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A tale of two parties: Press and television coverage of the campaign

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A Tale of Two Parties: Press and television coverage of the campaign.**David Deacon, John Downey, David Smith, James Stanyer and Dominic Wring**

Election campaigns are still shaped by mainstream news narratives despite the rise and continuing growth of alternative forms of online reporting and commentary. Moreover a significant section of the population continues to receive much of their political information from print and television sources. This in turn helps explain why the rival parties have remained committed to trying to manage the news in the hope of promoting a favourable impression to the widest possible audience or, at the very least, rebutting claims made by opponents. 2017 proved to be a more exciting, eventful campaign than most. Theresa May declared the snap election having looked unassailable since becoming Prime Minister in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. Hardly any of the many media commentators predicted this campaign would deliver the surprise result it did. May lost her commanding position in parliament but also in terms of a carefully cultivated persona that was undone in the critical weeks running up to polling day.

This chapter is based on a detailed content analysis of news coverage produced on each weekday (Monday to Friday inclusive) between 5 May and 7 June, i.e. the final five weeks before polling day. The sample covers the major broadcast and print outlets. The television content comprises: Channel 4 News (7pm), Channel 5 News (6.30pm), BBC1 News at 10, ITV1 News at 10, Sky News 8-8.30pm. The team analysed all election news found in the

aforementioned TV programmes. The press material includes: *The Guardian*, *The I*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express*, *The Mirror*, *The Sun*, *The Star*. For these newspaper titles the material sampled includes election news on the front page, the first two pages of the domestic news section, the first two pages of any specialist election section and the page containing and facing the papers' leader editorials.¹

This study explains what the campaign was about. It does so through measuring the visibility or presence of the different parties as well as other organizations and individuals in the news. The latter included the various rival politicians and comparisons are made with recent elections, especially the previous one in 2015. The chapter also identifies the issues that attracted most news attention and, by extension, those that were less prominent than might have been expected when the campaign began. Finally there is some consideration of the role of the (partisan) press, focusing on the negativity versus positivity of the coverage that appeared in print.

¹ More information on methodology is available at <http://blog.lboro.ac.uk/crcc/methodology-2/>. Thanks go to the coding team: Shani Burke, Gennaro Errichiello, Simon Huxtable, Jack Joyce, Herminder Kaur, Jade Markham, Nathan Ritchie, Lukas Stepanek, Ian Taylor, Rosie Tinker and Lou Tompkins. Inter-coder reliability tests were conducted on all key variables:

A reliability test using a random sample of 11 newspaper stories was conducted early on in the coding process with 10 coders. It is customary to provide an inter-coder reliability measure for each variable on a coding sheet. We have focused here on the more subjective variables that require coder judgement and the scores below are for these variables on the coding sheet.

Two measures are used, average pairwise percent agreement (APPA) and Krippendorff's Alpha. Given the number of coders and the amount of training time ahead of this snap election our confidence level was set at 70% for APPA and 60% for Krippendorff's Alpha.

The identity of actors in the news: APPA 78.324%; Krippendorff's Alpha, 0.733776976662
Disposition of actors in the news: APPA, 72.9761904762% Krippendorff's Alpha, 0.633986079743
The themes of news items: APPA, 76.2962962963%; Krippendorff's Alpha, 0.684490950537
Overall story evaluation: APPA, 86.7824074074%; Krippendorff's Alpha, 0.644939179375

Parties

The Conservatives were the most prominent party in terms of the frequency of their representatives' appearances on TV and in print. Incumbent governing parties have tended to benefit from this advantage in the past (Miller et al., 1990), although the resulting news attention - especially in this campaign - was not always necessarily favourable. Some of this coverage was, for instance, devoted to the furore that followed in the wake of the debate over the so-called 'dementia tax', and the perceived failure of Theresa May to reassure journalists that she had not committed a 'U-turn' on her social care manifesto pledge. Together with their principal Labour rival, the Conservatives dominated the news coverage of this campaign, particularly in terms of the way the major newspapers reported the election (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: Prominence of parties and their leaders in the press (5 May - 7 June)

