

# Knows Little, Learns Less?

An experimental study of the impact of the media on learning  
during the 2001 British general election.

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**Synopsis:** One central claim for the value of democratic elections has been their potential for civic education. This paper is designed to understand how and under what conditions people learn about public affairs from different channels of communication provided by the news media and parties. In particular, much of the previous American literature assumes that newspapers are more effective channels of political information than television news. This poses three questions: (i) Is this also the case in other countries where the press and television differ systematically from the American model? (ii) What are the effects of new media that blend print and visual components like party websites? And (iii) do any learning effects vary by type of voter?

The Campaign Learning Study uses large-scale experiments involving over 900 participants in the June 2001 British general election campaign. Learning about the government's record and party policies is monitored following exposure to campaign coverage in five outlets: tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, television news, election broadcasts by the major parties, and party websites. Using a typology based on voter's prior cognitive mobilization and strength of partisanship, voters are classified into four major types: apoliticals, ritual partisans, deliberators and cognitive partisans.

The results confirm that: (i) in the midst of the campaign, prior to the experiments, British voters displayed widespread ignorance about party policies on some of the key issues in the campaign, such as Europe, asylum seekers, and taxation; (ii) after brief exposure to the media, there were substantial gains in knowledge about prospective party policies and, to a lesser extent, about the government's retrospective record; (iii) the knowledge gains about party policy were similar across TV news, broadsheet and tabloid papers, and party websites (although not party election broadcasts) even after applying the standard battery of social controls; (iv) the learning effects were fairly evenly divided among different types of voters, and; (v) the knowledge gains persisted well after the experiments ended. The conclusion considers the implications of the results for theories of the function of the news media as a civic forum in democratic elections.

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*“The first element of good government, therefore, being the virtue and intelligence of the human beings composing the community, the most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves.” J.S.Mill Representative Government.*

Ever since John Stuart Mill, a long tradition of liberal democratic theory has emphasized the educative benefits of citizen participation. Studies in cognitive psychology, communication studies, public opinion, and political behavior have explored how citizens learn about public affairs from the news media and parties. But how and under what conditions do campaign communications influence political knowledge? In particular, much of the previous literature, based on the particular characteristics of the American media, assumes that newspapers are more effective channels for conveying political information than television news. The proliferation of outlets and structural changes in the news media during the last decade poses three questions: (i) Does print continue to trump audiovisual media today? (ii) How do the effects of new information sources like party websites compare with older media like TV and newspapers? And (iii) does learning vary by type of voter, such as by prior levels of partisanship, interest and cognitive skills, so that different types of voters learn best from different types of media?

To address these issues this study used a large-scale experimental design as the most feasible method of measuring the effects of campaign learning. Replicating our previous study in 1997 (Sanders and Norris 1998, Norris et al. 1999), this project used a large cross-section of the public that is broadly representative of the Greater London electorate, involving over 900 participants selected by quota sample, with experiments conducted in the midst of the June 2001 British general election campaign. A rolling callback procedure after the election monitored the persistence of any effects. This combination of an experimental design with a broad cross-section of the public in a natural setting allows us to draw causal inferences that have application well beyond the particular population included in our experiments. Accordingly Part I of this paper briefly reviews the previous literature and outlines the theory framing our expectations. Part II provides a detailed account of the experimental research design, an important methodological tool in the social sciences, and one rarely applied in British political science, although increasingly popular in the United States. Part III summarizes the results of the analysis. These confirm that: (i) in the midst of the campaign, prior to the experiments, British voters displayed widespread ignorance about party policies on some of the key issues in the campaign, such as Europe, asylum seekers, and taxation; (ii) after exposure to the media, there were substantial gains in knowledge about prospective party policies and, to a lesser extent, about the government’s retrospective record; (iii) the knowledge gains about party policy were similar across TV news, broadsheet and tabloid papers, and party websites (although not party election broadcasts) even after applying the standard battery of social controls. (iv) the learning effects were fairly evenly divided among different types of voters. The concluding section considers the insights this provides into how voters learn, the role of the news media and party communications in this process, and the broader implications that flow from this understanding.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Perennial debates about whether citizens know enough to cast an informed vote, and whether people learn from the news media, remain unresolved in part because theorists remain divided about the most appropriate way of conceptualizing and measuring ‘political knowledge’. There are three broad paradigms in the literature.

The so-called “*civics test*” approach, exemplified by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1991, 1993, 1996), assumes that voters need to understanding the basic rules of the political game (typified by identifying the name of the US Vice President or which party controls Congress), comprehensive and detailed information about the policy platforms of the main contenders for office; and familiarity with the fine-print of the government’s record, like changes in spending on health or the size of the trade deficit. The main problem with the encyclopedic approach is that the majority of citizens appear to fail these test most of the time. Often the trivial is weighted

equally with the important, and no allowance is made for whether it makes any difference or whether there are any consequences if citizens get the answers right or wrong. Being able to identify the 15<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, or the number of states in the European Union, is given equal treatment with knowing whether the Republicans or Democrats were responsible for cutting taxes, vetoing the Kyoto treaty seeking to preserve our planet, or boosting defense spending on Star Wars. Moreover this definition and conceptualization of political knowledge may have important consequences for understanding the most effective channels of communication. Graber (2001) argues that the pro-print bias in many studies is produced by the common use of simple true-false factual tests of civic knowledge. A broader understanding of information processing, she suggests, indicates that audio-visual cues on television provide the sort of political insights used by most citizens, such as understanding the state of the economy, problems of health care, or the character of rival presidential nominees.

