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Advocacy versus Attack: The impact of political advertising in the 2001 UK general election

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Synopsis This paper seeks to expand what we know about the effects of political advertising to the context of party election broadcasts (PEBs). In particular, we analyze how far the PEBs of the three major national parties altered voters' preferences during the 2001 UK general election campaign. Section 1 outlines the main theoretical framework. It generates a set of empirical predictions about the likely impact of the PEBs shown during the 2001 campaign. Section 2 outlines the data sources used to evaluate these predictions. The study draws on both the 2001 British Election Study Campaign Panel and also a series of media-exposure experiments among a representative sample of voters from Greater London, conducted among over 900 participants during the 2001 general election campaign. Section 3 reports our findings. We argue that, using panel survey data alone, it is almost impossible to establish a causal relationship between exposure to PEBs and changes in voters' party images. Using an experimental approach, however, the question of causality can be addressed more directly. The comparison of advocacy broadcasts shows that the two major parties failed to have a significant impact in improving their party image, but in contrast the Liberal Democrat broadcast both successfully boosted their own image and reduced Conservative support. The comparison of attack broadcasts by Conservative and Labour shows that the results backfired, as both had the unintended consequence of increasing support for their major opponent.

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In recent years scholars and practitioners have turned increasing attention towards understanding the impact of political advertising. Stimulated in part by the work of Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995), much of the debate has revolved around the issue of how far there are significant electoral rewards from either “*advocacy*” broadcasts, which offer a positive vision of the advertised party, or “*attack*” broadcasts which concentrate on criticizing the opposition (for a detailed meta review of these studies see Lau and Sigelman, 2000). Yet this body of work has occurred within a specific electoral and media context, in particular a lengthy American candidate-centered campaign where 30-second paid ads are ubiquitous, repetitive, and highly personalized. It remains unclear whether similar effects are likely to be produced by the unpaid party election broadcasts (PEBs) common in many western democracies outside the United States (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha 1995). Party election broadcasts tend to be far longer, single-shot rather than repetitive, and party rather than candidate-orientated. The length of PEBs is important because this format could lend itself to the presentation of more detailed and complex policy proposals and party programmes, broader discussions of the government’s record, and more in-depth coverage of the leadership teams than a fleeting 30-second spot (Kaid and Tedesco 1993). Even more crucially, the fact that major parties are well-known to the electorate, with familiar and long-established images, leadership teams and policy platforms, means that party-oriented ads in Europe can be expected to serve a different function, and to have different effects, from candidate-centered ads in America, rather like the contrasts between commercials for major household brand-names as opposed to marketing launches for unfamiliar products.

This paper therefore seeks to expand what we know about the effects of political advertising to the context of party election broadcasts. In particular, we combine analysis of the British Election Study campaign panel survey with large-scale experimental research with over 900 participants to see how far the PEBs of the three major national parties altered electoral preferences during the 2001 UK general election campaign. Section 1 outlines the main theoretical framework. Potentially campaign communications can influence many aspects of electoral behavior, such as mobilizing or depressing turnout, framing campaign issues, or encouraging learning about party programmes (Norris et al .1999; Norris and Sanders 2000). Here we focus on *persuasion effects*, the most traditional concern in studies of campaign advertising, on the assumption that politicians are rational vote-maximizers who use PEBs primarily to influence voting intentions. We note, however, that attempts to persuade voters always take place within a context which must be taken into account in any assessment of the impact of political advertising. Accordingly we develop a set of simple principles for predicting the impact of this context on the success of party election broadcasts and generate a set of empirical predictions about the likely impact of the PEBs shown during the 2001 campaign. Section 2 outlines the data sources used to evaluate these predictions. The study draws on both the 2001 British Election Study Campaign Panel and also a series of media-exposure experiments among a representative sample of voters from Greater London, conducted among over 900 participants during the 2001 general election campaign. Section 3 reports our empirical results. The simple message of our findings is that political party campaign managers and strategists should avoid going negative because attack broadcasts are counter-productive. The broader lesson is that party broadcasts can serve an important public service role by helping to create more balanced party competition, offsetting to some extent the communication disadvantages experienced by minor parties during election campaigns.

1. The theoretical framework: persuasion, reinforcement, and context

An extensive literature has sought to assess the effectiveness of television-based campaign advertising in American elections, particularly the impact of advocacy and attack ads (Pfau and Kinski 1990; Lau and Sigelman, 2000; West 2001; Thurber 2000). In Britain, many studies have described the evolution and character of campaign communications (see, for example, Scammell 1995; Seymore-Ure 1996; Butler and Kavanagh 2001) and the impact of news media coverage upon electoral behavior (Miller et al. 1991; Norris et al. 1999). A smaller body of work has focused on trends in the format and contents of party election broadcasts (see Scammell and Semetko 1995; Johnson and Elebash 1986; Harrison 2001; Pipkin 2001). In particular, content analysis by Hodess et al. (2000) noted a tendency towards increased negativity evident in PEBs aired during the 1997 campaign, compared with 1992. Similar trends have been documented as continuing in the 2001 election (Pipkin 2001).

Despite growing interest, there have been few rigorous attempts to evaluate the precise effects of campaign advertising on public opinion in Britain, and the possible impact of any rise in negative messages. Early study of political advertising when television was first introduced into British campaigns (Treneman and McQuail 1961; Blumler and McQuail 1968), represent the most important exceptions. Blumler and McQuail found no influence on voting intention for Conservative and Labour, yet a small but significant increase in Liberal Democrat support from viewers of their broadcasts. They concluded that PEBs are of greater significance for smaller parties, and this corresponds with general research on the effects of political advertising in the USA: the greatest impact being associated with parties or candidates who have relatively low levels of background news media coverage (Kaid and Johnston 2001). Nevertheless these early British studies are not only seriously dated now, given the substantial changes in political marketing and professional campaign communications that have occurred during the last thirty years, they also suffer from the general limitation characteristic of all survey-based attempts to assess the causal impact of particular political messages on the electorate. With a survey-based research design, even a multi-wave or rolling campaign panel survey, it is extraordinarily difficult to show that any observed changes in preference are the result of exposure to the particular message being analyzed, rather than the result of exposure to the multiplicity of other influences occurring during the campaign that are *not* being analyzed (Hovland 1959; Iyengar and Simon 2000). Previous experimental research on the impact of the direction of news coverage in the 1997 British election, by Sanders and Norris (1998; Norris et al. 1999) found that negative TV news had no impact on party support, whereas positive news about a party increased voter support for that party. Accordingly we wanted to extend this approach to see whether similar effects were evident for Party Election Broadcasts as had been found for television news in Britain.

A brief summary of the role and structure of party election broadcasts is necessary before we can proceed to examine their possible impact. The *1990 Broadcasting Act* and the *Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act 2000* regulate the context of political advertising in Britain (for details, see Election Commission 2001). Under UK law, any body whose objects are wholly or mainly of a political nature is not permitted to advertise on radio or television, including parties and candidates. Instead, as the result of an agreement between the broadcasting licensees and representatives from all the major parties, determined by the informal Committee on Party

Political Broadcasting (subsequently the Broadcasters' Liaison Group), political parties are each allocated unpaid Party Political Broadcasts (PPBs) and Party Election Broadcast (PEB) time (for details see the ITC Programme Code 2001, BBC Producers' Guidelines 2001). Party Election Broadcasts started in 1924 with 20-minute radio broadcasts by the three main party leaders. In 1951 the first televised party election broadcasts were made by each major party, each 15-minutes in length. In the 2001 general election campaign, each of the three major UK national parties was allocated in total up to a maximum of 5 nationally broadcast television PEBs each, carried on all five terrestrial television channels and all nation-wide radio stations, with separate arrangements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Minor parties qualified if they contested at least one-sixth of all seats in each nation, rather than on a UK-wide basis, and ten minor parties were allocated at least one broadcast each in England, Scotland and Wales or Northern Ireland. In the 2001 election, parties could choose a length of 2'40", 3'40" or 4'40" for their broadcasts, rather than the traditional 5 or 10-minute slots. Editorial control of the content of Party Election Broadcasts normally rests with the originating political party. However, licensees are responsible for ensuring that nothing transmitted breaches the Programme Code, notably the requirements on matters of offence to good taste and decency, and the Pro-Life Alliance fell foul of this regulation in the last campaign, in a case currently under appeal.

