Chapter 1
Theories of Political Communications

On May 1st 1997 the sheer size of the Labour landslide of seats surprised almost everyone, even Tony Blair. In the immediate aftermath of victory a common consensus quickly emerged to explain Labour's historic victory after eighteen years in the wilderness. The conventional account of the election stressed that Blair won due to a radical re-branding of the image of New Labour. Peter Mandelson, chief Labour strategist, was credited as the primary architect of victory. The creation of New Labour started in the mid-1980s and continued under the leadership of Neil Kinnock, John Smith and Tony Blair. The project involved three major components: the modernization of the party organization by-passing activists so that internal power flowed upwards towards the central leadership and downwards towards ordinary party members; revision of traditional party policies with the abandonment of socialist nostrums and the adoption of a 'third way' straddling the middle ground of British politics; and last, but not least, the deployment of strategic communications to convey the image of New Labour.

The techniques of professional political communications were commonly regarded as so effective that Labour managed to stay 'on message' throughout the period of the 'long' campaign in the year before the election, and the six-week official campaign from mid-March to 1st May 1997. Moreover, in this view Labour's assiduous wooing of the press paid off in reversing their historical disadvantage: during the 1997 election twice as many people were reading a newspaper which backed Labour than the Conservatives. *The Sun*'s defection into the Labour camp is often regarded as particularly important. In contrast, Conservative failure has often been attributed to their failure to project a consistently positive image, with their election campaign derailed by leadership splits over Europe and dogged by news headlines dominated by sleaze. The lessons of strategic communications apparently embodied in Labour's remarkable victory have been noted by many other parties, in the United States and Europe, not least by the Conservative party in Britain.

But is the conventional view of the importance of strategic political communications correct? Often popular interpretations are based on *post hoc* explanations. The party which wins an election, especially with a landslide of seats, is usually assumed to have run the most effective campaign. In this view the proof of a campaign is in the votes. Party consultants, strategists and journalists who frame our view of the outcome have a natural tendency and self-interest to believe that their role was important, indeed decisive. But if we look more closely and critically is there systematic evidence to support this interpretation? The 1997 British general election campaign provides a case-study for testing two central claims: are strategic communications by parties important for electoral success? And does the news media have a powerful impact upon the electorate in election campaigns?

One of the most striking developments in recent years is the widespread adoption of the techniques of strategic communications by political parties. Strategic communications involves a coordinated plan which sets out party objectives, identifies target voters, establishes the battleground issues, orchestrates consistent key themes and images, prioritizes organizational and financial resources, and lays out the framework within which campaign communications operate. This development is part of the 'professionalization' or 'modernization' of

campaigning, giving a greater role to technical experts in public relations, news management, advertising, speech-writing and market research. Many observers assume that the use of these techniques has become critical for the outcome of modern elections in many countries (Swanson and Mancini 1991).

New Labour's victory in 1997 was widely regarded as a textbook triumph of packaging over politics, spin over substance, and image-building over ideology. This conventional explanation accords with an expanding literature which emphasizes the growing importance of political marketing, spin doctors and sound-bites, and the rise in the power of the news media as 'king-makers' in Britain as well as in many other countries (Franklin 1994; Kavanagh 1995; Scammell 1995; Jones 1995). The first concern of this book is therefore to establish how far strategic communications are important today for electoral success. In particular, did Labour's communication strategy prove the most effective, as widely assumed, in the 1997 British general election? Were Labour most successful in influencing the news agenda? And as a result did they boost their party fortunes during the long and short campaign? Our answers, contrary to the conventional wisdom, are no, no and no. Insights into this issue help us to understand the process of strategic communications and its limitations in the modern campaign.

Equally important, many observers have emphasised the rise in the power of the mass media and their growing influence, for good or ill, in election campaigns. Some hope that television and the press can help to mobilise and energize voters, generate effective public deliberation which informs citizens, and produce 'enlightened preferences' (Gelman and King 1993; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Others fear that predominant news values and journalistic practices lead to campaign coverage focussing on the strategic election game, tabloid scandal and down-market sensationalism rather than serious policy debate. Such practices are believed to encourage public cynicism, to alienate voters, and to lead to civic disengagement (Fallows 1996; Patterson 1993; Putnam 1995; Cappella and Jamieson 1997).

The second major concern of this book is to establish how far political coverage on television and in the national press has the capacity to influence the electorate, in particular their levels of civic engagement, issue priorities, and party preferences. We argue that the more exaggerated hopes and fears over-estimate the power of newspapers and television to change the electorate within the limited period of an election campaign. Nevertheless we demonstrate that there is systematic and plausible evidence for consistent long-term learning, mobilization and persuasion effects associated with patterns of media use. Moreover, in contrast to previous British studies, we show that newspapers have only limited ability to change party support during the campaign but nevertheless positive television news has the capacity significantly to boost a party's fortunes in the short-term.

These issues are important in analyzing the specific reasons for the outcome of the 1997 British general election, but also more generally for understanding the impact of party communications and the news media in a modern democracy. While there are many other books about the 1997 election, including a companion study focussing on long-term social and ideological dealignment in the electorate (Evans and Norris 1998), there has been little examination of the systematic evidence about the effects of political communications in Britain. Since the structure of the information environment and the political system is important for electoral choice, we need to test whether we can generalize to the British context from the extensive literature on political

communications in the United States and Europe. This book presents the first results of a research design combining three major elements: content analysis of party and news messages during April 1997; the 1997 British Election Study (BES) campaign panel survey; and an experimental study of the effects of television news (see Chapter 3 for details). To consider the central issues this introduction lays out alternative theories about the influence of political communications, describes the core conceptual framework, and outlines the plan of this book.