In contrast, the “*relativist*” approach acknowledges that people have a limited reservoir of political information, but suggests that this can be sufficient for people to cast a meaningful ballot (Zaller, 1993; Sniderman et al., 1992; Popkin, 1994; Neuman, Just and Crigler 1992; Graber 2001). Relativists argue that cognitive short cuts, such as ideology or ‘schema’, like a handy ready reckoner, reduce the time and effort required to monitor candidates and thereby 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. Relativists lower the necessary information hurdles, producing a more realistic assessment so that most voters get at least a passing grade. Yet one major difficulty with this approach is that the cognitive shortcuts that voters use to decide may be helpful in reducing the buzzing clutter of multiple media messages, or they may be based on serious factual inaccuracies – or “false knowledge” – especially if the public is not paying attention when parties shift their stance or even ‘leapfrog’ over each other across the ideological spectrum, as has happened in Britain (Bara and Budge 2001). In the last election, if British voters used old-fashioned ideological shortcuts which led them to believe that, as in previous decades, the Conservatives were still the most pro-European party, the Liberal Democrats favored centrist economic policies, and Labour were the party most likely to renationalize the railways, and if these issues mattered to voters when casting a ballot, then they would have been factually wrong, not just in trivial ways, and thereby acting against their real interests.

The last approach, associated with the work of Lupia and McCubbins (1998), focuses on the importance of “*practical knowledge*”. In this view, citizens 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 – to connect their political and social preferences accurately to the available electoral options. This approach strikes a middle way on the assumption that voters do not need to scan all campaign news comprehensively, as if for a school civics test. Nor do they need to rely upon ideological shortcuts, which may be misleadingly dated or inaccurate. Instead the practical knowledge approach which is adopted in this study implies that to connect their preferences with their voting choices citizens need two basic types of electoral knowledge: (i) accurate information about the *retrospective policy record* of the government on the important issues of the day; and also, (ii) accurate information about the *prospective policy proposals* for the major political parties on important issues. If issues are trivial to most voters, for example if the closure of the ideological gap among the major parties in Britain means that voters have no party preference about the outcome, then it is rational to pay little attention when there are many other more rewarding uses of limited time and energy than scanning the papers or watching the news. Learning more about politics – the name of the Speaker of the House, the role of the Privy Council, the meaning of a ‘three line whip’ - may well be virtuous or beneficial in and of itself, in the best of all possible worlds, but no matter how desirable it is not essential, or even relevant, to citizen’s roles in casting a ballot. And if all parties share a broad consensus about the main policy options on the important issues, then again voters do not need to pay any attention to the campaign news, or even to cast a vote, since doing so will not affect their interests directly. If, however, the major parties differ on the issues that voters do care about, so that putting a cross

against the 'wrong' party could affect their interests, then citizens need correct practical information about the government's record and party policies to cast a rational vote. How much knowledge is sufficient for this process remains a matter of controversy, but the practical knowledge approach strikes a middle way between the impossibly high everyone-fails standards of the civics test and the no-hurdles everyone-passes of the relativists.

*Does print trump audiovisual information?*

Given this understanding, how can the channels of communication be expected to influence the stock of practical political knowledge? An extensive literature in communication studies, cognitive social psychology and voting behavior has examined learning effects from different mass media. The largest body of survey-based research has compared learning effects from audiovisual messages (television news) and print media (newspapers) in the American context (eg Neuman 1974; Robinson and Levy 1986; Culbertson and Stempel 1986; Graber 1988; Mondak 1995; Chaffee and Frank 1996), although similar comparisons have also been made in Britain (Blumler and McQuail 1968; Gunter 1987; Miller 1991; Newton 1997; Norris et al. 1999). The most comprehensive recent meta-analysis reviewing the results of the U.S. studies concluded that attention to print media has generally been found to be a better predictor of knowledge than attention to television news (Halpern 1997). Experimental studies have also often found that when the content is held constant by transcribing audiovisual information to print, or by having a newspaper story reported on video, print is the superior mechanism for the transmission of knowledge (eg Browne 1978; Furnham et al. 1990; Furnham and Gunter 1989; Furnham, Proctor and Gunter 1988; Gunter et al. 1994; Wilson 1974). Some, however, have reported no difference in campaign learning from print and audiovisual formats (Stauffer, Frost and Rybolt 1981), or that television is more effective than print formats (Just and Crigler 1989). Therefore the conventional wisdom from most of the survey-based and experimental studies is that, at least in the US context, newspapers have usually been regarded as providing more information than television news.

This consensus needs to be reexamined for at least three main reasons. First, studies need to take account of the substantial changes in the news industry experienced in recent decades. The range of media channels where people get their news and current affairs has proliferated well beyond the evening news and daily papers, reflecting the real world fragmentation of media outlets and sources (Norris 2000). In the 1990s studies have monitored the effects of television advertisements, talk radio, and more recently news sites and party/candidate websites on the Internet (Defleur et al. 1992; Neuman, Just and Crigler 1992; Martinelli and Chaffee 1995; Just et al. 1996; Brians and Wattenberg 1996; Newton 1997; Davis and Owen 1998; Bimber 1999; Johnson et al 1999; Althaus and Tewksbury 2000; Norris 2000, 2001). The results have cast doubt on the claims of print media as superior in conveying information over all other sources, but no clear consensus has yet emerged about this, in part because few studies have simultaneously examined and compared all these channels. Moreover 'the Internet' is itself a multimedia chameleon transmogrifying and absorbing the characteristics of other print and audiovisual formats. A recent survey-based study by one of the authors found that greater knowledge of political leaders and parties in the United States was positively associated with exposure to all news media, with no significant difference in learning effects among newspapers, national (but not local) TV news, and Internet campaign news (Norris 2000:284). Nor is this simply a product of American exceptionalism; similar patterns were evident across the 15 EU member states in the relationship between frequency of exposure to TV news, radio news and newspapers and a multidimensional set of knowledge indicators (Norris 2000: 224). The authors examined campaign learning effects in the 1997 British election, based on campaign panel surveys, and found that after the usual social controls were employed, attention to political news on TV was significantly associated with knowledge of party policies, but neither exposure or attention to newspapers proved significant (Norris et al. 1999: 105). Nor could we establish that any changes in knowledge of party policies during the 12-months long campaign were associated with use of television news or newspapers. As Graber notes (2001), one reason why print is often believed superior to audiovisual content is that many of the studies have used the 'civics' test of factual knowledge, rather than the more satisfactory criteria of practical knowledge that relates

what people know to its relevance for citizenship. Despite the traditional wisdom established in the older studies, therefore, it is not clear that print media are ipso facto necessarily more informative than all electronic channels today.

