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The  
Electoral  
Commission



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# Election 2005: engaging the public in Great Britain

An analysis of campaigns and media coverage

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### The Electoral Commission

We are an independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Our mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.

Election 2005: engaging the public in Great Britain  
An analysis of campaigns and media coverage

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# Preface

The 2005 UK Parliamentary general election<sup>1</sup> was the second to be held since the establishment of The Electoral Commission. This report is one of a series being published following the election. It focuses on communication with the public at the election, an issue of particular importance to those, including political parties, who wish to promote involvement in the democratic process.

Turnout at the election was up, but only marginally, on the 2001 general election. In our report *Election 2005: turnout*, released in October 2005, we noted that non-voting and disengagement from electoral politics are evident throughout society, particularly among the younger age groups. This report looks at what those involved in the democratic process did in the build-up to the 2005 contest to encourage electors to take part and vote.

This report also aims, along with the others in the series, to provide a record of the 2005 general election. It does not offer any recommendations for policy reform, but does draw on extensive research and analysis of the nature of the campaign and the media's coverage of it, in order to further understanding of issues surrounding voter engagement and participation.

It is hoped that this analysis of the efforts of those involved in engaging the public in the democratic process will further contribute to the very important debate on voter engagement and participation. The Commission looks forward to working with others to further promote participation in our democracy.



Sam Younger  
Chairman, The Electoral Commission

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter referred to as the 'general election'.



# Executive summary

This report is the third in a series of reports and papers on the 2005 UK Parliamentary general election. It focuses particularly on the campaigns of the main political parties and the media coverage they received.

## The political campaigns

Political parties fought their campaigns for the 2005 general election on many of the usual policy issues – the economy, public services, taxation and so on – while the war in Iraq was also a notable feature of debate. The parties used a variety of campaigning methods to get their messages across to the electorate; modern methods such as automated telephone calls supplemented the more traditional campaigning methods such as leaflets and house-to-house canvassing.

There was an improvement from the 2001 general election in terms of public awareness of the campaigns. For example, more people appear to have seen political advertisements on billboards and in newspapers, watched the leaders in the televised audience debates or heard party election broadcasts on the radio. In terms of electronic campaigning moving to the centre stage, the 2005 general election seems to have been another false dawn.

However, the general focus of the party campaigning was in marginal constituencies, where the majority of resources were targeted. There was a clear correlation between marginality and the level of campaigning activity by political parties which was especially marked for telephone and house-to-house canvassing. Research undertaken for The Electoral Commission shows that people were more than five times as likely to be contacted in this way if they lived in a marginal seat rather than a safe seat during the 2005 general election campaign.

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The concentration on marginal constituencies was understandable given the limited resources available to parties, but it worked against the engagement of the electorate as a whole at the 2005 general election. Many people appeared to feel that the result, both in their constituency and overall, was a foregone conclusion.

## Media coverage of the campaigns

As ever, media coverage was an important aspect of the general election campaign. The media's role is crucial given that the public relies so heavily on it for much of their information about the parties and issues – for example, our research shows that almost 90% of people used television as their main source of information on political issues during the campaign.

The fact that a general election is being held does not command the media's interest as of right. The 2005 general election was just one news item among many at the time, and other major news events – for example coverage of events around the Pope's funeral – kept it in the background to some extent, certainly at the start of the campaigning period.

Media coverage of the election also partly reflected the large fall in turnout at the 2001 general election – the assumption being that many people might not be particularly interested. The coverage there was did not particularly focus on policies, although that may reflect the perceived closeness between the policies of the two parties considered by the public most likely to win the election.

The lower levels of coverage elicited by the 2005 general election, compared to previous campaigns, is cause for some concern. There may be a 'chicken and egg' situation, where the media do not cover general elections if the public are thought to be uninterested, while public interest is unlikely to be stimulated greatly unless there is sufficient media coverage.

The most prominent news theme was the electoral process itself. Research shows that the majority of items in all national media sectors contained either no descriptive policy-related information, or a negligible amount. The broadcast media produced a higher proportion of items containing at least some descriptive policy information than all sections of the national press.

Overall however, the coverage there was of the 2005 general election by the media was generally informative, accurate, balanced and valued by the public.

## Engagement

The Commission and other civic organisations also play a role in attempting to stimulate interest and participation in politics and elections. This is done against a backdrop of concern by many that such interest is declining. In line with our statutory responsibilities, we attempted to ensure that there was broad public awareness of when the general election was being held, and why it was important to vote.



Other reports from the Commission have shown that engaging the electorate **between** elections – not just during the campaign period – is a key element in reversing the long-term decline in participation. We reiterate the point in this report. Although there may be a link between the perceived closeness of the contest and public engagement, turnout levels are also linked to ‘positive politics’ outside election periods by the political parties, and positive coverage of politics by the media.

## Conclusion

Although turnout went up marginally at the 2005 general election compared to the 2001 contest, there remains a great deal of work to do by all those with an interest in engaging more people in politics.

Full copies of all the research reports referred to in this report are available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk).



# 1 Introduction

This is one of a series of reports on the 2005 general election. It pulls together the key findings from a programme of research projects. We hope that it will have long-term value as a record of the election; more immediately, we see it as a reference point to inform initiatives on the continuing problem of disengagement, for all those involved in the democratic process.

## Context

**1.1** On Tuesday 5 April 2005 and after considerable media speculation about the date of the forthcoming general election, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, announced that his request to dissolve Parliament had been granted by Her Majesty the Queen. That day, the Queen issued the proclamation dissolving Parliament and the writs for the 2005 general election were issued. This officially triggered the election process and, with the close of poll scheduled for 10pm on Thursday 5 May 2005, meant a campaign lasting four full weeks.

**1.2** Significant boundary changes in Scotland meant that fewer seats were contested than the total of 659 at the 2001 general election. Six hundred and forty-six Parliamentary constituencies were contested at the 2005 general election, although the Staffordshire South election did not take place until 23 June as a result of the death of one of the candidates.<sup>2</sup> There were 529 constituencies in England, 59 in Scotland (down from 72 in 2001), 40 in Wales and 18 in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>2</sup> The data presented in this report includes data for the Staffordshire South constituency, unless stated otherwise.

## The Electoral Commission and election reporting

**1.3** The Electoral Commission is a public body established on 30 November 2000 under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA). The Commission is independent of Government, non-partisan and directly accountable to the UK Parliament. We aim to foster public confidence and participation in elections by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process.

**1.4** We are responsible for overseeing a number of aspects of electoral law including the registration of political parties and third parties,<sup>3</sup> monitoring significant donations to registered political parties and regulating national party spending on election campaigns. In addition, we have a role in advising those involved in elections on practice and procedure and a duty to keep electoral law under review. Unlike many electoral commissions around the world, we do not have responsibility for administering electoral registration or conducting elections.<sup>4</sup>

**1.5** We have a statutory duty to report on the administration of all major elections – and may also report on other elections if asked to do so.

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3 A third party is a person or body which campaigns on behalf of one or more registered political parties or a particular category of candidates (for example, those that hold or advocate a particular policy or opinion). PERA restricts the amount that a third party can spend on campaigning for the electoral success of registered parties or candidates.

4 The Commission does, however, have certain management functions in relation to the conduct of referendums.

Since our establishment in 2000, we have reported on the 2001 general election, the 2003 combined local and Scottish Parliamentary elections, the 2003 Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly elections, the 2004 European Parliamentary elections, and local elections in Wales.<sup>5</sup> These reports are available on our website.

**1.6** In addition to reviewing the administration of particular elections, past reports have also taken the opportunity to comment on issues relating to turnout, the campaigns undertaken by the political parties, and the media coverage they received. Such analysis is consistent with our remit to keep under review the law in relation to elections and to promote public awareness of electoral systems and related matters. We have also published full records of election results and reported on the expenditure incurred by parties, candidates and third parties.

## Reporting on the 2005 general election

**1.7** We have adopted a thematic approach to reporting on the 2005 general election. We have fulfilled our statutory obligation to report on the administration of the election in Great Britain in *Securing the vote* (May 2005), a major review of the conduct of the election with recommendations for reform, especially in relation to postal voting. Subsequently, we are publishing a series of reports on specific aspects of the election:

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5 The reports on the Scottish local elections in 2003 and the Welsh local elections in 2004 were prepared at the request of the Scottish Executive and Welsh Assembly Government respectively.

- *Election 2005: turnout* (October 2005);
- *Election 2005: engaging the public in Great Britain* (December 2005);
- *Election 2005: Northern Ireland* (December 2005); and
- *Election 2005: campaign spending* (spring 2006).

**1.8** This report reviews the work of the political parties, candidates, registered third parties and others to engage the electorate in the key issues during the election campaign and encourage participation. It also examines the way in which that activity was communicated to the public by the media. We deliberately do not consider in this report the Northern Ireland aspects of the general election, which are covered in a separate, more detailed, report on the experience of the general election (including the effects of combination with local elections) in that part of the UK.

**1.9** Our report has been informed by a wide-ranging programme of research, designed and managed by our Research Team. We have also drawn on a variety of published and unpublished work from the academic and research communities, as well as media coverage of the election.

**1.10** The Commission's 2005 general election research programme included several projects:

- analysis by Professors Michael Thrasher and Colin Rallings of the University of Plymouth Elections Centre of election data including turnout and postal voting data collected by the Commission from (Acting) Returning Officers;
- media content analysis conducted by the Communication Research Centre at Loughborough University and involving David Deacon, Dominic Wring, Peter Golding, Michael Billig and John Downey;
- analysis by a team including Dr Justin Fisher (Brunel University), Professor Edward Fieldhouse (University of Manchester), Professor David Denver (Lancaster University), Dr Andrew Russell (University of Manchester) and Dr David Cutts (University of Manchester) of the election campaigns run by political parties and third parties;
- survey research conducted on our behalf by a team at MORI among a representative sample of British adults during the election, and among a sample of people from black and minority ethnic communities after the election;
- qualitative public opinion research involving focus groups conducted at four locations across Britain by Cragg Ross Dawson; and
- additional qualitative research involving one-to-one depth interviews by Research Works Ltd exploring voters' perspectives on the process of voting.

**1.11** We have also benefited from partnering and co-funding the British Election Study (BES), a long-standing survey organised by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and managed this year by the University of Essex (with colleagues from the University of Texas) with survey fieldwork undertaken by the National Centre for Social Research. This report makes use of survey questions asked on our



behalf as part of the post-election BES survey and a report prepared for us by a team led by Professor David Sanders.<sup>6</sup>

**1.12** Copies of the full reports relating to each of the research projects funded by the Commission and used in this report are available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk) or on request from the Commission's offices. A full breakdown of data from the 2005 general election, including election results, turnout and postal voting data sorted by Parliamentary constituency, is provided on the Commission's website, and in hard copy on request.

**1.13** This report does not make recommendations and has been published as one part of a comprehensive account of the 2005 general election. The Commission has previously made a series of recommendations for changes to electoral legislation in *Voting for change* (2003) and reiterated a number of recommendations relating to electoral registration and postal voting in *Delivering democracy?* (2004) and *Securing the vote* (2005). We are delighted that the Government has taken many of these recommendations forward in its Electoral Administration Bill, before Parliament at the end of 2005.

**1.14** This report is submitted, as required by Section 6 of PPERA, to the Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs. However, we hope that the analysis provided will provoke debate among all those who play a part in maintaining the vibrancy of our democratic traditions.

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<sup>6</sup> The BES is a public opinion survey on each general election. It is currently managed by Essex University, and has been running since 1964. Data and analysis from the BES is available at [www.essex.ac.uk/bes](http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes). See the Appendix for technical details of this and our other research inputs.

# 2 The political campaigns

The 2005 general election campaign lasted four weeks and involved 44 million potential electors and 3,554 candidates representing 114 parties. Across the UK, around 27 million people voted. The extent to which the political parties engaged with the electorate, and how their messages were received, were important factors during the campaign period (although not the only ones) in determining whether or not people voted and who they voted for.

**2.1** This chapter looks at key aspects of the campaigns of the three largest parties in Great Britain, as well as the main nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales. It also looks at the campaigns of smaller parties and independent candidates, and reviews the role of registered third parties during the election period.