Between them both major parties accounted for 84 per cent of all politicians reported by the press. In TV terms the two accounted for 67 per cent (Figure 2.2), reflecting the sensitivity of the broadcasters to reporting the various third parties. This greater diversity of

voices is in part a reflection of the regulatory codes governing the provision of television news. This also helps explain why, when appearances by their representatives were compared, the margin of difference between the Conservatives and Labour was greater for the press (9.6 per cent) than the broadcasters (2.1 per cent). But overall this was very much a two horse race where politicians from other parties played less of a role in terms of media coverage during the campaign. This was in striking contrast to the previous election of 2015 where there had been more diversity in respect of the representatives featured, with the Liberal Democrats, SNP and UKIP enjoying greater prominence (Deacon et al, 2017).

**Figure 2.2: Prominence of parties and their leaders
on TV
(5 May - 7 June)**

The Conservatives' advantage in terms of their being able to attract greater news coverage during the 2017 election was reinforced by them also having representatives who were most likely to be directly quoted in the press reports (Figure 2.3) and heard on TV news bulletins (Figure 2.4). Once again, reflecting the Tory sympathizing leanings of the newspaper industry, Conservatives were more likely to be quoted than their Labour rivals. There was, however, greater balance in the equivalent measure of television coverage.

Figure 2.3: Direct quotation of parties and their leaders (press)

Broadcasters were as likely to give direct airtime to comments made by Theresa May as they were Jeremy Corbyn. By contrast the smaller parties were largely overshadowed in this respect: individually and collectively they received a relatively small amount of quotation time. This was perhaps to be expected from the largely pro-Conservative newspapers keen to promote the government and attack Labour. But television news similarly marginalized what were, in media terms at least, the 'minor' parties. This was in sharp contrast with the 2015 election where the widespread anticipation of a hung parliament had heightened interest in the various junior partners in potential coalition scenarios. Two years on, and with most polls were predicting the return of a majority Conservative government, there appeared to be comparatively little reporting of the SNP, UKIP, Greens and even the Liberal Democrats.

Representatives including the leaders of the various third parties were somewhat marginalized in this election, although they were more likely to be directly quoted on television than in the press. And as with the two major parties this larger news access was

necessarily a positive. Tim Farron, for instance, spent the early part of the campaign embroiled in a controversy surrounding the discrepancy between his party's and his own stance on same sex marriage. Paul Nuttall also had a difficult start to his race with limited media attention he received largely taken up by him defending the continuing relevance of UKIP in the aftermath of a referendum vote that had delivered Brexit, the party's *raison d'être*.

Figure 2.4: Direct quotation of parties and their leaders (TV)

Aside from the changed political landscape since 2015, another significant factor that influenced coverage of this campaign was the revision of the broadcast guidelines by the regulator Ofcom. These afforded news organizations greater freedom to exercise their editorial judgement as to the degree they reported on rival leaders, parties and candidates in this election. Cumulatively the impact of the revised Ofcom guidance may have further diminished the third parties' already limited access to the airwaves. It would appear the live debates failed to help boost the profile of non-Labour/Conservative leaders in terms of the wider media coverage certain leaders had received following such encounters in the

2010 (i.e. Nick Clegg) and 2015 (Nicola Sturgeon) campaigns. The marked decline in the news devoted to the third/minor parties since the last general election was a marked trend of this campaign.

Figure 2.5: Party prominence in press coverage in the 2015 and 2017 General Elections

The 2017 campaign saw the resumption of Labour and Conservative dominance in terms of their joint share of the electoral coverage, not to mention the actual vote itself. This two-party squeeze was most evident in press reporting. In the 2015 campaign 69.7 per cent of politicians covered in the newspapers were Conservative or Labour whereas by 2017 this had increased quite significantly to 84.3 per cent (Figure 2.5). This trend was also noticeable in terms of TV news coverage too (Figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6: Party prominence on TV news in the 2015 and 2017 General Elections

In 2015 55.7 per cent of all appearances by politicians on television were made by representatives from the two main parties. By 2017 the equivalent figure had gone up, though not as drastically as the figure for print reporting. Nonetheless the total for Conservative and Labour representatives combined was just over two thirds at 67.1 per cent of all broadcast appearances.