The media system in different societies may also have influenced the conventional wisdom about the supposed virtuous of the printed press. Most of the older studies were conducted within the United States, and the results may reflect the characteristics of the news media in this particular nation, such as the predominately commercial nature of American television, in contrast to the public service ethos that continues to prevail throughout most of Western Europe, and the lack of a large-scale tabloid newspaper market in America. The typical coverage of politics found in commercial and public TV news mean that their effects on political knowledge differ systematically (Holtz-Bacha and Norris 2001). What people learn, for example, from reading the worthy *New York Times* and watching Boston Channel 7 News ('if-it-bleeds-it-leads') may well not be equivalent to reading *The Sun* and watching the BBC 10 O'clock News. Accordingly the impact of alternative media can be reexamined in this study within the context of the British media system. The classification of the 'type of media' is relatively straightforward in Britain where national newspapers and evening television news on the five major terrestrial national channels continue to be the main sources of campaign communications, despite some fragmentation of channels and outlets from cable, satellite and broadband services in recent years (Norris et al. 1999). The study compared television news, newspapers (distinguishing among the 'quality' or heavyweight broadsheets and the popular 'red-top' tabloids), the party websites, and election broadcasts by each of the major parties.

Lastly, many studies in communication are primarily concerned with the impact of different channels of communication upon the general public. An alternative mainstream perspective, common in studies of cognitive social psychology, education, and voting behavior, shifts the focus and level of the analysis from the type of medium to the type of user, based on the assumption that the social background, prior cognitive skills, and political predispositions of the audience can often prove vitally important in the learning process. Different social groups -- young and old, university graduates and high school dropouts, women and men -- typically are found to use and to learn from different types of media (Tewksbury 1999; Eveland and Scheufele 2000). Social variables such as education and age are highly correlated both with patterns of media use and with the acquisition of knowledge, for example even on the same topic, readers with poor literacy and cognitive skills may learn more from human interest stories conveyed in the vivid and direct writing style found in the tabloid press, while those with greater educational training may cope better with the greater cognitive demands and more complex and abstract prose style found in typical stories in the broadsheet press (Neuman, Just and Crigler 1992). It follows that certain *political* characteristics, beliefs and attitudes of citizens, such as their prior partisanship, trust in the news media, and the effects of selective perception, may make voters predisposed to learn more from one source than another.

Therefore for all these reasons this study sought to reexamine the conventional wisdom about the supposed virtuous of print media by comparing typical campaign messages found across a wide range of communication sources in the context of the last British general election campaign. The research aimed to compare what practical political knowledge people acquired from TV news and both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, as well as party websites and party election broadcasts, comparing learning effects among different media and different types of voter.

### Research Design

Cross-sectional surveys are the most common way of exploring the influences of the media upon voters but they can say 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 party political broadcast, and 'pre-post' designs allow us 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. In contrast this project used a large cross-section of the public that is broadly representative of the Greater London electorate, involving over 900 participants selected by quota sample, with experiments conducted in the midst of the June 2001 British general election campaign. This combination of an experimental design with a broad cross-section of the public in a natural setting allows us to draw causal inferences that have application well beyond the particular population included in our experiments.

To test how far the theoretical expectations were met in practice, different experimental groups were shown comparable party broadcasts, newspaper stories, and television news stories containing equivalent information about the same issues, as well as similar content downloaded from party websites. The experiments administered a pre-questionnaire survey, exposed groups to different media, and then administered the post-questionnaire. The change between the pre- and post-surveys were monitored to find out the type of media influenced the practical political knowledge that was acquired. Experiments are becoming increasingly common in political science (Iyengar and Simon 2000), nevertheless the way that they are designed is critical to the results. Since the methodology is less familiar than other approaches we need to outline the specific research design in some detail, including the selection of participants, the experimental procedures, and the measures of political knowledge used as the dependent variables in the analysis.

#### *Selection of Participants*

In total, 919 participants drawn from the general electorate were included in the study, more than most experimental designs. Of these, 628 were used in the tests of campaign learning. The remainder was treated as a pooled control, since they were not exposed to the information about the government's record or party policies under examination, and instead they were used in separate experiments concerned with the impact of positive and negative news on persuasion. The experiments were based in a Greater London location, in central Ilford, with participants drawn primarily from south-east England. The location was selected to provide a diverse group of Londoners including office-workers and casual shoppers, in a mixed constituency, drawing participants from around the region who were attracted to a popular shopping mall. Most came from the borough of Redbridge but others were drawn from the surrounding boroughs of Epping Forest, Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Newham, Tower Hamlets, and Waltham Forest, as well as elsewhere in Greater London. Respondents from one area should not be understood to represent a random sample of the whole UK electorate, but they were selected by a professional fieldwork agency using quotas for age, gender, class, ethnicity, and past vote to reflect the social and political background of the Greater London population. The accuracy with which the demographic profile of respondents matched that of the Greater London population is shown in Appendix A. Moreover the fact that the media outlets under comparison are nation-wide, with the same papers read and TV evening news watched from Cornwall to Cumbria (with the exception of some minor differences in the media systems in Scotland and Wales) means that in principle we would expect to find the same results if the experiments had been conducted anywhere else in England. Nevertheless 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 reflect the stimuli treatment rather than their social backgrounds or prior political attitudes. The only exception concerned the group of Internet users, where we only tested those who already had some prior experience of surfing the Internet. This group can therefore be regarded as reflecting the general background of the online community, with higher educational and occupational status rather than the Greater London electorate as a whole.

