

But most politicians were slow to adapt. On one day during the 1924 general election the Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald left Glasgow at 9 a.m. and in the course of the next 12 hours addressed large crowds in 16 constituencies. Needless to say he was exhausted at the end of the day by these methods of communicating with voters (Marquand 1977: 379). As recently as the 1955 general election campaign, the Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden would spend Monday to Friday touring the country, staying overnight in provincial hotels, accompanied only by two or three aides. He would have a late-night telephone talk with the party Chairman, read the morning newspapers over breakfast and deliver a set speech each night. He had no need to plan mass-media campaigns or monitor the output of television and radio – which did

not report the campaign – or comment on the opinion polls. He did not hold daily strategy meetings and gave very few press conferences or media interviews (Lindsey interview).

Technology has now made such methods of campaigning 'old style'. The new methods enable politicians to communicate with millions of voters via television or direct mail, rather than hundreds of voters face to face. A consequence has been the party leaders' growing use of short statements for television soundbites and a reduction in the number of major campaign speeches delivered or which are reported at length in the press. In recent general election campaigns Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Neil Kinnock each gave only a handful of set-piece speeches. Servicing the media is now a major operation and requires a great deal of advance preparation. In contrast to Eden, the party leaders are now accompanied by several aides, in regular touch with campaign managers by fax and mobile phones, and followed by buses containing scores of journalists. The new technologies have also given scope and influence to new campaign elites, recruited from public relations and advertising, with expertise in television, direct mail and opinion polls.

Labour and Conservative parties have differed in their use of professional communications, differences which in part derive from their contrasting political values and party structures. But the convergences between the parties now outweigh the differences and amount to a new professionalization of campaign communications. For the 1992 election the parties devoted more resources to advertising, public relations, opinion polling and marketing strategies than ever before. A typical judgement on the election's stage-managed media events and photo-opportunities was that it 'was the most orchestrated, sanitised and Americanised campaign Britain has ever seen' (Berry 1992: 565). More broadly, according to Bob Franklin, we now live in 'a media democracy in which politicians and policies are packaged for media marketing and public consumption' (1994: 23). According to two observers of the successful Presidential campaign of Mary Robinson in Ireland in 1990, 'The political campaign is analogous to the product development process and can be described and managed in the same way' (Butler and Collins 1993: 4). Similar trends are evident in business, local and central government, pressure groups and many organizations. Franklin (1994: 4) quotes a Conservative Cabinet minister in 1988, saying 'policies are like cornflakes, if they are not marketed they will not sell'. All want to improve their internal and external communications.

We would not expect parties to be different, for a general election is the largest of all exercises in persuasion.

Professionalization

The trends towards the professionalization of the parties' campaign communications have not been confined to Britain. They are increasingly found across many countries where competitive elections are held, and where the uses of computers, television, advertising and opinion polling are well developed. This globalization of the new methods is sometimes called an 'Americanization' of campaigning. In the United States, computers and television have revolutionized American campaign methods and facilitated the rise of a corps of campaign consultants, pollsters and media advisers who in turn have made politicians dependent on them and their services. The main features of the professional model are (Blumler, Kavanagh and Nossiter 1995):

- 1 *The importance of campaign communications.* This process includes the parties' recruitment of technical experts from the public relations, media and advertising industries to assist with campaign publicity, media presentation, opinion polling and advertisements. It is accompanied by an *ethos* of professionalism in which the parties emphasize the need for co-ordination, orchestration and discipline in their communications.
- 2 *An uprating of publicity priorities in campaigning, as the party actors devote more energy and resources to media strategy and tactics.* Much of a leading politician's campaign day – the morning press conference, afternoon walkabout and evening rally – is largely shaped by the requirements of the media and setting the media agenda is the main purpose of the communications strategy.
- 3 *The explanation of a party's election victory or defeat in terms of (1) and (2) above, i.e. publicity-related factors.* Poor communications or 'failing to get the message across' are often advanced as major reasons for a party's defeat.
- 4 *The adaptation of the campaign to the presumed format requirements of television.* These include the persistence of leader walkabouts, focus on the leader and organization of press conferences and events suitable for soundbites, photographs and film.
- 5 *The idea of electioneering as political marketing.* Parties commission public opinion polls to research the mood of voters and the results are used by parties to shape their campaign communications. Opinion polls are also used by the news media to report how the parties are doing or what Americans call the election 'horse race'.

- 6 *An increase in negative or attack campaigning.* Publicity concentrates at least as much time attacking the defects of opponents as presenting the merits of the sponsoring party. More campaign managers appear to believe that such communications are electorally more effective than positive appeals. The aggressive tone is strengthened as journalists present a more negative interpretation of the campaign, in the sense of reporting it in adversarial terms (Patterson 1993).
- 7 *The dilemma for political journalists in defining a role for themselves in an era of 'saturation' coverage and manipulative politicians and campaign advisers.* Faced with the parties' efforts to shape and even manipulate media coverage, journalists respond by commissioning opinion polls, concentrating on campaign gaffes, assuming a 'disdainful' style of coverage and presenting behind-the-scenes stories about the party's strategies and image-making efforts (Levy 1981; Semetko et al. 1990).
- 8 *The main gainers from the new political campaigning being the independent experts such as advertising personnel, media advisers and pollsters, most of whom are recruited from outside the parties.* Within the party machine those charged with responsibility for publicity and campaigning have moved up the pecking order ahead of other officials. The publicity chief is often, *de facto* or *de jure*, a formal or informal member of the strategy group formed around the leader; this will not usually be so for other officials. The losers have been old-style politicians and party officials, in so far as they have not absorbed the new techniques.

Resistance

The above trends emerged rapidly in British elections between 1959 and 1970 and have been consolidated since. But initially they faced hurdles. Before 1959 there was little polling and no political advertising during general election campaigns. Even when professional communicators were employed they were often kept at arms' length by party leaders. One reason was the general scepticism among senior politicians that such techniques, perhaps suitable for promoting goods and services, were effective for politics. They claimed that politics was different and that, as elected politicians, it was their job to understand and to lead public opinion. They were their own communicators via speeches reported in the press, and political statements of national importance were made in Parliament not to the media. Most politicians also probably regarded themselves as having a higher social status than people employed in advertising or the media. In 1950 a deferential television interviewer asked Prime Minister Attlee if he had anything

he wished to say on the eve of the election campaign. Attlee replied 'No' and after an awkward pause that was the end of the interview!

There was also resistance from some officials employed in the parties' headquarters and from agents in the constituencies. During elections it was their task to report back on the voters' mood in the constituencies and to organize the distribution of party pamphlets and leaflets to the voters. The new methods and the new men were a threat, an invasion of their 'turf'.

There was, further, a perceived legal obstacle to importing the skills of the advertising industry. Party leaders assumed that political advertising during an election was illegal, because Section 63 of the Representation of the People Act provides that no person other than the candidate's duly authorized agent may incur election expenses. They feared that a display of national posters in a constituency might be regarded as an election expense and be chargeable to the local candidate. A court case (*R v. Tronah Mines Ltd*) in 1952, however, ruled that political advertising which did not mention specific candidates was not a breach of the law on expenses and opened the way for the use of nationwide posters in the campaign in the late 1950s. But parties remained uncertain about the legality of press advertising in the campaign and abstained from it until 1979. Since then the increase in such advertising has added substantially to the costs of elections, with the Conservatives for example spending nearly £4 million on press ads in the 1987 campaign. The rules governing access to the broadcasting media also limited the scope for political advertising – and therefore the use of money. Neither the BBC nor independent television allows party political advertising. According to a policy decision of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) 'No advertisement may be inserted by or on behalf of anybody the objects whereof are wholly or mainly of a political nature, and no advertisement may be directed towards any political end' (see Briggs 1970). Until recently, therefore, the scope for using the skills of the modern persuaders was restricted.

The most notable party use of an advertising agency and large-scale press advertising was by the Conservatives in the 1959 election and it produced much hostile comment. Labour politicians criticized the methods as 'Americanization', 'selling politics like soap powder' and some Conservatives also thought them vulgar. But the trends continued and by 1964 Labour followed suit. In the course of a review of a study of the 1964 election the Political Correspondent of *The Times* warned 'The real risk is that we are moving towards the day when

market research, opinion poll findings, techniques of motivational persuasion and public relations, and even the analyses of political scientists would be crudely and cold bloodedly used to govern party strategies in government and out' (27 April 1965).

Projecting Party Images

Achieving a favourable image for the candidate or party is now a key objective of modern campaigning. Parties and candidates will have images freely provided by the mass media and by their political opponents. Hence the incentive to do it for themselves. A prerequisite for good political communications is to understand the thinking of the voters. As long ago as 1908 Graham Wallas, in his *Human Nature in Politics*, questioned the assumption that most people thought rationally about politics; he was more impressed by how emotional and prejudiced they were and by their susceptibility to propaganda and symbolic appeals. Voters carried in their heads simple images of the parties and politicians should address that fact. In Wallas's words: 'Something is required, simpler and more permanent, something which can be loved and trusted, and which can be recognised at successive elections as being the same thing that was loved and trusted before; and a party is such a thing' (1948: 83).