As the only opportunity to display television messages during the campaign, unmediated by programme planners, producers, editors or potentially aggressive interviewers, the major parties treat their broadcasts very seriously. The fact that all five terrestrial channels are required to broadcast each party's PEB on the same day (although not simultaneously) means that most viewers, from the single-station devotee to the channel surfer, are aware that the PEB is being broadcast – even if a sizeable minority choose not to watch it. *Potentially* party election broadcasts can still reach the vast majority of the electorate: despite the substantial proliferation of broadcasting channels available in Britain, it is estimated that the audience share for the television channels forced to carry PEBs remains at 80%, while the equivalent figure for radio stations is about 35% (Electoral Commission 2001). The BES campaign panel survey found that 58% of the electorate saw at least one PEB during the 2001 election, and 37% saw PEBs from all three major parties (see Table 3), reflecting very similar estimates to those produced by commercial polling surveys commissioned by the Electoral Commission (MORI 2001). At the same time, ITC survey research found that during the campaign 57% of respondents claimed either to switch channels or to turn off when a PEB was broadcast (ITC 2001). Even if not viewed directly, there is also often secondary commentary, previews and reviews about the contents of PEBs carried in the daily press, as the equivalent of US 'ad-watches', especially if the broadcast is either particularly memorable (such as 'Kinnock the Movie' in 1987) or controversial (such as the row over 'Jennifer's Ear' in 1992).

The focus of this study is on the *persuasion effects* of party broadcasts. The simple and obvious task of television advertising is to shape voter's choices. In principle, rational political advertisers direct their efforts at three main target groups. The first is the "waverers", who are either undecided about their party preferences or uncertain as to whether they will bother to vote at all. Ideally, for this target group, "becoming more sympathetic to the advertising party" entails a non-trivial number of *conversions* to the party's cause. The second target group consists of current partisan sympathizers. The objective of the rational advertiser here is *positive*

reinforcement: to strengthen the commitment of her/his own partisans in order to ensure that they turn out to vote for the advertising party in the greatest possible numbers. Finally, the third target is the voters supporting competing parties. Here, the objective is *negative reinforcement*: to weaken the commitment of opposing partisans to their respective parties so that they either fail to vote at all or even switch allegiance altogether.

All of this, of course, serves to underpin what can be regarded as the rational politician's core assumption about the effects of PEBs. This "axiom" can be stated as follows.

A₁ If voters are exposed to our party's unmediated political messages in PEBs, other things being equal, they will be persuaded to take a more favourable view of our party. Undecided voters may be persuaded to vote for us; our own partisans may be strengthened in their commitment; while our opponents' supporters may be weakened.

Political advertising then, seeks to persuade the undecided, to reinforce the party's own partisans, and to neutralize opposing partisans. PEBs attempt to achieve these objectives through a mixture of *advocacy* and *attack*. Advocacy involves making a positive appeal to voters. The party stresses its own record, in national, local or regional government, in satisfying voters' demands. It emphasizes its own vision and policies for the future and indicates how these will contribute to meeting voters' continuing needs and aspirations. Attack implies "going negative". It involves, *inter alia*, criticizing the record of the opposing party or parties; questioning the judgment, experience and probity of opposing leaders; and generating fear about what the future might hold if the opposing party or parties were in power. The mechanisms implicitly associated with these two approaches – the making of promises and threats – are as old as politics itself and, in principle, can be used in combination. In the style of the mafia bosses, voters can be made an offer they can't refuse: one that promises a reward if the offer is accepted but threatens a punishment if it is spurned.

In practice, however, mixed advocacy-attack PEBs are relatively rare. Indeed, in the 2001 UK campaign, all of the transmitted broadcasts were primarily based either on advocacy or attack. For example, the Conservative's broadcast on crime, shot in grainy 'black and white' in 'shockumentary' crime-watch style, showed footage of a pensioner being mugged on the street in one clip and school kids playing truant and setting fire to an abandoned car, to illustrate the failure of the government's record on law and order, accompanied by a litany of statistics about prisoners released by Labour's Special Early Release Scheme. In contrast, the Labour advocacy PEB provided a lengthy shopping list of policy achievements to demonstrate how Britain had changed for the better in the previous five years of the Blair government, including the creation of new jobs, the introduction of the minimum wage, the expansion of maternity leave, the reduction in child poverty, and so on and so forth, ending with the slogan: "A lot has been done, but there's still a lot more to do. So the work goes on. Vote Labour on Thursday June 7th."

The importance of context: four supplementary axioms

It is a relatively straightforward matter, then, to specify the aims of PEBs, which are to persuade and to reinforce voter opinion, using the strategies of advocacy and attack. These sorts of *intended* effects, however, even they could be straightforwardly observed, might not be the only consequences of campaign advertising. PEBs, like any commercial marketing campaign, can have *unintended* consequences. Just as economic market conditions are crucial to the success of commercial advertising, so the political market of electoral competition is important for the way that people react to any given message. In our view, the context of campaign messages can either undermine or complement persuasion/reinforcement in at least three ways.

First, the messages that parties convey in the heat of an official general election campaign are not received in a vacuum. The long campaign invariably begins well before the dissolution of parliament. Politicians use legislative debates, formal speeches, policy launches, by-elections, local, and regional elections, and journalists' briefings throughout the parliamentary cycle to influence press and television reporting. In these circumstances, through constant repetition, the public becomes familiar with the lines of argument and styles of presentation that the parties espouse. The public becomes most familiar with the images, leaders and policies of the major parliamentary parties, who are heard day after day in any major political debate and who receive the lion's share of coverage in the news media. Like the products made by household brand-names – Ford, Coke or McDonalds – most people already have fairly fixed ideas about whether they like or dislike these products, so exposure to more information in a single advertisement will be unlikely to alter their perceptions. This claim leads directly to our first supplementary axiom:

SA₁ For the major parties, where the public already has already developed fairly stable and familiar images through constant repetition, further advocacy information obtained by watching a single election broadcast will have little or no effect on changing party images.

SA₁, moreover, has a direct corollary. If the marginal effect of hearing a little more about the major parties is relatively small, then by implication the marginal effect of hearing more about the minor parties is likely to be greater. Minor and fringe parties receive far less coverage than major parties in the news media, even with the special 'balance' rules that come into play during election campaigns. Combined with the lack of the familiar 'left-right' ideological cues, the public is also likely to be particularly hazy about how to place traditional centrist parties. As a result public awareness of these parties is far less, and their images can be expected to be more fluid and less fixed in the mind of the public. The lack of visibility of the minor parties in the UK is demonstrated by the fact that the public is often remarkably ignorant about many policies espoused by the minor parties that are taken for granted as common knowledge by election commentators (Norris et al. 1999; Norris and Sanders 2001). Our second contextual effect can accordingly be expressed as:

SA₂ Minor parties are less familiar to the public, so a single election broadcast will be more likely to shape the public's image of these parties.