#### *Experimental Procedures*

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 were informed (falsely) prior to participating that we were

conducting market research to find out whether people are interested in different stories in the mass media. The briefing did not mention that the news was about the election, to avoid the danger of selection bias by discouraging participation by the politically apathetic. The main experiments employed a single-shot rather than a repeated design, to avoid respondents becoming unduly conditioned by the research process itself, although one call back was used after the election among a sub-sample to monitor any 'decay' effect of the stimuli.

The experiments were conducted during the last part of the election campaign, from mid-May until 6<sup>th</sup> June, election eve. 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 watch a 30-minute video compilation of television news, or to read selected newspaper stories, or to read selected off-line party web pages that had been downloaded and edited into a dedicated site. 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. A member of the research team interviewed respondents unable to read the questionnaire separately on a face-to-face basis. To reduce the artificiality of the exercise, the atmosphere was designed to be relaxed, with refreshments provided in a comfortable environment. The whole process lasted for about an hour for each participant. The experiments were 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, again to increase the realism of the experimental conditions.

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 was followed to select party political broadcasts on the same issues, choosing functionally equivalent but not identical broadcasts by the Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat parties. Respondents were not 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 pages downloaded from official party websites containing information about party policies.

To test for knowledge, nine experimental conditions were used, with approximately 40-100 respondents in each experimental group. The first four manipulations involved exposure to different types of media: TV News, broadsheet papers, tabloid papers, and party websites. Further experiments tested the impact of exposure to election broadcasts by the major parties. In addition, a TV news control group was shown a typical evening news bulletin with content unaltered by any sort of experimental manipulation, and other experiments (not reported here) replicated tests for the impact of negative and positive news.

#### *Measuring Knowledge of the Government's Record*

The items measuring knowledge of the government's retrospective record included a battery of six true/false factual statements. These asked participants whether the rate of unemployment, the basic rate of income tax, of crime, and the number of asylum seekers had been rising or falling, when the euro was going to be introduced in most European member states, and whether the government had removed the automatic right of asylum seekers to cash benefits. The accuracy of these factual claims was checked against the official sources. For comparability of content, the campaign coverage in the different media was selected to include functionally equivalent although not identical statements giving information about each of these matters. The study used typical stories or web content that were published in the period leading up to and during the official campaign. The reason for this decision was to facilitate generalizability from the results and to increase the realism of the experiments, although admittedly at the loss of some control over the information presented to participants. To check the

comparability across media, the information presented to respondents on the websites is available for scrutiny at one of the author's websites ([www.pippanorris.com](http://www.pippanorris.com)), along with transcripts of the TV news broadcasts, the full text of the broadsheet papers, links to the video party election broadcasts, and the full pre and post questionnaires. In addition, the surveys included a short battery of five statements about 'civic' knowledge, where no information was provided in the media stimuli, as controls to see whether there was any change in these measures from pre- to post- caused by the experimental conditions, such as heightened attention to the news media. The inclusion of the 'civics' items interspersed with the 'record' items also helped disguise the true purpose of the study. The civic items have previously been used in the British Election Study.

#### *Measuring Knowledge of Party Policies*

Five items were selected to measure knowledge of prospective campaign policies including those on taxation, the Euro, asylum seekers, and child-care. People were asked to identify which of the main parties was most in favour of each of these proposals. These issues were chosen for two main reasons. First, issues were selected where one of the major parties had adopted a distinctive position in its official manifesto that differed from the other two. In the 2001 British election the major parties were relatively close together the issues of education, crime and health, but they differed sharply towards Europe, with the Conservatives staking much of the election on the claim that only they could 'save the pound'. On taxation, as well, there were distinctive platforms, with the Conservatives pledged to cut taxes by 8 billion pounds, while Labour promised no increase in the basic rate of personal taxation, and the Liberal Democrats said they would raise income tax by one penny in the pound to pay for public services. Asylum was another issue that featured in the campaign, with the Conservatives promising to create new secure reception centers for asylum seekers. Lastly, Labour in the run up to the official campaign, also launched a distinctive initiative to introduce 'baby bonds' for every child at birth, a savings fund with a contribution from the public purse, although this pledge was not widely featured in the campaign proper. In contrast it proved difficult to identify any clear-cut distinctive party policies on other important valance issues.

Moreover we selected issues like taxation, asylum-seekers and Europe that were central to the campaign, as shown by the attention devoted to these issues in the news media and in public perceptions of the most important problem facing the country (Norris 2001b). The pros and cons of the issues of Europe, taxation and asylum seekers were widely debated on television news and current affairs programs, as well as covered in the special supplementary election pages in the broadsheets (Deacon, Golding and Billig 2001). Content analysis by Echo Research found that Europe was the 1<sup>st</sup> issue in newspaper coverage of the Conservative party and the 2<sup>nd</sup> issue for coverage of the Labour party, while coverage of taxation ranked respectively 2<sup>nd</sup> for the Tories and 4<sup>th</sup> for Labour. The issues were also important to voters, although not critical: MORI polls found that taxation was the 5<sup>th</sup> most important issue to voters while Europe ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the most important problem facing the country (Norris 2001: Table 4).

To control for the type of issue, the study selected functionally equivalent although not identical stories covering the same issues across all media. We considered striving to eliminate all differences between conditions except for the medium of presentation, as Clark suggested (1983), for example by transcribing the TV news stories and turning them into mocked-up print format or webpages. This strategy would have maximized control for theoretical reasons so that we could have been sure that it was only the medium of presentation and not the typical content or formal features of each medium. After considerable discussion, however, we decided that the result, while technically clean, would have been relatively meaningless since we are interested in the way that formal features (eg length, structure, or language) covary with the medium. Removing these features, by transcribing audiovisual information into print, would have made it impossible to generalize about learning effects in the real world (for a discussion see Eveland and Dunwoody 2001).