## The starting point of the campaigns

**2.2** Although the formal campaign period began with the calling of the election, campaign teams for the largest political parties were already in place; preparations had been going on for at least a year in anticipation of a 5 May 2005 general election. Indeed, the election date had been widely predicted by most commentators as it was the date of local elections in much of England and also in Northern Ireland.<sup>7</sup>

## Who took part

**2.3** For the purposes of this report, when referring to the 'main parties' we mean the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, as far as Great Britain is concerned. In addition to these three parties, the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru are main parties in Scotland and Wales respectively.

**2.4** Following the May 2005 general election, Great Britain's representation in the House of Commons is drawn from these five parties, with three exceptions. Peter Law was elected

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<sup>7</sup> The date of the Northern Ireland local council elections was recently brought into line with the rest of the UK and moved permanently to the first Thursday in May; previously they were scheduled to be held on the third Wednesday in May.

as an independent in Blaenau Gwent; George Galloway was elected for the Respect Coalition in Bethnal Green & Bow; and Richard Taylor was elected for a second time for Independent Kidderminster Hospital & Health Concern in Wyre Forest.

**2.5** A number of other parties also stood candidates at the general election. Of these, the three which obtained the most votes (without gaining a seat) were the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Green Party<sup>8</sup> and the British National Party. A full list of all the parties which contested the 2005 general election is available on the Commission's website.

**2.6** There were 175 independent candidates at the 2005 general election in Great Britain, an increase on the 116 who stood in 2001. Despite Peter Law's victory, independent candidates generally did not fare well at the election – no others won seats and all but 10 lost their deposits.

**2.7** This was the second general election in which a person or organisation (other than a registered political party) was required by law to register as a third party if they intended to spend large sums on publishing material which could reasonably be regarded as intending to promote the electoral success of candidates or parties participating in the election. Twenty-six third parties participated at the 2005 general election, an increase on the 10 registered for the 2001 campaign.

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<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this report, references to the Green Party include both the Green Party (England & Wales) and the Scottish Green Party.

**2.8** Many of the main campaign issues at the 2005 general election were familiar from previous elections, but issues unique to this particular election were also raised; the war in Iraq and immigration and asylum were particular features of campaign activity and media interest at a national level.

## Campaigning techniques

**2.9** The traditional campaigning methods used in Britain since the advent of universal suffrage are still regarded as the 'bread and butter' of elections. The distribution of leaflets or letters to, and the house-to-house canvassing of, potential electors by political representatives provide the bedrock on which other, more modern, campaign techniques can build. All political parties relied to a large extent on traditional methods at the 2005 general election, although these are increasingly being supplemented by other more modern campaigning techniques.

**2.10** In all campaign activity, parties are understandably keen to target those electors most likely to be sympathetic to their messages. Technology plays an important part here. The larger political parties, in particular, made use of databases to contact what they considered to be key voters.

**2.11** The Labour Party's 'Mosaic' software contained information for all the party's main target seats and enabled the targeting of personal calls and direct mail. Similarly, an important part of the Conservatives' strategy was to use the 'Voter Vault' software they had developed to assist the contacting of key voters

in target seats. Of the other parties, Plaid Cymru made use of a voter identification database which it hopes will also aid future election campaigns.

### Leafleting

**2.12** To provide a basic level of equality between those seeking public office at a general election, the law entitles all nominated candidates to have a single election address weighing no more than 60 grams delivered free of charge to electors in their constituency. If it is addressed to individuals, a copy of the election address can be sent freepost to every elector and proxy. If not, the literature can be sent freepost to all households with a clearly defined address.

**2.13** Responsibility for delivery rests with Royal Mail, whose costs are reimbursed by the government. The Department of Constitutional Affairs estimates these costs to be around £28 million. The cost of producing (rather than delivering) the leaflet must be met by the candidate or their party. As a result, some smaller parties and independent candidates were unable to take advantage of the free delivery as they could not afford the printing costs.

**2.14** The freepost leaflets that electors receive during a general election campaign are usually only a small part of the literature received from political parties; in most areas party volunteers also deliver other material. Leafleting is an integral part of the campaigning process at a UK general election. Findings from a MORI post-election poll show that 89% of respondents recalled receiving at least one leaflet during the 2005 campaign.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> MORI post-election poll, conducted 5–10 May 2005.

**2.15** In terms of direct communication from political parties, the MORI survey indicates that by far the most common way electors found out about the general election was through leaflets or letters. Furthermore, research published by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust/New Politics Network showed that, on average, respondents to their survey received more than 11 contacts (of any description) from all parties, and that the vast majority of such contacts, more than 96%, were through leaflets and letters.<sup>10</sup>

**2.16** The MORI research found that people were slightly more likely to report having received a leaflet from the Conservative or Labour parties (71% recall leaflets from one or both of those parties) than the Liberal Democrats (65%). These figures mirror the experience of past general elections.

**2.17** Despite this, the Joseph Rowntree research indicates that the Liberal Democrats delivered the largest number of leaflets (in areas covered by its survey), followed by the Conservatives and then Labour. This may be due to the Liberal Democrats undertaking more 'multi-leafleting' (delivering different leaflets to the same addresses) than the other parties during the campaign. By contrast, the Labour Party made the greatest number of contacts by telephone, with the Liberal Democrats behind the Conservatives on this type of campaigning.

<sup>10</sup> Justin Fisher, *General Election 2005: A Voter's Eye View* (Joseph Rowntree Trust/New Politics Network, 2005).

**2.18** The same analysis demonstrated that, for this type of campaigning, there was generally more positive than negative campaigning by the main political parties, although the latter was more prevalent in marginal seats.<sup>11</sup> The research found that Conservative leaflets were seen as being the least positive and Labour's the most positive. Personal attacks were also far more widespread in literature delivered in the more marginal seats. The degree of local content in party leaflets also increased as contests became closer.

**2.19** In terms of the issues reflected in the leaflets, the Joseph Rowntree research found that immigration and asylum was mentioned by all three of the main parties. It featured most often in Conservative leaflets and least often in Liberal Democrat material. Conservative coverage of the issue was far more likely to be negative than positive. However, it featured in fewer Conservative leaflets than many other policy issues, coverage was not universally negative, and it did not vary by seat marginality.

**2.20** The research found that Europe hardly featured as an issue in Labour and Liberal Democrat literature. Conservative leaflets featured the issue far less often than certain other election issues, but where it did feature, the tone was nearly always negative. Such negative coverage occurred more often in marginal than non-marginal seats.

<sup>11</sup> Political party leaflets were coded according to mentions of various policy issues, personal attacks and significant amounts of content related to the constituency itself. Two particular policy domains (immigration and asylum, and the European Union) were further categorised in terms of whether the general message was being presented as positive and/or negative.

**2.21** The research also highlighted some national and regional variations in the parties' leaflets. For example, negative Conservative coverage of immigration featured less often in Scotland and the South West of England – the research contended that a possible reason (at least in the South West of England) could have been the need not to alienate wavering Liberal Democrat voters.

**2.22** According to the research, Labour's campaigning in England appeared to be 'least local' in the North East, South East and West Midlands regions. The research stated that the variation in the first two regions was easier to explain than in the third – the North East is a traditional area of strength for Labour and the South East an area of relative weakness, while the West Midlands is more 'marginal'. It was argued that in the North East and South East, where the electoral outcome was fairly predictable, there would have been less incentive for Labour to produce localised leaflets; this would not have been the case in the West Midlands.

### House-to-house canvassing and telephone calls

**2.23** House-to-house canvassing remains an important part of campaigning at general elections, but on the evidence of the last two contests, its importance may be diminishing. Findings from the British Election Study (BES) are useful in this analysis – only around one in five respondents (21%) said that a canvasser from a political party called at their home to talk to them during the 2005 general election campaign. This is similar to the figure (22%) from the 2001 election, where this type of campaigning was also relatively low in frequency in historical terms.



**2.24** Electors were also contacted during the election period via the telephone. This was done either in the conventional way, through a party representative telephoning directly, or through an automated call. A relatively recent phenomenon, automated calls allow a message from a senior and well-recognised figure to be communicated more widely than would be possible in person. Typically, a recorded voice comes through on an individual's telephone and asks them to give information, via their telephone keypad, about their voting intentions and the party which they support.

**2.25** Research undertaken by Dr Justin Fisher and others for the Commission found that Labour, in particular, made use of this method of contacting potential voters.<sup>12</sup> Even though it is generally acknowledged that automated calls are less effective than having a real person making the call, Labour estimated that during the general election campaign such calls produced a response rate 10 times greater than that achieved by direct mail. It was also estimated that automated calls were cheaper than those made in the traditional manner, and achieved a 'contact rate' (the proportion of those telephoned who responded) of around one-third.

**2.26** Other political parties also used automated telephone calls. The Conservative Party contacted potential voters in this way, although they subsequently believed the benefits of such calls to have been mixed. In Scotland, one of the more notable aspects of the SNP's campaign

was its use of an automated telephone call to voters from the actor Sir Sean Connery asking for support; the party claimed the message was generally well received. Plaid Cymru also used automated calls in Wales.

**2.27** The Information Commissioner wrote to the major political parties at the start of the 2005 general election campaign to advise them of the implications of relevant legislation about automated calling.<sup>13</sup> Following a number of complaints being made during the campaign period, including some media commentary, the Information Commissioner issued supplementary guidance. It appeared subsequently to the Information Commissioner that two parties had continued to act in breach of the PECR 2003 by making automated calls to voters and formal enforcement proceedings were initiated against those parties.<sup>14</sup>

**2.28** The total level of contact via either the telephone or house-to-house canvassing was relatively low in comparison to contact via leaflets. On average, just over 40% of respondents in the Joseph Rowntree research were contacted either by telephone or on the doorstep.

<sup>12</sup> Dr Justin Fisher et al., *General election 2005 campaign analysis*, undertaken for The Electoral Commission (August 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Data Protection Act 1998 and the Privacy and Electronic (EC Directive) Regulations (PECR) 2003.

<sup>14</sup> The Information Commissioner considered that calls made on behalf of political parties, designed to identify likely supporters who would then be approached, over the telephone or in person, in order to urge them to support the party in question, would constitute direct marketing calls for the purpose of the PECR 2003.

## Party manifestos

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**2.29** For all the parties, the launch of their party manifestos provides a key hook for their campaign coverage in the media, and increasing access to the internet has meant that the full documents are read by larger numbers of people. The statements within them are also widely quoted by the political parties and the media during general election campaigns, both proactively and defensively.

**2.30** The main party election manifestos were published as follows: Conservative (11 April), Labour (13 April), Liberal Democrat (14 April), SNP (15 April) and Plaid Cymru (16 April). At previous general elections, some parties had attempted to summarise their manifesto commitments in the form of 'pledge cards', or similar, for distribution directly to electors. This approach was not generally adopted at the 2005 campaign.

## Billboards

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**2.31** As in 2001, billboards again played a role in the 2005 general election campaign. While Labour placed some billboard advertisements in safe seats, in an attempt to mobilise traditional Labour voters, the marginality of the seat and the prominence of the billboard's position (for example, being in a 'travel-to-work' location) were the two main criteria in deciding on their placement for most parties.

**2.32** Like Labour, the Conservatives used billboard advertising in key seats and prominent locations. An interesting development was the party's use of 'virtual' billboards – their 'wipe the smile off his face' campaign (criticising the Prime

Minister) was only shown on a few billboards but an electronic version of the poster was sent to the media, which gave it extensive coverage. The same campaign theme was also used as part of an advertisement series shown in some cinemas in or near to target seats.

**2.33** The Liberal Democrats also used billboards. One of the most prominent instances was their 'top 10' poster, which featured Charles Kennedy giving 10 reasons to vote Liberal Democrat. The SNP and Plaid Cymru did not use fixed billboards, instead choosing to use mobile poster vans in target seats.

## National advertising

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**2.34** A notable shift between the 2001 and 2005 general elections was the Labour Party's use of national newspaper advertising. In 2001, when Labour was further ahead of its rivals in the polls than in 2005, national newspaper advertising was not integral to the campaign, nor would it have been particularly cost-effective.