Our third contextual effect relates to the corrosive, and potentially counterproductive, character of attack broadcasting. We have already noted, in Supplementary Axiom SA₁ above, that voters are unlikely to be change their minds about familiar party images and messages that they have heard many times before. Attack broadcasts, however, have a distinctive quality because they call attention to the opponent's retrospective record, leadership qualities, or prospective policies. If the broadcasts provide dissonant messages, if attacks are regarded as exaggerated, untrustworthy and implausible, a real danger given the partisan source, then the public is likely to dismiss the intended message. Moreover by publicizing their opponents, the message may provoke voters into becoming more sympathetic towards the *target* of the attack. For example in the 1997 election, the 'demon-eyes' Conservative campaign tried to paint Labour as closet radical reds and leftwing loonies, but since the overwhelming thrust of Labour's campaign was towards the moderate center, this appeared grossly implausible to nearly all commentators, as well as to the public when asked to locate Labour on the left-right scale. Such attacks can backfire, because they reminded voters that in fact that, under Blair, Labour proved far from leftwing, and it made the Conservatives seem out-of-touch, feeble, and ineffective campaigners. Along similar lines, Labour's caricature 'Mr. Boom and Mr. Bust' attacks on the Conservative's economic record may have appeared implausible and acted in counterproductive ways if the message prompted the public to actually recalled the economic prosperity Britain experienced in the 1980s under Thatcherism. There are similar dangers in the next general election if the Conservatives are tempted to criticize Labour's record on the railways, if instead this prompts the public to blame the Conservative rail privatization programme. This putative mechanism produces our third supplementary axiom:

SA₃ *In a situation where attacks are widely regarded as implausible, attack messages have the counterproductive effect of boosting support for the target of the attack.*

Our final contextual effect relates to the effects that attack messages are likely to have on the partisans of an "embattled" party, that is, one that is making very little progress in the opinion polls. We noted above that there may be circumstances in which "attack" messages either have no effect or are counterproductive. However, for a party that appears to be in electoral difficulties, attack messages can still represent a very useful device for reinforcing its partisans' distaste for the opposition. This in turn means that the partisans of an embattled party are likely to be particularly receptive to attack messages, even in situations when voters in general are likely to be unaffected by them. In short, for partisans of an embattled party, attack messages *are* likely to have their intended effects on partisans, reinforcing partisans' dislike for the party that is the target of the attack. To summarise:

SA₄ If the partisans of an embattled party, A, are exposed to attack messages directed at party B, they are likely to take note of the messages and to reduce their support for B.

We have sought in the preceding discussion to show how, in principle, PEBs can have both intended (A₁) and (largely) unintended effects (SA₁₋₄). We have also stressed the importance of plausibility as an influence on the

unintended effects of political messages. In the following section, we translate our axioms into testable hypotheses about the effects of the election broadcasts in 2001.

From context to hypothesized effects

In this part of our discussion we use the axioms outlined earlier to develop a series of specific hypotheses about the effects that PEBs had on voter preferences during the 2001 UK election campaign. In our empirical analysis reported in Section 3 below, we consider the effects of five different sorts of PEB: Conservative Advocacy, Conservative Attack, Labour Advocacy, Labour Attack and Liberal Democrat Advocacy.¹ The hypotheses that we develop here accordingly encompass the predicted consequences of these five types of PEB. We begin, however, by considering the set of hypotheses that are implied by A_1 above – “the rational politician’s axiom”.

Table 1 outlines the set of predicted PEB effects implied by A_1 . The most obvious effects are denoted by the plus (+) signs shown in the table. The simple hypothesis underlying each of these predicted effects is that *if voters are exposed to party X’s PEB, then they are likely to increase their support for X (H1.1)*. The negative signs in Table 1 represent what might be termed “collateral damage effects”. Again, a very simple hypothesis underlines this predicted pattern: *exposure to party X’s PEB reduces voters’ support for X’s opponents (H1.2)*. Table 1, however, entails only one possible set of predicted effects. Table 2 offers an alternative set of predictions, together with the hypotheses (outlined below) from which they are derived. It specifies the ways in which the contextual conditions summarized in supplementary axioms SA_{1-4} are likely to have influenced the effectiveness of the parties’ various PEBs. We present the hypotheses in order of increasing specificity. Where the axioms imply conflicting propositions, then we regard the more specific hypotheses as over-riding the less specific.

Supplementary Axiom SA_1 suggests that for major parties, with familiar images, single election broadcasts are unlikely to exert much, if any, marginal effect on the public. Labour and Conservatives party images were so familiar and well established at the time of the 2001 campaign that exposure to self-promotion messages via advocacy PEBs were unlikely to affect voters’ perceptions. Accordingly, we hypothesize that *voters’ party images were unaffected by advocacy PEBs for the major parties (H2.1)*.

Supplementary Axiom SA_2 suggests the obverse of SA_1 . It asserts that minor parties are less familiar to the public, with more fluid party images, so that a minor party election broadcast is more likely to have more impact on voters’ opinions. This axiom has obvious implications for the impact of the *Liberal Democrats’* PEBs. Throughout the long campaign, lack of media interest meant that the party struggled to get any sort of message across to voters. The Liberal Democrats’ PEB accordingly conveyed a message that had not been heard extensively before. This implies two hypotheses about the impact of the Liberal Democrats’ PEBs: *the Liberal*

Democrats' broadcast increased voters' support for the Liberal Democrats (H2.2a); it weakened support for the Liberal Democrats opponents (H2.2b)

Supplementary Axiom SA₃ focuses on the likely impact of implausible claims. It suggests that the *attack* PEBs were unlikely to affect voters in the way that the attacking parties intended because the attacking messages themselves were widely regarded as implausible. Following the logic of SA₃, we accordingly hypothesize that *the Conservative attack broadcast increased support for Labour, though it left support for the other parties unaffected (H2.3a)*. Similarly, *Labour's attack broadcast increased support for the Conservatives, though it left support for the others unaffected (H2.3b)*.

Our final hypothesis relates to the impact of attack broadcasts on “embattled” partisans. As SA₄ anticipates, the *partisans* of an embattled party *are* likely to respond sympathetically to attack messages delivered by their own party by taking an even more critical view of the attacked party. The Conservatives' disastrous performance in the 1997 general election and their persistent failure to make significant progress in the opinion polls during the course of the 1997 parliament clearly qualifies them for the label of “embattled” in the sense that we have used it. Their partisans were thus primed to respond positively to attacks on their main rival. Accordingly, we hypothesise that *among Conservative partisans, the Conservatives' attack PEB reduced support for Labour (H2.4)*.

2. The Data and Model Specifications

The data that we employ in order to evaluate the hypotheses developed above are taken from two sources. The first is the 2001 British Election Study Panel Survey. This is a nationally representative face-to-face probability survey with a weighted N of 2331. The first panel wave was conducted in April/May of 2001, immediately before the official election campaign began. The second wave was conducted in June/July of 2001, immediately after the election. We treat self-reported exposure to the various parties' PEBs during the official campaign as an intervention and, with appropriate statistical controls, compare post-election perceptions of the parties with pre-election perceptions.