Walter Lippman's *Public Opinion* (1922) also refuted assumptions that voters were rational; he claimed that most people thought about public affairs in terms of stereotypes. Joseph Schumpeter was another who emphasized the scope which politicians had for crude persuasion and making irrational appeals, largely because most people found politics complex and remote compared to, say, making decisions about spending the household budget; they wanted simplicity. Schumpeter believed that voters were more interested in a party's image than its policies (Schumpeter 1976: 283). A more up-to-date statement about the importance of the politician's and party's image was made by a speechwriter for Richard Nixon, then seeking the Republican nomination for the Presidential election in 1968. In a memorandum to his campaign colleagues he stressed that the voters' approval of a candidate was not based on reality, but

is a product of the particular chemistry between the voter and the image of the candidate. *We have to be very clear on this point: that the response is to the*

image, not to the man . . . It's not what's *there* that counts. . . . and this impression often depends more on the medium and its use than it does on the candidate himself. (McGinnis 1970: 174–5, original emphasis)

The new methods of political communications were pioneered in the United States. In 1933 the Californians Clem Whitaker and Leone Smith Baxter formed the first firm of campaign consultants, Campaigns Inc., providing the strategy and advertising for local candidates. Today their many successors can draw on computers, opinion polling, direct mail and diverse media outlets to plan more sophisticated and expensive campaigns. A significant development in political marketing via television advertising was the 1952 Presidential campaign of the Republican candidate, Dwight Eisenhower. His campaign team recruited from leading advertising agencies, commissioned Gallup to research the issues which concerned the voters and employed a Hollywood actor, Robert Montgomery, to improve Eisenhower's television performances. The candidate then made television and radio 'spot' commercials, lasting between 20 and 60 seconds, for transmission in key states. At the time half of American households already had television sets. The messages, in which Eisenhower expressed his concern about a particular issue and made a vague promise to improve things, were played repeatedly over the last few days of the campaign. Even greater influence was attributed to the medium in 1960 when John F. Kennedy impressed viewers in the first televised Presidential debates with Nixon.

Since then political marketing and the use of television in the United States have increased significantly in scale, sophistication and expense (Sabato 1981: ch. 4). The development of telephone canvassing and direct mail enables candidates and parties to write personalized letters to millions of 'target' voters for support and funds. Speeches are now made in specially staged locations to facilitate television coverage and in the hope of gaining an insert in a news broadcast, enabling candidates to speak to millions of voters in their living rooms. The 1968 Nixon Presidential campaign, designed to project a 'new Nixon', drew heavily on the skills of pollsters, advertising and public relations consultants and speechwriters, and marked a new stage in professionalization. Since then the Reagan, Bush and Clinton campaigns marked similar breakthroughs respectively in media management, negative advertising and research-based campaigning.

British parties have responded and are now expected to enter an election with what is called a communications strategy, just as a business does when it launches a new product. The professional communicators write planning papers well in advance of an election, stating the campaign's strategic objectives and proposing ways to realize them. The papers cover plans to set the political agenda, fight by-elections, increase or reduce the salience of particular issues and themes; they will also include suggestions for 'pacing' a campaign, timing initiatives, selecting themes and photo-opportunities for each campaign day, anticipating the election strategies of other parties and how these might be countered, as well as which research to commission, phrases and arguments to deploy for attack and defence and personalities to give prominence to. Posters and stage sets for the leaders' meetings are specifically designed to attract the 'free' coverage in the press and television news reports. Television coverage of the 'unveiling' of a single party poster is a virtually cost-free exercise and all parties ruthlessly exploited the format in 1992.

British party leaders delegate campaign arrangements to the head of the party organization. In the Conservative party this is the party Chairman, who heads Central Office and is usually a senior politician; for Labour, the General Secretary who runs the party headquarters. Each in turn will allocate a major responsibility to the party's communications director who, in contrast to other officials, is likely to have had public relations or media experience. The director will usually be the *de facto* client for the advertising and polling agencies and give approval to the proposals from the communications team. He or she is the link between party organization and the communications professionals.

Advertising agencies regularly ask or help their clients in business or politics to define their objectives. What do they stand for? How do they differ from their competitors? Why should people vote for them? In drawing up a strategy the essential questions they ask of the party managers, as of commercial clients, are:

What are we trying to say?

Whom are we trying to reach?

How should we reach them?

The policies are a matter for the politicians, and for the governing party they exist in the form of its record and its promises for the future; for the opposition parties in the form of their programmes. The target voters,

usually potential converts or potential defectors, are identified on the basis of focus-group research and surveys. Once the strategy has been designed the agency plays a significant role in choosing the media mix for communicating the party's messages. In 1991 Saatchi & Saatchi proposed that the Conservative party should concentrate on increasing the salience of issues on which it was favourably regarded by voters (e.g. defence, tax and law and order) and improving its standing on issues which were more salient (e.g. health, unemployment). The politicians agreed (see pp. 68–9).

Harry Treleavan, a member of Richard Nixon's advertising team in the 1968 Presidential campaign, wrote about the need to develop the 'proposition . . . the message we want to communicate', something that is more than a slogan or a theme (McGinniss 1970: 154). Communicators working for British parties listen to politicians, officials and researchers expounding the party's case and then use this information to propose themes for speeches, broadcasts and advertisements. Once the strategy emerges it will, as far as possible, be distilled to one or two pages. (For an example, see the Conservative strategy document for 1970 in the Appendix to chapter 3, pp. 75–6.)

Condensing a party's message to, say, one page, however, is not always easy. One difficulty, according to communicators, is that most politicians talk in a particular style and language. They are often evasive, invoke approved party symbols and myths and tend to be specific about benefits and vague about costs; they resort to generalizations and vagueness to avoid offending voters. Politicians may also remember that simple statements and slogans have often got political leaders into trouble. Chamberlain's 'peace for our time' (1938), Macmillan's 'never had it so good' (1957), Wilson's 'pound in your pocket' (1967), Heath's 'at a stroke' reduction in the rate of price rises (1970), Saatchi's 'Labour isn't working' poster (1978) and Callaghan's alleged 'Crisis? What crisis?' (1979), all soon came to haunt them.*

The fact that a government is unpopular, say, because of a poorly performing economy, divisions in Cabinet or outside events may also make it difficult for the party to answer the communicators' questions directly. Geoffrey Tucker, who has helped in various capacities with Conservative campaign communications, is struck by the sheer

* Callaghan did not use these words. It was the *Sun* newspaper's headline interpretation of his reply to a reporter's question on his return from Guadaloupe during widespread strikes.

variability of what is marketed in politics, compared to commerce: 'A can of coca-cola or a car does not change from day to day. But perceptions of a party, a government or a leader can shift dramatically not because they have changed but because of the impact of events. And we cannot control these' (interview). In 1963 the Conservative communicators felt themselves unable to project a positive message for the party because of the uncertainty over Harold Macmillan's leadership, scandals, by-election humiliations and economic problems. Labour's agency in 1983 had difficulty summarizing a positive case for such a divided party and for policies which many leaders found abhorrent. In 1991 the Conservative advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi found that party managers took some time to define John Major's new Conservatism. According to Jeremy Sinclair,

We had worked for Thatcher for many years and voters had a clear idea of what she stood for. We now wanted to know if the party clearly stood for lower taxes over more spending and the delay was in large part because the client did not yet know what he stood for. Politicians are bad, they don't have the discipline say, of the marketing department of Procter & Gamble. The job of advertising is to supply that discipline. What we want from a client is the objective or the proposition, what there is to support that proposition and what tone do they want to adopt. This produces three paragraphs and is the purpose of modern marketing. This simplicity comes as a surprise to many politicians. They want to go on and talk for ages. (Interview)

The typical politician's career background does not help. A party leader, or Conservative party Chairman or Labour General Secretary will usually have had less experience of acting as a client for an advertising or polling agency than will the managing director or marketing manager of a large company. The party leader or Conservative Chairman is plucked from the ranks of professional politicians, while most managers will have worked their way up the organization and, at each stage, probably been involved in decisions about marketing strategy. And few politicians before reaching the top have had to think in terms of preparing a communications strategy for the electorate as a whole. As they ascend the career ladder, politicians acquire skills in speaking to different audiences – local activists, fellow MPs, civil servants, party conferences and committees. But not until they become leaders do they regularly address the national electorate.