### *Types of Voters*

Drawing upon the typology originally developed by Dalton (1984), the classification of voters used in this study is based upon two dimensions: strength of partisanship and prior level of cognitive awareness. In combination these measures provide a fourfold typology of the electorate (see Figure 1). Building upon this simple classification, each of these groups can be expected to respond differently to the opportunities for learning from political communications during election campaigns.

*Deliberators* are characterized by high cognitive mobilization but weak partisanship. This group is interested and well educated but lacking a strong attachment or loyalty towards any of the parties. As such, they can be expected to be functionally independent of partisan cues and most open to absorbing new information from the more demanding materials presented to them by the news media during the election. This group is predicted to have the cognitive skills to cope with complex arguments presented through 'objective' or 'balanced' journalistic formats, characteristic of television news and the broadsheet press. *Cognitive partisans* also possess 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 election broadcasts, from the more partisan broadsheets (such as the Guardian or Telegraph), and from party web pages, rather than from television news. *Ritual partisans*, as party loyalists with low cognitive mobilization, are less likely to learn from the campaign, as they come to the election with their minds already made up. But they are also likely to take their cues or to be reinforced in their decisions from partisan sources, such as party TV broadcasts, as well as from the more partisan tabloid press such as *The Mail* or *The Mirror* newspapers (for details of press partisanship see [www.echoresearch.com](http://www.echoresearch.com)). Lastly, *apoliticals* without strong partisan anchors of cognitive mobilization are the group who can be expected to prove least informed about public affairs (the know-nothings, care-nothings), but also most resistant to political communications in all forms, most particularly party political broadcasts, election news in the broadsheet press, and partisan resources on the Internet. This classification of the electorate can be measured and operationalized in different ways. For this study, the strength of partisanship was measured by the standard survey item gauging how far people identified with parties. Cognitive skills were measured by combining education (representing skills) and political interest (representing civic involvement).

Lastly, our previous experiments have been single-shot, to avoid conditioning. One important question that arises from such an approach, however, is the persistence of any effects. This is theoretically interesting given the on-line model of learning (Lodge et al. 1995) which suggests that when people are presented with additional information they commonly incorporate new facts in an accumulating tally to help them form a judgment, as they evaluate previously unknown presidential nominees, unfamiliar policy proposals, or new issues like global warming. Once people make an evaluation, however, the online processing model suggests that they commonly forget the more detailed information that they initially used to make their evaluation and they only recall their final judgment. To test this thesis, in these experiments we employed a rolling call back among a sub-group of participants who indicated that they would be willing to be telephoned to answer a few more questions in a short survey. We contacted 201 successfully within three weeks of their initial experiment on a daily basis allowing us to monitor any decay function in knowledge of party policies, vote intention and liking of the major parties.

### **Analysis of the Results**

Turning to the first results, in the midst of the British general election campaign, prior to the experimental stimuli, what did most British voters know about some of the major issues that distinguished the parties? Studies in America have reported the existence of a chronic core of 'know-nothings', roughly one fifth to one third of the public steeped in ignorance that were beyond the reach of information campaigns (Hyman and Sheatsley 1947; Neuman 1996; Bennett 1988). Kinder and Sears (1985: 664) observe that "Americans are...hazy about many of the principal [political] players, lackadaisical of facts that experts take for granted, and unsure about policies advanced by candidates for the highest public office." Are similar problems evident in Britain?

### *Learning about Party Policies*

Despite the barrage of media headlines on some of the key issues in the campaign, prior to the experiments the British public displayed widespread ignorance about party policies on Europe, asylum seekers, and taxation (see Table 1). About half the public could identify the Conservatives as the party proposing to keep the pound for the duration of the next parliament, to house new asylum seekers in reception centers, and to introduce the 8 billion pound tax cut. Even fewer (43%) knew that the Liberal Democrats proposed raising income tax, their most distinctive pledge in the election. More of the public (68%) were aware of Labour's baby bond pledge, with two-thirds identifying this correctly as Labour policy, a surprising result in the sense that of all the issues under comparison this had been given by far the least coverage in the mass media during the election and it received almost no attention in Labour speeches or campaign literature.

[Table 1 about here]

But are these irredeemable know-nothings, consigned forever to political ignorance about party policies? The answer is clearly negative. The second major finding is that after relatively brief exposure to information in the media experiments, for example 1-2 minute items in the TV news, interspersed with many other elected and non-election news, the public learnt a lot about prospective party policies. Gains were measured by the mean change in the knowledge scales from pre-test to post-test among the pooled group of all those exposed to the learning experiments. For example, those who could identify the Conservatives as the party proposing housing new asylum seekers in secure reception centers jumped dramatically from half to three-quarters of the public. Knowledge that Labour proposed baby bonds rose from 68% to 83%. Awareness that the Liberal Democrats proposed tax increases increased from 43% to 60%. There were also smaller but significant improvements in awareness of Conservative policies towards the euro and tax cuts.

### *Learning about the Government's Record*

Yet there does seem to be an important difference in learning about prospective party policies and in learning factual items about the government's performance in office, for reasons that are not wholly clear. On knowledge of the government's record, there was far greater variation across the items in the scale (see Table 2). There was widespread awareness that the unemployment rate had fallen (73%), that a record number of asylum seekers had entered Britain in the previous year (78%), and that euro notes and coins were going to be introduced in most EU states next year (62%). But less than a third were aware that the rate of crime had declined under the Blair administration, and about a third knew that the government had removed the automatic right of asylum seekers to cash benefits. In addition, there are far more modest gains in what the public learnt about the government's record.

