

Media content analysis, May 2011

News Media Coverage and Information in Combined Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On Thursday, May 5th 2011 the public in the United Kingdom (UK) had the opportunity to vote in a nationwide referendum for the first time in a generation. On the same day, elections to the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly were held as well as local elections in most parts of England (not including London). The news media play a crucial role in informing voters about the issues, alternatives and candidates in an election. Therefore, when elections are combined to be held on the same day there is a question about the impact it will have on the information provided via the news media. Given there is limited space in news media outlets to cover the stories of the day, editorial decisions are made as to what will top the news agenda. We report the results of a 7 week media monitoring project of 41 national, regional and local media outlets conducted by the Centre for Elections, Media, and Parties at the University of Exeter. The report, based on data collected from over 50,000 news stories, illustrates how the news media covered the Parliamentary Voting System (PVS) referendum, the elections to the Scottish Parliament, the national assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland and the local elections in England.

The main findings are:

- There was a crowded news agenda where the elections and the PVS referendum were vying for news attention with global events such as the unrest in the Middle East/North African region. Therefore, the PVS referendum and election related news was not at the top of the agenda and did not feature within the top 10 news items for the most part in the national press, although they were mostly in the top 10 television items. However, the saliency in the national news media of the elections and the referendum increased as voting day grew nearer.
- Consistent with a 'division of labour' between national and regional outlets, the national media treated the PVS referendum as the more important election while regional outlets in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland paid more attention to national assembly and parliament elections.
- Local media varied in terms of coverage to the extent that where elections were held, as opposed to the referendum only in London, we saw more overall coverage, but this was skewed towards election coverage.
- Within England, we note substantial differences in coverage in newspapers but not television. When comparing Manchester, with local elections, to London, with no local elections, newspapers in Manchester devoted slightly less space to PVS referendum stories than election stories while in London, as might be expected, there was much more coverage of the PVS referendum than local elections.
- Although these have a limited audience, the PVS referendum was at the top of the agenda on the blogs we investigated.
- There were other differences between types of media with television paying more attention to both the elections and PVS referendum than newspapers in terms of its place on the news agenda.
- Our analysis of leafleting, another source of information for voters, demonstrates similar patterns. The London area received no information about elections, as would be expected, but voters in Scotland and Wales were bombarded with election leaflets which overshadowed the PVS referendum campaigning.
- Overall, we do find that the news information varied by the context of voting choices being faced by voters. Voters in locations with concurrent national elections were likely to be exposed to less information about the PVS referendum than in other locations-in Scotland, for example, the five newspapers we analysed carried 141 stories between them, an average

of about 30 stories each, whereas the Evening Standard had more than 50 stories on the referendum. With concurrent local elections the differences in coverage were small. In those locations without combined elections, news information ran in favour of the PVS referendum.

- Subjectively, the majority of citizens felt they had sufficient information to make decisions. Our analysis of further data indicates, however, that there were differences in certainty and knowledge about AV statements amongst respondents who relied on different types of media (though we are limited to national media for this finding).
- Finally, we note the potential effect of combined elections on turnout. There is a clear pattern suggesting that turnout is higher in locations with combined elections (e.g. Scotland and Northern Ireland) and lower in areas with just one election (e.g. London). However, the differences were not as great as expected. Although our data do not allow a direct link between turnout and news media information, when considering turnout alongside the data on the news information environments in these contexts, voters in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were potentially exposed to relatively less PVS referendum information but voted in higher numbers.

Full report

1. Introduction: Understanding information in combined elections

The aims of the Electoral Commission's media monitoring project were to gauge 1) What information is made available through the media about the various polls and 2) The impact of combining the electoral events on the information made available to the public. As such, we were interested in the flow of information from media about the PVS referendum and other scheduled elections in the two months leading to 'election day' on May 5th. In examining the flow of information we seek to assess the impact of holding concurrent elections and the PVS vote on the same day. In order to fully assess the impact of the combined elections on the information available to citizens, we examine public opinion in the context of the media environment at the national and regional level.

The Centre for Elections, Media and Parties at the University of Exeter met these aims with content analysis of a broad range of media outlets—national and regional television news, national and regional newspapers, Internet sites, and television and press advertisements. Comparisons of the agenda (the topics and issues covered in the news and in advertising), the salience of the referendum and elections (indicated by the number of stories in addition to the length devoted to them and their prominence in the news outlets), and the types of information presented about them, allow us to address issues regarding the impact on electoral information of combining the PVS referendum with other elections on May 5th.

Past research on information flows in concurrent elections is relatively scarce. However, there is much more known about media coverage of elections and campaigns in the UK in general. We address the context of the referendum and elections and key findings from previous research about information flows in concurrent elections in Section 2. In order to avoid confusion, throughout the report we refer to the media outlets in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as regional outlets (including Scottish variants of national newspapers such as The Sun and Daily Express) and we refer to UK-wide outlets (that are readily available across all locations under study with the exception of Scotland) as national outlets. Local outlets refer to outlets in England whose main circulation or audience is in the city or larger metropolitan area to which the newspapers are attached. In terms of elections, we refer to the referendum vote on the alternative vote as the parliamentary voting system referendum [PVS referendum]. We refer to the elections to the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly alternatively as devolved elections or regional elections whereas we use the term local elections for elections to local councils.