Theories of Mass Propaganda

We can identify three main schools of thought which have developed to account for the influence of political communications: pre-war theories of mass propaganda, post-war theories of partisan reinforcement, and recent theories of cognitive, agenda-setting and persuasion effects which form the framework for this book.

The earliest accounts of mass communications, popular in the 1920s and 1930s, were greatly impressed by the rapid growth and potential reach of mass communications, and stressed that the public could easily be swayed by propaganda on the radio and in newspapers. In Public Opinion, first published in 1922, Walter Lippmann emphasised that the 'manufacture of consent' and the 'arts of persuasion' were nothing new, since there had always been popular demagogues. Nevertheless he believed that the growth in circulation of the popular press, developments in advertising, and the new media of moving pictures and the wireless, had decisively changed the ability of leaders to manipulate public opinion:

"Within the life of the generation now in control of affairs, persuasion has become a self-conscious art and a regular organ of government. None of us begins to understand the consequences, but it is no daring prophecy to say that the knowledge of how to create consent will alter every political calculation and modify every political premise." (Lippmann 1997).

Not only were the effects of mass communication pervasive, they were also seen as generally harmful for democracies. Lippmann's premonitions seemed to be confirmed by the use of the media by authoritarian regimes in the inter-war years, and the development of more sophisticated and self-conscious psychological techniques of mass persuasion by the allies in war-time. In the 1930s the Payne Fund Studies in the United States looked at the impact of movies on delinquency, aggression and prejudice, while early experimental studies by Hovland (1949, 1953) examined the impact of the media for planned persuasion (McQuail 1992; Lowery and DeFleur 1995). Popular accounts in the inter-war years reinforced the notion that the mass media could have a direct and decisive impact upon shaping public opinion, and ultimately voting choices.

Theories of Partisan Reinforcement

Yet propaganda theories came under strong challenge from the first systematic research using the modern techniques of sample surveys to examine public opinion. Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet at Columbia University used panel surveys in their classic study of Erie County during the 1940-44 American elections, in *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Berelson et al. 1954). The Erie County study concluded that the main impact of the campaign was 'reinforcement not change', as partisans were strengthened in their voting choice. In this account elections went through four stages. First, as the campaign gathered momentum the rising volume of

political news meant that people who had not been interested begin to pay attention. As citizens woke up to the campaign, many increased their exposure to political information, thereby increasing their interest, in an interactive 'virtuous circle'. To cope with the rising tide of political propaganda that became available, people brought selective attention into play. Partisans tuned into the information most congruent with their prior predispositions: in 1940 more Democrats listened to speeches by Roosevelt while more Republicans tuned into Wilkie. Political propaganda thereby served mainly to reinforce party support, reducing defections from the ranks. Once sufficient information had been acquired from the campaign, Lazarsfeld suggested, for many people uncertainty evaporated and the voting decision crystallized.

Nevertheless Lazarsfeld suggested that there were clear socioeconomic biases in 'the attentive public' so that the more educated became most informed as the campaign progressed. There was a small but politically important group of waverers who tended to be less attentive to the campaign, and, (by implication), less informed than average (1948, 95-100). The conclusions undermined the assumptions of liberal democratic theory that elections should involve a process of rational deliberation about issues, candidates and parties by well-informed citizens. The overall message from the Lazarsfeld study was that theories of propaganda had largely exaggerated the effect of political communications on the mass public.

> *"In summary, then, the people who did most of the reading and listening not only read and heard most of their own partisan propaganda but were also most resistant to conversion because of strong predispositions. And the people most open to conversion - the ones the campaign manager most wanted to reach - read and listened least.....The real doubters - the open-minded voters who make a sincere attempt to weight the issues and the candidates dispassionately for the good of the country as a whole -- exist mainly in deferential campaign propaganda, in textbooks on civics, in the movies, and in the minds of some political idealists. In real life, they are few indeed." (Lasarsfeld et al, 1948, pp.95-100).*

Following in Lazarsfeld's footsteps, the new orthodoxy in post-war American studies stressed theories of minimal consequences, which down-played media influence (Klapper 1960). The earliest studies of the effects of television in Britain lent further weight to these conclusions. Many anticipated that television would become a powerful new weapon in the hands of political parties but the first systematic survey analysis in Britain emphasised that the overall impact of mediated communications was essentially one of reinforcement not change (Trenaman and McQuail 1961; Blumler and McQuail 1968). After the Erie Country studies over twenty years elapsed before another study analyzing individual-level change within the American campaign was produced (Mendelsohn and O'Keefe 1976; Patterson and McClure 1976).

Social and Party Alignments: Its Class, Stupid.

If campaign communication was largely unimportant for the outcome, what was decisive? Social psychological theories developed by Campbell et al. in *The American Voter* (1960) came to provide the conventional understanding of electoral behaviour. This framework became widely influential in Britain following publication of *Political Change in Britain* (1969, 2nd ed. 1974) by David Butler and Donald Stokes, which shared many of the same concepts and theoretical assumptions developed by the Michigan school.

Drawing on the British Election Study from 1963 to 1970, Butler and Stokes argued that politics remained peripheral to most people's lives: the

British electorate rarely participated politically and had minimal involvement in civic life. The typical British voter was seen as fairly uninformed about politics, falling far short of the expectations of citizenship in liberal theories of representative democracy. Butler and Stokes concluded that few people had consistent and stable opinion about well-known issues which divided the parties. Yet despite widespread ignorance about politics and minimal interest, nevertheless about three-quarters of the British electorate cast their vote. When faced with the choice of parties at the ballot box, Butler and Stokes concluded that British voters sought cognitive short-cuts, or 'standing decisions', to guide them through elections. As in the United States, during periods of stable partisan alignment, voters in Britain were seen as being rooted for many years, even for their lifetime, to one or other of the major parties.