Why Communicators get Involved

It is understandable why a major party or ambitious candidate recruits a pollster, an advertising agency and volunteers from the public relations and communications industry. But parties can be difficult clients and not all advertising or polling agencies are willing to handle a party's account. Politics is controversial; a party's account may divide the agency's workforce and, particularly if the party is Labour, other clients of the agency may be offended. The pressures at election time are intense and even if the agency is large the demands may overload it or force it to neglect its other clients. Working for a political party is also high risk; mistakes are magnified and covered by the media, losing politicians are usually ungrateful, agencies are not expected to answer back and there is a dreadful finality about being on the losing side on polling day.

Yet many agencies and pollsters eagerly court political parties. The Conservatives, in particular, have had no shortage of applicants. Many are inspired by the record of Saatchi & Saatchi, whose turnover and profits before tax grew ten-fold and six-fold respectively in the first five years after taking the Conservative account in 1978. But that growth record was not sustained and a commercial boost is far from assured. An advertising agency will agree a programme of work and a budget with a party, covering fees for services and expenses of staff; in addition it will collect the standard 15 per cent commission for placing press advertisements, as well as costs for additional services. The financial rewards are modest, compared with what can be earned from commercial clients and payments from a party are often irregular and delayed; some Saatchi executives claim that the party has often undercharged for services and that, at best, the agency has broken even on the Conservative account. In 1992 the Saatchi election budget was some £5 million, and the account was still being paid off 24 months after the election by a Conservative party heavily in debt. In contrast, commercial clients usually settle accounts promptly. Communicators who have worked on a paid basis for Labour in the past have also complained about the difficulties in extracting payment from the party.

Most of the many rewards for the communicators are therefore less tangible. There is also the prospect of political honours (e.g. Labour's Lord Lyons and Lord Lovell-Davis, as well as the Conservatives' Sir Tim Bell, Sir Ronald Millar and Sir Gordon Reece). They certainly

acquire more visibility; handling a party account guarantees massive publicity for the agency or pollster. Communicators who have worked on an election campaign often look back on it as the most exciting period in their career. It provides an opportunity to meet a Prime Minister or other senior political figures (compared to the middle-level executives that they usually deal with), to help elect a government and to influence the way in which a country is governed. There is also the challenge that comes from the opportunity to write ads which are guaranteed wide publicity. Even professional communicators who have found working on an election campaign a bruising experience and the politicians ungrateful, usually still regard it as a highlight in their professional careers.

Full-time employees for the political parties do not always take easily to the arrival of the communicators. They are aware that most pollsters and advertising directors are highly paid, have careers and sources of income apart from their work for the party and enjoy privileged access to key party figures. They may also feel that the communicators' jobs are not on the line, in the way that their own are. As a group the communicators have little time for the labyrinthine committees so beloved of parties, particularly Labour.

There are analogies between an agency selling the merits of a political party or leader to voters and, say, a bar of chocolate to customers. (Indeed in 1981 the Conservatives recruited an executive from the American Mars chocolate company to head a new marketing department in Central Office and to promote direct mail.) In both cases the task is to formulate a communications strategy and then implement it. A profits-oriented firm or business wants to know what customers want and how to sell it to them. The communicator builds on the existing brand loyalty of customers or voters, tries to meet the dislikes and wishes of potential purchasers or supporters and selectively reviews the strengths and weaknesses of rival brands or parties. Voters are like customers and the party has to respond to their concerns and establish its own 'brand' image to distinguish itself from rivals.

Communications specialists are reluctant to state that selling parties is like selling a bar of soap because they know that politicians resent the analogy. But they also make clear that many of the disciplines involved in selling the two are similar. This is not surprising, for they have gained most of their experience in the commercial field and draw on it when employed by the political parties. A political scientist, Adrian Sackman, defends the relevance of a political marketing approach

'which views the political party as a "player" in the political market, exploiting the techniques of audience research and persuasion in a similar way to actions of a commercial firm operating in a competitive market' (Sackman 1994: 466).

In spite of similarities between promoting a product and promoting a party, differences remain. Publicists and pollsters who have worked in both fields claim that nothing in product promotion compares with the pressure of an election campaign – the need for speed, the intense scrutiny of the media, the public interest and the finality of the verdict on election day. In commerce there may be many rival brands but in an election campaign there is a more clearly defined opponent – be it a party or a candidate. John Bartle, a managing director of the BBH agency which does not handle party campaigns, reflected: 'There is no repertoire in politics. If you are advertising chocolate, people can buy two or three brands or change from day to day. But in politics you can vote for only one party. That is why you have to believe strongly what you are promoting in politics' (interview).

Targeting Voters

Experts in political communications, like their counterparts in commerce, talk about targeting specific groups. They broadly divide voters and constituencies into 'ours' and 'theirs'. In a competitive two-party system the crucial voters are those who are weakly attached or not attached to a party. The purpose of the opinion polling and qualitative research is to enable the party's strategists to identify the characteristics and concerns of these voters and then address them. Target voters may be variously defined by geographical location, life style, values or attitudes, demography, e.g. age, sex or social class, and so on. Another approach is to define the targets in terms of constituencies, particularly the marginal seats, the results in which decide most general elections. Apart, however, from some clustering in a few regions marginal seats are found across the country and the social characteristics of voters in such seats are pretty similar to those found elsewhere.

But some experts doubt the effectiveness of targeting, for commercial experience suggests that if the sales of a product increase they usually do so across social groups. It is also difficult to target voters precisely in a national campaign. The *Guardian* readership, for example, is largely

middle class but the paper and the great majority of its readers do not support the Conservative party; the *Sun* has a largely working-class readership and is read by many Labour voters but is hostile to the party. Martin Harrop's warning is apposite: 'Target voters should therefore be identified by attitudes to parties rather than to policies and, when this is done, they turn out to be much like everyone else. It is therefore no surprise that the campaign that works for target voters works for other groups as well' (Harrop 1990: 283). At constituency level, the development of computers and information technology does provide the opportunities for making targeted appeals to voters. Local parties can use telephone canvassing, direct-mail appeals for funds and support and leaflets to different socio-demographic groups. As yet, however, Britain still lags behind the United States in using these techniques and the strict laws on local campaign expenditure mean that they will be more widely used before the campaign is officially declared and limits on expenditure operate.

Conclusion

The ways in which a more professional communications approach has been adopted by the Conservative and Labour parties are considered in succeeding chapters. The development has had the effects of promoting among campaign managers a greater interest in studying the mood of the electorate; an increased awareness of 'key' voters and determination to target campaign messages at them; a concentration on and greater repetition of arguments and phrases, and a concern with setting the agenda by suggesting stories and interpretation for the media and staging events specifically for coverage. A professional approach to campaigning is marked by a number of features:

- the subordination of all goals to that of election victory;
- the reliance on survey and focus-group research to guide the party's appeal to voters;
- the pre-eminence of the mass media as the means for reaching voters;
- the importance of communications specialists in campaign terms.

Chapters 3 to 6 analyse the ways in which the parties have come to terms with the new methods. Before then chapter 2 provides a contextual background.

CONTEXT

It is difficult to generalize about election campaigns because no two elections are ever quite the same, even in one country. Students of elections often regard the verdict as the outcome of (a) long-term forces such as demography and underlying party loyalties, and (b) short-term factors surrounding each election, which reinforce or change those predispositions. The same kind of approach can be applied to election campaigns. Even within a period of three or four years each election is shaped by a different combination of short-term forces like public mood, political personalities and issues, party records, national and international events and more gradual changes in the composition of the electorate, election laws and communications technology. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the more significant features of the political environment in which British election campaigns are held. It discusses, in particular, the recent developments in electoral behaviour, campaign themes, parties and mass media.

Electoral Change

Since 1945 British society has become more middle class, more 'up-market'. As late as the 1970s market researchers divided society into an approximate 60-40 split between working and middle class. Today, depending on definitions, the manual working class has fallen to between a third and 40 per cent of the workforce. Since 1979 the steady increase in home ownership, now covering two-thirds of households, decline in trade union membership from over 13 million to less than 8 million, greater reliance on private transport and extension of share ownership to 20 per cent of the adult population, are signs of this

embourgeoisement. Some four-fifths of voters now belong to 'mixed' social-class categories, e.g. working-class home-owners, or white-collar wives of working-class husbands. The greater ambiguity of class identity has helped to weaken partisanship. Indeed, a person's housing tenure, whether owner-occupation or council tenancy, is now a better predictor of party vote than social class. The social changes have political consequences, for the groups declining in size – council-house tenants, trade unionists, manual workers and inner-city residents – have been disproportionately core Labour voters. A calculation of the net political effects of such social changes in the parties' hypothetical natural vote is that between 1964 and 1987 they cost Labour some four per cent of the vote and boosted the Conservative vote by nearly three per cent (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1991).