Our second data source is a set of media-exposure experiments that were conducted in London, using a representative sample (N=919) of the greater London population, during the official election campaign in May-June 2001. The design and conduct of the experiments is described in Appendix 1 and full details about the methodology including the stimuli and questionnaires are available at www.pippanorris.com. The basic design of the experiments replicates those conducted during the 1997 UK general election campaign (Sanders and Norris, 1998; Norris *et al*, 1999). The experiments involved randomly assigning subjects (“respondents”) to five different *test* groups and to a larger *control* group. Respondents' attitudes to the political parties and other relevant political attitudes were measured in a pre-test questionnaire. Respondents were then exposed to one of

five PEBs or to the control stimulæ. We had originally intended to use six PEBs – one “advocacy” and one “attack” for each of the three major parties. As noted above, the Conservatives did not produce an “advocacy” broadcast, so we used the nearest functional equivalent, which was a Comment piece by the party’s shadow Education minister. The Liberal Democrats, however, did not produce any sort of “attack” broadcast, so we were obliged to drop this element from our original design. After exposure to the test PEBs, respondents completed a short post-test questionnaire which, *inter alia*, again assessed their attitudes to the political parties and other relevant attributes. In order to assess whether the messages contained in the PEBs had any effect, we compared the pre-test to post-test changes in respondents’ attitudes towards the parties across the test and control groups.

As far as possible, in the analysis presented here we use identical measures taken from the BES panel data and from the experimental study. Using BES data, there are in principle two different dependent variables that can be used in order to assess the possible effects of exposure to PEBs. One involves measuring pre-election to post-election changes in the degree of support that respondents display towards the major parties. The other involves a lagged endogenous variable specification in which vote preference in the post-election wave is considered as a function of vote preference in the pre-election wave plus a set of other relevant explanatory and control variables. In the analysis reported here, we use only the first of these specifications, for two reasons. First, the two specifications (results not reported) do not differ hugely in the substantive conclusions that they imply. Second, the “change in degree of support” approach provides us with a much closer comparison between our BES and our experimental results. In conducting our experiments we did not ask respondents’ vote preferences in both the pre-test and post-test. This was because we felt that, during the course of an experiment that lasted no more than one hour, it was not feasible to ask respondents on two separate occasions how they intended to vote in the forthcoming general election.

BES model specification

Table 3 (column 1) shows the measures used for the BES part of our analysis. We use two indicators (each measured on a 10-point scale) to measure pre-election and post-election perceptions of the major UK political parties: perceptions of the party leader and feelings of affect towards the party. For each party, our dependent variable, “party image”, is the arithmetic mean of these two scales, measured as the change in pre-election to post-election scores. We do not report the behaviour of the component indices; suffice to note that the two components are highly inter-correlated and that they behave very similarly when used separately.

We include two sorts of explanatory variables. The most important are the “intervention” exposure variables – whether or not the respondent watched a particular PEB. Note, however, that a significant proportion of BES respondents saw more than one party’s PEB. For example, as the table indicates, 37% of respondents saw the PEBs of all three major parties between the two survey waves. Accordingly, the core explanatory variables

shown in Table 3 specify the various combinations of PEB exposure (e.g. watched Conservative and Labour but not Liberal Democrat; watched Labour only) that could in principle have produced different effects on voter preferences. Note also that at this stage of our analysis we are unable to differentiate systematically between “advocacy” and “attack” exposures to PEBs. Rather, our main focus here is on assessing the general persuasion and reinforcement effects of the various PEBs (outlined in Axiom A₁), rather than on the supplementary hypotheses that we investigate later in our experimental analysis.

The second group of explanatory variables are those that, on the basis of *a priori* reasoning, might be expected to influence the extent to which individuals shift (or fail to shift) their perceptions in response to exposure to PEBs. In this context we include, first, the pre-election party image score for each party, in order to reflect the fact that an individual who already scores highly on a particular dimension has less scope for increasing her/his score. We also include whether or not the individual has a partisan identification with each of the major parties, on the assumption that as the election approaches identifiers with party X are more likely, *ceteris paribus*, to draw closer to X and to distance themselves from X’s competitors.

Finally, we include a set of control variables, designed to ensure that any effects we might observe are not the incidental result of the tendency of certain types of people to react in specific ways. These control variables consist of the usual demographics (age, gender, education, ethnicity and class), together with interest in politics, attention to television news and newspaper readership. This latter cluster of variables is included in order to reflect the fact that, in 2001, the various national newspapers made different recommendations as to how their readers should vote. Our controls in this context differentiate among the *Mirror* (traditional pro-Labour tabloid), the *Sun* (which converted to Labour in 1997), the *Express*, *Mail* and *Telegraph* (which remained staunchly pro-Conservative) and the *Guardian*, *Independent*, *Times* and *Financial Times* (which were broadly agnostic between Labour and the Liberal Democrats).

The basic form of the model specification we employ is implicit in the list of variables provided in Table 3. Our core model specification for our BES analysis is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
 dXImage = & a + b_1LabImage_{t1} + b_2ConImage_{t1} + b_3DemImage_{t1} \\
 & + b_4LabPartisan_{t1} + b_5ConPartisan_{t1} + b_6DemPartisan_{t1} \\
 & + b_7LabPEB + b_8ConPEB + b_9LibPEB \\
 & + b_{10}ConLibPEB + b_{11}ConLabPEB + b_{12}LabLibPEB \\
 & + b_{13}LabConLibPEB \\
 & + b_{14}Interest + b_{15}TVattention \\
 & + b_{16}Age + b_{17}Male + b_{18}White + b_{19}Graduate
 \end{aligned}$$

$$+ b_{20}\text{Sun} + b_{21}\text{Mirror} + b_{22}\text{GITFT} + b_{23}\text{ExpMailTel} + e \quad [1]$$

In this model, dX_{image} is the pre-election to post-election change in the Party Image score of party X , the subscript t_1 refers to the pre-election wave, e is a random error term, and all other variable names are as defined in Table 3.

Experimental model specification

Table 3 (column2) lists the variables employed in our experimental analysis. As far as data availability permits, the variables are identical to those deployed in our BES analysis. However, in the experimental analysis, the party image index for each party is composed of three indicators rather than two. In addition to the party leader and party affect ratings that we use in our BES analysis, we also use the probability of voting for party X in the general election. (This third component clearly made no sense in the BES *post*-election survey, was therefore not asked in that survey, and was accordingly unavailable for our BES analysis). For each party, our dependent variable, “party image”, is the arithmetic mean of these three scales, measured as the change in pre-test to post-test scores.

The core explanatory variables in our experimental design are slightly different from those in our BES design. With the BES data, as noted above, many respondents reported having seen the broadcasts of more than one party, which meant that we have to test for the effects of various combinations of exposures. In our experiments, however, we allocated (randomly) respondents to PEBs – so we knew that respondents had not been exposed to more than one party’s broadcast between the pre- and post-tests. In our experimental models, therefore, we have only five core explanatory PEB terms, which correspond to our five test exposures (Conservative Advocacy, Conservative Attack, Labour Advocacy, Labour Attack and Liberal Democrat Advocacy). With regard to additional explanatory variables, our experimental analysis uses exactly the same set of variables as that used in our BES-based investigation (the pre-election party image score for each party and whether or not the individual has a partisan identification with each of the major parties). The experimental analysis also uses a similar set of control variables (demographics and political interest). The only exceptions are the omissions, in our experimental models, of attention to television news and newspaper readership on the grounds that, for the duration of the experiments, our test respondents by definition remained unexposed to either television news or newspapers.