Communications were critical, but largely operating at the interpersonal level, since political attitudes were believed to be reinforced through discussions with friends, colleagues and family who shared similar party attachments. Socialisation theory explained how party loyalties developed when influenced by the family and social milieu of voters, including their neighbourhood, workplace and community. Partisan newspapers were also regarded as important reinforcing mechanisms, since people read the paper which most agreed with their own viewpoint. The role of the press was therefore primarily to mobilise, rather than to convert, partisan voters. For Butler and Stokes, modern party loyalties were founded on the rock of class identities although there was evidence for a weakening relationship as early as the 1960s, partly due to the influence of television (Butler and Stokes 1974:419).

> If voting behaviour is stable, then is little room for the influence of issues debated during the campaign, news coverage of leaders' speeches, or indeed any short-term flux in party support. If voters are anchored for a lifetime, the campaign can be expected to reinforce partisans, to bring them 'home', and to mobilise them to turnout, but not to determine patterns of voting choice. Electoral studies therefore turned to understanding structural determinants on the vote (see, for example, Heath et al. 1985, 1991, 1994). Because of this dominant paradigm, beyond some occasional articles, it was not until two decades after Blumler and McQuail (1968) that a new study re-examined the effects of the news media in British campaigns (Miller 1991).
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> Yet the traditional Michigan framework is less useful today due to social and partisan dealignment. In common with many advanced industrialized societies, since the early 1970s Britain has experienced a progressive weakening of the traditional social anchors of voting behaviour. *Critical Elections* (Evans and Norris 1999) found that the process of secular dealignment has persisted and deepened in recent years. In the 1997 election, class voting reached its lowest level since the BES series began; the proportion of the middle class voting Labour was far higher than in any previous general election since 1964. The strength of party identification has also weakened over successive elections during the last three decades, a process that continued in 1997, so that the proportion of strong loyalists plummeted from 44% of the electorate in 1964 to only 16% in 1997. The classic left-right divide over the role of the state in the economy, which is usually the basic ideological cleavage in the British electorate, proved to be more weakly associated with Labour voting than in any previous contest. Lacking stable social and partisan anchors, voters may become more open to the influence of campaign factors: evaluations of the government's record, particularly on the economy, preferences about party policies,

perceptions of party and leadership images, and the way all these factors are communicated to the public.

Its the Economy, Stupid

Given the evidence of social and partisan dealignment, an alternative school of thought has focused on theories of political economy stressing the importance of 'pocket-book' voting. One popular account of the 1997 election suggests that the outcome was largely decided by the events of 'Black Wednesday' with the currency crisis following Britain's withdrawal from ERM in September 1992. The opinion polls seemed to indicate that due to this event public opinion switched decisively towards Labour, and then stabilized at a new level, eventually producing Blair's landslide of seats:

> *"The fate of the Conservative government was essentially settled in September 1992, shortly after their fourth electoral victory in a row...Only a major political shock could have turned things around after that, and this did not happen."* (Whiteley 1997)

The argument suggests that the Conservative government lost its reputation for competent economic management due to the effects of the ERM crisis, almost five years before polling day, and they never recovered subsequently as this proved a 'crystallizing' moment for the other factors troubling voters (Sanders 1997:68). In this view the next five years were just a question of waiting patiently for the curtain to fall and the Conservatives to exit stage right. Yet, as Harrop (1998) points out, it is not immediately apparent why the events of a few days in September 1992 should continue to have had major reverberations on party fortunes five years later. The electorate's memory must be unusually sharp for this rather abstract and technical issue to have led to the government's downfall.

This explanation draws on the long tradition of political economy which has attempted to predict party support from a few aggregate-level economic and political variables. During the 1990s this approach has developed increasingly sophisticated modelling techniques to demonstrate that the outcome of elections can be forecast, with some degree of accuracy, well before the launch of the official manifestoes. These models have typically sought to explain government popularity by reference to variations in certain core macroeconomic variables, like the rates of inflation and unemployment, combined with a few key political events, such as the outbreak of the Falklands War (see, for example, Lewis-Beck 1988; Norpoth et al. 1991; Price and Sanders 1993; Clarke et al. 1991). Forecasting models differ in terms of the precise specifications and modelling techniques they employ. What they share, however, is the emphasis that campaigns do not matter if the voting outcome can be predicted parsimoniously from a few economic indicators. Economic conditions are believed to lead to predictable outcomes, despite fluctuations in the opinion polls and the intense party and media battle to dominate the political agenda during the official campaign (Gelman and King 1993).

In 1992 this approach seemed to provide a plausible account of the outcome: in November 1990 the 'Essex' model forecast that in the next general election the Conservatives could expect to be returned with 42.5 percent of the popular vote, based on certain levels of inflation and interest rates (Sanders 1991, 1993). This forecast proved remarkably prescient when the Major Government was returned in May 1992 with 42.7 percent of the popular vote. But in 1997 the Essex forecast failed to hit the mark (Sanders 1996, 1997). Standard pocket-book accounts have difficulties in explaining why the Conservatives won in 1992 in the middle of a recession while in 1997 they lost in the middle