It is sometimes suggested that these social changes are connected with the growth of electoral volatility, although this feature has also been linked with the spread of television, better education and the voters' disappointment with the records in office of both major political parties. Volatility may be measured in different ways. Between a fifth and a quarter of voters claim to decide how to vote during the election campaign and about a third actually change their voting intention over the lifetime of a Parliament, features which have been pretty stable for the past twenty years. A second measure is party loyalty. Surveys conducted between 1964 and 1987 showed a fall in the number of people identifying with the Labour and Conservative political parties, particularly with Labour (see table 2.1). Of those claiming to identify very strongly with the two parties the fall has been sharper,

Table 2.1 Trends in party identification

	<i>Con. %</i>	<i>Lab. %</i>	<i>Lib./SDP %</i>
1964	39	42	12
1966	36	45	10
1970	40	43	8
Feb. 1974	35	40	13
Oct. 1974	34	40	14
1979	38	36	12
1983	36	31	17
1987	37	30	16
1992	42	31	12

Source: British Election Study cross-section surveys

from about a half in 1964 to a quarter in 1992. In theory, this means that many voters are potentially up for grabs at elections.

A third measure lies in the opinion polls and results in by-elections. Support for the Labour and Conservative parties was fairly steady in opinion polls and by-elections in the first two postwar decades. In these years campaign managers were able to divide the electorate into two pretty fixed camps – the working class, council estates and trade union members were solidly Labour, the middle class, home-owners and the ‘aspiring’ working class were solidly Conservative. Work, family, neighbourhood and friendships all socialized many people into an allegiance for one or other of the two big parties. ‘Other’ parties attracted very little support. Since then there have been big shifts among voters. In the course of the 1979–83 Parliament, for example, each of the three main parties (including the new SDP–Liberal Alliance) saw its share of support in the opinion polls fluctuate by as much as 20 per cent. Whereas only one seat changed hands at by-elections in the twenty years after 1945 one in three seats have changed since then, almost invariably at the cost of the government of the day.

More recent research suggests that this fickleness may have been due less to changes in social structure or public mood and more to the initiatives of the politicians. These include Labour’s move to the left and split after 1979, the creation and then collapse of the Social Democratic party and the Conservative’s move to the right under Mrs Thatcher. In other words, a good part of the change in party support may be a response to the different signals communicated by the parties.

What is undeniable is that the share of the electorate now regularly voting for the Labour and Conservative parties has fallen considerably in recent years. At the general elections between 1945 and 1970 an average of 91 per cent of voters supported the two parties; since then it has fallen to 76 per cent. And the class base of the party system has declined. In 1964 some two-thirds of the working class voted Labour and two-thirds of the middle class voted Conservative. But in elections since 1979 less than half of the working class vote Labour and just over half of the middle class vote Conservative. Indeed the rise of support for a centre party (be it Liberal, Alliance or Liberal Democrat) means that most people now vote for a party not of their ‘natural’ class. Another way to describe the impact of these changes is to say that the stable, class-based two-party system that prevailed in Britain between 1945 and 1970 has steadily weakened.

Yet for all the talk of volatility, it is still the case that most voters

(nearly 80 per cent) have already decided how to vote before the campaign begins. A party has little chance in the short period of a campaign to overturn a voter’s long-standing allegiance to another party. Over thirty years ago, Labour’s Richard Crossman stated: ‘The election is the end of a long process’.

We can adopt the notion of a normal or expected vote to gain some idea of a party’s baseline support, the share of the vote a party will *normally* gain, other things being equal. For Richard Rose, ‘The normal vote reflects long-term structural influences, and the current deviation reflects short-term cyclical fluctuations’ (1992: 452). It can be compiled from recent figures on party identification, local election results, national elections and opinion polls and used to test if parties do better or worse than expected in elections. In the general elections between 1945 and 1970 the two main parties averaged similar levels of support – around 45 per cent each. But because Labour usually enjoyed a lead over the Conservatives in its share of party identifiers it could be judged to have ‘under-performed’, the Conservatives to have ‘over-performed’. The task of Labour campaigners, therefore, was to mobilize the party’s ‘natural’ majority in the largely working-class electorate, while the task of Conservatives was to retain their supporters and attract converts.

Since then, the party balance has shifted dramatically. Table 2.2 shows that in general elections between February 1974 and 1992 the Conservative share of the vote varied between 43.9 per cent (1979) and 35.8 per cent (October 1974) and the Labour vote between a high of 39.2 per cent (October 1974) and a low of 27.6 per cent (1983). The Conservative mid-point in these elections was 39.8 per cent, 6.4 per cent higher than Labour’s 33.4 per cent, giving normal votes of some 40 per cent and 34 per cent respectively, for the two parties. In the 1992 election both parties (Conservative 41.9 per cent, Labour 34.4 per cent)

Table 2.2 Normal vote 1945–92

	Con. %	Lab. %	Lib. %	Other %
Mean, 1945–70	45.2	46.1	7.1	1.6
Mean, Feb. 1974–92	40.7	34.4	19.5	5.5
Range, Feb. 1974–92	39.8 +–4.1	33.4 +–5.8	19.6 +–5.8	5.5 +–1.1
General election result 1992	41.9	34.4	17.8	5.0

Source: R. Rose, ‘Structural change or cyclical fluctuations?’ *Parliamentary Affairs* 1992: 453

just managed to exceed their normal vote. The figures clearly show that over the past two decades the Labour and Conservative parties do not enter an election on equal terms, regarding their natural levels of support. Labour has been second best and 'getting out the vote' has no longer been sufficient for victory.

Politicians and political scientists have concentrated more attention on political issues than on party images. Politicians often think in terms of 'our' agenda, i.e. those issues which their party is perceived as handling better than other parties, and then try to fight the election on them. But studies suggest that this approach is of limited use for understanding electoral behaviour. If people had voted purely on the basis of their policy preferences in 1983 then the outcome would have been a virtual dead heat between Labour and Conservative rather than a decisive Conservative victory. Had voters decided in 1987 on the basis of their preferences on the key issues of unemployment and health then Labour would have just won, rather than suffering another crushing defeat. And on the basis of surveys about voters' main issue concerns (education and unemployment) Labour would have gained a handsome victory in 1992.

Issues, therefore, are only part of the story. Ivor Crewe (1993: 115) reminds us that voting is not like shopping in a supermarket, for dissatisfied voters cannot simply change policies or the government after a few weeks. Parties offer a service, namely governing the country, and have to persuade voters that they can do it competently. Voting for a party may be more like choosing a doctor or solicitor where a client relies on the professional's competence and reputation. Voters are interested in a party's image, particularly such features as its perceived trustworthiness, potential governmental competence, ability to manage the economy and the likelihood that it will keep its promises. A problem for Labour in 1987 and 1992 was that, for all its popularity on a number of issues, many voters simply did not trust it, particularly on the economy. Martin Harrop suggests that, because of their interest in a party's image, marketing experts are more likely to appreciate the distinction than political scientists (Harrop 1990: 278).

Campaign Change

National campaign techniques have gradually changed, largely as a consequence of developments in communications technology. Before

the 1959 election television did not cover the election, few public and no private opinion polls were conducted during the campaign and no party employed an advertising agency in a significant way. Campaign managers in headquarters had little sense of a campaign plan or an overall communications strategy and professional communicators played limited roles, such as designing and placing advertisements and posters. Today, by contrast, the national leaders are supported by research and professional help, fight media-oriented, particularly television-oriented, campaigns, 'target' groups of voters, 'pace' the campaign and fight on 'their' agenda. Parties at the centre self-consciously adopt campaign strategies and employ professional communications advisers to help them.

It is worth stressing that the developments of opinion polling, advertising and television are almost entirely employed by campaign managers at the centre and not in the constituencies. The limited opportunities to spend money (see below, pp. 33-4) restrict the local candidate's ability to use the new campaign techniques. Some four-fifths of constituencies are safe for the incumbent party so the overall election result is effectively decided in the remaining hundred or so marginal seats. Some targeting of seats is done as the party headquarters provide limited help in the form of advice, computers, staff and funds to the marginal. Poor attendances have resulted in the wholesale abandonment of public meetings and a decline in the amount of door-to-door canvassing. Perhaps the main change at the local level has been the use of computers. Since 1986 local authorities have supplied local parties with electoral registers on computer tape. Parties with up-to-date records of the names and the voting intentions of the people on the electoral register can use computers for niche marketing and to direct personal letters to target voters, according to their party loyalty, issue concerns and even socio-economic backgrounds. Letters can be directed, for example, to elderly voters outlining a party's policies on pensions. But the success of direct mail depends upon the local party activists collecting reliable data on the voters and keeping it up to date. So far the use of direct mail in British campaigns still lags behind that in the US.

Party managers have become increasingly aware of the need to communicate with voters over the long term, not just during the three weeks of the election campaign. Some influences on the voter stemming, for example, from childhood or schooling are too remote for the parties to influence; a government's record in office or memories of

what the opposition did when it was last in office are largely beyond the campaigners' control, although skilled communications may influence public perceptions. A party in government is particularly well placed to use office to dominate news bulletins and shape the agenda before the election is declared. A government's policy proposals, ministers' speeches and initiatives and the Prime Minister's activities satisfy the media's criteria of 'news' and are sure to be reported. Another advantage is that in contrast to the election period the broadcasting media are not obliged by rules of political 'balance' to give equal coverage to the other political parties.