**2.35** By contrast, the 2005 election was viewed as likely to be far closer. In this campaign Labour chose to advertise in national newspapers to put forward positive messages and to counter negative ones from other parties. The other two main parties also used national newspaper advertisements. The Conservatives particularly focused on the use of such advertisements at the weekends during the campaign period.

**2.36** The use of regional newspaper advertising was also a feature of the 2005 campaign, particularly in areas with a high proportion of marginal seats. Our research found a general perception among party strategists that as

regional newspapers (and national ones in Scotland and Wales) are more localised and ‘personal’ than UK-wide ones, they had value in getting local messages across to readers. Notably, the regional press was used for interviews with senior politicians, particularly during their visits to the relevant area.

### Party election broadcasts

**2.37** Alongside the provision of the freepost facility, the law also allows for parties with significant numbers of candidates to have free airtime on the main terrestrial television channels, again with a view to providing the electorate with information about each of the key challengers. Paid advertising by parties on television and radio is prohibited in the UK, so party election broadcasts (PEBs) provide a valuable opportunity for parties to have direct editorial control over the presentation of their policies in the mass media. Digital channels are not required to carry PEBs, but in 2005 (as at some previous general elections) Sky TV did so voluntarily on its news channel.

**2.38** The allocation of PEBs is determined by the broadcasting authorities (the BBC, S4C and Ofcom) through an allocation formula based on previous electoral support and on the numbers of candidates nominated to stand at the election. At the 2005 general election, the main parties in each of England, Scotland and Wales were entitled to either four or five PEBs each, either on a Great Britain-wide basis or on a national basis in Scotland and Wales. In addition, a number of smaller parties were also entitled to PEBs by standing candidates in one-sixth of the total number of seats in England, Scotland or Wales.

Broadcasting authorities are required to have regard to views expressed by The Electoral Commission on their policies for determining allocations of PEBs.

**2.39** Although part of general election campaigning for many years, it appears the importance placed on PEBs by the political parties may not be as high as it once was. The Conservative Party, for example, did not believe the use of such broadcasts to be a particularly effective campaign tool in engaging key voters in marginal constituencies during the general election campaign.<sup>15</sup>

**2.40** The MORI post-election research indicated that, Great Britain-wide, more people (70%) saw a party election broadcast in 2005 than in 2001 (58%) although historically the figure is still low. People were slightly more likely to have seen a Labour Party election broadcast (61%) than one by the Conservatives (58%) or the Liberal Democrats (53%).

### Tours and rallies

**2.41** Personal visits to constituencies by leading party figures were an important feature of the 2005 election. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of such tours were focused in or near key marginal seats; constituencies that were considered either safe or unlikely to be won were largely left off tour agendas. Tour routes were often designed to attempt to maximise the interest of the regional media, enabling parties to get their messages across without leading party figures having to visit every constituency.

<sup>15</sup> Dr Justin Fisher et al., *General election 2005 campaign analysis*, undertaken for The Electoral Commission (August 2005).

**2.42** One of the areas where there was some difference between the main parties was in the use of rallies. This was a campaign tactic the Liberal Democrats thought worthwhile in attracting the attention of the media – an example being a ‘sold out’ rally held in Cambridge which the party believed produced positive media attention. However, neither Labour nor the Conservatives saw as much value in holding rallies during the campaign. The Conservatives, for example, considered them poor value, being expensive to arrange for a perceived limited return.

**2.43** The SNP held one large rally at the start of the campaign, to launch its manifesto, but no others. Plaid Cymru held no major rallies although it did hold press conferences and public meetings.

### Press conferences

**2.44** All parties used press conferences to highlight their policies, although not to a great extent. Conscious of ‘the media focus on the two main parties during the inter-election period’,<sup>16</sup> the Liberal Democrats used various methods to try to get their campaign message across. One tactic the party believed to have been successful was its use of early morning press conferences, allowing Liberal Democrat issues to feature in morning media coverage before the other parties had the chance to divert attention elsewhere.

**2.45** Within Scotland, the SNP made positive use of the press conferences

held by senior party figures, in an attempt to divert the agenda away from the other parties, particularly Labour. The SNP points to six occasions where they were the first news item on BBC Scotland’s evening television news programme *Reporting Scotland*.

### Electronic campaigning and new technology

**2.46** The Commission and others have, over the past few years, commented on the potential of electronic campaigning (e-campaigning) and many believe that in future it will play an increasingly important role. However, the 2005 general election seems to have been another false dawn; electronic campaigning did not play an integral role in the national campaigns.

**2.47** Although the Conservatives provided what they considered to be a user-friendly website for voters, the party believed e-campaigning to be of only limited use in terms of getting through to key ‘floating’ voters. The Labour Party’s eCampaigns unit used emails and text messages to mobilise core voters across the country, not solely in the marginal seats, but again the party did not believe e-campaigning to have been particularly influential.

**2.48** The Liberal Democrats’ website was heavily promoted by party figures and using the number of ‘hits’ as a guide, the party thought the promotion of the website to have been relatively successful. In common with the other main parties, electronic campaigning in general was not perceived to have been particularly influential.

**2.49** Other forms of new technology were also used by both the Labour and Conservative

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

parties. For example, Labour sent DVDs to what were considered to be undecided voters in certain target seats. The tactic built on what the party had done at the 2001 election, when videos were sent to some voters.

**2.50** Labour's DVDs were tailored towards individual constituencies (for example showing the local MP or candidate) and included short pieces with local themes on election issues, such as the health service or education. The DVD also featured a message from the Prime Minister and a Labour Party election broadcast. A response card was included with each DVD, which asked for details about the extent to which it was viewed. In addition, follow-up telephone calls were made, where information about the extent of DVD viewing was gathered; many voters to whom the DVD was sent appear to have watched it all.

## The main party campaigns

**2.51** This section looks at the how the three main Great Britain-wide political parties, and the main nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, organised themselves for the general election campaign, and briefly covers the issues on which they campaigned. It also looks at how the parties tried to appeal to particular groups of electors.

### The Labour Party

**2.52** As Labour was the party of government going into the 2005 general election, the campaigning onus was on it to defend its record and inform voters as to how it would build on its perceived achievements if it were re-elected. The opinion polls at the start of the campaign pointed to a relatively close contest.

**2.53** Labour adopted a more targeted approach than in 2001. Based on the techniques outlined in the section above, and in common with all three main political parties, it concentrated its efforts on the key marginal seats that it believed would be crucial to the outcome of the election. Labour directed a significant proportion of its campaign towards around 100 of these seats.<sup>17</sup> Labour campaigned principally on three policy areas – the economy, health and education – and sought to target a number of key groups – those in low turnout areas, young people, women and families, and Muslims.

**2.54** One of Labour's key strategies was to try to translate its key national messages, on issues such as economic stability and the delivery of public services, into a local context. What the party believed had been achieved locally was promoted to local voters, particularly in the key marginal seats; as we have seen in the preceding section, Labour got its messages across in a number of different ways. As in 2001, they made use of private polling and focus groups in target seats to attempt to pick up shifts in support.

**2.55** In effect, Labour nationally managed a series of local campaigns, particularly in the case of the marginal seats. The Labour campaign was coordinated from its main offices in London while local management came from 80 regional organisers, employed by the national organisation, regional parties and local constituencies.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



## The Conservative Party

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**2.56** In line with the other main parties, the Conservative Party concentrated its efforts on what were perceived to be key seats. Faced with overturning a majority of 167, the party identified 180 target seats, the vast majority of which it was trying to win (mostly from Labour), though it was also attempting to retain 16 of the seats. The party focused on five key issues: crime, tax, immigration, healthcare and clean hospitals, and school discipline. The party made efforts to build contacts with two key groups – ethnic minorities and pensioners. First-time voters were also targeted significantly more than they were by the other two main parties.<sup>18</sup>

**2.57** The way Conservative policies were presented took account of polling and focus group data, which the party used to a greater extent than in previous general elections. Daily tracking polls were undertaken among key voters in target seats, while focus groups were used to ascertain how messages were being received.

**2.58** Conservative Central Office coordinated the campaign from its London headquarters with assistance from the party's Target Seats Unit. This unit (based near Birmingham), together with more than 40 Area Campaign Directors, enabled the central party organisation to manage the local constituency campaigns more effectively than at previous general elections.

## The Liberal Democrats

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**2.59** The Liberal Democrats identified around 35 target seats, concentrating not just on those that

were marginal at the 2001 general election, but also on some in areas where the party had achieved promising local government results. The party also campaigned strongly in 20–25 seats that it was defending. The party campaigned at a national level on five principal areas – the abolition of student tuition fees, free personal health care for the elderly, scrapping the council tax, opposition to the Iraq war, and the environment. It tried in particular to engage and mobilise students and ethnic minorities, especially Muslims.<sup>19</sup>

**2.60** A key difference between the Liberal Democrats' campaign and that of the other two main parties was in the relative devolution of central control. Although there was some central management of local campaigns, particularly in respect of the target seats, the party's view was that campaign activities should primarily be undertaken at the local level, without large-scale central supervision.

**2.61** It is also important to take account of the relative strength of party finances during the general election campaign, as this almost certainly had an important bearing on the level of centralised campaigning. Although the Liberal Democrats 'went into the election with more funds than ever before',<sup>20</sup> the party still had considerably fewer resources than either the Labour or Conservative parties. In relative terms, assistance from the centre to local constituency parties was therefore somewhat constrained, making it incumbent upon local constituency parties to do much of the campaigning work without a high level of central support.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

### The Scottish National Party

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**2.62** The central, all-encompassing campaign message of the SNP was that it is Scotland's party. This underpinned three more specific messages – that the SNP stands up for Scotland, favours Scottish independence and that, despite devolution, voting SNP would be a positive protest against the treatment of Scotland, and against the Iraq war, particularly the Government's position on the issue.<sup>21</sup> In targeting voter groups, the party believed that it was unlikely to attract many new voters at the UK Parliamentary level, so it concentrated mainly on its core support.

**2.63** Although it did not use focus group research, the SNP did conduct its own private polling on voting intentions. This proved useful to the party, particularly when it was able to counter other polls which showed the party's likely support in a poor light. The SNP relied heavily on traditional campaigning methods such as leafleting and house-to-house canvassing during the election campaign, but also used many of the modern techniques favoured by the three largest (Great Britain-wide) parties.

**2.64** Our research found that the party's campaign was mostly run locally in each Scottish constituency. Although the central party organisation did offer advice and material such as leaflet templates, local party workers were generally left to run the campaign in their areas. Visits to constituencies, particularly those viewed as key targets, were made by senior party figures, usually at the request of the local party.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

### Plaid Cymru

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**2.65** Plaid Cymru campaigned under the general banner that it was the party looking after the interests of the people of Wales and seeking to build a better Wales. A series of messages was promoted: a proper Parliament in Wales to deliver better public services, fair taxation and funding; affordable homes in safer communities, and action to promote a sustainable countryside.<sup>22</sup> At a Wales-wide level, no particular groups were targeted but in the party's target constituencies, Welsh language speakers and ethnic minorities were a focus for local campaigns.

**2.66** As Chapter 3 on the media coverage of the campaigns explains, a particular problem for Plaid Cymru is that the majority of news consumed in Wales comes from media based in London, with a UK-wide focus. Partly because of this, the party did not place advertisements in the leading newspapers in Wales, but it did use local press in the party's target seats.

**2.67** Plaid Cymru, in common with other political parties, concentrated its efforts in key seats. The national (Wales-wide) and constituency campaigns were largely one and the same, focused on these target seats. This was also where the leader and party president concentrated their tours. The party did not carry out its own polling, although there was some limited focus group research prior to the election period.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

## Other party campaigns

**2.68** As stated in paragraph 2.4, with the exception of the three seats of Blaenau Gwent, Bethnal Green & Bow and Wyre Forest, all seats in Great Britain were won by one of the three main Great Britain-wide parties, or by nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales. However, a number of smaller parties and independent candidates stood at the general election, either across the country or in certain seats. This section briefly looks at the smaller parties – independent candidates are considered in the subsequent section.

**2.69** Table 1, below, gives further details of how smaller parties fared at the general election. Votes for the two smaller parties which won seats, the Respect Coalition and Independent Kidderminster Hospital & Health Concern, are included in the ‘all other smaller parties’ row. Despite their general lack of electoral success in terms of seats won, smaller parties gained almost 1.4 million votes in total.