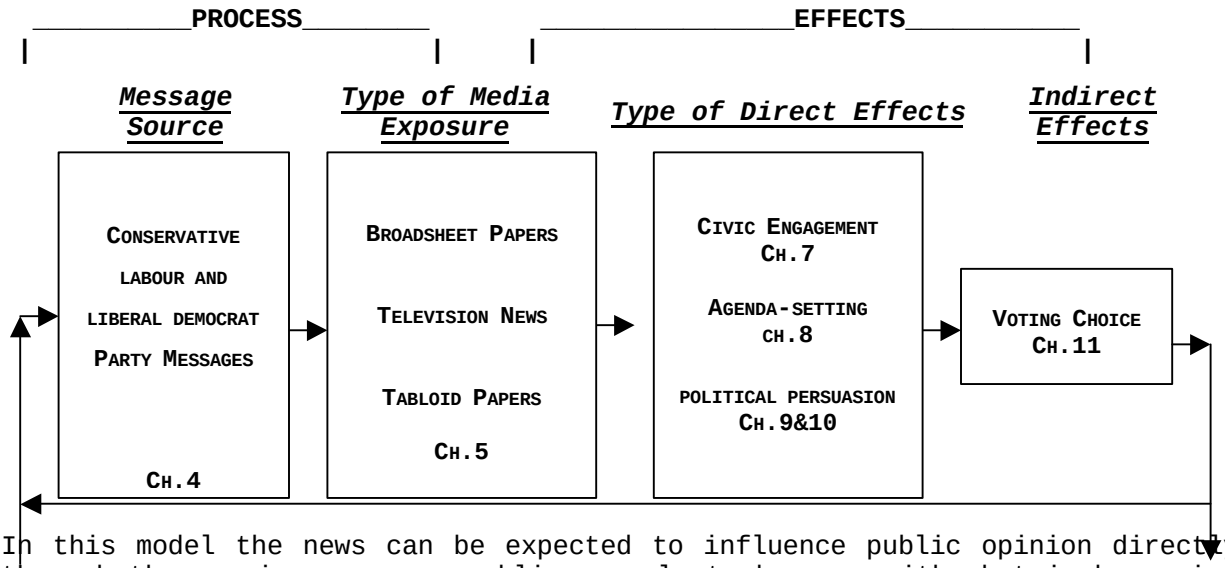
of a boom. In the run up to the 1997 election the economic record of the Major government looked remarkably healthy. During the twelve months prior to May 1st, average earnings were rising at 4%, comfortably out-stripping inflation at 2.9%. Economic growth (GDP) was around 2.2%, down from the peak of 1994 but still positive, while the rate of unemployment saw a steady decline to around 7.2%, Moreover, reflecting these indicators, consumer confidence did show a modest recovery during 1995-97 (Gavin and Sanders 1997). Yet in 1997, unlike in 1983, 1987 and 1992, the pocket-book economy apparently failed to translate into a recovery for the government at the polls. The magic 'feel-good factor', so much discussed in the popular press, seemed to have lost its powers.

Theories of Cognitive, Agenda-setting and Persuasion Effects

If long-term anchors like class and partisan identification have eroded, and yet if it wasn't 'the economy, stupid', then this leaves us scratching our heads for other factors which could account for Labour's victory. For many observers the role of strategic communications represents the most plausible alternative candidate, suggesting that Labour won because of their superiority in image-building, news-management and political marketing (Butler and Kavanagh 1998:224-243). In this account Mandelsonian magic rebranded Old Labour under the leadership of Tony Blair into a new centrist image, located between the Conservatives on the right and the Liberal Democrats on the left. In contrast during the campaign the Conservatives usually seemed deeply divided, dispirited and mired in sleaze. An important component of this change has been attributed to the switch in partisanship among the press, with more major newspapers backing Labour than in any previous post-war general election (McKie 1998). But is there systematic evidence to show that political communications played a key role in Labour's landslide, as is so often assumed, and that campaign coverage in the news media influenced voters?

To examine this issue let us outline the schematic model about the process of political communications which guides the thinking behind this book. Even since Harold Lasswell (1948) the literature has commonly understood the process of communications as divided into a series of steps: who (the source) says what (the content) through which channel (the media) to whom (the audience) with what effect (the impact). The central focus of this book, shown in Figure 1.1, concerns the *process* and *effects* of political communications within election campaigns.

Figure 1.1: The Schematic Model of Political Communications



In this model the news can be expected to influence public opinion directly through three main avenues: enabling people to keep up with what is happening in the world and mobilizing them to vote (*civic engagement*), defining the priority of major political issues (*agenda-setting*), and shaping people's political preferences (*persuasion*). In turn, these attitudes can be expected to influence reasoned voting choices. These categories are understood to represent a sequence of effects in a dynamic process: from growing information and awareness of a problem (like the issue of Britain's role within the ERM, long delays in hospital waiting lists, or constitutional reform), to rising public concern about these issues, and finally to persuading voters to shift party preferences. Of these factors, most attention in the British literature has been devoted to the media's (particularly newspapers') powers to alter party support in the short-term, without taking into account the intermediate steps which may, or may not, lead to changes or reinforcement in voting choices. Let us examine each of the steps in this sequence.

The Process of Campaign Communications

Parties as Communicators

First, a growing literature has emphasised that in many countries parties have become increasingly sophisticated in the use of strategic communications in the attempt to retain control of the agenda or to stay 'on message'. Changes in party campaigning have been richly documented in Nuffield studies covering every British general election since 1945. More recent work has examined how electioneering has been transformed since the 1980s by 'political marketing' and the rise of campaign professionals (Scammell 1995; Kavanagh 1995; Crewe and Harrop 1989; Crewe and Gosschalk 1995). Studies have described the day-to-day party campaigns and the outcome of the 1997 election (Butler and Kavanagh 1997; King 1997; Norris and Gavin 1997; Jones 1997; Geddes and Tonge 1997; Crewe, Gosschalk and Bartle 1998; Evans and Norris 1999). Building upon this foundation, this book highlights and summarises significant institutional changes in the context of political communications in Britain, notably the rise of a more autonomous press, the growing fragmentation of the electronic media, and how parties have responded to this increasingly complex environment. The development of

24-hour news and the expansion of news outlets makes it far harder than in the post-war era for parties to stay on message in the hurly-burly of the official campaign and to avoid being deflected by unexpected stories, disruptive events, or sudden gaffes. Parties have responded by attempting to maintain control through strategic planning, rapid response and targeted messaging.