[Table 2 about here]

### *Control items with no stimuli*

One reason for any change in knowledge, however, could be the experience of participating in the experiment itself if this generated any unintentional effects, for example by heightening attention to politics. As a check on our results we included nine control items to monitor changes in knowledge without providing any information about these items in the media stimuli. The four items on party policy concerned matters like student fees, paternity leave and the minimum wage. The five items on civic knowledge asked the truth or falsity of statements about the number of members of parliament, the longest time between general elections, and whether there were separate elections for the European parliament. The results in Table 3 show that there were some positive gains on three of the nine control items, but the size of these effects were less than that for the policy items where we provided media information, and there were no significant knowledge gains on the other items.

[Table 3 about here]

### *Learning Effects by Type of Media*

Does the medium matter? Table 4 describes the size of the mean changes in knowledge of party policies by the different types of media, without any controls. For a more rigorous test, Tables 5 and 6 show the effects in regression models including the standard social controls for age, gender, education and interest, all of which can be expected to influence how much people learn about politics. The results show that, contrary to popular wisdom and many previous studies, in Britain the print media did not perform better in providing information about party policies than television news. The knowledge gains about party policy were of a similar size across TV news, broadsheet and tabloid papers, and party websites (although not party election broadcasts), even after applying the standard battery of social controls. The impact of exposure to all the media except for party election broadcasts produced large and significant effects on campaign learning about party policies. In contrast, once the standard controls were applied in the regression models predicting changes in knowledge of the government's record, none of the changes proved significantly related to either the social or the media exposure variables. Apparently neither print media nor other types of exposure helped inform the public about these items. If there is a hard-core group of know-nothings in America, it appears that similar findings may be evident in their British cousins.

[Table 4, 5 and 6 about here]

The reason for the difference between the campaign learning effects for party policies and for the government's record needs further exploration and investigation. It could be due to the way that these variables were operationalized and the selection of media information about the government's record. Alternatively one plausible reason could be the way that claims about party policies often involved 'one-sided messages': irrespective of the merits of the proposals, few doubted that the Liberal Democrats promised to raise taxes or that the Conservatives wanted to cut taxes. In contrast many of the aspects of government performance were heavily contested, representing 'two-sided' messages in the heat of party campaign debate, so that people may have had many more reasons to doubt whether, for example, the rate of crime or income tax had genuinely gone up or down under the Blair administration. Any assessment also depends upon the fine print of the particular facts that are being discussed by government and shadow spokespersons, such as whether crime refers to household burglaries, car thefts, violent offences, as well as whether the changes in tax refer to VAT, personal tax or capital taxation. In contrast the monthly official unemployment figures may have widely reinforced awareness than this had fallen under the Labour government. Whatever the reason, the relatively clear cut and unambiguous learning effects about party policies are not evident in what people learnt about the government's record.

### *Learning Among Type of Voters*

Did different types of voters respond differently to these experiments? We had anticipated that this would be the case, as prior partisanship and cognitive skills would influence learning. The classification of voters did confirm the anticipated levels of knowledge evident prior to exposure to the media stimuli, so that the apoliticals started out knowing least, followed by the ritual partisans and deliberators, with the cognitive partisans scoring best on the knowledge scales. Yet contrary to expectations, the results in Table 7 suggest that the learning effects did not vary systematically among the different types of voters; instead there was a more uniform gain in knowledge among apoliticals, ritual partisans, deliberators, and cognitive partisans. Like the rain that falleth equally among hill and dale, any learning from the media occurs across all citizens, no matter their prior cognitive mobilization or partisanship.

[Table 7 about here]

### *Decay Effects*

Lastly, did the effects persist? To check this we used the daily rolling callback surveys among the sub-group willing to participate in a short telephone interview between 2 to 18 days after the original experiment. The results in Table 8 show the callback knowledge of the mean scale of party policy and the decay in knowledge since the post-test. The results show that once

learnt, there was remarkably little decay in awareness. The changes are illustrated in Figure 2 showing a pattern of trendless fluctuations in the daily callback, rather than a secular slide. Far from any progressive weakening, it appears that the effects of our modest experimental stimuli continued for many days after the event.

[Table 8 about here]

### Conclusions

The question of the educational functions of election campaigns has been subject to extensive scrutiny starting with the earliest studies of mass propaganda in the 1920s and continuing with the earliest surveys of election campaigns conducted by the Columbia school in then 1940s (Lazarsfeld 1944). The bulk of the research in recent decades has been American and this has usually, although not always, pointed towards the superior role of the print media as channels of information rather than television news. Changes in the media environment, with the fragmentation of broadcasting and the rise of the Internet, mean that these issues deserve reanalysis, especially in a non-US context. The conclusions from this study are as follows:

- i. In the midst of the June 2001 British general election, despite extensive political news available on radio, television, current affairs programs, newspaper supplements and the Internet, about half the public appeared unaware about some of the key issues features in party political debates, such as the stance of the Conservative towards the euro and their promise to cut taxes.
- ii. Nevertheless after relatively brief exposure to information about these issues, interspersed by other election and non-election news, the public's knowledge of party policies rose significantly.
- iii. In contrast there were only modest gains in awareness of the government's record, and these increases proved insignificant once social controls were introduced.
- iv. The increase in knowledge of party policies was equally evident across almost all types of media (TV News, broadsheet papers, tabloid papers and party websites although not party election broadcasts), even after controls were applied, suggesting that there was no advantage to the print media, as many earlier studies had suggested.
- v. The gains in knowledge of party policies were also evenly distributed across all the type of voters examined here, namely apoliticals, ritual partisans, deliberators and cognitive partisans.
- vi. The increase in awareness of party policies persisted well after the experiments, with minimal decay, at least for the 18 days monitored by the callback study.