But a British government's efforts in image projection and management pale in comparison with those of the United States, where the use of the White House for campaigning has been developed to a fine art. President Reagan's staff ruthlessly used photo-opportunities, tours, speeches, press conferences and other initiatives to dominate the media and help his chances of re-election in 1984. White House officials seemed to judge the performance of government by the contents of the television news programmes: 'For the Reagan White House every night is election night on television' (Kernell 1986: 138). Reagan spent some two-thirds of his time in the White House on public relations and ceremonial duties, compared to only one-third on policy matters (Foley 1992: 96-7). Less successful in managing the media was President Carter, even though his pollster advised him at the outset, 'Government with public approval requires a continuous political campaign' (Sieb 1987: 184).

In spite of the more professional communications approaches there has been a good deal of continuity in the electoral messages of the Labour and Conservative parties. Because a party is already a known quantity to most voters it is not entirely free in the choice of credible appeals which it can make; many voters already have an image of a party, one that usually changes slowly. A party has either to build on this or try to change it gradually. To some extent, voters' perceptions of Labour and Conservative are mirror images of each other and have been so for many years. A study of the parties' standings on issues in opinion polls shows that for much of the postwar period they have 'owned' different issues (Budge and Fairlie 1983; Harrop and Shaw 1989: 71). Labour dominates the 'caring' issues of pensions, health, education and employment. The Conservatives have long been ahead on the issues of law and order, defence and immigration, as well as taxes and (except for the early 1970s) prices and prosperity. These

differing strengths and weaknesses of the political parties remained largely intact in the 1992 election.

The Conservative party has been seen as more united than Labour, apart from short spells in the 1960s, 1974 and post-1992. It has also been regarded as the more likely of the two to provide competent economic management and to defend Britain's interests against other countries. Since the beginning of the century Conservative electioneering has regularly attacked the opposition party of the day for lacking patriotism, threatening private property and enterprise and neglecting the nation's defences. Labour has been widely regarded as the party of 'fairness', in the sense of favouring policies which promote equality, help the less well-off and protect the welfare state and full employment. What recent elections, particularly 1992, show, however, is that the electorally decisive arena is the economy and perceptions of which party is more likely to deliver prosperity.

A party's positioning on the issues depends only partly upon its traditional values; whether it is in or out of office also matters. At election time a government persistently boasts about the strength of the economy it has achieved compared with the mess it inherited from the opposition. For the government to blame the other side for its economic difficulties is now a standard theme of campaign rhetoric. The new Labour government in 1964 made great play with the £800 million balance of payments deficit it inherited from the Conservatives. This struck such a chord that voters were still blaming the Conservatives for the country's economic problems some years later under a Labour government. Mr Heath's government blamed the rising inflation rate it inherited in 1970 on the short-term decisions of the outgoing Labour government. When it regained office in March 1974 Labour in turn exploited the coal strike and industrial disruption which preceded the election.

More positively, a government puts a favourable gloss on its record and warns against the dangers of change. In 1959 the Conservative government exploited the mood of prosperity and warned voters 'Don't let Labour ruin it'. When in government again, the party's slogan in the last week of the 1987 election campaign was virtually identical. In 1970 Harold Wilson boasted 'No Prime Minister in this century has fought an election against such a background of economic strength as we have today', and regularly attacked the 'doom and gloom merchants' and 'the knock Britain brigade'. His successors as Prime Minister have regularly recited statistics in election speeches and

interviews to show what economic progress there has been under their stewardships and attacked media critics and political opponents for 'talking Britain down'.

Governments usually excuse their own shortcomings by pointing to the unacceptable alternative. They try to make an election issue of the opposition party. 'Is that really what you want?' ministers ask. In its 1979 manifesto Labour pointedly overlooked its own recent winter of industrial discontent and reminded voters:

When Labour came to government in March 1974, Britain was facing its most dangerous crisis since the war. The Tory programme of confrontation and social injustice brought the country almost to its knees. Unlit streets, unheated homes, shut-down factories – these were the fruits of the Tory three-day week . . . but . . . Our country has come a long way since.

Conservatives have reaped rich electoral dividends from the winter of discontent under the last Labour government. In 1979 and every subsequent general election the party's manifesto and election broadcasts have referred to it. In 1992 the Conservatives did not have much of an economic case to set before the electorate. Instead their communications hammered at Labour on tax and spending, and leadership – two areas which, surveys told them, were Labour weaknesses. The thrust of such campaign communications is: 'You may not think much of us, but look at the alternative'.

A recurring election theme of the opposition is that it is time for change, to counter the government's claim for a mandate to finish the job, or to carry on with its excellent work. In 1964 the Labour opposition's campaign theme was 'Lets GO with Labour'. In the 1960s and 1970s the opposition exploited public concern over rising prices to berate the government of the day. Conservatives did this effectively in 1970, making use of a shopping basket in election broadcasts to remind voters of how the price of goods had risen under Labour. Labour retaliated in the 1974 general election, by sending its most prominent female politicians, Barbara Castle and Shirley Williams, both armed with shopping baskets, to compare price levels in the shops with those in 1970. In 1979 the Conservative slogan in the final week was 'It's Time For Change'. In 1992 Labour used virtually the same slogan.

Parties frequently accuse their opponents of having a hidden agenda, policies that will be so unpopular that they keep quiet about them. Since 1979 Labour has regularly charged that the Conservatives have plans to cut back or tax some welfare benefits and privatize education

and health. Surveys in 1992 showed that most voters believed the health accusations. Conservatives base their charges that a Labour government will increase taxes on their 'costing' of the party's spending promises and translating this sum into extra income tax. They also frequently point to the sinister left-wing politicians and trade union leaders lurking behind the leader. In 1955 the pro-Tory *Daily Express* ran a famous cartoon which showed a smiling Aneurin Bevan lurking behind the party leader Clement Attlee. The implication was that the left was poised to take over from a moderate Labour leadership (see figure 2.1). In February 1974 a controversial election broadcast showed the faces of moderate Labour frontbenchers giving way to prominent left-wingers. The consistent message is that behind the 'moderate' image Labour presents to the voters, 'extreme' left-wingers are waiting to take over.

Party leaders may also try to invent or exploit a sense of crisis, warning voters that they have not yet understood the dangers of electing the other party. Usually the opposition does this but the government may do so if it looks like losing the election. In 1966 Mr Heath trailed by a large margin in the opinion polls and warned voters that the country was facing its greatest threat since 1938 – that of national bankruptcy. In 1970 Heath, again tagged by the media as an inevitable election loser, once more wore the mantle of a prophet of gloom. In the final weekend he appealed: 'I have to say to the British people "For heaven's sake wake up"'. I want them to recognize what the real issues are, because Labour has pursued a policy of diversion with a bogus story of sham-sunshine'. In 1992 John Major, also facing defeat according to the opinion polls, claimed in the last few days, that 'The United Kingdom is in danger. Wake up, my fellow countrymen! Wake up now before it is too late!'

Party Change

The outcomes of elections decide whether or not parties have the opportunity to realize their policy goals and fulfil their leaders' ambitions for office. Politicians and party activists often invoke military or sporting analogies to distinguish elections from routine activities. When an election is announced a party is said to be put on a 'war footing', as opposed to 'peace time', 'troops' are called to 'battle', a speech is a 'rallying cry' and the opposition is frequently designated the