After the election the conventional explanation attributed Labour's victory to their effective use of these techniques to stay on message, in contrast to the flubs and flurries experienced by the Conservatives. *The Independent* provided a typical post-election account:

"T*he party's(Labour) campaign strategy owed much to the success of Bill Clinton's successful campaigns in the United States with its remodeling of his party into New Democrats…The hierarchical structure of the Labour election machine was jettisoned and replaced with a dozen task forces on key seats, party, media, trade unions, attack and rebuttal, presentation, regions, leader's office, message delivery, logistics, and so on… As a result Labour has been following a detailed week-one-week electioneering strategy for almost a year…It also learned from Clinton's people the techniques of how to stay on that strategy and deflect Tory attempts to derail it. Throughout the campaign a central control room at the party's Millbank head-quarters provided a rapid rebuttal unit which responded instantly to any new Conservative claims. Its liaison with the media was slick, feeding out approved messages and effectively emasculating attempts to undercut the official version of events. Its use of pagers, the Internet and faxes helped keep its candidates consistently 'on message'. Its advertising was focused and effective…Amid all this the Conservatives were unable to gain any momentum."* (Paul Vallely et al. *The Independent* 3 May 1998)

But much of the popularity of this explanation rests on post-hoc rationalizations in the aftermath of Blair's victory, reflecting the size of the Labour landslide of seats. If we look more critically at the evidence, did Labour actually 'win' the battle over the campaign agenda? To examine this proposition we need systematic evidence about the strategies of the major parties in the 1997 campaign. One criteria is to see how far the major parties stuck consistently to the themes which they prioritized in daily press releases, party manifestoes, and election broadcasts during the 1997 campaign. Parties remaining 'on message' would be consistent throughout the campaign, whereas if they were blown off course they be more likely to stress different issues on different occasions. Based on content analysis of party messages we examine whether the Labour party had the most successful campaign in 1997, as commonly assumed, contributing towards their eventual victory.

The News Media

The modern campaign is characterised by a complex and increasingly fragmented news environment. Voters may draw upon information from personal conversations with friends, family and neighbours (Huckfelt and Sprague 1995); direct contact with constituency party canvassers and parliamentary candidates; election coverage in the local and regional press; news and current affairs on regional and national radio; paid party propaganda like posters and newspaper advertisements; party election broadcasts on television and radio; as well as coverage of the campaign in national newspapers; and news and current affairs on terrestrial and satellite television. The local party campaign involving canvassing, leaflets and the local activists, often discounted, is now seen as far more important for voter mobilization(Denver and Hands 1997). The 'new media' of the internet is

rapidly adding another layer of complexity in campaigning (Norris and Jones 1998; Ward and Gibson 1998; Gibson and Ward 1998).

This book focuses in particular upon monitoring the effects of the main evening television news programmes on BBC1 and ITN, and broadsheet and tabloid national newspapers. These media are widely available and are commonly regarded as the most influential in British election campaigns. Our focus therefore provides a strong test of the media effects thesis: if we fail to find any influence from attention to these sources then arguably we would expect to find even weaker effects from many others. These media were also selected because they provide significant contrasts in terms of the coverage of campaign news, and therefore variance in its potential effects. Newspapers are relatively partisan, but television news broadcasts aim to provide more impartial and balanced information. Moreover the differences between broadsheet (quality) and tabloid papers in Britain, as well as between Labour and Conservative-leaning papers, and to a lesser extent between commercial and public service broadcasting, provide important contrasts.

Based on this evidence we examine whether strategic communications actually helped Labour get its preferred messages across via the mass media. Did Labour's communications operation at Millbank Tower influence the news agenda more than the other parties, as many assume? And did television and print journalists follow any party, or were they more autonomous in their priorities? The content analysis allow us to compare the issues stressed by the parties in their press releases with those picked up by television news and the press, to understand who set the media agenda.

The Effects of Political Communications

Part III goes on to consider the impact of political communications on the public. There are multiple ways in which political communications may influence the electoral process and today the literature has moved beyond a narrow focus on voting behaviour (Bryant and Zillman 1994). We argue that we need to distinguish between the impact of political communications on the outcome for government and on individual participants. The 1997 campaign was probably not decisive for the return of the Labour government, but this did not mean that the election broadcasts, or the coverage of opinion polls, or the rallies, meetings and speeches did not affect party supporters.

We also need to draw an important distinction between cumulative and campaign-specific effects from the news. *Cumulative media effects* due to repeated exposure to television and the press. This assumes that news habits have a diffuse influence on our values and opinions in a long-term socialization process, analogous to the role of the family, school or neighbourhood. Cumulative effects are monitored by comparing *absolute* differences between groups of media users, for example whether broadsheet readers are better informed than those who buy tabloids. Since evidence in this study is confined to the period of the long-campaign (starting twelve months before polling day) we cannot firmly establish that any persistent differences are due to the news *per se*, rather than the prior predispositions of viewers and readers. Nevertheless we shall argue that, in an interactive process, this seems like a reasonable assumption. Hence, for example, people who are more right-leaning may prefer to buy the Daily Telegraph, but over time we would also expect that the paper's culture would influence its regular readers. In the same way the more knowledgeable may turn to the BBC

World Service to find out about international affairs, but we would also expect that longtime listeners would learn more about developments from Azerbaijan to Afghanistan. In this context it is the steady drip-drip-drip of media messages over a prolonged period, for example the constant repetition of the phrase 'New Labour', the steady series of opinion polls showing the Conservatives in the doldrums, or continuous headlines about government scandal, which is understood gradually to shape our opinions, attitudes and values.