**2.70** Given the relatively small resource base of most, if not all, of the smaller parties, it is not surprising that in general they relied very much upon traditional campaign methods such as leafleting and house-to-house canvassing. There are some exceptions to this – for example, eight smaller parties qualified for party election broadcasts – but overall a lack of resources meant the smaller parties were generally unable to employ more modern techniques such as voter identification software, automated telephone calls, focus group research and private polling.

**2.71** During the general election campaign, the UK media generally tends to concentrate on the larger parties, making it difficult for smaller parties to compete for attention. The results in Bethnal Green & Bow and Wyre Forest show that although it is difficult, it is not an impossible task to take on and beat the established parties.

**Table 1: Votes cast for smaller parties at the 2005 general election**

	Votes cast	Seats won
UK Independence Party (UKIP)	605,973	0
Green Party*	283,414	0
British National Party	192,745	0
All other smaller parties	316,974	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,399,106**</b>	<b>2</b>

Notes: Figures are for Great Britain only, i.e. excluding Northern Ireland.

\* For the purposes of this report, references to the Green Party include both the Green Party (England & Wales) and the Scottish Green Party.

\*\* This total excludes votes cast for independent candidates and for the Speaker.

Source: Professors Thrasher and Rallings, University of Plymouth Elections Centre.

**2.72** However, there were particular local circumstances behind those results at the 2005 election. In Wyre Forest, Richard Taylor, sitting MP for Independent Kidderminster Hospital & Health Concern, retained the seat he had won in 2001; the main local campaign issue was reflected in the name of the party. In Bethnal Green & Bow, a high-profile campaign by George Galloway of the Respect Coalition, who campaigned strongly on an anti-Iraq war platform, saw him win the seat from Labour.

### Independent candidate campaigns

**2.73** The success of high-profile independent candidates such as Martin Bell in Tatton, in the

1997 general election, does not mask the difficulties faced by those who stand for election unaffiliated to any political party. Independents are almost always up against well-organised political parties whose policies are better known, and which have more resources available and at least some degree of central support. Indeed, as shown in Table 2, below, statistics from the last two general elections show how poorly independent candidates have fared, the only successful candidate in that time being Peter Law in Blaenau Gwent. All but 10 of those who stood as independent candidates at the 2005 general election in Great Britain lost their deposits.

**Table 2: Independent candidates at the 2001 and 2005 general elections**

	General election 2001	General election 2005
England		
Candidates	101	151
Votes cast	76,348	76,152
Elected candidates	0	0
Wales		
Candidates	7	12
Votes cast	5,720	28,888
Elected candidates	0	1
Scotland		
Candidates	8	12
Votes cast	3,605	4,417
Elected candidates	0	0

Source: Professors Thrasher and Rallings, University of Plymouth Elections Centre.

**2.74** The result in Blaenau Gwent at the 2005 general election was the product of unusual circumstances. Mr Law was (and, on the date of publication of this report, is) Blaenau Gwent's member for the National Assembly for Wales constituency, and represented the Labour Party until just before the general election. However, he stood against Labour's official candidate at the general election in protest at the fact that the candidate had been selected from an all-woman shortlist. Mr Law was expelled from the Labour Party and won the general election seat as an independent.

### Third party campaigns

**2.75** The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) established the category of 'third party' at an election. In this context, a third party is a body or person that campaigns on behalf of one or more registered political parties or a particular category of candidates, for example, those that hold or advocate a particular policy or opinion. PERA restricts the amount that a third party can spend on campaigning for the electoral success of registered parties or candidates.<sup>23</sup> Twenty-six third parties were registered by the Commission to take part at the 2005 general election, as shown opposite.

- Alliance – Alliance Party of Northern Ireland
- Amicus
- British Declaration Of Independence [The]
- Campaign for an Independent Britain
- Community
- Conservative Rural Action Group
- Evershed Patrick Mr
- G.M.B.
- Gilpin Zaccheus Mr
- Howard's End Ltd
- League Against Cruel Sports Ltd
- Musicians' Union
- Muslim Friends Of Labour
- National Autistic Society [The]
- Searchlight Information Services Ltd
- Society for the Protection of Unborn Children
- TMVO Ltd
- Transport and General Workers' Union
- Transport Salaried Staffs' Association
- Uncaged Campaigns Ltd
- Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW)
- UNISON – The Public Service Union
- Unite Against Fascism
- Vote-OK
- Waging Peace
- Working Hound Defence Campaign

<sup>23</sup> PERA, Section 85. The Commission will be reporting in detail on campaign expenditure in a further report (*Election 2005: campaign spending*), due to be published in spring 2006. The expenditure of third parties will be included in that report.



### Box 1: Case study of a third party – Vote-OK

Vote-OK was formed in January 2005. It sought to assist the campaigns of candidates who:

- sought a reversal of the ban on hunting;
- were in a relatively close second place to an incumbent MP who had voted for the ban; and
- were keen to accept assistance.

The organisation was primarily interested in working at local level, with activities such as writing letters and articles for publication in local press.

Vote-OK was an innovative and somewhat unusual single-issue campaigning group as it did not directly campaign on the issue but instead offered resources, particularly volunteers to help with conventional campaigning, to candidates who supported its position and had a reasonable chance of winning the seat. More than a hundred candidates took up the offer. Research concluded that the activity and role of Vote-OK could represent something of a new departure in modern British general election campaigning.<sup>24</sup>

### How effective were the campaigns?

**2.76** This section looks at the effectiveness of the campaigns at the general election. It considers the impact of party funding on campaigning activities, examines the public

<sup>24</sup> Dr Justin Fisher et al., *General election 2005 campaign analysis*, undertaken for The Electoral Commission (August 2005).

perception of the campaigns and briefly looks at what the parties themselves thought was successful.

### The funding of political parties

**2.77** The impact and effectiveness of the campaigns of the political parties depend to some extent on the resources, including financial resources, they have available to promote their policies at elections, and more generally between election periods. Political parties have a variety of ways of raising financial support, including subscriptions and donations from supporters.

**2.78** Income is also available to some parties via policy development grants administered by The Electoral Commission, in accordance with Section 12 of PPERA. The current scheme allows the Commission to allocate up to £2 million each year between certain registered political parties, to assist with the costs of developing policies to be included in manifestos for elections.<sup>25</sup>

**2.79** We believe the policy development grant scheme to have been of positive benefit, particularly to the smaller parties who are least able to devote funds to campaigning and other activities. As such, we have recommended to the Government that the scheme should be

<sup>25</sup> To be eligible to receive a grant, a political party must have at least two sitting MPs in the House of Commons on the 7 March prior to the year of their application, who have sworn the oath of allegiance provided by the Parliamentary Oaths Act 1866. The annual allocation is divided between the eligible parties according to an allocation formula set out in the scheme.

expanded to make it easier for smaller parties to receive funding, and to increase the total 'pot' available to £3 million.<sup>26</sup> At the date of publication of this report, the Government is yet publicly to respond to our proposals.

**2.80** The constraints on resources obviously need to be taken into account when considering the effectiveness of the campaigns. Political parties have a vital role to play in our democratic system and cannot carry out that role unless they are adequately funded. As well as generating sufficient income to fight election campaigns, parties must ensure that they have the necessary resources to fund their activities **between** elections; we believe this is a key element in trying to engage people in politics.

### Views of the parties on the 2005 campaign

**2.81** Part of the campaign analysis research conducted by Dr Justin Fisher and others – qualitative interviews with party campaign officials – offers an insight on how the parties viewed the campaigns, although the findings should be regarded as largely impressionistic.<sup>27</sup> The research concentrated on which campaign techniques were considered effective, rather than how engaged the public was overall by the party campaigns.

**2.82** The Conservative Party viewed billboard advertisements and direct mailings to key

<sup>26</sup> The Commission conducted a review of the funding of political parties and published recommendations in *The funding of political parties* (December 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Dr Justin Fisher et al., *General election 2005 campaign analysis*, undertaken for The Electoral Commission (August 2005).

voters in target seats as two particularly important campaign techniques, while they regarded party election broadcasts as the least effective. Labour, in addition to highlighting direct mailings, were of the view that automated telephone calls and the sending of DVDs to key voters were particularly useful campaign tools.

**2.83** Plaid Cymru stated that voter identification was its most useful campaign technique – particularly as it helped the party create a national voter database for the first time – while the SNP found automated calls to be particularly useful. The Liberal Democrats did not offer a view on their most effective campaign technique.

### Views of the electorate on the 2005 campaign

**2.84** The Electoral Commission asked Cragg Ross Dawson to undertake qualitative research examining public opinion and perceptions of the general election, including the campaigns. The main findings of the research paint a fairly negative picture: '... with very few exceptions, respondents said they felt uninspired by the state of politics in 2005, by the election campaign itself and by the choice presented to them on 5 May.'<sup>28</sup>

**2.85** On the measure of overall voter turnout at the election (61.4%) it could be argued that the party campaigns were more effective than in 2001, but the figure remains relatively low in historical terms. A lack of voter engagement with the party campaigns is only one of many reasons for this.

<sup>28</sup> Cragg Ross Dawson, *Uninspired to vote*, qualitative public opinion research on the 2005 general election undertaken for The Electoral Commission (2005).

**2.86** The theme of turnout at the election is explored more fully in our report *Election 2005: turnout* (October 2005) but it is worth briefly reiterating some of the points relating to the party campaigns. The campaign, particularly at local level, was seen as ‘lacklustre’ by most respondents in the qualitative research, especially those outside marginal constituencies. For many, ‘the local campaign had consisted of a handful of leaflets through the door and a few billboards’.<sup>29</sup>

**2.87** The research found that media speculation about the date of the election (i.e. most commentators had correctly predicted 5 May as the likely election date for some time) appeared to have contributed to the lack of excitement by blurring the boundaries of the campaign period. There was little sense of a ‘campaign launch’ and many felt that by the time the election was officially called, the campaign had effectively been underway for some time.

**2.88** The research further found that a factor which may have discouraged voting was the relative stability of Labour’s period in office, particularly in economic terms. A commonly held view was that the Government had neither triumphed nor foundered. Many felt disappointed that Labour had not achieved more and were unhappy about specific issues such as the Iraq war and the NHS, so did not feel strongly inclined to cast a vote in the party’s favour; at the same time, there was no sense of immediate crisis which might have inspired a vote for another party.

**2.89** Another important factor identified in the research was the perceived similarity between the two parties (Labour and Conservative) that most respondents thought capable of winning the election. At a broad level, the perception of Labour as a party of the left and the Conservatives as a party of the right was weak, particularly among young voters who did not remember a time when this ideological division was strongly felt. Older voters recognised this historical difference between the two parties but felt that it had steadily declined over the last two decades.

**2.90** Respondents also stated that they found it difficult to choose between Labour and the Conservatives on the basis of their policies. The research contended that many issues respondents felt most strongly about (for example, immigration and anti-social behaviour) were not the issues that have traditionally formed the basis of the differences between the political parties. The research therefore argued that respondents found it difficult to decide who to vote for, as they did not think either of the two largest parties was able or inclined to address the problems that concerned them most.

**2.91** A further difficulty faced by the parties and others in engaging the electorate at the 2005 general election was the perception that voting would make no difference to the result; most respondents appeared to have viewed the result – a Labour victory – as a foregone conclusion. Many felt that they would have liked to vote for another party (usually the Liberal Democrats or Greens) but saw no point

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29 Ibid.

because their preferred party was unlikely to form a government. As a result, several said they had not bothered to vote at all, or had voted but considered their vote wasted.

**2.92** At a local level, a minority of respondents felt further discouraged from voting by the degree of marginality in their constituency. Some of those who lived in reasonably safe seats saw little point in voting against the incumbent MP, and a few felt resentful that the election campaign focused so heavily on the marginal seats.

**2.93** In Scotland, the research found that some people felt less engaged by UK general elections since the creation of the Scottish Parliament, which they considered their true representative body. A few thought devolution had confused the electoral situation; they were no longer certain which aspects of political life were governed by the Scottish Parliament and which by the UK Parliament, and were not sure how their vote in the general election would affect life in Scotland.