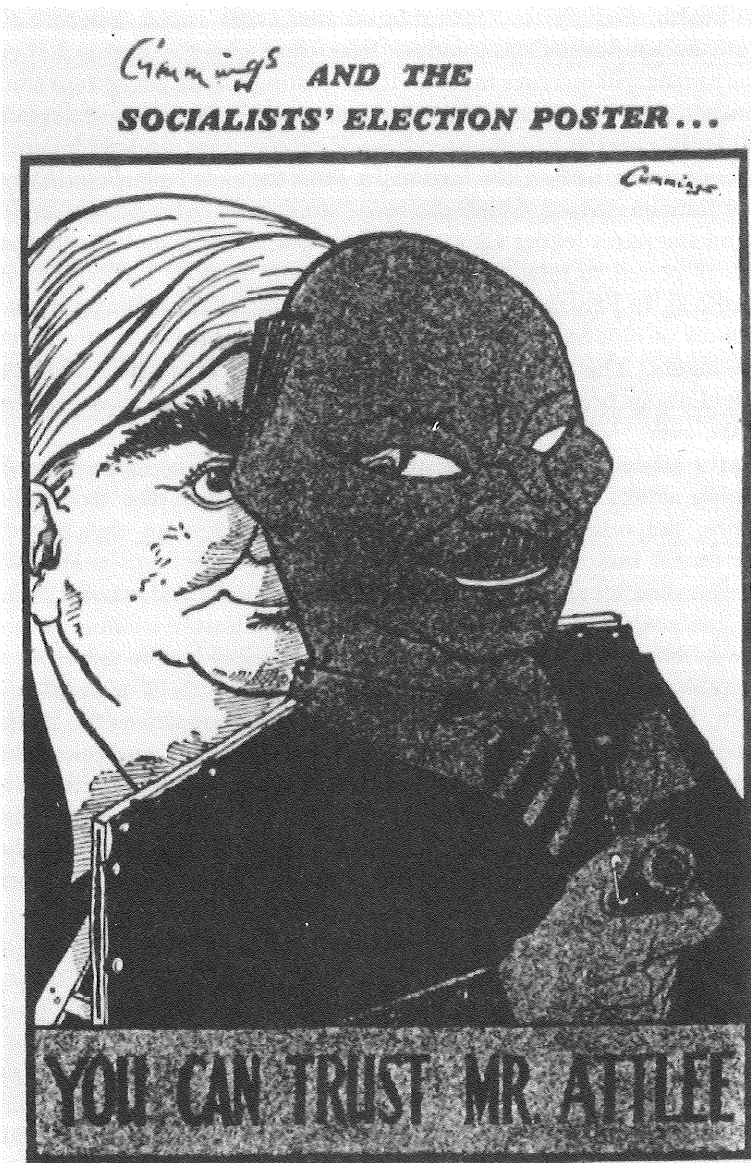


Figure 2.1 A cartoon carried in the Conservative-supporting *Daily Express* in the 1955 general election. It expresses a familiar Conservative election charge that the left wing (here represented by Aneurin Bevan) will dominate a Labour government.

'enemy'. The party's campaign planning document is usually called a 'War Book', and for planning purposes parties use the 'D-(minus)' system, numbering each day in a countdown to 'D-Day' – polling day. The media also use military or sporting-contest metaphors in reporting the campaign.

But to fight elections political parties require resources, particularly workers, funds and professional staff. How well equipped are British parties? We have already noted a weakening of popular attachment to the main parties. It may be a sign of the voters' low commitment to parties that so few are willing to participate in activities that involve a public proclamation of their loyalties. A MORI poll in January 1993 found that only 4 per cent of voters would canvass in person for the party or speak out at another party's meeting, and a mere 2 per cent would canvass by telephone or discuss the advantages of the party with strangers in the street. Parties are not, relatively speaking, as well resourced in members or even money as they were twenty or thirty years ago. In the 1950s the Labour party claimed about a million individual members, a figure that has fallen to about 300,000 today. Over the same period Conservative membership has declined from a figure of some 2.8 million in the 1950s to less than half a million, and the majority of both parties' members are hardly active.

Disillusion with the policies of the Labour government in 1966–70 led to a large exodus of party activists from local parties (Seyd and Whiteley 1992) and something similar has happened among Conservative associations in the early 1990s (Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson 1994). The decline has had the effect of reducing the number of those eligible to perform political chores, fill offices in the constituency parties and stand in local elections. The parties have also found themselves under severe financial pressure. By the end of 1994 Conservative Central Office reported an accumulated deficit of over £16 million and both Labour and Conservative parties have had to make severe reductions in staff. Compared to the major political parties a number of pressure groups are better financed and have larger and more active memberships.

It is fortunate for the parties that British elections are relatively cheap when compared with the sums spent in other countries, or even with pre-1918 elections. Candidates in the constituencies are strictly limited by law on how much money and on what they can spend. In 1992 successful candidates spent around £5,000 on their constituency campaigns, with the Conservatives spending a bit more than candid-

ates for other political parties. Most is spent on leaflets and clerical chores. The strict spending limits preclude local parties from using opinion polls, large-scale telephone canvassing or paid advertising in the local media and contrast sharply with the position in the US (see chapter 10). In real terms the local campaign spending has fallen by about a third compared to 1945.

There is, however, no control on the parties' central expenditure. Nor is there any requirement on them to publish their spending figures for advertising, opinion research, election broadcasts and leaders' tours and rallies. Not until 1964 did a party (Conservative) spend over £1 million in a campaign, a figure that was not breached again until 1979 (once more Conservative). Since then election spending has risen sharply, with Labour following on the heels of the Conservatives and by 1992 almost catching up. Labour's 1992 spending doubled compared to 1987. It is difficult to compare the costs precisely because of differences in what the parties declare as campaign expenditure and which periods they cover. The parties' estimates of their spending for the 1992 election are presented in table 2.3. In real terms total spending in 1992 fell compared to 1987 and the cost of both elections in real terms was less than in 1935 and 1964 (Pinto-Duschinsky 1991).

State finance for the parties would be a way of reducing the two big parties' dependence on interest groups for funds. There is in fact already a good deal of indirect state subsidy for the parties' campaign activities. They receive free broadcasting time for their television and radio election broadcasts, use of halls for election meetings and distribution of local candidates' election addresses in the campaign. Pinto-Duschinsky (1991) calculates that the value of these subsidies in kind during the election actually exceeds the total local and central campaign spending of the parties. The exclusion of political advertising from the broadcasting media also acts as a limitation upon the level of

Table 2.3 Parties' central campaign expenditure (1992)

	1987 (£ million)	1992 (£ million)
Conservative	9	11.2
Labour	4.3	10.6
Liberal	1.9	1.8

Source: Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, 'Labour's £10 m campaign spending closes the gap with Tories', *The Times* 30 November 1992

campaign spending and the impact of money in campaigns. Parties may, however, spend freely on press advertising and in 1987 50 per cent of the parties' total election spending went on national press advertising. In 1992 the Conservatives cut this spending back by two-thirds and spent more on posters, election broadcasts and sets for John Major's rallies. Although Conservatives have outspent Labour in postwar general elections and won more often, it is doubtful if money wins elections. The Conservatives heavily outspent Labour on press advertising in elections from 1979 to 1987, but not in 1992. Indeed Labour spent even more if we credit advertisements from public sector trade unions to the party. One always has to remember that people are more likely to be influenced by the news and current affairs coverage of the election on television and in the press.

A political party is not a unitary entity. A party machine consists of many different sections or departments, covering research, publicity, organization, campaigns, women, trade unions, finance and so on. At election time there will also be specialist units which concentrate on marginal or 'special' seats, overseas electors, postal votes, relations with the mass media, the party leader's tour and so on. The efforts of these groups affect the final outcome but observers may sometimes be struck by the extent to which they are wrapped up in their own activities. A major division in a British party's organization is between those career staff employed in its London headquarters and those in the constituency parties. The professional staff in London operate nationally, servicing the party leadership, developing policy, trying to generate favourable publicity and liaising with constituency parties. But local parties are voluntary bodies, employing very few or, more usually, no career staff and much time is spent recruiting members and raising funds. Candidates rely on their local members' goodwill to deliver leaflets, raise funds and canvass support at election time. Norman Tebbit, as Conservative party Chairman, once compared himself to 'a general whose troops may desert at any time and I can't do anything about it' (interview). For the national leaders winning or losing a general election is crucial, affecting their own careers and their ability to implement policies. But some members of the constituency party may be consoled for national defeat by winning the seat or running the local council. For some constituency parties electing a few local councillors is a more realistic political goal than striving to elect an MP.

The Labour and Conservative parties are hardly models of efficient

organizations. A Prime Minister understandably ranks the party machine rather low in his list of priorities and party leaders have rarely sought to strengthen the party headquarters, perhaps fearing the emergence of a rival power centre. Central Office chairmen have often been appointed for their political support for the leader of the day, rather than for their proven electoral or organizing skills. No postwar Conservative leader has taken much interest in Central Office and Mrs Thatcher, according to aides, was often scathing about its performance. She became almost apoplectic when the Chairman, Lord Thorneycroft, recommended that Ted Heath should be recalled to share the platform with her at one of the party's final election press conferences in 1979, a suggestion she regarded as defeatist. Her unease about the party Chairman Norman Tebbit and his campaign strategy led her to appoint another minister to Central Office to 'shadow' Tebbit, seek advice elsewhere about polling and strategy and insist on a last-minute change in advertising (see below, p. 64). Her Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson (1992: 698), wrote that as a result of the tensions Central Office was 'divided into two warring factions, who spent far more energy trying to get the better of each other than they did in fighting the enemy'.

Most Labour leaders, from Hugh Gaitskell on, have also complained about the campaign effectiveness of their party's organization. Key appointments, including the General Secretary and Campaigns and Communications Director, are made by the NEC, at times over the leader's opposition. Leaders have often sought to keep the drafting of the manifesto, the results of private opinion polls and key campaign plans under the control of their office. In 1959 Hugh Gaitskell's relations with the party's General Secretary and the head of publicity were poor. Harold Wilson's lack of confidence in Labour's electoral machine was succinctly noted in the 1966 Nuffield election study: 'In all of the Prime Minister's electoral thinking, the National Executive Committee and the party staff at Transport House played very little part' (Butler and King 1966: 30). The tensions continued during the 1970s and 1980s. The party organization was in no sense the source of Labour's strategic thinking about elections. Most party leaders despaired of its efficiency and looked elsewhere for advice on strategy.