We monitor *short-term media effects* with relative measures which focus on the degree of change among users of different news media within the long (12 month) and short (6-week) campaign. For example, as polling day approaches we might expect feelings of political efficacy to increase in general, almost irrespective of the campaign, as citizens come to believe that they can determine the outcome. What we test is whether this sense of efficacy increases more during the campaign among different categories of news users, for example for regular viewers of television news more than for non-viewers. The focus on relative change, using the time line of the campaign, provides a more satisfactory test of media effects. Relative measures allow us to control for other factors which commonly distinguish both the characteristics of media use and political attitudes, such as higher levels of education among regular readers of broadsheet papers.

As we go on to discuss, we also need to distinguish different types of media effects: on cognitive learning and political mobilization, on agenda-setting, on persuasion, and on voting behaviour. During the course of a campaign citizens may potentially learn more about public affairs, or may alter their issue concerns, without this necessarily translating through into changes in voting behaviour. Reinforcement and mobilization effects are just as important for elections, by generating participation in the democratic process, as the alteration of party preferences.

Lastly, we also need to distinguish *conditional* effects (which specify if X then Y) from *actual* effects which occurred within a given news environment. For example, in practice party political broadcasts are strictly ruled by the conventions of stop-watch balance but it is important to know if this were no longer the case, -- for example if Britain adopted political advertising on a commercial basis, -- whether this would make a difference to party support. Conditional effects often do not appear in the campaign, because of the conventions of news coverage and party campaigning, where there are multiple messages which may cancel each other out. But this does not mean that conditional effects detected through experimental manipulation are any less 'real' than the actual effects of the campaign detected through panel surveys (Hovland 1959). With these distinctions in mind, what sort of effects might we expect from attention to campaign news?

Civic Engagement

Democratic theory suggests that one of the most important impacts of campaign communications is upon civic engagement, including cognitive and mobilization effects. The first and primary function of the news media in a democracy, widely accepted as a guiding principle by British broadcasters, is to transmit information so that citizens can make reasoned choices about their electoral alternatives. Downsian theory stresses that the capacity to make reasoned choices does not require full, comprehensive and encyclopedic information about every detail of each party's manifesto, which would be unrealistic. Elections are not a civics test with twenty pass/fail questions like Mastermind. Rather, citizens need sufficient information about the

government's record on the important issues, about the major policy proposals of alternative parties, and about the competence and trustworthiness of leaders and candidates, to predict the probable consequences of casting a ballot (for a discussion see Downs 1957: 207-259; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Information costs are reduced by relying upon a few trusted sources and by seeking information only about issues which concern the voter.

Ever since Lazarsfeld et al. (1948) one stream of research has considered what knowledge voters acquire from the news media. Recent work has often focussed on the role of cognitive short-cuts such as ideology or 'schema' which reduce the time and effort required to monitor the candidates and allow a reasoned choice with imperfect information (Zaller 1993). Much of the literature has stressed the breadth and depth of citizen's ignorance about public affairs and minimal retention of factual knowledge from watching news broadcasts (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997). But others have emphasised the limited but still significant acquisition of information about candidates and issues derived from exposure to the news in an American campaign (Graber 1984; Neuman et al. 1992; Just et al. 1996). Popkin (1994) has argued that gains in knowledge, even if modest, may be sufficient to allow voters to cast a meaningful ballot. The cognitive impact of the media depends upon many factors, including the substance of the message, the form of communication, and the receptivity of voters.

Although generating an increasingly sophisticated body of research, it is not clear how far we can generalize from cognitive effects within the institutional context of American presidential campaigns to British campaign. In the U.S. political system several institutional features create exceptionally high hurdles in the levels of information required for citizens to make reasoned choices. This includes, *inter alia*, the frequency and number of elections, the largely unknown qualities of non-incumbent candidates at the start of the race, the lack of party cues in primary elections, the weakening of collective party discipline, the fragmented commercial news media lacking a public service culture, the reliance upon 30-second ads as the primary means of candidate communications, the complex choices facing voters in multi-level elections, as well as the common use of state-level referenda. In states like California the briefing book for the latter alone is commonly a few inches thick. Given this context we might expect American voters to start the long campaign knowing far less, but also potentially to learn far more, than their European counterparts.

In Britain, general elections provide an information-saturated context where it is difficult to avoid the campaign. The news media, particularly television, provides wall-to-wall coverage of issues and events during the official campaign, from the launch of the party platforms through to the results on polling day. This is often the most intensive period of exposure to politics that most citizens will ever experience. On the other hand, although coverage is comprehensive, by the time of the long and short campaign, much involves the repetition of familiar and well-rehearsed party positions, with few genuine surprises, rather than providing genuinely new or unexpected information. In this regard election campaigns can be seen as largely ritualistic devices, where all the actors go through the familiar steps, as part of the dignified constitution.

To examine what citizens learn in British general elections we compare the effects of exposure to different types of media which prioritize different types of political news. For example, did tabloid readers learn less than those who buy broad-sheet newspapers? If politicians and journalists succeed in their civic education function we would

expect cognitive learning effects during the course of the long and short campaign, as citizens acquire more information about party policies, candidates, and the civics in general. If parties and the media fail in this role, then voters may end up no wiser at the end than the start of the campaign.

Moreover, in a democracy the campaign should also function to mobilise citizens to turn out on polling day and boost interest in public affairs. By this criteria parties and the news media succeed if they stimulate debate and grassroots discussion, if they encourage party members to participate at local level, and if they boost civic engagement. On the one hand, videomalaise theories emphasize that the modern news media often fail in this role, due to an over-emphasis on negative news and 'horse-race' strategy, producing turned-off and cynical voters disconnected from civic affairs (Robinson 1976; Fallows 1996). Hence Patterson (1993) suggests that American journalistic values produce an excessive focus on the poll-led horse-race and insider strategy, rather than the policy issues. Putnam (1996) argues that attention to American television discourages civic engagement and social capital, while Gerbner et al.(1980) postulated a 'mean-world' effect from television news. Experimental studies have demonstrated the power of negative advertising to discourage electoral turnout in the United States (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1997). Civic engagement is a matter of considerable concern given the fall in voting participation in the 1997 British election, producing the lowest turnout since 1935.