**2.94** Despite the findings of the Cragg Ross Dawson research, the public's view of the information given out by parties during the campaign period throughout Great Britain does not appear to be viewed as negatively as 'the campaign' more generally. In research from the 2005 BES, for example, more than two-fifths of respondents (42%) either agreed, or strongly agreed, that the election campaign gave them enough information to make a good choice between the parties.<sup>30</sup>

**2.95** From the analysis above, it seems that the type and nature of campaigning by the political parties was in itself not a principal factor in whether or not people voted. As our report *Election 2005: turnout* (October 2005) discusses in detail, political circumstances were key determinants of non-voting, especially the perceived one-sided nature of the contest and the perceived closeness of the parties in policy terms.

**2.96** As the section above on the main party campaigns indicates, this is not the full picture – in marginal seats there was a considerable amount of campaigning by the parties which resulted in generally higher levels of turnout. It is not so much how the parties campaign as where they campaign that seems to be more important.

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<sup>30</sup> The BES is a public opinion survey on each general election. It is currently managed by Essex University, and has been running since 1964.

# 3 Media coverage of the campaigns

The media has a multifaceted role in any election. It provides a key source of information for the public, and securing attention in the media is central to political party campaigning. Consequently, in considering questions of voter engagement and participation, the role of the media cannot be ignored.

## The importance of the media

**3.1** The role of the media in UK general elections is crucial since the public get most of their information about politics and elections from the different media sources. Research carried out by ICM on behalf of Ofcom in June 2005 found that around nine in ten people (89%) used television as their main source of information on political issues during the 2005 general election campaign, a figure similar to that recorded at the past two elections.<sup>31</sup>

**3.2** In addition, the ICM research indicated that around half the public (54%) read their local newspaper as a source of information on political issues during the election; 50% listened to the radio to access information on political issues during the campaign (compared to 39% in 2001). Table 3, overleaf, shows the different sources from which the public accessed information on political issues during the 2001 and 2005 general elections campaigns.

**3.3** The Commission's analysis of the impact of the media is based on independent research on the role of the media in the general election. We commissioned a team of academics at Loughborough University's Communications Research Centre (LCRC) to analyse election campaign-related coverage across a diverse range of news sources, including national and regional television, radio and press.

**3.4** The analysis indicated that in the early stages of the campaign (early April 2005), coverage of the election was down compared to the same period in the 2001 contest. The

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31 ICM, post-election research for Ofcom (June 2005).

**Table 3: Public sources of information on political issues during the 2001 and 2005 general election campaigns**

	General election 2001*	General election 2005**
Watched election coverage on television	89	89
Received any political leaflets through the letter box	69	89†
Read any of the newspaper election coverage‡	74	–
Read local newspapers‡	–	54
Read broadsheet/tabloid newspapers‡	–	43/43
Heard any election coverage on the radio	39	50‡‡
Used the internet to access information on candidates or parties	2	7†

Notes: \* Figures in this column from the MORI pre-general election survey, June 2001.

\*\* Figures in this column from the ICM post-election research for Ofcom, June 2005, except where stated.

† MORI post-election poll, conducted 5–10 May 2005.

‡ Figures within the categories on newspapers should be treated with caution due to differences in sample sizes and slight variations in questions between the MORI and ICM surveys.

‡‡ Respondents were asked whether the radio had been a source of information.

LCRC suggested that we may be seeing the emergence of a 'more pragmatic, news value-based approach to electoral reporting... in which the campaign [of the political parties] must compete for prominence [with other news items] rather than command it as of right'.

### The extent and nature of national media coverage of the campaign

**3.5** As at past general elections, the media made significant investments of time and money, and ensured substantial coverage. However, LCRC's analysis suggests that media coverage of the election was less extensive in 2005 than it was in 2001. In early April 2005, the election received less than half the amount of coverage than at the same stage of the 2001

campaign, while broadcasters devoted 10% less airtime to the election during their main evening bulletins. Furthermore, there was a notable lack of tabloid newspaper coverage of the election during the four weeks of the official campaign, with 87% of tabloid front covers not mentioning the election at all.

**3.6** The low level of election coverage in the first week of the campaign is likely, at least in part, to be due to other significant news events that displaced news of the election, such as events around the Pope's funeral. LCRC contends that this 'displacement effect' could 'signal a growing disengagement with [politics] among certain sections of the national media'. Comparisons over time (using LCRC data) reveal



an election-by-election decrease in the extent of coverage by the BBC's news and current affairs programmes between 1992 and 2005.

**3.7** LCRC argues that the media's approach was 'motivated by a number of factors, but none more so than a perception, reinforced by the fall in turnout in 2001... that a significant minority of their audience was not particularly interested in the election'.<sup>32</sup>

### Agenda balance in the UK media: policy versus process

**3.8** Overall, the news agenda of the UK media was restricted to a limited range of topics at the 2005 general election, as shown in Table 4, overleaf. The most prominent news theme covered was the electoral process – that is, the party campaigns and activities.

**3.9** Forty-four percent of all media election coverage was about electoral process, with nearly half this category accounted for by the media discussing the parties' campaigning strategies. The so-called electoral 'bread and butter' issues (taxation, education, crime, the economy, the NHS and social security) commanded far less electoral coverage, obtaining a combined total of just 22%.

**3.10** As observed at other recent elections, process was more prevalent in the media agenda than policy during the 2005 campaign. For example, the majority of items contained

either no detailed information related to political parties' policies, or a negligible amount.

**3.11** However, the research also found that the broadcast media produced a higher proportion (37%) than the press of news items containing at least some description of the parties' policies. There were no major differences between the UK press sectors in the extent of their policy reporting – 24% of 'upmarket' press news items contained a degree of such information, while the figures for the 'midmarket' and 'populist' press were 23% and 22% respectively.

**3.12** In all UK-wide media sectors, the most common set of issues in the 'political impropriety' category related to the personal integrity and trustworthiness of candidates. The Prime Minister was the dominant focus of this debate, particularly in the midmarket press. Some sections of the press also commented on the integrity of postal voting arrangements, with particular interest from *The Times*, although coverage of this issue accounted for only a small proportion of all election coverage.

**3.13** In our report on the 2001 general election we highlighted research that demonstrated the public's appetite for greater information about policies and candidates, and less about 'political gossip' and campaign tactics. The media's emphasis on process in its coverage does not appear to have changed at the 2005 election. The media's coverage of electoral process (44% of all coverage)<sup>33</sup> was subdivided as shown in Table 5, overleaf.

<sup>32</sup> David Deacon et al (LCRC), 'More megaphone than dog whistle: the mainstream UK media and the 2005 General Election', paper given at EPOP conference (September 2005).

Table 4: Top four themes in UK media coverage, by media sector

Ranking	All media	Coverage (%)	UK broadcast	Coverage (%)
1	Electoral process	44	Electoral process	42
2	Political impropriety	8	Iraq	10
3	Iraq	8	Asylum/immigration	8
4	Asylum/immigration	7	Political impropriety	8

Notes: \* Upmarket press: *Guardian, Observer, Independent, Independent on Sunday, Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Times, Sunday Times, Financial Times.*

\*\* Midmarket press: *Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday, Daily Express, Sunday Express.*

† Populist press: *Sun, News of the World, Daily Mirror, Sunday Mirror, People, Star, Sunday Star.*

Source: David Deacon et al. (LCRC), *Reporting the 2005 UK General election (2005).*

**3.14** Evidence from academic Dr Margaret Scammell of the London School of Economics, quoted in the Commission's report on the 2001 general election, suggested that the media, particularly the broadsheet newspapers, initiated more political analysis – as distinct from general reporting of political events – in 2001 than at either the 1997 or 1992 general elections. This was also evident in 2005, with 'truth watch' initiatives (for example, ITN's *Unspun* programme) and comparisons of party claims featuring in the national press and on media websites.

Table 5: Sub-themes within the 'electoral process' category (UK-wide media)

Sub-theme	(%)
Discussion of campaigning strategies	19
Opinion polls, focus groups	8
Passing references to the chosen daily topic agendas of political parties	3
Political tensions and infighting within parties, defections	2
Party spin/PR/news management	2
All other themes in this category	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>

Source: David Deacon et al. (LCRC), *Reporting the 2005 UK General election (2005).*

### 'Stop watch' balance: coverage of political parties

**3.15** LCRC argue there was evidence of a 'two party squeeze' in UK-wide press coverage of the general election, which marginalised the Liberal Democrats and smaller political parties.

33 LCRC defines coverage of the electoral process as 'the actions, strategies and prospects of the participants'. The sub-theme total of 44% is equal to the percentage coverage of process by the media, as indicated in Table 4, above.

Upmarket press*	Coverage (%)	Midmarket press**	Coverage (%)	Populist press†	Coverage (%)
Electoral process	49	Electoral process	28	Electoral process	46
Iraq	8	Political impropriety	17	Political impropriety	6
Political impropriety	7	Iraq	10	NHS	6
Asylum/immigration	6	Asylum/immigration	9	Crime	6

For example, in the upmarket press, 15% of all articles or items featured Mr Blair, 10% Mr Howard and 6% Mr Kennedy, while in UK-wide broadcast coverage, Mr Howard featured in 13% of items, Mr Blair in 12% and Mr Kennedy in 9%. Coverage of all Labour (51%) and Conservative (31%) politicians in the upmarket press exceeded coverage of all Liberal Democrat politicians (16%).

**3.16** It appears that, across Great Britain, media coverage of general elections remains distinctly ‘presidential’; a substantial proportion of coverage is devoted to the main party leaders to the exclusion of other politicians. The leaders of the three main political parties accounted for more than one-third of all politicians identified in coverage. In the populist newspapers, Mr Blair, Mr Howard and Mr Kennedy accounted for 60% of the space given to direct quotation by politicians.

**3.17** According to LCRC’s analysis, there was a slight increase in speaking time (quotation

time) for party political leaders during this election campaign compared to the 2001 campaign. In overall broadcast coverage, the Liberal Democrats commanded 22% of total quotation time, the Conservatives 32% and Labour 38%; the three main parties accounted for 92% of all quotation coverage. Coverage of the smaller political parties and independents was therefore very limited.

**3.18** Experts in both the USA and the UK have often commented on the surfacing of a ‘sound-bite culture’ in mainstream politics.<sup>34</sup> It seems that, in relative terms, there was a move towards slightly longer sound-bites at the 2005 general election, which would be a reversal of the trend since 1992 of an election-on-election compression in the average speaking time given to politicians on national news programmes.

<sup>34</sup> According to LCRC, the term ‘sound-bite’ originally emerged in the 1980s to describe ‘how politicians, adapting to the logic of media formats, have sought to organise their public communication around brief, pithy and memorable phrases’.

It is unclear whether this is a temporary shift, or a longer-term trend. The Commission will review developments in future elections.

## Great Britain-wide and national balance: election coverage in Scotland and Wales

**3.19** The three main parties dominated the Great Britain-wide media agenda during the 2005 general election campaign, but there was a different dimension in Scotland and Wales, with the SNP and Plaid Cymru respectively gaining coverage. In the Scottish media, the Labour Party's political actors accounted for 40% of all appearances in election coverage, the Conservatives' 25%, the Liberal Democrats' 19% and the SNP's 10%.<sup>35</sup>

**3.20** In the Welsh media, the picture was similar with the Labour Party's political actors accounting for 34% of all media appearances, the Conservatives' 25%, the Liberal Democrats' 19% and Plaid Cymru's 14%. In a report on the National Assembly for Wales elections in 2003, the Wales Media Forum at Cardiff University commented that over 85% of newspapers bought in Wales are produced elsewhere, mostly in England. This helps to explain, at least in part, why it is sometimes difficult for Plaid Cymru politicians to obtain media coverage.

**3.21** Perhaps unsurprisingly, the leaders of the three main parties attracted less coverage in the Welsh and Scottish media than they did

<sup>35</sup> In its analysis, LCRC defined a party political actor as an 'individual [within a party] or institution whose actions or existence were directly mentioned in a news item'.

Great Britain-wide. As would be expected, the leaders of Plaid Cymru and the SNP gained considerably more prominence in the Welsh and Scottish media respectively than they did throughout Great Britain as a whole.