We introduce one other new term in our experimental specification. Hypothesis H2.4 suggests that Conservative partisans reacted differently from other voters to the Conservatives’ attack PEB. In order to test this proposition, we introduce a multiplicative interaction term between exposure to this PEB and whether or not the respondent was a Conservative identifier. The model specification for our experimental analysis is accordingly:

$$\begin{aligned}
dXImage = & a + b_1LabImage_{t1} + b_2ConImage_{t1} + b_3DemImage_{t1} \\
& + b_4LabPartisan_{t1} + b_5ConPartisan_{t1} + b_6DemPartisan_{t1} \\
& + b_7LabAdvoc + b_8LabAttack \\
& + b_9ConAdvoc + b_{10}ConAttack + b_{11}LibAdvoc \\
& + b_{12}Interest + b_{13}Age + b_{14}Male + b_{15}White + b_{16}Graduate \\
& + b_{17}ConAttack*ConPartisan + e \quad [2]
\end{aligned}$$

where ConAttack*ConPartisan is a multiplicative interaction term; $dXImage$ is the pre-test to post-test change in the Party Image score of party X; the subscript t1 refers to the pre-test; e is a random error term and all other variable names are as defined in Table 4.

3. Empirical Results

In the previous section we pointed out that, with BES data, the task of estimating the effects of exposure to PEBs was complicated by the fact that many voters saw the PEBs of more than one party. This pattern of multiple exposure obviously creates the possibility of “canceling” effects, in which, say, the beneficial effects (for Labour) of exposure to its PEB are cancelled out by the damaging effects of exposure to the Conservative or Liberal Democrat PEBs. If we temporarily ignore these potential canceling effects, and simply substitute “exposure to party X’s PEB or not” into [1] instead of the more complex exposure pattern contained in [1], we get the results reported in Table 4. On the face of it, these results suggest that PEBs have strong and consistent persuasive effects on voters’ opinions. In the equation for changes in Conservative party image, exposure to the Conservative PEB (and *only* to the Conservative PEB) yields a significant positive coefficient. In the other two equations, exactly the same pattern is found: in the Labour equation, only exposure to Labour’s PEB is significant (and positive); and in the Liberal Democrats equation, only their PEB is significant (and again positive). These simple results, however, are misleading for the precisely the reason indicated above: they ignore the effects of multiple exposures.

Table 5 takes these multiple exposures explicitly into account. It reports the results of estimating equation [1] using the BES data to predict the pre- to post-election changes in party image scores for the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The pattern of results among the various sets of control variables is both consistent and fairly stable. For the most part, identifiers with party X tend to increase their support for X (see, for example, the significant positive coefficient for Labour identifiers in the Labour equation) and to reduce it for other parties (see the significant negative coefficients for Conservative and Liberal Democrat identifiers in the Labour equation). Similarly, individuals who score highly on X’s party image in the pre-election survey are less likely to increase their score than who register a low score (see, for example, the significant negative coefficients on the pre-election Conservative party image score in all three equations). In general, the

demographic variables are non-significant, suggesting that there are no omitted confounding effects from this quarter. The press readership effects are all consistent with the positions taken by the major newspapers during the campaign: *Mirror* readers were less likely to shift to the Conservatives; *Sun* readers were more likely to switch to Labour; and broadsheet readers (*The Telegraph* excepted) were more likely to switch to the Liberal Democrats.

The key coefficients in Table 5 from our perspective, however, are those relating to the PEB exposures. Here, the pattern that we observe is far less compelling than the picture that was presented in Table 4. To begin with, exposure to all three parties' PEBs appears significantly to have increased support for all three parties. This pattern is replicated, moreover, among voters who watched any two parties' broadcasts: voters who watched the Labour and Conservative PEBs increased their support for both Labour and the Conservatives; and so on. It is possible, of course, that these multiple exposures genuinely increased support for all three major parties at the expense of "minor" parties and "non-voting", though it still seems odd to us that multiple exposures could have such promiscuous effects. Moreover, in the one place where we would expect the effects of exposure to be strongest – when a voter has seen the PEB of only one party – the effect pattern disappears. Exposure to solely a Conservative PEB does *not* affect Conservative support. Similarly, exposure to solely a Liberal Democrat PEB leaves Liberal Democrat support unaffected. Only exposure to a Labour PEB appears to improve the exposed party's image. These very limited single exposure effects – or more typically non-effects – are not really consistent with the idea that exposure, of itself, produces an enhanced party image for the exposed party. Indeed, notwithstanding the large number of significant coefficients on the party exposure terms in Table 5, we consider that those coefficients do not constitute evidence that exposure has a causal effect on party image. On the contrary, we believe that the apparent effect on party image of watching PEBs is almost certainly spurious. Voters who are drawn to party X during the course of a campaign, for whatever reasons, may simply be more likely to watch party X's PEB – or to report in a post-election survey that they have watched it. In this sense, it is not exposure to a PEB that produces the change in preference, but rather the change in preference that produces the (report of) exposure.

In our view, the pattern of apparent exposure effects shown in Table 5 – in which almost all exposures except single exposures appear to enhance the party images of all of the major parties – suggests the impossibility of properly assessing the effects of exposure to PEBs using panel survey data. This is precisely why we consider an experimental approach to the effectiveness of political messages to be necessary. Experiments that test voters' opinions both immediately before and immediately after exposure to PEBs provide an alternative, and more rigorous, way of assessing the causal impact of PEBs on voters' preferences. The exposure can be precisely controlled and any changes in party image that occur immediately after it can be carefully measured.

Table 6 reports the consequences of estimating equation [2] above using our experimental data. The table shows the effects of our various control variables as well as of exposure to our five test PEBs. The pattern of control variable effects is similar to the one that we reported for our BES analysis in Table 5, so we do not

comment on it further here. The pattern of test exposure effects suggests some successful *persuasion* took place during the 2001 UK election campaign. The Liberal Democrats' advocacy PEB was the most obviously successful. Exposure to it increased the average support for the Lib- Dems by almost 0.5 of a point on the 10-point scale (see $b=.45$ for exposure to the Liberal Democrat PEB in column 3 of Table 6). At the same, the Lib-Dems' PEB inflicted roughly the same amount of "collateral damage" on the Conservatives (see $b=-.41$ for the Lib-Dem PEB in column 1). The Conservative and Labour PEBs, however, had no such general persuasion effects. Neither of the Conservatives' PEBs had any general effect at all, at conventional levels of significance. The same was true of Labour's advocacy PEB. However, Labour's attack PEB had the opposite effect to that which Labour had intended: exposure to it actually increased sympathy for the *Conservatives* by just under 0.4 of a point on the 10-point scale. The Conservatives' attack PEB was even more damaging to the Conservatives' own cause: exposure to it increased support for *Labour* – its target – by almost 0.5 of a point. So much for the persuasive power of the negative, attacking party broadcast.

The most effective way of looking at the results presented in Table 6 is to consider Table 7, which summarises the pattern of significant and non-significant exposure effects from Table 6. The results in Table 7, compared with the predictions that we set out in Tables 1 and 2, provide compelling evidence for our claim that context matters. The observed pattern of significant coefficients shown in Table 7 almost exactly matches the predicted pattern suggested in Table 2. Consider, first, the impact of the *Conservatives' attack* PEB. The hypotheses that we advanced earlier suggested that this PEB should have had no effect on Conservative and Liberal Democrat support but should have increased support for Labour (H2.3a). It should also have reinforced Conservative partisans' dislike of Labour (H2.4). All these predictions are borne out by the data. Conservative and Liberal Democrat support were unaffected by the broadcast, while Labour support increased among voters generally but fell among Conservative partisans. *Labour's attack* PEB also had exactly the predicted effect on support patterns. As H2.3b anticipated, Liberal Democrat and Labour support were unaffected by the broadcast, but it increased Conservative support. A similar pattern of support for the predictions in Table 2 can be seen in relation to the *advocacy* broadcasts of both Labour and the Conservatives. As anticipated in Table 2, both broadcasts left voters unmoved (see the zero coefficients in the Conservative and Labour Advocacy columns), thus confirming H2.1. Finally, the *Liberal Democrats' broadcast* had the predicted impacts on Lib-Dem support (positive, in line with H2.2a) and on Conservative support (negative, in line with H2.2b), though it did not (contra H2.2b) affect Labour support. This pattern certainly suggests partial support for H2.2b.