Campaigners

Media coverage in elections tends to focus on certain personalities, most notably those with any realistic chance of becoming Prime Minister. Table 2.1 highlights the extent to which Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn dominated the reporting of individual protagonists involved in this campaign. Both leaders on their own received approximately four times the coverage afforded Tim Farron, the third placed most prominent figure. This is a significant issue for politicians representing parties other than the 'big two' because campaigns have

traditionally been an opportunity for them to gain greater exposure than might normally expect in routine political coverage (Blumler and McQuail, 1968).

Table 2.1: Most prominent politicians in campaign coverage (total news appearances)

1	Theresa May (Cons)	30.1%
2	Jeremy Corbyn (Lab)	26.7%
3	Tim Farron (Lib Dem)	6.8%
4	Nicola Sturgeon (SNP)	3.7%
5	Boris Johnson (Cons)	3.6%
6	John McDonnell (Lab)	3.4%
7	Paul Nuttall (UKIP)	3.4%
8=	Amber Rudd (Cons)	2.8%
8=	Diane Abbott (Lab)	2.8%
10	Emily Thornberry (Lab)	1.8%
11	Philip Hammond (Cons)	1.7%
12	Michael Fallon (Cons)	1.5%
13=	Ruth Davidson (Cons)	1.4%
13=	Caroline Lucas (Green)	1.4%
15	Jeremy Hunt (Cons)	1.2%
16	David Davis (Cons)	1.1%
17=	Leanne Wood (PC)	1.1%
17=	Jonathan Ashworth (Lab)	1.1%
19=	David Cameron (Cons)	1.0%
19=	Angela Rayner (Lab)	1.0%
19=	Vince Cable (Lib Dem)	1.0%

Aside from their prominence, May and Corbyn also received roughly twice as much news attention as their respective predecessors achieved in the 2015 election (Deacon et al, 2017). Conversely others including Farron, Nicola Sturgeon and Paul Nuttall saw their equivalent leaders' profiles plummet in line with the decline of their respective party's prominence in the news. Apart from these five leaders, the six other most high profile politicians were the holders of the 'Great Offices of State' (Chancellor, Foreign and Home

Secretaries) and their Shadows on the Opposition frontbenches. The coverage of these portfolio holders reflected the significance of Brexit and security concerns in this campaign as well as the perennial issue of the economy (see below). And despite their presence on the platform in the largest set-piece debate between the party leaders, the Greens' Caroline Lucas and Leanne Wood of Plaid Cymru received comparatively modest amounts of attention in terms of how the wider campaign was covered by the news.

The two major party leaders were, as has already been noted, the dominant figures in what was a highly presidential campaign. This of course reflected the initial strategic choice of the Conservatives to brand their campaign with the name of the Prime Minister. Although the accompanying descriptive slogan 'strong and stable' later became notorious, this personalized approach contributed to Theresa May becoming the most prominent politician over the course of the election. Aside from Jeremy Corbyn, who was a clear second, other politicians commanded a fraction of the attention over the duration of the campaign. Home Secretary Amber Rudd, who deputized for the Prime Minister in the live televised leader debate, was the eighth most prominent figure overall but still received less than a tenth of the coverage that May garnered.