**3.22** Overall, the themes covered by the media in Scotland and Wales were broadly similar to those covered Great Britain-wide. As might be expected, constitutional issues attracted slightly greater levels of attention in the Welsh and Scottish media than they did across Great Britain as a whole.

**3.23** However, despite the fact that the Scottish Parliament, not the UK Parliament, now has primacy over issues such as the NHS in Scotland, coverage of issues in the Scottish media did not vary greatly from the Great Britain-wide coverage. Furthermore, the revised Parliamentary boundaries that came into effect in Scotland at the general election barely featured in Scottish media coverage.

## Gender balance and representation in media coverage

**3.24** LCRC argues that the 'gender gap' in representation of male and female politicians in the media was as significant in 2005 as in 2001 and at earlier general elections. Male politicians appeared in coverage 10 times as frequently as their female counterparts (91% compared to just 9%). Notably, as LCRC states, 'this differential considerably exceeds broader inequalities in the British parliamentary system'.

**3.25** Women were also severely under-represented in media coverage in Scotland and Wales. In Wales, women accounted for only one in five of the political actors, although this is better than the figure for Great Britain as a whole. In Scotland, the ratio (87% male to 13% female) was only marginally better than the Great Britain-wide average.

**3.26** This ‘gender gap’ in media coverage is of considerable importance. It has been argued that the imbalance in reporting could be ‘entrenching, or even increasing, broader [gender] inequalities in participation and representation’.<sup>36</sup> When women were represented in media coverage of the 2005 general election, it was more often as family members of male politicians, rather than as politicians in their own right.

**3.27** Political parties were said to be actively trying to target women voters in their campaigns during the 2005 election. However, LCRC’s analysis concludes that this was not evident from any substantial media reporting of the election in women’s weekly magazines, or among other publications that are specifically aimed at a female audience.<sup>37</sup>

**3.28** LCRC looked at a sample of the most popular women’s magazines, to assess the extent and nature, if any, of the sector’s coverage

36 This view was also reflected in The Electoral Commission’s report *Gender and political participation* (2004) which drew on research by Rosie Campbell and Joni Lovenduski (Birkbeck College, University of London) and Pippa Norris (Harvard University).

37 David Deacon et al (LCRC), *Reporting the 2005 UK General election* (2005).

of the 2005 general election.<sup>38</sup> The analysis found that the majority of women’s titles (12 of the 19 sampled) featured no advertisement, photograph, story, or even any reference to the general election, or any of the people (men or women) involved in it.

## Public perception of media coverage of the campaign

**3.29** This section explores the public’s impression of the role and quality of the media’s coverage of the 2005 election campaign. We commissioned Cragg Ross Dawson to run focus groups to explore why people did or did not vote at the election, and, additionally, what they thought of the media coverage.

**3.30** The research findings indicate that most people seem to feel, whatever their political leanings, that the media has an obligation to report the policies and activities of the various parties in an informative and relatively impartial fashion. However, it also found a degree of scepticism as to whether the media fulfilled this role at the 2005 general election campaign.

**3.31** According to the British Election Study (BES) 2005, public opinion seems divided as to whether the media plays a useful role in informing the public about political issues. Although 29% agreed that ‘the media coverage of the election campaign made it difficult to learn what the parties stood for,’ 30% disagreed with this statement while 26% neither agreed nor disagreed.

38 The complete analysis by David Deacon and Dominic Wring can be found in LCRC’s report, and can be downloaded from The Electoral Commission’s website.



**3.32** As has been found in earlier research for the Commission, the BES survey suggests that when people feel informed about political issues, or they seek to inform themselves via the media, they are more likely to vote. Of people who said they read a newspaper everyday, nearly three-quarters (72%) said that they would be very likely to vote in the general election.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, of those people who said they only sometimes read a newspaper, or never did, only 56% said that they would be very likely to vote.

**3.33** Exposure to the media also has significant potential to help engage the public in politics more generally. For example, the BES survey indicated that, of those who said they read a daily newspaper every day, 55% said they were very interested in the election. Of those who said they sometimes or never read a daily newspaper, only 37% said they were very interested in the election. However, as the Wales Media Forum at Cardiff University noted, ‘the “chicken and egg” question of whether voters are more likely to consume election news, or whether election news makes people more likely to vote, is difficult to determine’.<sup>40</sup>

**3.34** The role of television in both informing and engaging electors during an election campaign is particularly important. In our statutory report on the 2001 general election, we stated that there would be benefit in discussing with

broadcasters and the three main parties whether more could be done in future to use television as a medium to engage voters and encourage turnout.

**3.35** BBC One’s *Question Time*, broadcast at 8.30pm on 28 April 2005, interviewed the three main party leaders in turn in an election special. According to the BBC’s audience figures, the interviews attracted 4.1 million viewers. Nearly three-quarters of viewers (73%) felt that it helped them to understand the parties’ policies better.<sup>41</sup>

**3.36** The media has long argued for a ‘leaders debate’ during election campaigns, televised nationally, as happens in the USA presidential election. However, there has traditionally been some reluctance from the parties, especially from the governing party of the day, to agree to this. Moreover, the logistics of determining which party leaders should take part creates some problems. In 2005 a compromise solution was developed – the *Question Time* format, and interviews of the party leaders on successive evenings by Jeremy Paxman, (both heavily analysed in other media) were the results.

**3.37** A post-election poll by MORI highlighted the impact of the media in influencing the way that people intend to vote at elections, in comparison to other sources of information.<sup>42</sup> Eighteen per cent of respondents said that party leaders’ televised debates had influenced their vote, while 14% said that coverage of the election in newspapers had done so. A similar

39 These findings are based on a pre-election measure from the BES face-to-face survey.

40 J. Thomas, J. Jewell and S. Cushion (Cardiff School of Journalism), *Media Coverage of the 2003 Welsh Assembly Elections*, report submitted to The Electoral Commission (2003).

41 [www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/05\\_may/06/election.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/05_may/06/election.shtml)

42 MORI post-election poll, conducted 5–10 May 2005.



proportion of people (12%) said that the views of their local candidate had influenced them, while 8% of the public said that political leaflets through their letterbox had done so. Just 2% of the public said the internet had influenced their vote, and 3% cited posters on billboards.

**3.38** People also obtained information on the general election from party election broadcasts (PEBs). The BES found that around two-thirds (68%) of people said they saw a party election broadcast in 2005. Views on their effectiveness was mixed – while 30% agreed that the parties' election broadcasts helped them to understand what the parties stood for, 28% disagreed with this statement while 29% neither agreed nor disagreed.

**3.39** As discussed in Chapter 2 (paragraph 2.40), a post-election MORI opinion poll highlighted that the proportion of the public that watched PEBs on television during the 2005 election campaign rose to 70% (from 58% in 2001), near to the 1997 level of 73%. In contrast, the poll suggested that a relatively small proportion of the public (20%) heard any of the PEBs on the radio in 2005, although this was a slight increase from the 16% at the 2001 general election.

**3.40** Research commissioned by Ofcom on the attitude of the general public to television coverage of the 2005 election found that:

- for four-fifths of the public, television was their main source of news on election issues;
- just over half felt that, on the whole, television channels devoted the right amount of time to election coverage (but around two-fifths felt there was too much); and
- just over half believed that political parties should be prevented (as is the case at present) from buying advertising airtime on television, although nearly two-fifths believed this should be allowed either instead of, or as well as, PEBs.<sup>43</sup>

**3.41** According to the same Ofcom research, the majority of the public (69%) believed that television news coverage of the 2005 general election was 'fair, accurate, balanced, informative and impartial'. Unlike the print media, the television media is regulated to ensure that its coverage of political parties is balanced and impartial. The study also found that the most commonly used television sources of information on political issues were news broadcasts (51%), followed by current affairs programmes (30%).

**3.42** In support of these findings, a poll carried out by NOP and MORI for the BBC and ITV found that around half of television news viewers felt that there was the right amount of election coverage.<sup>44</sup> Yet almost as many felt that there was too much coverage, while very few (3%) felt there was not enough.

<sup>43</sup> Ofcom commissioned ICM Research to carry out a study into views of the general public towards general election broadcasting on television. ICM Research interviewed a random sample of 1,438 people aged 18 years and over by telephone in the pre-election survey (undertaken 6–12 April 2005), and 1,433 in the post-election survey (undertaken 6–16 May 2005).

<sup>44</sup> MORI/NOP exit poll for BBC/ITV News, 5 May 2005; [www.mori.com/polls/2005/exit-poll.shtml](http://www.mori.com/polls/2005/exit-poll.shtml).

## How the media portrays politics

**3.43** Do the media contribute to the public's apparent general distrust of politicians because of the manner in which television news programme presenters can present politicians and politics? The next section of this report considers the media's impact on political engagement and participation in the political process, drawing on independent qualitative analysis by Professor Michael Billig (LCRC).<sup>45</sup> His analysis explores the ways in which the style of presentation could be perceived as presenting politicians as figures to be distrusted.

**3.44** Professor Billig highlights that drawing a distinction between the 'appearance' of a political speech or policy and the underlying 'truth' of it was a common feature of television news programmes during the election period. His analysis identifies that the presenter often appeared to speak to the public as if the point being made (by a politician) was 'over the heads of you and me,' and thus required interpretation ('unspinning') such as that given on ITN's *Unspun* programme.

**3.45** While a MORI poll found that three-quarters of the public (75%) stated they 'would not trust politicians as a class', by contrast, two-thirds (66%) stated that they would trust newsreaders on television. Professor Billig suggests that the 'suspicion of politicians is in-built into the formats and [encouraged or perhaps reinforced] by rhetorical conventions within [media] reporting' on television.

**3.46** Professor Billig goes on to argue that an underlying message of distrust of the politician is transmitted to the viewer at home often enough to reinforce this perception. The television programme's political expert (i.e. not the politician) is treated with 'old-fashioned deference' during the interview, the approach to interviewing politicians themselves perhaps some 40 years ago.

**3.47** Professor Billig warns that 'there is a danger in people seeing [and believing] the presentation of politics as a one-way business in which all the manipulation and self-interested rhetoric comes from the politicians, while the "unbiased" media seeks to get beyond the rhetoric to the truth on behalf of an otherwise [uninformed] and confused electorate'. In short, he argues, it is easy for the viewers of current affairs and news programmes to forget that 'the media have their own interests and rhetoric'.

**3.48** The media undoubtedly have an invaluable role to play in engaging and informing the public. However, this is an interactive process. The academic Pippa Norris argues that 'the public is not passively absorbing whatever journalists and politicians tell them, not simply taking everything at face value... Because of increased [thinking] skills and greater diversification of media outlets, the public is actively sifting, sorting, and thereby constructing political impressions in line with their prior predispositions'.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Professor Billig's analysis is included within the LCRC research report, available via The Electoral Commission's website.

<sup>46</sup> Pippa Norris, *A virtuous circle – Political communications in post-industrialist societies* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

**3.49** Norris and others have identified an increasing division between the ‘information-rich’ and ‘information-poor’.<sup>47</sup> A Hansard Society report from 2003 further supports this perspective. *A tale of two houses* divided the electorate into two broad groups – the Political Junkies (PJs) who watch *Newsnight*, and the Big Brother fans (BBs) who are turned off from politicians and the news.<sup>48</sup> Coverage at the 2005 general election was, arguably, mainly for the PJs, informing the already-informed, while large proportions of the electorate still remained ‘outside the loop’ and were simply not watching, reading or listening.

**3.50** In 2003, the Wales Media Forum at Cardiff University argued that the Welsh media [was] ‘super-serving the knowledge-rich while failing to do much to improve the situation of the knowledge-poor’.<sup>49</sup> This observation could equally be extended to the UK media. Reaching and engaging those who are presently not engaged presents a large, problematic challenge to politicians, the media and the wider political community, which must be overcome if the high levels of political disengagement visible at the past two general elections are to be reversed.

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47 Ibid.

48 Stephen Coleman, the Hansard Society (2003) *A tale of two houses – The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the people at home*.

49 J. Thomas, J. Jewell and S. Cushion (Cardiff School of Journalism), *Media Coverage of the 2003 Welsh Assembly Elections*, report submitted to The Electoral Commission (2003).