Political parties require the services of professionals. At constituency level the key figure is the agent, usually the party's only fulltime official. Election law requires the candidate to have a designated agent who is accountable for expenditures designed to promote the candidacy. But

less than a tenth of local Labour parties and fewer than half of local Conservative parties now have the resources to employ a fulltime agent. In 1951 Labour had fulltime agents in about half the seats, and the Conservatives had one in virtually every seat. Most Conservative fulltime agents are concentrated in the safe seats which can afford to employ them. For a time in the 1970s the party had a scheme of centrally employed (and paid) agents who were directed to the marginal seats but the scheme lapsed as a result of financial pressure and constituency jealousies.

A party agent is expected to be interested in politics and support his or her political party. But excessive political commitment in a professional can be a disadvantage. A political party may be divided on key policies or change policy direction quickly, as the Conservative party did in the transition from Edward Heath to Margaret Thatcher or Labour did when Foot replaced Callaghan and again under Kinnock after 1987. Much more of the agent's time is spent in fundraising activities than in debating politics. As Richard Rose says, 'A good agent is more like a clergyman than like a bishop or a theologian' (1974: 176).

Parties also have their own research departments. At general elections researchers provide the arguments, quotes and statistics to support the party's speakers. The Conservative Research Department was created in 1929 out of the Parliamentary Secretariat. It came into its own after 1945 and again after 1964 when, having lost office, the party embarked on ambitious policy reviews. Labour's research department was founded in 1932. It works on home or domestic policy and a separate international department works on foreign policy. Both parties recruit staff mainly from recent university graduates, some of whom regard a post as a stepping-stone to becoming a Member of Parliament. The work brings the researcher into contact with ministers and MPs, briefing them, servicing backbench committees and helping ministers with speeches. Six of Mrs Thatcher's final Cabinet in 1990 had had previous Research Department experience and in the 1992 Parliament 26 Conservative MPs had at one time worked in the department.

The different centres of power in the Labour party have sometimes created difficulties and opportunities for researchers. By tradition the department has been more left wing and more oriented to the party conference than the Parliamentary party. In the 1960s and 1970s senior staff often criticized the work of a Labour government and complained

of the influence of the civil service on ministers. In these years its concentration on preparing long-term policies brought it into conflict with the then Labour government. Harold Wilson was furious at the department for producing a draft manifesto, *Agenda for a Generation*, which he felt was a device for putting left-wing pressure on him. Wilson again, before the 1974 election, and James Callaghan, before the 1979 election, voiced similar complaints about the left-wing thrust of the policy work of the department and its neglect of what they regarded as its more important task of providing research to support the government (Minkin 1980).

In the run-up to the 1992 election the Conservatives employed 25 desk officers who combed through opposition speeches, articles and policy documents for damaging material. Such 'bullets' of information, to be used in ministers' speeches or fed to sympathetic journalists, are essential for a negative campaign. The department prepared 65 dossiers in the 12 months before the election was called and produced 21 publications on the theme 'You Can't Trust Labour' during the first two months of 1992.

Attracting well qualified and politically sympathetic publicists has proved to be a problem for both political parties. The task of the publicist is to help the party to gain favourable media coverage. The job includes briefing the media, liaising with the party's polling and advertising agencies and supervising the preparation of a communications campaign for the general election. Conservatives have usually drawn their directors from outside Central Office, from press or public relations, and suffered a high turnover. No director has yet served the party in that post in two successive general elections. The three most recent appointments have come from advertising (Brendan Bruce, 1989–90), television (Shaun Woodward, 1991–2) and the Research Department (Tim Collins, 1992–5). Although the Director is responsible to the Chairman of the party and through him to the party leader, the appointment is in the hands of the party leader. This frustrated Norman Tebbit when, as party Chairman (1985–7), he found that all the names he proposed for the post to Mrs Thatcher were turned down and the party fought the 1987 election without a Director of Publicity.

Publicity, in Labour, was for long a career post and appointments were made from within the party machinery. Until his retirement in 1978 Percy Clarke (who had held the post since 1963) was one of only three people since 1945 to have held the post of Press and Publicity Director. (The title was changed to Campaigns and Communications

Director in 1985). In the sixteen years since Clarke's retirement the post has been held by five different people, including an ex-MP, an ex-trade union public relations officer, two former television producers and a special adviser to the deputy leader. The Director is appointed by and reports to the NEC and is a member of the campaign committee. At times he has often been caught up in the warfare that has existed between left and right and the party leader and the NEC. But under Neil Kinnock the Director's effectiveness depended crucially on his closeness to the party leader.

Media Change

Perhaps the most significant change in the campaign context has been in the role of the mass media, particularly television. Modern elections have become mass-media elections. Parties and candidates can only communicate with millions of voters through the national press and broadcasting networks and much national campaign activity is tailored for television. Campaign managers have developed techniques to feed or counter a partisan press and cope with an increasingly active but statutorily impartial television system (see chapters 8 and 9). In a recent general election a Labour MP, Austen Mitchell, complained that he was treated as an intruder when canvassing because he disturbed people who were following the election on television! A constant refrain of campaign managers about an election activity is: 'If it's not covered by the cameras, then there is not much point in doing it'. In some respects there are two election campaigns, one in which politicians address voters, another in which they address the media journalists, but as a means of communicating with voters.

The British broadcasting media are independent of political parties and have only an indirect relationship with the government. Although the broadcasting media are free from editorial direction by the government, both the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and independent television companies are subject to government regulation: the Boards of Governors of the BBC and Independent Television Corporation (ITC) are appointed by the Home Secretary, the BBC's licence fee is determined by the government and it operates under a charter decided by Parliament. The BBC and ITV are also expected to maintain a balance between the parties in their coverage of politics.

The political impact of television advertising was first seen in the US

Presidential election in 1952 (see above, p. 14). Perceptive British politicians also noted that over 20 million people had watched the Coronation on television in 1953 and wondered how the new medium could be used for politics. Before 1959, however, television and radio refused to cover a general election, ceasing all political coverage from the beginning of the campaign until the close of polling. This was despite the fact that three-quarters of households already had television sets and the election was the main source of news in the national press. The BBC observed its duty to be politically 'balanced' by ignoring the election, apart from providing time for the parties to transmit their own election broadcasts. It feared that coverage would infringe the law restricting spending on the promotion of candidates.

The position is very different today. The broadcasters have steadily increased their campaign coverage, carrying debates between and interviews with leading political figures, allowing voters to question politicians, providing expert analysis and interpretation and using outside cameras to report events live. Voters claim that television is their main source of information about politics and the most trusted as well. As Blumler (1974) notes, in covering elections the British media, notably the broadcasters, are subject to a variety of pressures and expectations. In 1992 87 per cent of the public claimed to view television news at least once a day before the election campaign began and 83 per cent during it; for reading the national press the respective figures were 66 per cent and 63 per cent. The same survey reported that 88 per cent considered that television had covered the election 'very' or 'fairly' well, compared to 62 per cent who gave a similar evaluation to the press. More striking was the finding that 78 per cent thought that the BBC and ITV could be relied on to give unbiased and truthful coverage, compared to only 23 per cent who thought the same of the press (Butler and Kavanagh 1992: 179).

Parties compete not only for votes but also in setting the campaign agenda, i.e. what the election is about. This creates tensions between the parties and news organization teams (Semetko et al. 1990). Behind the public party battle there lurks another, less overt, struggle between politicians and television journalists over election coverage. Most voters expect to be entertained as well as informed, some look mainly for reinforcement of their political loyalties, and some are more open-minded and seek guidance. The politicians want to ensure that 'their' issues, statements and photo-opportunities are adequately covered by the mass media. Parties are now intense in covering all media outlets

and opportunities, monitoring broadcasts and trying to dominate the agenda. They are also more willing to employ the services of media advisers, in support of their own communications officials, to help with news management, press conferences, current affairs programmes and interviews. Politicians are therefore both media communicators and media audience; in both roles they are highly partisan.

What, however, should be the role of the broadcast journalists? Is their main role to carry the parties' soundbites and photo-opportunities or make an independent contribution of their own, interpreting and contextualizing what the politicians are doing? At the BBC Blumler found that some were *sacerdotalists*, viewing an election as intrinsically important and regarding it as their duty to provide full and serious coverage of the parties' activities. Others were *pragmatists*, arguing that the amount of election coverage should be based on news values and take account of audience size and interest.