Overall, the degree of fit between Tables 2 and 7 is good – certainly much better than the fit between Tables 1 and 7. Table 2 correctly predicts 15 out of the 16 observed coefficients in Table 7. (The only error is that the Liberal Democrat broadcast did not, as predicted, reduce support for Labour). This in turn suggests that our analysis of the importance of political context – as articulated in our four "supplementary axioms" – gives a rather better account of the impact of political messages on voters than the claims of the "rational politician" claims, as articulated in Axiom A₁ and hypotheses H1.1 and H1.2.

Conclusions

The analysis that we have presented is both limited and potentially wide-ranging in its implications. It is limited in the sense that our key empirical results are derived from experiments that were conducted during a single election campaign in the UK and that involved only 250 “test subjects” and just over 650 “control subjects”. Our analysis is nonetheless wide-ranging in the sense that it demonstrates how political contexts constrain the extent to which political messages are capable of swaying voters’ opinions towards and away from different political parties.²

In our theoretical analysis we sought to show how campaigning patterns during the “long campaign” – in the months and years before the final campaign messages are delivered – can either nullify, or even reverse, the intended effects of political advertising. We would certainly not claim to have identified all of the possible contextual effects that could in principle confound the intentions of political advertisers. We do claim, however, that our “supplementary axioms” represent a plausible and important set of contextual calculations that voters are likely to make when they are exposed to political messages during an election campaign. In essence, our supplementary axioms constitute a set of reasons that help to explain why political advertising often fails to sway voters’ opinions. Voters are neither persuaded nor reinforced in their opinions to anything like the extent that the “rational politician” model implies. Rather, voters in general are unconvinced by messages that they have heard frequently before and they dismiss those which involve implausible advocacy. Crucially, voters seem to respond to negative attacking messages by increasing their support for the target of the attack, rather than for the attack’s originator. Partisans of embattled parties are the only group that responds to attack advertising as party managers would wish, by reducing their support for the target of the attack.

Our theoretical claims, however, are not made in an empirical vacuum. We sought to test our claims, insofar as this is possible, against two datasets. Our analysis of the 2001 British Election Study data suggests that the apparent effect on party choice of watching PEBs, which is commonly found using survey data, may be spurious. Our interpretation of the pattern of results that we reported in Table 5 is that voters who are drawn towards a particular party during the course of a campaign are more likely to watch or to report that they watched that party’s PEB. Exposure, in this respect, has no causal effect on preference; it is preference that affects exposure or the report of it. It is in this context that an experimental approach becomes so important, because the immediate consequences of different sorts of exposure can be measured and compared.

We do not wish to exaggerate the value of our experimental findings. Like all experiments, they do not measure “the real world”. We believe, however, that our experimental findings cannot be lightly dismissed. We have shown elsewhere that experimental designs of the sort employed here can produce significant and

robust statistical effects both on voters' party preferences and on their levels of political knowledge (Norris et al. 1999, Norris and Sanders, 2001). The fact that many of our "observed effects", as reported in Table 7, are "null effects" cannot simply be dismissed as the consequence of an experimental design that was never likely to produce statistically significant changes in voters' electoral opinions in the first place. What needs to be stressed is that the pattern of effects (and non effects) shown in Table 7 is largely consistent with the theoretical and substantive story that we have developed here.

Our conclusions about the effects of PEBs in the 2001 UK election campaign can be stated very simply.

- (1) The comparison of advocacy broadcasts confirmed that, as major parties with well-established images, Labour and the Conservative PEBs failed to have a significant impact in improving their party image, but in contrast the Liberal Democrat broadcast introducing Charles Kennedy to the public both successfully boosted their own support and reduced support for the Conservatives.
- (2) The comparison of attack broadcasts by Conservative and Labour showed that the results backfired, as both had the unintended consequence of increasing support for their major opponent.

As Blumler and McQuail (1968) found more than thirty years ago, the opportunity for greater exposure available via the free airwaves favors minor parties more than the major players. It is perhaps no coincidence that the Liberal Democrats, despite being outspent and also given substantially less attention by the press and television than their major rivals (Butler and Kavanagh 2001), were also the only party that substantially improved its general support during the course of the 2001 general election campaign (Norris 2001). The reason why they improved their standing with the broadcast, we suggest, is because the public had less familiar and fixed images of this party, and so were more open to persuasion when given a positive and credible message about their leader.

The results of this study have potentially important implications for political parties in the UK. There is currently a major debate among broadcasters and politicians as to whether the institution of Party Election Broadcasts should be maintained in its current form, revised with the introduction of a mixed system including paid commercials, or simply abandoned wholesale (Electoral Commission 2001). The lessons of our findings for the parties are straightforward. The main beneficiaries of PEBs were the Liberal Democrats. The combination of added exposure, and a determination to confine themselves to advocacy messages, gave a significant boost to their electoral fortunes. Although we have no direct evidence, by implication this suggests that if other minor parties like the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens follow similar strategies, we would expect that party election broadcasts could serve similar functions for them. In this regard, party election broadcasts in their current form serve an important public service role by helping to create a more balanced playing field for minor parties, increasing party competition, and informing the public of the full range of electoral choices on offer. Without them, the substantial electoral hurdles facing minor parties would be even greater. This pattern is consistent with the evidence of the differential impact of campaign advertisements on incumbents and less known challengers in the United States (Kaid and Johnston 2001), as well as with the fact that the Liberal Democrats have often experienced a more substantial boost in the polls during general election campaigns than

the major parties (Norris 2001). Future research need additional experiments, exposing the public to the ads run by other minor parties such as the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens, to test these propositions further.

For Labour and the Conservatives, in the 2001 election, the PEBs were more of a penalty than an opportunity. At best, the parties' PEBs had no effect on general voter opinion, who had already made up their minds about whether they liked or disliked these parties. At worst, negative campaigning, by calling attention to their opponent with implausible claims that were discounted by the public, actually increasing support for their opponents. In comparison ads, Pepsi may claim to be more nutritious, less calorific, or more fashionable than Coke, but if these claims are widely regarded as false and unbelievable, then Pepsi may well simply be providing Coke with 30-seconds of free prime-time publicity. In the words of the old adage: 'there's no such thing as bad publicity'. Admittedly we have no direct evidence that the reason why the attack ads backfired was because they were widely regarded as implausible criticisms of their opponents, but this seems like a plausible assumption to make sense of the results that are found. The analysis suggests that, unless strategic attacks are actually targeted in accord with the widely perceived Achilles heel of their opponents, both Labour and the Conservatives would do well to minimize their use of attack advertising in the run-up to the next election.

Table 1: Predicted effects on party support of watching Party Election Broadcasts implied by Axiom A₁

| Change in pre- to post-exposure party image score | Advocacy PEBs | | | Attack PEBs | |
|---|---------------|------|---------|-------------|--------|
| | Labour | Cons | Lib-Dem | Cons | Labour |
| Conservative | - | + | - | + | - |
| Labour | + | - | - | - | + |
| Liberal Democrat | - | - | + | - | - |

Notes: A positive sign (+) denotes a predicted positive effect (derived from H1.1).
A negative sign (-) denotes a predicted negative effect (derived from H1.2).