## Other forms of media: the internet and ‘blogging’

**3.51** As at the 2001 general election, the traditional print and broadcast media were supplemented to some extent by internet sites, providing archived information and other opportunities to extend election coverage and make more it more interactive, as well as some political ‘blogs’.<sup>50</sup>

**3.52** LCRC’s research suggests, however, that the internet did not play a significantly greater role in coverage of the 2005 general election campaign than it had previously.<sup>51</sup> They state that this is because, despite 2005 being the first general election during which more than half of UK households had access to the internet, ‘both political parties and mainstream news providers tended to “normalise” the internet; it is very much politics or news as normal repackaged for well-to-do internet users’.

**3.53** Those people who sought information from news websites, such as the BBC News website and Guardian Unlimited, are likely to have generally been the type of people who would have accessed such information anyway, via conventional media. Furthermore, LCRC argues that despite the provision of online news ‘coming of age’, much of the content merely reflected the material that was already provided in the ‘off-line’ world of national print and broadcast media.

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50 Web logs; online diaries of events surrounding the election.

51 David Deacon et al (LCRC), *Reporting the 2005 UK General election* (2005).

**3.54** Several of the national news media organisations did incorporate blogs into their conventional reporting. LCRC's analysis suggests that the likely significance of 'blogging' may have been over-estimated prior to the election campaign, and that it was less important during the election than had been predicted. In addition, despite the increase in the number of blogs at the 2005 general election, the political importance of blogging, according to LCRC, remains 'extremely marginal in comparison to political blogs in the USA, for example'. LCRC concludes that political blogs were largely a source of information for journalists, activists, and academics, 'rather than making [any] substantial impression on the broader electorate'.

# 4 The Electoral Commission and wider civic engagement

Political parties and the media play important roles in persuading people to take part in elections and more generally in politics. However, other bodies also try, in a variety of different ways, to assist political engagement. Here we focus in particular on how The Electoral Commission discharged its duty to promote public awareness of the election.

## Introduction

**4.1** The challenge of encouraging participation in the election was taken up by a range of civic bodies operating on a non-partisan basis as well as by parties, candidates and the media. This chapter considers relevant activities, particularly those undertaken by The Electoral Commission.

## The Electoral Commission

**4.2** Since July 2001, The Electoral Commission has had a statutory role to promote public awareness of electoral systems and elections (under Section 13 of PPERA). Placing responsibility for this role with the Commission represented a major shift in political culture – until then, there had been no national organisation, within government or elsewhere, responsible for encouraging or promoting public interest in elections.

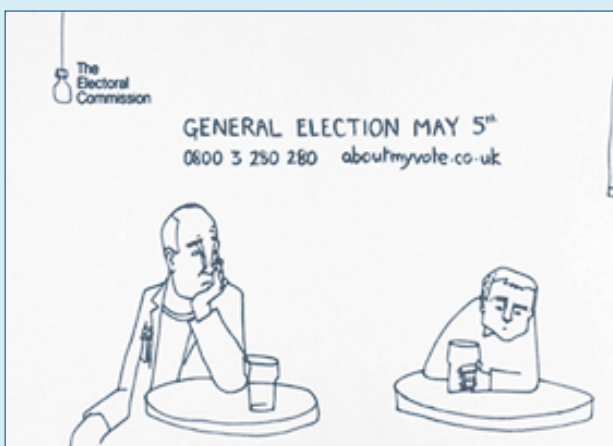
**4.3** The Commission takes this role very seriously. Although primary responsibility for engaging (and re-engaging) the electorate with the democratic process must rest with the political parties, the Commission has pursued a number of measures since its inception to promote voter awareness, both generally and in relation to certain sections of the population. In particular, it tries to communicate the fact that an election is happening, and why it is important.

**4.4** To promote public awareness of the 2005 general election, the Commission built on the experience and evaluation of previous campaigns, such as those for the Scottish Parliamentary and Welsh Assembly elections of 2003, and the European Parliamentary

elections of 2004. Planning for an awareness campaign had been underway for some time in anticipation of a general election that would have to be held before June 2006. Key elements included television, radio and newspaper advertising, a dedicated website and a telephone helpline.

**4.5** Evaluation of our ‘Don’t do politics’ campaign for the European Parliamentary elections in 2004 illustrated that television advertising had a strong, positive effect on the electorate: according to research by Ipsos (an independent research company), 33% of those who saw the campaign said they voted as a result of seeing the animated commercial voiced by the actors Timothy Spall and Jim Broadbent. In view of this, we decided to use television once again in 2005 as one of the key elements of our awareness campaign. Our first ‘Don’t do politics’ television advertisement (see Figure 1, below) was aired on 6 April 2005, the day after the general election had been announced.

**Figure 1: Still from the ‘Don’t do politics’ television advertisement**



**4.6** We also used radio advertising at the general election, a relatively new medium for us although it had been used in our public awareness campaigns for the combined Scottish Parliamentary and local government elections in 2003 and for the regional referendum in the North East of England in November 2004. Among the strengths of using radio are its local nature, which helps with our aim of ‘making politics personal’ and that it can communicate with certain hard-to-reach groups, such as young people and those on the move. It is also a useful medium to remind people, on polling day, to vote on their way home. A scheme of radio community messaging was also implemented to harness the respect and trust that people have for local radio presenters. Local radio stations were encouraged to discuss issues such as the importance of voting.

**4.7** Our UK press advertising contained a message encouraging people to express their opinions through voting. The advertisement was placed in all major UK titles including Sunday newspapers, Scottish and Welsh national titles and Welsh language publications. Commuter titles in London (the *Evening Standard* and *Metro*) were used on the day before the election, while ethnic language titles were also used, the advertisement being placed both in English and a variety of minority ethnic languages.

**4.8** A silent version of the ‘Don’t do politics’ television advertisement was developed for bus video screens and could be seen on over 1,000 buses in London and the Midlands. The frequency of the advertisement was increased in the two days before polling day; it was also shown on large screens at mainline railway



stations in London, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Manchester and Leeds, to target commuters in the final two days of the election campaign.

**4.9** The Commission's website [www.aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk) was aimed particularly at assisting people to register to vote. It was relaunched on 8 April 2005 specifically for the general election, and included details of the new Scottish constituency boundaries. A Welsh language version of the website was launched on 20 April. A useful feature of the website was a postcode search facility, which allowed users to find personalised information, such as the council area they lived in and who their MP was, quickly and easily.

**4.10** The Commission also carried out work through our Outreach programme with on-the-ground activity designed to promote key messages to particular communities and encourage democratic participation. Outreach is currently aimed at 16–24 year olds and aims to raise awareness of democratic processes in the UK. It does this through:

- running interactive educational events and workshops;
- providing training for organisations who work with young people; and
- producing resources and educational materials.

**4.11** During the 2005 general election campaign period, the Commission ran voting workshops with over 2,500 young people across the UK. A team of 30 youth workers were recruited to the Outreach Team specifically to help raise awareness of politics, voting and the general

election. The Commission's outreach activities also include resources (such as games) which can be downloaded from the tailored website [www.dopolitics.org.uk](http://www.dopolitics.org.uk), a monthly 'Do Politics' newsletter, and the *Democracy Cookbook*, an interactive information pack on how UK politics works, what UK democratic institutions do and why they matter.

**4.12** Finally, the Commission set up a free telephone helpline, managed by a call centre. The number featured on our advertising material and allowed callers to ask specific questions about registration or voting.

## Impact of the Commission's campaign

**4.13** The key objectives for our awareness campaign were to raise awareness of the general election (including the date) and to encourage involvement in the electoral process, including making it easier to find out relevant information and providing a simple, impartial information source via [www.aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk) and the telephone helpline.

**4.14** The key research finding, from tracking research by Ipsos, is that of the 76% who were aware of the Commission's campaign, 43% said that they had voted and 36% that they had talked about politics with friends or family as a result of seeing it. This compares to the 2004 figures of 33% and 24% respectively.

**4.15** When asked whether politics affected their everyday lives – without being shown our 2005 general election campaign – 57% of respondents stated that it did. This figure rose to 60% among

those who had seen the campaign. When compared to the 2004 figures of 45% and 50% respectively, it seems to indicate that the campaign's key message of 'politics affects everything' is being taken on board, not only by those who specifically recall seeing the advertisement but also across the whole electorate. However, the different levels of importance people attach to general elections and European Parliamentary elections may also be a factor in the responses.

**4.16** The statistics for our website are also encouraging. On average, the 2004 awareness

campaign generated 7,500 visits per week; for the 2005 general election there was a more than six-fold increase, to an average of almost 41,000 per week. This could be attributed in part to the improvements made to the site and to greater knowledge of its existence, although it must also be acknowledged that general elections are of greater interest to the public than European Parliamentary elections. We also received over 20,000 calls to our call centre. Many callers were concerned at not being registered to vote at the election; others were complaining at not having received a polling card or postal vote, and being too late to apply to vote either by post or by proxy.

### Box 2: Case study – overseas voters

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) estimates that there are around 15.5 million UK citizens living abroad, many of who are eligible to register to vote but may not be aware of it. Of those who are aware of their right to vote, many do not know how to take it up. Before the 2001 general election only 11,496 UK citizens were registered to vote as overseas electors.

For the 2005 general election the Commission made concerted efforts to ensure that UK citizens living abroad realised they were entitled to register to vote in the UK, as long as they had been registered to vote in the UK within the last 15 years.

The Commission used a variety of means to communicate registration messages to potential overseas voters. The internet was a vital tool in reaching such a geographically diverse audience. We were able to provide clear information about how to register and an online

registration form on [www.aboutmyvote.co.uk](http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk). Just under 30,000 overseas voter registration forms were downloaded. The FCO also linked to our website. Sponsored links on internet search engines meant that anyone searching for voter registration was directed to the website.

Recognising that not everyone has access to the internet, we also made information available via other sources. A simple leaflet explaining overseas registration was produced; over 44,000 copies of the leaflet were distributed via FCO embassies and consulates, electoral administrators and our call centre.

During January and February 2005 we ran advertisements in overseas editions of British newspapers such as the weekly *Telegraph* and *Guardian*, and carried out media relations work with a range of English language titles overseas and international broadcast outlets such as the BBC World Service.

### Box 3: Case study – HM Armed Forces voters

These voters tend to be fairly mobile compared to the general population, and as they are often stationed abroad, low rates of electoral registration can result.

Until 2001, members of HM Armed Forces were required to register as service voters. Registration as a service voter at a particular address continued until the elector made a new declaration or left HM Armed Forces. In practice, this system meant that many service voters were registered in areas where they no longer lived.

Since 2001, service voters have had the option of registering in the same fashion as other voters. The effect of this has been a significant decrease in the number of registered service voters. Some of them may now be classified as 'ordinary' electors although the decrease may also be due to other reasons.

Because of the significant drop in the number of those registered as service voters, the Commission has made specific efforts to assist them; one example was a leaflet detailing registration options for service voters with sources of further advice. The leaflets were printed and distributed in partnership with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and are given to new recruits as part of the 'welcome pack' when they join HM Armed Forces.

We have also worked with the British Forces Broadcasting Service which provides radio and television to areas with a high concentration of forces overseas. This has enabled relevant information to reach a large number of service personnel and their families. We have also liaised with editorial staff at the MoD's in-house publications (*Soldier*, *Navy News* and *RAF News*) to ensure timely publication of articles concerning electoral registration.

## Other campaigns

**4.17** The range and depth of different organisations' attempts to raise awareness varied considerably, as did the groups within society at which the campaigns were aimed. Although no comprehensive research has been carried out into such activities at the 2005 general election, we provide here an indication of the types of projects undertaken.

**4.18** Operation Black Vote, a non-party political campaign organisation which focuses on the black democratic deficit in the UK, sought to

increase the number of black people registered to vote in the general election, as part of their wider aim to enable the black community to fully participate in British democracy. Operation Black Vote's 2005 general election *Black Manifesto* outlined the group's political, social and economic policy demands for Britain's black communities.

**4.19** The Hansard Society, an independent, non-partisan educational charity that exists to promote effective Parliamentary democracy, developed 'Turnout or turn off', a special

general election forum hosted on its website between 25 April and 13 May 2005. This was part of a wider citizenship education forum.