If we can extrapolate from these results more broadly it suggests that despite the barrage of political commentary and election news, the daily press conferences and policy announcements, the manifesto launches and soapbox speeches, the leadership walk-about and photo-ops, the poster campaigns and party websites - in short despite all the hoop-la and razz-ma-tazz by parties to convey their core message during the general election - the British public remained unaware of many basic political divisions in party politics at the heart of the campaign that the more attentive take for granted all the time. But although many are know-nothings, or at least know-littles, under certain conditions, when they pay attention, the public *can* learn, quite a lot, quite rapidly. The British public may have deserved an 'F' grade before the exam, but they managed a respectable B+ afterwards. The challenge for journalists, broadcasters and politicians, indeed the challenge for civic engagement in a democracy, is how to achieve this transformation in real life.

**Table 1. Change in Knowledge of Party Policies**

	Pre- test correct %	Post- test correct %	Change %
House new asylum seekers in secure reception centers (Con)	50.5	76.8	+26.3
Raise income tax (LDem)	42.7	59.5	+16.8
Create a Baby Bond saving fund for every child at birth (Lab)	68.1	83.0	+14.9
Keep the pound for the duration of the next parliament (Con)	52.9	63.2	+10.3
Cut taxes by £8 billion (Con)	51.6	61.0	+9.4

**Note:** The proportion of respondents who could identify the correct party advocating each policy. Only respondents exposed to campaign learning experiments (N. 628). The pre-test survey was prior to any experimental stimuli. The post-test was administered after the stimuli.

Source: The Campaign Learning Study.

**Table 2: Change in Knowledge of the Government's Record**

	Pre-Test Correct %	Post-Test Correct %	Change %
The government has removed the automatic right of asylum seekers to get cash benefits (T)	35.7	42.1	+6.4
Euro notes and coins are due to be introduced in most EU member states next year (T)	61.9	68.9	+7.0
A record number of asylum seekers came to Britain last year (T)	78.4	83.8	+5.4
The overall rate of crime has gone down since 1997 (T)	29.6	29.6	0.0
The basic rate of income tax has risen under Labour (F)	47.5	46.8	-0.7
The rate of unemployment in Britain has fallen during the last 12 months (T)	73.2	72.7	-0.5

**Note:** The proportion of respondents who could identify correctly whether the statement was true or false. Only respondents exposed to campaign learning experiments (N.628). T=true, F=false.

Source: The Campaign Learning Study.

**Table 3. Change in control items with no media stimuli**

	Pre- test Correct %	Post- test Correct %	Change %
<b>PARTY POLICIES</b>			
Abolish student fees throughout the UK (Ldem)	33.7	42.1	+8.4
Introduce paid paternity leave (Lab)	47.7	55.6	+7.9
Abolish car tax on low polluting vehicles (Ldem)	13.3	13.6	+0.3
Raise the minimum wage to £4.20 (Lab)	60.4	60.5	+0.1
<b>CIVICS</b>			
Britain has separate elections for the European Parliament and the British parliament (T)	67.1	74.2	+7.1
No one may stand for parliament unless they pay a deposit (T)	53.7	56.5	+2.8
Voting in British General Elections is based on proportional representation (F)	47.8	46.9	-0.9
The number of members of parliament is about 100 (F)	54.2	53.0	-1.2
The longest time allowed between general elections is four years (F)	33.1	30.2	-2.9

**Note:** The proportion of respondents who could identify the correct answers. Only respondents exposed to campaign learning experiments.

Source: The Campaign Learning Study.

**Table 4: Mean Change in Knowledge by Type of Media Stimuli**

	Knowledge of Party Policy		Knowledge of Government's Record		N.
	Pre-test Mean	Change	Pre-test Mean	Change	
TV News	2.33	+0.89	3.17	+0.35	100
Broadsheet Papers	2.99	+0.71	3.35	+0.12	139
Tabloid Papers	2.14	+0.79	3.04	+0.001	72
Party Websites	2.54	+0.83	3.20	+0.22	77
Party Election Broadcasts	2.78	+0.001	3.39	-0.004	193
Control (No stimuli)	2.57	+0.14	3.01	+0.17	291
<i>ALL</i>	2.62	+0.54	3.19	+0.11	872

Notes:

For details of the knowledge of party policy 5-point scale see Table 1.

For knowledge of the government's record 6-point scale see Table 2.

Source: The Campaign Learning Study

**Table 5: Regression Models of Change in Knowledge of Party Policy**

	B	St. Error	Beta	Sig
<b>CONTROLS</b>				
Age (years)	.005	.002	.098	.006
Gender	.008	.071	.038	.247
Education	.002	.022	-.031	.348
Interest	.002	.045	-.016	.635
<b>MEDIA STIMULI</b>				
TV News	.646	.121	.190	.000
Broadsheet paper	.622	.107	.209	.000
Tabloid paper	.671	.138	.167	.000
Party website	.648	.135	.169	.000
Party Broadcast	-.009	.091	-.038	.319
Constant	-10.7			
Adj. R Squared	.111			

Note: OLS Regression models with the pre-post mean change in the 5-point scale knowledge of party policy as the dependent variable. For the separate items in the scale see Table 1. The figures represent the unstandardized coefficients (B), the standard error, the standardized coefficients (Beta) and the significance. The media stimuli are all coded as dummy variables (exposure=1/else=0). All participants (N. 929).

Source: The Campaign Learning Study

**Table 6: Regression Models of Change in Knowledge of the Government's Record**

	B	St. Error	Beta	Sig
<b>CONTROLS</b>				
Age (years)	.003	.002	-.018	.625
Gender	-.114	.075	-.053	.127
Education	.001	.023	.000	.998
Interest	.009	.047	.007	.847
<b>MEDIA STIMULI</b>				
TV News	.160	.127	.047	.210
Broadsheet paper	-.127	.113	-.043	.261
Tabloid paper	-.177	.146	-.044	.226
Party website	.002	.143	.006	.873
Party Broadcast	-.169	.097	-.070	.081
Constant	2.36			
Adj. R Squared	.003			

Note: OLS Regression models with the mean pre-post change in the 6-point scale of knowledge of the government's record as the dependent variable. For the full items in scale see Table 2. The figures represent the unstandardized coefficients (B), the standard error, the standardized coefficients (Beta) and the significance. All participants (N. 929). The media stimuli are all coded as dummy variables (exposure=1/else=0).