Figure 2.7: Proportional presence of the two main party leaders by week

Theresa May was the single most high-profile politician of the campaign but her lead, in media coverage terms, was not continuous throughout the race. During the penultimate week before polling day Jeremy Corbyn managed to overtake the Prime Minister as the most prominent figure before May regained a slender lead in the final days before the election (Figure 2.7).² The surge in the coverage of Corbyn marked a significant transformative period in the campaign. This change followed on from what turned out to be the defining weekend in the race when the Labour leader was warmly greeted by a crowd of young people attending a concert in Merseyside. By contrast the same period saw the self-proclaimed 'self and stable' May struggling to re-assert her authority after the launch of her manifesto became mired in (counter-) claim and confusion over the details of her plans relating to social care for elderly people. Senior citizens are normally regarded as being more reliably pro-Conservative, so the party suffered from the ensuing uncertainty

² Sample days for the respective weeks were the weekdays between: 5 to 11 May (week 1), 12 to 18 May (week 2), 19 to 25 May (week 3), 26 May to 1 June (week 4), and 2 to 7 June (week 5).

caused by a policy change quickly interpreted as being detrimental to a significant group of core Tory supporters.

Initially the Conservative manifesto launch in Halifax had appeared to go to plan. By contrast Labour published their programme for government following the leaking of a draft version of the document. But far from damaging the party, the additional publicity generated may have succeeded in helping promote the manifesto. Whether by design or not the impact of this preview meant the party's policies were widely discussed before and after their formal announcement by Corbyn and his colleagues. This also contributed to the election debate being more decidedly policy rich than was the case in 2015 when a good deal more of the media focus had been on the so-called 'process' including the 'horse race' aspects of the campaign.

It has already been noted how anticipation of a hung parliament emerging after the 2015 election appeared to significantly boost media interest in those parties that might play a role in one of the various possible coalition government scenarios. In the event the Conservatives won an outright majority, rendering this kind of journalistic speculation (a marked feature in the latter stages of that campaign) redundant. Ironically this election did result in a hung parliament despite most polls indicating another Conservative victory was the likeliest outcome. The polling industry had, of course, suffered much criticism and an inquiry following their performance in 2015. But despite this it is noteworthy how the media nonetheless still internalized the dominant trend in the polls in terms of the way the campaign was covered. An important manifestation of this was the already noted decline in

news attention devoted to the various third parties whose support a Conservative or Labour led minority administration would need to govern.

Few in the extensive network of political commentators retained by the print and broadcast media entertained the possibility of a hung parliament. This reflected the tenor of much coverage. A strong indicator of this was the lack of any sustained reporting on the Democratic Unionist Party (Table 2.2). After the election the Conservatives became reliant on the DUP's 10 MPs to stay in office. The party inevitably attracted a considerable amount of media interest but their virtual absence prior to polling day reinforced the degree to which little serious attention had been given to the possibility of another hung parliament being returned. Paradoxically the dominant, misplaced narrative of the 2015 campaign about a future coalition government would have been far more appropriate for this race.

Table 2.2: 'Coverage' of the DUP (total news appearances)

Politician	N	% items
Arlene Foster MLA (Leader and Northern Ireland First Minister in the suspended administration)	5	0.2%
Nigel Dodds (Deputy and Westminster Leader)	2	0.1%
Other	3	0.1%
Total Appearances	10	0.4%

Arlene Foster was one of several women to lead parties into this election. Others included the comparative veteran Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon of the SNP, Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood and Caroline Lucas, having previously returned to (co-) lead the Greens for a second time. Further to this the position of women had been advanced through their now

occupying senior frontbench positions including some of the major offices of state and their shadows. And for the first time since Margaret Thatcher a woman was in Downing Street while leading a major party. This election might have been expected to herald something of a potential breakthrough for women, at least in terms of their presence in the news coverage.

Figure 2.8: Gender balance across sources

Figure 2.8 identifies the different kinds of gendered actor who appeared in the election reporting. Overall the percentages demonstrate women were still in the minority whatever their role with nearly two thirds (63%) of the coverage featuring men. Females are in the minority whatever the category but achieved their best representations in the groupings for 'politicians' and 'citizens' with shares of approximately 40% on both cases. Conversely there were comparatively few women identified as 'experts' and none featured as 'pollsters' in the coverage.