**4.20** The Hansard Society, The Electoral Commission and the Department for Education and Skills ran a collaborative campaign to increase awareness of the election among schoolchildren. The ‘Y Vote Mock Elections’ project, run by the Hansard Society since the 1950s, aimed to actively engage students with the electoral process in the run-up to the general election.

**4.21** Approximately 800,000 pupils at more than 2,100 schools registered for the ‘Y Vote Mock Elections 2005.’ There was also a ‘Y Vote Mock Elections 2005 at Westminster Day’ event; over 3,000 young people met and questioned senior political figures, participated in open workshops and attended exhibitions by a range of political groups.

**4.22** Some local authorities across the country also promoted awareness of the general election as part of their own public outreach efforts. Some placed advertisements in council magazines and put articles on their websites to encourage participation in the election. The ability of Returning Officers – as opposed to local authorities – to promote awareness of participation at elections is not currently clear in the relevant legislation, and Returning Officers have been understandably reluctant to act beyond their powers.

**4.23** The Electoral Commission has previously recommended that Returning Officers should have such powers, and the Government’s Electoral Administration Bill proposes new powers to enable Returning Officers to promote participation at elections and to allow central government to fund such activities. The Commission welcomes these provisions.

# 5 Conclusion

As with previous contests, the 2005 general election saw a targeting of party resources towards the perceived key marginal seats. The relatively low prominence given to the election in the media reflected the fact that it was competing with other major news events for coverage, and it may also have reflected a belief in the media that the election was not of interest to a wide audience. While some of the public were interested in and engaged by the election, large numbers of people did not vote.

## An improvement on 2001?

**5.1** Whatever the public might have thought about the political parties' campaigns, there was an improvement at the 2005 general election in the numbers of potential voters who were aware of those campaigns. For example, more people than at the 2001 election said they had seen political advertisements on billboards (62%). They were more likely to have seen Conservative advertisements (47%) than ones for Labour (40%) or the Liberal Democrats (26%).<sup>52</sup>

**5.2** More people in 2005 said they watched a leaders televised debate (46%), had seen political advertisements in newspapers (48%) or heard party election broadcasts on the radio (20%). Although only 21% of people said they had been called on by a representative of a political party, this is higher than the 14% in 2001, although lower than has historically been the case in the latter part of the twentieth century.<sup>53</sup>

**5.3** The parties campaigned on a range of 'usual' issues such as the economy, public services, crime and taxation, but the issue of the Iraq war also featured strongly. Constitutional issues also featured to some extent in Scotland and Wales. Furthermore, in Scotland, the general election campaign featured a number of issues, for example health and education, that are devolved matters for the Scottish Parliament and not under the control of the UK Parliament.

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52 MORI post-election poll, conducted 5–10 May 2005.

53 Ibid.

**5.4** The largest parties generally made extensive use of telephone voter identification, while automated telephone calls were a particular campaign innovation at this election. At constituency level, traditional forms of campaigning continued, but modern techniques were increasingly being used. In Scotland and Wales, although both the SNP and Plaid Cymru used techniques such as automated telephone calling, the research carried out by Dr Justin Fisher and others concludes those parties were cautious about spending scarce resources on what for them has become something of a 'second-order' election.<sup>54</sup>

**5.5** Direct mail and telephone contacts were viewed as being particularly effective campaign techniques at the 2005 general election. Traditional techniques such as party election broadcasts and rallies appear to be becoming less important as the main parties adopt other, more modern, methods to target voters in key battleground seats, which has the effect of integrating national and constituency campaigns.

**5.6** The public generally seemed to have a negative view of the party campaigns, particularly the majority of electors who did not live in marginal constituencies. Political parties have limited funds for campaigning and therefore concentrate their resources on areas that potentially yield the greatest electoral advantage. The downside of this is that voters outside marginal constituencies can feel that their vote is valued less by the parties and

are relatively less engaged with the parties' campaigns. Despite this, our research shows that the parties' campaigns generally reached more voters, across different types of constituencies (marginal and non-marginal) than was the case at the general election in 2001.

**5.7** In addition, marginality tended to increase the degree of both localism and personal attacks in constituency campaigns. There was a clear correlation between marginality and campaigning activity by political parties which was especially marked for telephone and house-to-house canvassing. You were more than five times as likely to be contacted in this way if you lived in a marginal seat than if you lived in a safe seat during the 2005 general election campaign.<sup>55</sup>

**5.8** The campaign analysis research concluded that both the Conservatives and Labour 'ruthlessly used national campaign tools to target key battleground seats and get their messages across'.<sup>56</sup> While the Liberal Democrat campaign used more sophisticated techniques than previously, they did not do so on the same scale as the largest two parties.

**5.9** The political parties ran energetic campaigns at the 2005 general election. Although to a greater or lesser extent they used modern methods of campaigning in an effort to attract voters, large parts of their campaigns remained reliant on traditional techniques such as leafleting and house-to-house canvassing.

<sup>55</sup> Justin Fisher, *General Election 2005: A Voter's Eye View* (Joseph Rowntree Trust/New Politics Network, 2005).

<sup>56</sup> Dr Justin Fisher et al., *General election 2005 campaign analysis*, undertaken for The Electoral Commission (August 2005).

<sup>54</sup> Dr Justin Fisher et al., *General election 2005 campaign analysis*, undertaken for The Electoral Commission (August 2005).



This appears partly to do with necessity (on-the-ground volunteers are one of the main resources available to the parties at election times) and partly due to a perceived need to conduct 'local' campaigns.

**5.10** General election campaigns are sometimes referred to as the aggregate of a series of local campaigns in constituencies across the country. However, evidence from the research we commissioned indicates that the campaigns of the major parties were more centralised than ever before, with modern technology helping the parties to coordinate different local focuses from a central base.

**5.11** Modern technology was used in particular to assist in concentrating efforts and resources into marginal constituencies. The willingness on the part of all the main parties, and some of the smaller ones, to embrace an array of modern campaigning methods and technologies indicates that these are likely to become increasingly important to the nature of political campaigning at future general elections.

**5.12** The concentration on marginal constituencies had important implications for public engagement with the campaign. Research indicates that many people felt the general election only mattered in some (not all) parts of the country. It is incumbent upon all those involved with elections, but particularly the political parties, to engage as many people as possible, in as many areas as possible, in the political process. It is important that this happens not just during the four weeks of a general election campaign but also during the period between elections, when attitudes to politics and political opinions are shaped.

**5.13** The media also plays an important role. Most people accessed information on the general election through the media and relied on it to present clear, impartial information, which did not always happen. The role of the media in influencing and reflecting the views of society is a complex one. To some extent, the media reflects the society around it. However, other research indicates that the media helps to influence and shape public opinion.

**5.14** If the public are perceived to be disengaged from politics, then politics is probably less likely to be considered by the media to be of interest to readers or viewers. Although the media can be accused of presenting politics in a negative manner, it can be argued that this is to a large extent a reflection on the campaigns of the political parties, which are frequently perceived as negative.

**5.15** It is no easy task to re-engage people with politics. Attempts to do so, particularly in respect of voting, need to be addressed across the board since non-voting and political scepticism is evident among all groups within society. The 2005 general election was a start – overall turnout went up slightly compared to the 2001 general election – but non-voting remains a key issue. The Commission hopes that the issues highlighted in this report will assist all who want to see increased levels of involvement in the political process in better understanding how this can occur.



# Appendix

## Technical details

This report has been informed by the findings from a programme of research projects designed and managed by The Electoral Commission's Research Team. Brief technical details of these projects are provided below. Further details can be found in the project reports available on our website.

### Electoral data

The findings relating to turnout presented in this report and the detailed breakdowns available on our website are derived from data collected by us from (Acting) Returning Officers in all 646 Parliamentary constituencies across the UK, including Staffordshire South where the election was postponed until June 2005. (Acting) Returning Officers were asked to supply us with copies of two standard forms – the declaration of results and the statement of postal ballots – plus some additional data. In some cases, the data we received was incomplete and while we have endeavoured to check its accuracy and fill in any gaps, this has not always been possible.

Analysis of the data was provided by a team at the *Local Government Chronicle* Elections Centre at the University of Plymouth, led by Professors Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher.

### The British Election Study

The Economic and Social Research Council funded the British Election Study (BES) and the Commission funded a suite of questions included in the post-election survey. The study was managed by the University of Essex with the survey component conducted by the National Centre for Social Research.

The bulk of the evidence drawn from the BES and presented in this report is taken from the second (post-election) wave in a two-wave panel survey involving interviews with 4,706 randomly selected British adults. The survey, which had a weighted base of 3,979, used a random probability-based design and the post-election interviews were carried out face-to-face in people's homes in May, June and July 2005. The results reported include respondents interviewed before 10 July 2005. The survey was confined to interviewing in Great Britain – the Commission conducted separate survey research in Northern Ireland.

### Qualitative focus groups across Britain

Qualitative public opinion research was conducted on our behalf by Cragg Ross Dawson during May and June 2005. Eight focus group discussions were held at four different locations across Britain, shown in Table A1, overleaf. Six of the groups were recruited after the election had taken place – two were voter groups and four were non-voter groups. A mix of constituency types was chosen with both marginal and safe seats included in the programme. The sample was segmented by age and social class and each group represented a spread in terms of knowledge of, and interest in, current affairs.

Two of the groups were recruited two to three weeks before the election. At the time, respondents in these groups were undecided about whether or not to vote (in the event, about two-thirds of these respondents reported having voted). Respondents were asked to

keep a diary during the period 25 April to 6 May 2005 to record their experiences of the election campaign and their thoughts about voting. These were used as stimulus material – respondents were asked to talk about the sorts of comments they had written – and were designed to ensure that real-time impressions and opinions were collected. Extracts have been used to illustrate the findings in this report.

### Qualitative one-to-one depth interviews across Britain

Additional qualitative research was conducted to explore voters' perspectives on the process of voting. This involved a programme of 24 one-to-one depth interviews of 45 to 60 minutes duration, conducted by Research Works Ltd between 18 May and 1 June 2005.

Interviews were conducted in four locations: Moston (in the Manchester Withington constituency), Dundee (Dundee East and Dundee West constituencies), Carmarthen (Carmarthen West) and Chippenham (Wiltshire North, where electors also had county council elections). All respondents had voted in the 2005 general election and the 24 interviews were divided equally between in-person and postal voters.

### Media content analysis

Media content analysis was conducted by the Communication Research Centre at Loughborough University (LCRC), principally by David Deacon, Dominic Wring, Michael Billig, Peter Golding, John Downey and Scott Davidson. It involved quantitative content analysis of coverage of the election campaign across a diverse range of news media and locations including national, regional, local and online media.

Table A1: Focus group programme

Location	Group type	Age profile	Social group
Poole	Voters	18–34	ABC1*
Edinburgh	Non-voters	18–25	C2DE**
Tyneside	Non-voters	26–35	ABC1
Poole	Undecided before election (diary group)	26–35	C2DE
Edinburgh	Undecided before election (diary group)	36–49	ABC1
Hertsmere	Non-voters	36–49	C2DE
Hertsmere	Non-voters	50–65	ABC1
Tyneside	Voters	50–65	C2DE

Notes: \* ABC1s = managers, administrators, professionals and clerical workers.

\*\* C2DEs = skilled and unskilled manual workers, those on long-term benefit and the retired drawing a state pension.

LCRC coded all election-related news items identified in a selection of television programmes and in the following sections of a sample of newspapers: the front page, the first two pages of the domestic news section, the first two pages of any specialist section assigned to the coverage of the campaign, and the pages containing, and facing, newspapers' leader editorials. LCRC's analysis also incorporated qualitative textual analysis.

### Analysis of party campaigns

The election campaigns run by political parties and third parties and their impact were analysed by a team including Dr Justin Fisher (Brunel University), Professor Edward Fieldhouse (University of Manchester), Professor David Denver (Lancaster University), Dr Andrew Russell (University of Manchester) and Dr David Cutts (University of Manchester). Interviews were conducted with representatives from the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party and Vote-OK.

In addition, Dr Fisher conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of communications received from political parties and candidates during the election by a team of 313 volunteers in 223 constituencies. The research was undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust and the New Politics Network. The Commission also part-funded the administration of a survey questionnaire sent to agents of the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party.