Source: The Campaign Learning Study

**Table 7: Mean Change in Knowledge by Type of Voter**

	Knowledge of Party Policy		Knowledge of Government's Record		N.
	Pre-test Mean	Mean change	Pre-test Mean	Mean change	
Apoliticals	2.28	.474	3.14	.001	137
Ritual Partisans	2.85	.437	3.24	.154	169
Deliberators	2.97	.600	3.42	.108	65
Cognitive partisans	3.10	.435	3.56	.111	108
<i>ALL</i>	3.15	.505	3.16	.111	627

Notes: For details of the knowledge of party policy 5-point scale see Table 1. For knowledge of the government's record 6-point scale see Table 2.

*Apoliticals*: low education and interest plus weak partisanship.

*Ritual partisans*: low education and interest plus strong partisanship.

*Deliberators*: high education and interest plus weak partisanship.

*Cognitive partisans*: high education and interest plus strong partisanship.

Source: The Campaign Learning Study

**Table 8: Decay in Knowledge of Party Policies**

Days after experiments	Callback Knowledge of Party Policies	Change Post-test to Callback	N.
1-3	3.61	0.01	65
4-6	3.28	-0.17	46
7-9	3.12	-0.16	31
10-12	3.22	-0.04	27
13-18	3.56	0.01	20

Note: Rolling callback surveys were conducted daily among a sub-group of 201 participants.

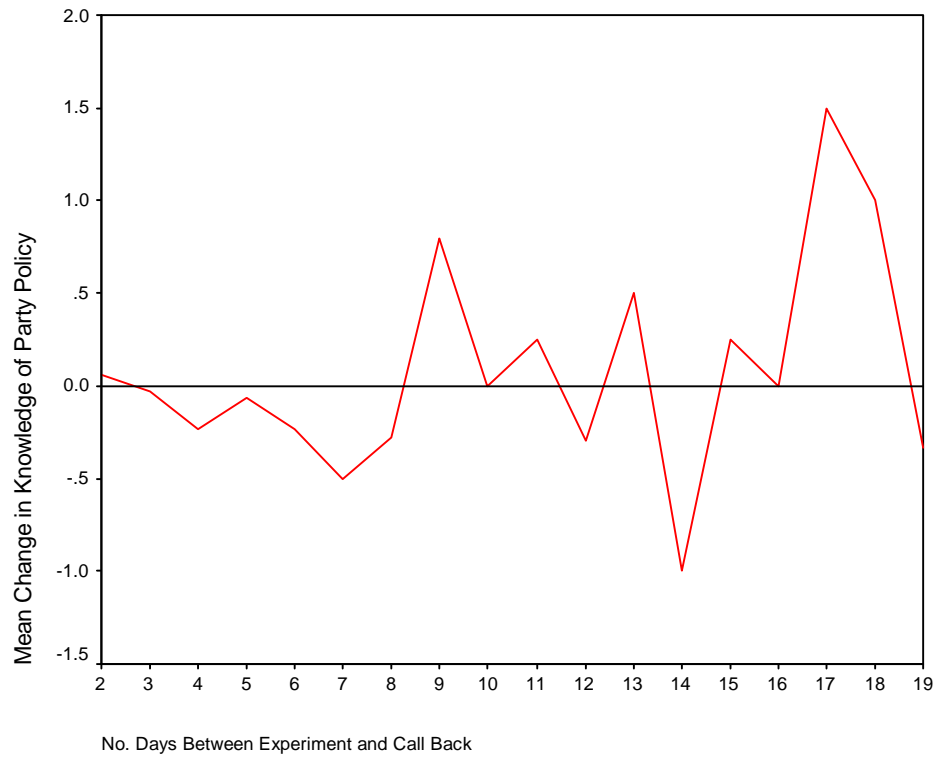
Knowledge of party policies was gauged on a five-point scale. See Table1 for details.

Source: The Campaign Learning Study

**Figure 1: Typology of Voters**

	<b>Low cognitive mobilization</b>	<b>High cognitive mobilization</b>
<b>Weak partisanship</b>	Apoliticals	Deliberators
<b>Strong partisanship</b>	Ritual Partisans	Cognitive Partisans

**Figure 2: Decay in Knowledge of Party Policies**



## Appendix A: Demographic profile of participants

	Experimental Participants June 2001	Greater London pop. 1991	Difference
<b>GENDER</b>			
Men	55.1		
Women	44.9		
<b>TENURE</b>			
Owner occupiers	60.9	58.2	+2.7
Rent privately	21.2	11.4	+9.8
Rent Housing Association	5.2	5.2	0
Rent LA/New Town	12.7	23.5	-10.8
<b>ETHNICITY</b>			
White	80.8	80.6	+0.2
Black	8.3	7.8	+0.5
Asian	8.5	7.4	+1.1
Other	2.4	4.1	-1.7
<b>SOCIAL CLASS</b>			
Middle class (ABC1)	58.1	59.1	-1.0
Working class (C2DE)	41.9	40.9	+1.0
<b>1997 VOTE</b>			
Lab 1997	54.8	53.1	+1.7
Con 1997	31.3	31.4	-0.1
LibDem 1997	13.7	15.0	-1.3

Note: Information about the Greater London population is derived from the 1991 Census. This limits strict comparability, for example with the growth of council house sales during the last decade. The 1997 vote for the three major parties is based on analysis of British Parliamentary Constituencies compared with recalled vote in the previous election, excluding non-voters and others. Quotas were employed by the fieldwork company in the initial selection of participants to match their background against the characteristics of Greater London population.

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