Issues

This most striking trend in terms of coverage during this campaign was the significant fall, compared with 2015, in the amount of reporting devoted to 'electoral process', a category including so-called 'horse race' journalism (Table 2.3). A corollary of this trend was that the amount of news attention given over to substantive policy concerns. There was greater coverage of the rival manifestos and their implications for government that had been the case, particularly in the previous general election where there was considerably more media interest in the polls, personalities and other aspects of this campaign. 2017 was different, most obviously because of the impact of the leaked Labour manifesto together with the furore that ensued following the confusion over the Conservative plans for social care.

Table 2.3: Most prominent issues in news coverage

		2017 General Election	% difference from 2015 General Election
1	Electoral process	32.9%	- 12.5
2	Brexit/European Union	10.9%	+7.8
3	Defence/Military/Security	7.2%	+4.7
4	Health and health care provision	6.7%	=
5	Taxation	5.7%	-1.1
6	Economy/Business/Trade	5.5%	-5.9
7	Social Security	4.6%	+2.4
8	Immigration	4.2%	+0.8
9	Devolution and other constitutional	3.3%	-1.0
10	Standards	3.0%	-0.3
11	Education	2.9%	+1.6
12	Public services	2.3%	+1.7
13	Employment	1.6%	-0.7
14	Housing	1.3%	-1.5
15	Other issues	7.9%	

Prior to the campaign there had been considerable speculation as to whether 2017 would be the 'Brexit election'. The European question was indeed the single most prominent issue, reflecting the salience of the topic in view of the UK's impending negotiations to leave the EU. But aside from Brexit several other substantive policy areas received significant news attention. Coverage of defence and security issues, marginal in 2015, was much more prominent in 2017 following the controversy surrounding the renewal of Trident as well as the responses to the Manchester and London terror attacks. Education related matters, including the debates over school meals and university tuition fees, received more attention than they had in 2015. News coverage of health and health care remained as prominent in 2017 as it had in the last campaign.

Some substantive policy areas received less news media attention despite their salience in previous years. For example, the important issues of housing, transport and the environment rarely featured in coverage, reflecting a similar pattern from the 2015 campaign. More surprising was the relative marginalization of immigration, an issue that had been a major factor in the reporting of the EU referendum campaign in 2016 if not so much in the previous election. One topic that was substantially down in terms of its prominence was the news coverage devoted to business and the economy this time. In past campaigns this had been a major issue. In 2015 David Cameron had led the Conservatives to victory having repeatedly attacked Labour for its alleged failure to manage the economy.

Figure 2.9: Proportional prominence of issues, week by week (all media)

Compared with 2015 the issue of the economy was more marginal in media terms and became ever more so as the campaign progressed (see Figure 2.9). Although traditionally the most prominent category, interest in the electoral process declined midway through the campaign as the debate over health (including social care) peaked following the controversy over the Conservatives' so-called 'dementia tax'. It is noteworthy that Brexit was the substantive issue that attracted most news attention in two different weeks but not throughout the campaign. In the final days of the election race the Manchester Arena bombing and latterly the attacks near London Bridge led to increased coverage of defence and security related matters, thereby making it foremost among the policy areas discussed in the media during the closing days of the race.

Partisanship

The print media report on elections, and politics more generally, free from the legal constraints imposed on their broadcasting counterparts. Newspapers are therefore able to editorialize in ways that favour a party or, as is common, denigrates another. The Conservatives have traditionally benefitted from this kind of press partisanship: the extent and nature of this support is examined as well as the degree to which the coverage was positive or negative.³ Figure 2.10 shows the overall directional balance of stories relating to the respective five parties that received the most electoral votes.

³ This is not solely a measure of overt support or criticism by a journalist of a party (although these instances would be included in the count). Rather it is a broader measure of the extent to which newspapers report on issues/comments/developments that have positive or negative implications for parties. We only coded these instances where these were overtly referred to in the piece. In term of scoring If an item mainly or solely focused on positive matters for a party, it was given a value of +1. If it was mainly/solely focused on negative matters for a party, it was assigned a value of -1. Items where there was no clear evaluation or they contained positive and negative issues in broadly equal measure were coded as zero. Items where no reference was made to the party were excluded from the calculation. The scores in Figures 2.10 – 2.12 are calculated by subtracting the total number of negative stories from the total of positive stories.