Yet on the other hand traditional social-psychological theories emphasize that partisan newspaper function to mobilise voters, reinforcing their commitment to particular parties as polling day draws near (Butler and Stokes 1974: 114-119). Recent studies have also challenged the videomalaise thesis (see the discussion by Newton 1999). The available evidence suggests that in many advanced industrialized societies the amount of time devoted to watching TV is often associated with civic apathy, but in contrast time devoted to watching news and current affairs is significantly associated with civic engagement (Norris 1996, 1999; Newton 1997). In this regard it matters what TV you watch as much as how much you watch it. Given this debate, we reexamine the evidence for the positive or negative influence of the news media on civic engagement within the context of the last British general election.

Agenda-setting

The function of the campaign for agenda-setting has also been a long-standing concern in the literature on political communications. Theories of agenda-setting suggest that the news drives the public's issue priorities, thereby telling people not 'what to think' but 'what to think about'. This idea can be traced originally to Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922), before first being tested systematically in the work of McCombs and Shaw (1972). During the last two decades a series of studies in the United States have found that the political agenda is set by a process of competition between politicians, journalists, and the public (for a review see Dearing and Rogers 1996; Protess and McCombs 1991; McCombs 1997). The theory of agenda-setting implies that stories which get most attention in the news become the problems which the public regards as the nation's most important. The theory focuses only on the amount of coverage, not its tone or contents. Should we be concerned about the effects of climate change and global warming? The threat terrorism poses to the Northern Ireland peace process? The impact of the European Union's Exchange Rate Mechanism on Britain's financial markets? The Lewinsky affair in the

United States? Internal civil war and strife in Kosovo? The news headlines are believed to shape public concerns about the most important problems facing the country. This process may have significant political implications if public concerns ultimately feed into government priorities, and thereby help drive the policy process. Theories of issue ownership also stress that the campaign is largely a battle about which policies are prioritised, whether those like defence where rightwing parties usually have a distinct advantage, or issues like welfare where leftwing parties have ownership (Budge and Farlie 1983).

Despite the extensive literature elsewhere, previous studies found little support for this thesis in the context of British general elections. In the 1987 campaign, for example, Miller et al. (1990:232) concluded that "*Television failed to set the public agenda and the public failed to set the television agenda. Each influenced the other to a very modest extent but they remained poles apart.*" (see also Miller 1991; Norris 1997). To see whether the adoption of strategic communications helped Labour set the news agenda in the 1997 campaign, we compare the issues which each major party tried to highlight during the campaign, those headlined by the news media, and those of concern to the electorate.

Persuasion

Lastly, the effects of the media in shaping electoral preferences, including images of the parties and party leaders, has long been regarded as important, ever since early studies of propaganda. Party managers, advertising consultants and market researchers think that strategic communications matters for persuading voters, and that this was a vital component in Blair's 1997 victory. The increased importance parties place on campaigning is demonstrated by the escalation in expenditure: the three major parties in Britain spent an estimated total of £56.4 million on the 1997 general election, compared with only £7.7 million in 1983. In the last campaign £21.5 million was spent on advertising alone, including newspapers, posters and the production of election broadcasts (Neill Report 1998). While there are serious doubts about whether some of the advertising spending was effective, nevertheless in an escalating 'arms race' more and more party resources are devoted to news management, election publicity and voter targeting.

Survey evidence provides some grounds to support the assumption that parties can use campaigns reach undecided voters. The British Election Study has regularly asked voters: *"When did you decide who to vote for?"* In 1997 27% of the electorate reported making up their minds '*during the election campaign*' (see Chapter 11). Moreover, about one quarter (23%) of the electorate fell into the category of 'waverers', defined as those who considered voting for another party during the campaign. This suggests that in the 1997 campaign many people were still potentially open to persuasion about how to vote, even close to polling day, rather fixed with party anchors. The proportion of late deciders and waverers was particularly high among Liberal Democratic voters. As discussed further in the conclusion, other evidence on the flow of the vote from 1992-97, as well as net indicators like the 'Butler' swing and the Pedersen Index, indicate considerable electoral volatility in 1997, more so than in most previous general elections.

Yet previous studies have found limited evidence for the power of parties and the news media to change voting behaviour within British campaigns, but most scholars have been fairly sceptical about some of the larger claims made by political consultants. Miller (1991) conducted the

most thorough previous study of the news media during the 1987 general election, based on a panel survey of voters and content analysis. The study found that the press had a significant but limited impact upon party images, leadership preferences and voting choice. But television viewing, with its more balanced and non-partisan messages, had relatively little influence upon viewers. Curtice and Semetko (1994) analyzed the 1987-1992 BES panel and found that over the longer term newspapers had a modest influence upon their readers' voting choice and economic evaluations, although there were few other short-term effects (see also Newton 1991; Webber 1993; Saunders et al. 1993; Gavin 1997). There studies are suggestive but one problem is that most previous British research has been based upon cross-sectional surveys, where it remains impossible to disentangle the direction of causal effects: people may vote for a party influenced by the political content of newspapers, but they may also buy a newspaper sympathetic to their party choice, or both. To overcome these limitations we reexamine persuasion effects using a triangulated research design combining content analysis, panel surveys and experiments.