British parties have some control over broadcasting coverage, through their party election broadcasts (PEBs). But these lack credibility and quickly lose viewers. More significant – and what constitutes much of the battleground between politicians and broadcasters – is how the election is covered as part of news and current affairs reporting. Because this audience is, compared to the election broadcasts, more 'inadvertent' and drawn from across the political spectrum, the reporting may have more impact. Campaign managers are more interested in gaining coverage on the relatively non-political early evening programmes and the main news bulletins; in 1992 the BBC and ITN attracted audiences of around a third of the electorate for their main evening bulletins. And even if the amount of coverage of a party's activities is balanced according to a stop-watch, the broadcasters have some discretion in selecting which issues, personalities and events to cover as well as in presenting them.

At first the politicians adapted to the introduction of television by providing activities for the cameras, e.g. Harold Wilson's walkabouts in 1970. By 1974 they had moved from adapting to trying to manipulate the medium, by providing specially staged events for morning, early evening and late evening coverage. Television relies on pictures and the parties strive to control the pictures transmitted by scheduling events, rallies, leaders' visits to hospitals, factories, schools and so on to carry the message. The reasoning is that if the broadcasts are limited to what the party allows them to film then the party managers can effectively determine what the television shows. The

rhythm of the campaign day, beginning with the morning press conference, continuing with afternoon 'events' and ending with the leaders' evening rallies, became geared to the deadlines for lunch-time, early evening and peak-time television news programmes. In turn, however, the television reporters are reacting against the parties' more blatant attempts at manipulation, insisting that they will not necessarily cover photo-opportunities or the unveiling of a poster, but judge campaign events more strictly on their 'news values'. The parties' media management has now evolved to the stage where the politicians and the parties' communications directors regularly complain to the broadcasters about coverage in an attempt to influence the media.

Until the arrival of television, politicians communicated with a mass electorate largely through the national and provincial press. The golden age of the press was not, however, an age of politically impartial newspapers. The links between parties and the press were often closer than today, newspapers usually advised their readers how to vote and, before 1914, the parties sometimes subsidized a paper to keep it in business, in return for support (Koss 1984). In recent years the *Morning Star* has been the only national paper owned and financed by a party – the Communist party.

The role of the press in election campaigns remains significant although it has changed in recent years. Table 2.4 reports the readership and circulation figures for national daily newspapers. Some three-

Table 2.4 Partisanship and circulation of national daily newspapers (1992)

<i>Name of paper</i>	<i>Circulation</i> (<i>'000</i>)	<i>Readership</i> (<i>'000</i>)
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	2,903	8,035
<i>Daily Express</i>	1,525	3,643
<i>Sun</i>	3,571	9,853
<i>Daily Mail</i>	1,675	4,303
<i>Daily Star</i>	806	2,628
<i>Today</i>	533	1,408
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	1,038	2,492
<i>Guardian</i>	429	1,214
<i>The Times</i>	386	1,035
<i>Independent</i>	390	1,083
<i>Financial Times</i>	290	668

Source: Butler and Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1992*, 181–2

quarters of the adult population read a daily paper, one of the highest figures found anywhere in the world. In 1992 the two best-selling tabloids, the *Mirror* and the *Sun*, had respective daily readerships of some 8 and 10 million, each equal to nearly a quarter of the electorate. Both papers are highly partisan, one for Labour, one for Conservative, and the coverage of both at election time relies heavily on a mix of propaganda, stunts, smears and innuendo.

The broadsheets have an overwhelmingly middle-class readership and provide more campaign coverage than tabloids. Seymour-Ure suggests that the broadsheets appear to have news and editorial values closer to the broadcasters in their interest in balance, while the tabloids resemble television in their emphasis on graphics and personalities (1992: 69). But tabloids and broadsheets devote similar amounts of space to election coverage – about 30 per cent of the total – and the same to opinion polls – about 5 per cent (MacArthur 1989: 98). In the 1992 election, for example, broadsheets led on four out of every five days with a campaign story, the tabloids on half of the days. On virtually every election day the broadsheets had front-page lead stories and all the national papers, except the *Sun*, had more front-page lead stories about the election than they did in 1987. The *Mirror* devoted 100 per cent of its editorials to the election, the *Daily Express* 97 per cent and the *Daily Mail* 79 per cent. The national newspapers clearly still care about elections.

Assessing the quality of the press coverage of election campaigns is a more subjective matter. Martin Harrop (Crewe and Harrop 1986) and Colin Seymour-Ure (1974: 234) have claimed that during the 1960s, probably as a reflection of the lack of marked disagreement between the parties and as a response to the balanced television coverage, the press became less partisan and more willing to discern merits in the party which it did not support. A study of the 1964 general election commented 'The traditional complaint that Labour has a bad press could not be raised in 1964: those who view any trend towards objectivity in the right-wing press as 'disloyalty' had more to complain about' and 'Some sections of the press, and particularly the national press, showed a greater disposition towards objective and fair reporting of the campaign than hitherto' (Beith 1965: 201, 203).

In recent elections, however, there has been a return to full-blooded press partisanship. One cause may have been that since 1979 all the popular papers have become tabloids. In 1959 there were two tabloids and they accounted for a third of the total circulation; by 1992 the respective figures had changed to six and over four-fifths. A second

cause may have been the leadership of Mrs Thatcher and the sharper polarization between the parties that resulted. She made a virtue of being a conviction politician and rejecting consensus politics. The tabloids both reflected and contributed to this polarization. Nigel Lawson complained that Mrs Thatcher, her press secretary Bernard Ingham and the partisan *Sun* fed on one another (Lawson 1992). Mr Ingham, according to Lawson, would often feed a line to the *Sun*, the paper would carry it, and then Ingham would highlight it in his digest of the daily press he prepared for Mrs Thatcher. Mrs Thatcher then marvelled at her hot line to the British people! It is interesting that the Conservative tabloids were less partisan when Edward Heath was Prime Minister and have not been happy with John Major since his 1992 election victory. Perhaps there was a Thatcher factor.

Table 2.5 Party supported by daily newspaper readers (1987 in brackets)

Newspaper		Party supported by readers		
		Con. %	Lab. %	Lib./Dem. %
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	1992	72	11	16
	(1987)	(80)	(5)	(10)
<i>Daily Express</i>	1992	67	15	14
	(1987)	(70)	(9)	(18)
<i>Daily Mail</i>	1992	65	15	18
	(1987)	(60)	(13)	(19)
<i>Financial Times</i>	1992	65	17	16
	(1987)	(48)	(17)	(29)
<i>The Times</i>	1992	64	16	19
	(1987)	(56)	(12)	(27)
<i>Sun</i>	1992	45	36	14
	(1987)	(41)	(31)	(19)
<i>Today</i>	1992	43	32	23
	(1987)	(43)	(17)	(40)
<i>Daily Star</i>	1992	31	54	12
	(1987)	(28)	(46)	(18)
<i>Independent</i>	1992	25	37	34
	(1987)	(34)	(34)	(27)
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	1992	20	64	14
	(1987)	(20)	(55)	(21)
<i>Guardian</i>	1992	15	55	24
	(1987)	(22)	(54)	(19)

Source: MORI

Paradoxically, this revival of press partisanship has occurred at the same time as popular attachment to the political parties has fallen (see p. 23). Moreover, the partisanship is expressed in more contemptuous Labour 'knocking' copy than was the case earlier (see below). The growth of partisanship may also explain why much of the public regard the press as a less credible source of information than television. For the most part the political leanings of newspapers match the preferences of their readers (table 2.5). In 1992 some two-thirds or more of the readership of *The Times*, *Express*, *Mail* and *Telegraph* supported the Conservatives and some two-thirds of the *Mirror* and 55 per cent of *Guardian* readers supported Labour. Until recent elections the *Sun*, incredibly, was regarded by a large majority of its readership as a pro-Labour paper and even in 1987 and 1992 appreciably less than half of its readers voted Conservative. People do not buy or read the *Sun* for its party politics.

Conclusion

The context alters from one election to another. Some of the change is gradual; the physical replacement of the electorate, due to deaths and the comings of age of voters, amounts to between 1 and 2 per cent of the electorate annually but cumulatively can produce a big change over twenty years. Other changes may be more abrupt, as television started to cover the election in 1959, or as parties introduce new issues, policies or arguments. Labour's policies and leader, for example, were very different in 1983 from 1979 and they had shifted again radically in 1987. Some of the changes have been mutually reinforcing, providing both challenges and opportunities for more professional approaches to campaigning. The electorate appears to be less constant to the parties and politicians are convinced that voters are more easily moved by campaigning. Campaign managers have come to terms with television as the main source of voters' information and impression about politics; the growth in the number of media outlets in radio, television and press requires them to devote more effort to news management. Increasingly, they have turned to professionals to fine-tune campaign strategies and make the best use of publicity and public relations techniques.

The next two chapters explore the ways in which the Conservative and Labour parties have adapted to the pressures for professionalization.