**Figure 2.10 Overall evaluations in newspapers
(unweighted)**

Although the media preoccupation with the major two is pronounced with Labour attracting the most adverse commentary, what is particularly noteworthy is that all columns in Figure 2.10 are negative: the tenor of the press coverage was ‘a plague on all your houses’. Admittedly the Liberal Democrat score is negligible but what limited newspaper attention the SNP and UKIP managed to attract appears to have been primarily critical. Most striking is the considerable amount of negative coverage the Conservatives received. Much of this was concentrated in the period after the ‘dementia tax’ when there was criticism of the party’s social care plans as well as the wider manifesto, the campaign strategy and then the leader herself (for further discussion, see Chapter XX).

Figure 2.11 presents the overall impact of press evaluations when these are weighted by the Audit Bureau of Circulation statistics for the respective newspapers. This pattern is more beneficial to the Conservatives, the only party to benefit from a positive rating overall. Whereas the other three received slightly negative scores, Labour's deficit is even more pronounced than in Figure 2.10, reflecting the considerable amount of 'knocking copy' they received from the 'Tory press'.

The various major newspapers differed in their partisanship but also in terms of the degree to which their coverage can be characterized as positive and negative. Figure 2.12 explores how the various titles evaluated the rival parties drawing on the data from Figure 2.10. Six newspapers (*Sun*, *Mirror*, *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Mail* and *Express*) were highly partisan in their reporting, offering positive coverage of the party they endorsed as well as all being even more negative about the principal rival they opposed. This trend does not, however,

take account of these papers' circulations: if these are considered the Conservatives advantage increases because of support from the best-selling *Sun* and *Mail* for them.

Figure 2.12 Evaluations by newspapers (unweighted)

The remaining four titles were less strident although the *i* was noticeably more critical of the Conservatives than any other party despite the newspaper's policy of not making electoral endorsements. The *Star* was the only other paper not to formally support a party in this election. The newspaper also offered the least partisan coverage of any of the ten national dailies, reflecting its avoidance of the campaign in favour of celebrity based human interest stories. The remaining two newspapers, *The Times* and *Financial Times*, endorsed the Conservatives but were not positive about the party. From a press perspective this election was more about the press attacking the politicians they most feared rather than promoting the vision of those they chose to support.

Conclusion

The two major parties dominated the print and broadcast media campaign in a way that emulated their combined share of the electorate's support. This marked a departure from the 2015 campaign in which several of the minor parties and their leaders had attracted a significantly higher level of news interest. 2017 was a very different media campaign. Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn each received far more attention during than their rivals and colleagues in this election not to mention their predecessors in the previous election. Initially May attracted more news coverage than Corbyn but this gap closed following the hiatus over the Conservative manifesto plans for social care. The Prime Minister denied this policy represented a significant change, but the incident proved to be a catalyst in terms of both the electoral dynamics as well as their reporting. There is evidence the so-called 'dementia tax' also muted newspaper support for May with print coverage largely consisting of 'knocking copy'. Admittedly most of this negative press was primarily about Labour but some of it was also aimed at a faltering Conservative campaign.

Reporting of the electoral process, encompassing aspects of the campaign such as the polls, mishaps and other events, was the main category in terms of news media coverage of this election. But the leaking of the Labour manifesto and the drama surrounding the Conservative 'dementia tax' generated ample copy to make this a more decidedly policy centred debate in terms of the print and broadcast reporting. There was also considerable interest in security and defence matters reflecting the heightened concern over public safety in the aftermath of the Manchester and London atrocities during the campaign. There was news media interest in Brexit but the key related issue of immigration was some

way down the list of news priorities in terms of election coverage. With hindsight the Conservatives might have fought a different kind of campaign by placing greater emphasis on another issue central to the referendum but not as critical a part of this campaign as it might have been: the supposed strength and stability of the economy.

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