Table 2: Predicted effects on party support of watching Party Election Broadcasts implied by Supplementary Axioms SA₁₋₅

| Change in pre- to post-exposure party image score | Advocacy PEBs | | | Attack PEBs | |
|---|---------------|-------------|-------------------|---------------|----------------|
| | Labour (H2.1) | Cons (H2.1) | Lib-Dem (H2.2a/b) | Cons (H2.3a) | Labour (H2.3b) |
| Conservative | 0 | 0 | - | 0 | + |
| Labour | 0 | 0 | - | + | 0 |
| Liberal Democrat | 0 | 0 | + | CONIDS - 0 | 0 |

Notes: Each cell shows the predicted coefficient sign. Each column indicates the hypothesis (in parentheses) from which the prediction derived. The negative sign next to CONIDS indicates that Conservative Partisans are expected to adjust their views of Labour differently from other voters in response to a Conservative Attack PEB (derived from H2.4).

A positive sign (+) denotes a predicted positive effect.

A negative sign (-) denotes a predicted negative effect.

A zero (0) denotes a prediction of no effect.

Table 3: Variables used in the analysis

| | BES Data | | Experiments | |
|---|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| Continuous Variables | Range | Mean | Range | Mean |
| Pre-exposure liking for Conservative leader | 0 to 10 | 3.99 | 0 to 10 | 3.69 |
| Pre-exposure liking for Conservative Party | 0 to 10 | 3.90 | 0 to 10 | 3.92 |
| Pre-exposure probability of voting Conservative | | | 0 to 10 | 3.74 |
| Pre-exposure Conservative Party Image Score | 0 to 10 | 3.96 | 0 to 10 | 3.79 |
| Pre-exposure liking for Labour leader | 0 to 10 | 5.49 | 0 to 10 | 5.24 |
| Pre-exposure liking for Labour Party | 0 to 10 | 5.27 | 0 to 10 | 5.37 |
| Pre-exposure probability of voting Labour | | | 0 to 10 | 5.39 |
| Pre-exposure Labour Party Image Score | 0 to 10 | 5.39 | 0 to 10 | 5.35 |
| Pre-exposure liking for Lib Democrat leader | 0 to 10 | 4.81 | 0 to 10 | 4.60 |
| Pre-exposure liking for Liberal Democrat Party | 0 to 10 | 4.97 | 0 to 10 | 4.30 |
| Pre-exposure probability of voting Lib-Dem | | | 0 to 10 | 3.57 |
| Pre-exposure Lib-Dem Party Image Score | 0 to 10 | 4.93 | 0 to 10 | 4.17 |
| Pre- to post-exposure change in Cons Image | -7 to 7 | -.09 | -4 to 9 | -.02 |
| Pre- to post-exposure change in Labour Image | -6 to 10 | +.25 | -8 to 7 | -.12 |
| Pre- to post-exposure change in Lib-Dem Image | -4 to 5 | +.19 | -10 to 5 | -.03 |
| Interest in Politics | -2 to +2 | -.00 | 1 to 4 | 3.01 |
| Attention to television news | 1 to 4 | 2.15 | | |
| Age | 18 to 95 | 47 | 18 to 88 | 45 |
| Dichotomous Variables | % | N | % | N |
| Conservative Partisan | 24.4 | 561 | 25.1 | 233 |
| Labour Partisan | 42.6 | 980 | 39.2 | 364 |
| Liberal Democrat Partisan | 9.2 | 213 | 9.5 | 88 |
| Gender: Male | 47.5 | 1095 | 54.1 | 503 |
| Class: Middle Class (ABC1) | 54.8 | 1262 | 56.9 | 529 |
| Ethnicity: White | 94.2 | 2169 | 79.5 | 739 |
| Education: University graduate | 15.9 | 367 | 21.4 | 199 |
| Express, Mail or Telegraph reader | 19.2 | 443 | | |
| Guardian, Independent, Times or FT reader | 10.0 | 231 | | |
| Mirror reader | 9.4 | 216 | | |
| Sun reader | 13.6 | 313 | | |
| Watched Con, Lab and Lib PEBs | 36.8 | 848 | | |
| Watched Con and Lib PEBs only | 1.1 | 26 | | |
| Watched Con and Lab PEBs only | 7.9 | 182 | | |
| Watched Lab and Lib PEBs only | 2.3 | 54 | | |
| Watched Con PEB only | 2.9 | 67 | | |
| Watched Lab PEB only | 5.2 | 120 | | |
| Watched Lib PEB only | 1.8 | 41 | | |
| Watched Con Advocacy PEB | | | 5.3 | 49 |
| Watched Con Attack PEB | | | 5.1 | 47 |
| Watched Lab Advocacy PEB | | | 5.0 | 46 |
| Watched Lab Attack PEB | | | 5.0 | 46 |
| Watched Lib Advocacy PEB | | | 5.5 | 51 |

Notes: BES data N=2303; Experiments N=919
 FT denotes Financial Times.

Table 4: Simple estimates of the impact of watching party election broadcasts on party image, BES 2001

| | Change in pre-election to post-election Party Image Score | | | | | |
|------------------------------|--|--------|---------------|--------|----------------|--------|
| | Conservative | | Labour | | Lib-Dem | |
| | b | St err | b | St err | b | St err |
| Watched Conservative PEB/not | .34** | .12 | .00 | .12 | .00 | .08 |
| Watched Labour PEB/not | -.11 | .13 | .39** | .11 | .00 | .08 |
| Watched Lib-Democrat PEB/not | -.01 | .11 | -.19 | .11 | .15* | .07 |
| Corrected R ² | .25 | | .18 | | .15 | |

Notes: Estimation by OLS. ** Significant at .01; * at significant .05.

Controls (not reported) applied for: Partisanship (Conservative/not; Labour/not; Liberal Democrat/not); Pre-election Party Image score (Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat); Demographics (Age, Gender, Class, Ethnicity, Education); Newspaper readership; Interest in Politics; Attention to television news coverage. All variables as defined in Table 3.

Source: British Election Study 2001 Panel Survey.

Table 5: The impact of watching party election broadcasts on party image, BES 2001