Feedback Loop: From Voting Choice to Party Messages

We would also expect a feedback loop in this process, where public opinion expressed through the outcome of the election may have a significant impact '*upwards*' on party leaders. The views of the electorate, expressed directly through opinion polls, focus groups, and canvassing operations, and indirectly through the filter of the news media, may shape party policies and communication strategies. Should Labour prioritize tax credits for families or child care places? Should the Conservatives adopt a policy of outright opposition to ERM, or a more cautious 'wait and see' approach? Party manifestoes are influenced by the popular mood, as well as by the attitudes and opinions of party members, elected MPs and leaders.

As an informal level there is nothing new in this process: this occurs whenever MPs go home to the constituency to listen to the views of party activists and supporters on particularly controversial or divisive matters. Door-stepping during the campaign is part of the long tradition of the election hustings. But in recent years the feedback loop has become far more intensive, systematic, professional, and centralized (Scammell 1995; Kavanagh 1995; Jones 1995). The Labour party's attempt to organize town hall meetings around the country, in their 'Labour Listens' campaign, (subsequently emulated by the Conservatives under Hague) can be regarded as a cynical exercise in the manipulation of public opinion or alternatively it can be seen as a genuine attempt to reach out and connect with the concerns of people in Britain, or a bit of both. The Blair government's use of specially commissioned opinion polls and focus groups represents a natural extension of this process. The feedback loop operates primarily after election day, especially among politicians thrown onto the opposition benches who are searching for the best way to regain public popularity. This process is a critical function of elections but because we focus upon only the period of the long campaign this is treated as essentially exogenous to our model.

The Plan of the Book

Therefore theories of the effects of political communications have developed from the pre-war accounts deeply fearful of the impact of 'propaganda' on the gullible mass public, through the post-war orthodoxy of

the Erie County and Michigan studies stressing partisan reinforcement, to more recent work on cognitive, agenda-setting and persuasion effects. British elections are often explained on the basis of long-standing cues like social identities and medium-term evaluations of the state of the economy. Yet the standard social and economic variables have had decreasing success in predicting voting behaviour, due to the process of class and party dealignment during the last thirty years (Evans and Norris 1999). Building upon the schematic model already discussed political communications is conceptualized in this book as a sequential process from message through successive steps of information and mobilization, agenda-setting, and persuasion, to the act of casting a ballot paper.

Part I of the book sets the general context for the study. **Chapter 2** outlines the changing pattern of political communications in British election campaigns. We argue that the evolution of the post-modern campaign has produced the rise of a more autonomous press and a more fragmented electronic news environment, and that parties have been forced to respond to these new challenges. **Chapter 3** considers some of the methodological challenges surrounding studies of media effects and outlines the multi-method research design used in this book, including the content analysis of party and media messages, the 1997 British Election Study (BES) cross-sectional and BES campaign panel surveys, and an experimental study of television news. These methodological considerations are important for weighing the evidence for our arguments but readers who prefer to skip over the technical details should move directly to the next section.

Part II: The Campaign Communication Process

Part II of the book examines the inputs into the process of campaign communications. **Chapter 4** analyses the contents of party manifesto, press briefings and party election broadcasts during the 1997 election to address three core questions: what were the campaign strategies of the major parties in 1997; what were their issues priorities; and far did they stay 'on message' with a consistent agenda throughout the official campaign? **Chapter 5** examines the coverage in the news media. Based on content analysis of national newspapers and television news in 1997 we examine the amount of attention devoted to the election campaign; the breakdown of this coverage between different issues; and which party was most successful in setting the news agenda in the campaign. **Chapter 6** considers the public's reaction to the coverage, who proved most attentive towards campaign news, and how far people were turned on or turned off by the election.

Part III: The Impact of Campaign Communications

The last part of the book examines the effects of the news media on voters. The role of the news media on **civic engagement** has long been a matter of concern. In democratic theory the most basic function of the campaign is to inform voters about the choices before them and to mobilise citizen participation. As we have seen, there is considerable controversy in the literature about how far the news media succeed in this function. **Chapter 5** analyses what the public learnt from the campaign in the British election, whether the news media influenced political cynicism among the public, and whether use and the news media discouraged electoral participation.

Chapter 8 compares the role of parties, the media and the public in agenda-setting. The core issue we address is how far the amount of attention

devoted to different issues by party campaigns influenced the news stories in the media, and then in turn how far the news headlines influenced the priorities of the public. Chapter 4 examines the issue agenda of the major parties (to see what messages they were trying to convey), while Chapter 5 compares this with the issue agenda of the news media (to see what messages were picked up), while Chapter 8 examines the public's issue concerns. We focus in particular on whether the issue agenda of parties, the media and the public moved together, or apart, during the campaign. The issue of Europe, which suddenly attracted news headlines in mid-April, is examined as a case-study in media agenda-setting. Agenda dynamics are examined using the panel survey and the experimental study.

Chapter 9 goes on to examine the influence of television news. We hypothesize that there are three primary ways in which the contents of television news could influence party support: through the amount of time devoted to each party (*stop-watch* balance), through positive or negative news about each party (*directional* balance), and through prioritizing certain issues over others (*agenda* balance). To examine this issue Chapter 9 analyses the results of the experiments which manipulated these factors in a montage of news and monitored the effects on party preferences.

Chapter 10 focuses on the impact of the press on party support. The post-war decade saw a rough division of newspaper support between the major parties but the balance of press swung towards the Conservatives in the mid-seventies. In 1992 the Conservatives campaigned assured of a largely sympathetic press. By 1997 this had changed, with an historic shift in editorial allegiances, particularly the defection to Labour of *The Sun*. The central issue this chapter examines is whether the change in newspaper partisanship led, or followed, their readers. Did *Sun* readers become more Labour after the paper declared their backing for Blair on the first day of the campaign? This provides a 'natural experiment' to test for the effects of newspapers partisanship.

The conclusion draws together the central themes, provides a summary of the core findings throughout the book, and considers the implications for our understanding of the role of parties, the news media and the public in a mediated democracy.