| | Change in pre-election to post-election Party Image Score | | | | | |
|---|--|---------------|----------|---------------|----------|---------------|
| | Conservative | | Labour | | Lib-Dem | |
| | <i>b</i> | <i>St err</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>St err</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>St err</i> |
| PRIOR CONTROLS | | | | | | |
| Conservative Partisan | .70** | .13 | -.26* | .12 | -.13 | .08 |
| Labour Partisan | .00 | .11 | .44** | .11 | -.04 | .07 |
| Liberal Democrat Partisan | -.14 | .15 | -.55** | .14 | .06 | .09 |
| Pre-election Cons Image score | -.42** | .02 | -.12** | .02 | -.04** | .01 |
| Pre-election Labour Image score | -.13** | .02 | -.31** | .02 | -.00 | .01 |
| Pre-election Lib Dem Image score | -.01 | .02 | .00 | .02 | -.22** | .01 |
| Age | .01** | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 | .00 |
| Male | .00 | .07 | .00 | .01 | -.05 | .05 |
| Middle Class (ABC1) | -.00 | .09 | -.11 | .07 | .03 | .05 |
| White | -.33 | .18 | -.44 | .17 | -.02 | .11 |
| Graduate | -.15 | .11 | -.02 | .10 | .00 | .07 |
| Interest in Politics | .13* | .06 | -.07 | .05 | .08* | .03 |
| Attention to TV news coverage | -.00 | .06 | .09 | .05 | -.06 | .04 |
| Express, Mail, Telegraph reader | .19 | .10 | .09 | .10 | .01 | .06 |
| Sun reader | -.14 | .13 | .23* | .12 | -.07 | .08 |
| Mirror reader | -.33* | .13 | .18 | .13 | -.07 | .08 |
| Guardian, Independent, Times, FT reader | .00 | .13 | .11 | .12 | .22 | .08 |
| WATCHED PEB | | | | | | |
| Con, Lab and Lib PEBs | .20* | .09 | .19* | .09 | .09 | .06 |
| Con and Lib PEBs only | .57 | .35 | .02 | .33 | .42 | .23 |
| Con and Lab PEBs only | .35* | .15 | .57** | .14 | .00 | .09 |
| Lab and Lib PEBs only | .00 | .22 | .56** | .01 | .26 | .14 |
| Con PEB only | .30 | .22 | .15 | .21 | -.19 | .13 |
| Lab PEB only | -.17 | .18 | .34* | .17 | -.01 | .11 |
| Lib PEB only | .11 | .27 | .12 | .26 | .00 | .17 |
| Constant | | | | | | |
| Constant | 1.90** | .30 | 2.68** | .28 | 1.56** | .18 |
| Corrected R ² | .25 | | .18 | | .15 | |
| Standard error of estimate | 1.51 | | 1.43 | | 0.91 | |
| N | 1709 | | 1732 | | 1708 | |

Notes: Estimation by OLS. ** Denotes significant at .01 or better; * significant at .05.

Source: BES 2001 Campaign Panel Survey

Table 6: The impact of party election broadcasts, experimental study

| | Change in pre-test to post-test Party Image Score | | | | | |
|--|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
| | Conservative | | Labour | | Lib-Dem | |
| | <i>b</i> | <i>St err</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>St err</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>St err</i> |
| PRIOR CONTROLS | | | | | | |
| Conservative Partisan | .86** | .14 | .01 | .15 | .12 | .16 |
| Labour Partisan | -.02 | .12 | .48** | .13 | .04 | .14 |
| Liberal Democrat Partisan | .27 | .16 | -.20 | .17 | .21 | .18 |
| Pre-test Cons Image score | -.11** | .02 | -.03 | .02 | -.01 | .02 |
| Pre-test Labour Image score | .01 | .02 | -.11 | .02 | .00 | .02 |
| Pre-test Lib Dem Image score | -.06** | .02 | .02 | .02 | -.10** | .02 |
| Age | .00 | .00 | .00 | .01 | .00 | .00 |
| Male | .02 | .08 | .07 | .08 | .14 | .09 |
| Middle Class (ABC1) | .00 | .08 | .17 | .09 | -.02 | .10 |
| White | -.05 | .10 | .00 | .11 | -.10 | .12 |
| Graduate | -.04 | .10 | -.17 | .11 | .16 | .11 |
| Interest in Politics | .04 | .05 | -.07 | .06 | -.03 | .06 |
| WATCHED PEB | | | | | | |
| Conservative Attack PEB | .33 | .18 | .49* | .23 | .12 | .22 |
| Conservative Advocacy PEB | -.23 | .17 | -.10 | .18 | -.12 | .19 |
| Conservative Partisan who watched Conservative Attack PEB | | | -1.3** | .44 | | |
| Labour Attack PEB | .36* | .17 | .00 | .18 | -.23 | .20 |
| Labour Advocacy PEB | .18 | .18 | .25 | .19 | .11 | .20 |
| Liberal Democrat Advocacy PEB | -.41* | .19 | .00 | .21 | .45* | .22 |
| Constant | .33 | .20 | .67** | .21 | .71** | .23 |
| Corrected R ² | .08 | | .05 | | .03 | |
| Standard error of estimate | 1.03 | | 1.10 | | 1.19 | |
| N | 775 | | 756 | | 752 | |

Notes: Estimation by OLS. ** Denotes significant at .01 or better; * significant at .05.
Source: Experimental Campaign Study, 2001

Table 7: Summary of observed experimental effects

| Change in pre- to post-test party image score | Advocacy PEB | | | Attack PEB | |
|--|---------------------|-------------|----------------|-------------------|---------------|
| | Labour | Cons | Lib-Dem | Cons | Labour |
| Conservative | 0 | 0 | - | 0 | + |
| Labour | 0 | 0 | 0 | + | 0 |
| Liberal Democrat | 0 | 0 | + | CONIDS - 0 | 0 |

Notes:

A positive sign (+) denotes a significant positive effect.

A negative sign (-) denotes a significant effect.

A zero (0) denotes no significant effect.

The negative sign next to CONIDS indicates that Conservative Partisans reduced their support for Labour in response to exposure to the Conservative Attack PEB.

Source: Table 6.

Appendix: the experimental design

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 May-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 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, 250 were used in the tests of campaign learning. The remainder was treated as a pooled control, since they were not exposed to party-generated messages and instead they were used in separate experiments concerned with the acquisition of political knowledge. 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 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 Table A1. 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 6th 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 exposure materials 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 consisted of a "sandwich", with ten minutes of identical, standard footage at the top and bottom of each programme and one of the different experimental PEB stimuli in the middle "core". Five PEBs were used:

1. Labour "advocacy" PEB, broadcast on the Blair government's record (N=50)
2. Labour "attack" PEB, broadcast on the Conservative's past economic record (N=50)
3. Conservative "advocacy" Comment, broadcast about education policy (N=50)
4. Conservative "attack" PEB, broadcast on crime and fuel tax (N=50)
5. Liberal Democrat "advocacy" PEB, broadcast about Charles Kennedy (N=50)

The responses of subjects in these test groups were compared with the responses of: (a) an explicit control group (N=100), which was shown a sport video in the middle "core"; and (b) an implicit control group that consisted of subjects exposed to a range of other experimental stimulæ (N=600). There were no statistically significant differences in the party preference responses of these two control groups, and they are accordingly treated in the statistical analysis reported here as a single control group.

Table A1: Demographic profile of participants

| | Experimental Participants June 2001 | Greater London pop. 1991 | Difference |
|--------------------------|---|--------------------------------|------------|
| GENDER | | | |
| Men | 55.1 | | |
| Women | 44.9 | | |
| TENURE | | | |
| 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 |
| ETHNICITY | | | |
| 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 |
| SOCIAL CLASS | | | |
| Middle class (ABC1) | 58.1 | 59.1 | -1.0 |
| Working class (C2DE) | 41.9 | 40.9 | +1.0 |
| <i>1997 VOTE</i> | | | |
| 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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Endnotes

1. All of the Conservatives' 2001 PEBs followed an attack pattern. However, for the experimental part of our analysis (which is described below) we were able to explore an important counterfactual. We sought to establish what might have happened if the Conservatives *had* used an "advocacy" PEB. In one of our experiments, therefore, we exposed a test group of respondents to a short Channel 4 "Comment" that had been broadcast by the Conservatives' Shadow Education Secretary, Theresa May, in April 2001. The Comment was exactly the same length and format as a PEB, but it adopted a positive, advocacy approach rather than the Conservatives' dominant attack approach.

2. Although we do not report the results here, our analysis allowed us to explore the impact of exposure to PEBs on voter turnout. We will report the results of these experiments in a later paper.