2. Setting the Context

a. Parliamentary Voting System (PVS) Referendum

Electoral reform, specifically proportional representation (PR) by the single transferable vote, has been a staple of every Liberal or Liberal Democrat manifesto since 1970 (the 1966 manifesto mentions reform but does not specify the system desired). The 2010 manifesto was no exception.

In 2010 the Labour Party manifesto committed to hold a referendum on electing members of the House of Commons by the alternative vote (AV). There was some cynicism about this for two reasons. First, Labour's 1997 manifesto had also promised a referendum on electoral reform but the referendum did not take place. Second, Gordon Brown had been seen as previously hostile to electoral reform, so that Labour's turn to AV was characterized as a "deathbed conversion."

The Conservatives, on the other hand, continued to support the current system in 2010, their manifesto stating that, "We support the first-past-the-post system for Westminster elections because it gives voters the chance to kick out a government they are fed up with." When the 2010 election results made single party majority government an impossibility electoral reform was an element of Liberal Democrat negotiations with both the Conservatives and Labour. As part of a coalition deal Labour apparently promised to introduce AV through legislation and to hold a referendum on a more proportional system in addition. The Conservatives promised a referendum bill on AV, which then became part of the coalition agreement, although they did not promise support for the reform itself.

The date of the referendum became the next controversy. Nick Clegg favoured May 5th because it coincided with assembly and parliamentary elections in the devolved regions, as well as local elections in Northern Ireland and most of England, meaning that the referendum would be less costly to hold. Other MPs, especially on the Labour side, were critical of this choice of date on the grounds that it would make turnout highly variable across different regions because some voters would have more than one reason to go to the polls while others would only have the referendum, and because it would distract from the debate about electoral reform.

Public opinion on AV showed more support than opposition in the months immediately after the election, but this support began to narrow. As Figure 1 shows, by February 2011, when the May 5th referendum was finally confirmed, if asked the referendum question about a preference for FPTP or AV, most polls showed a narrow plurality for AV. However, somewhat ominously for the Yes to AV campaign, polls that asked more elaborate questions in which the AV system was described began to show more support for FPTP than AV from mid-August 2010. This trend continued. By early May, regardless of question wording, polls were showing the Yes campaign as much as 30 points behind. Figure 1 and Figure 2 provide a summary of the polls over the year preceding the referendum.

Figure 1: Polls with Referendum Question

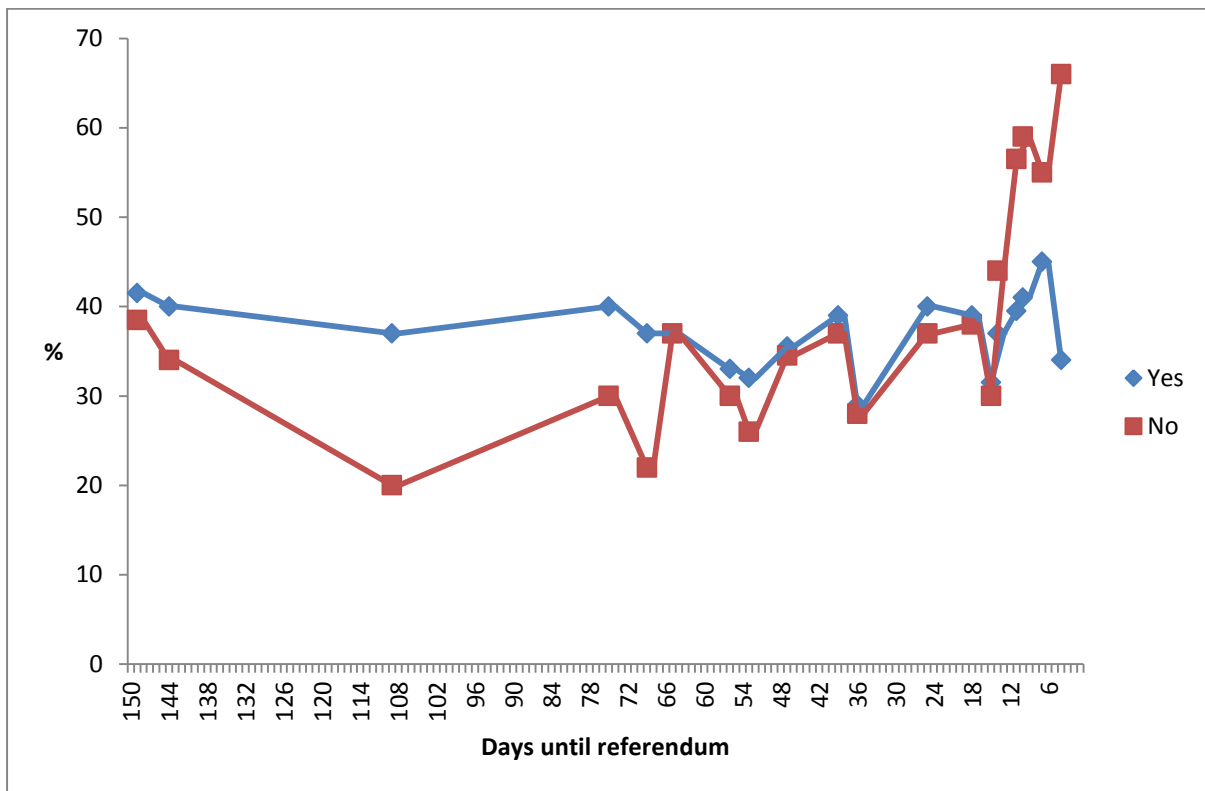
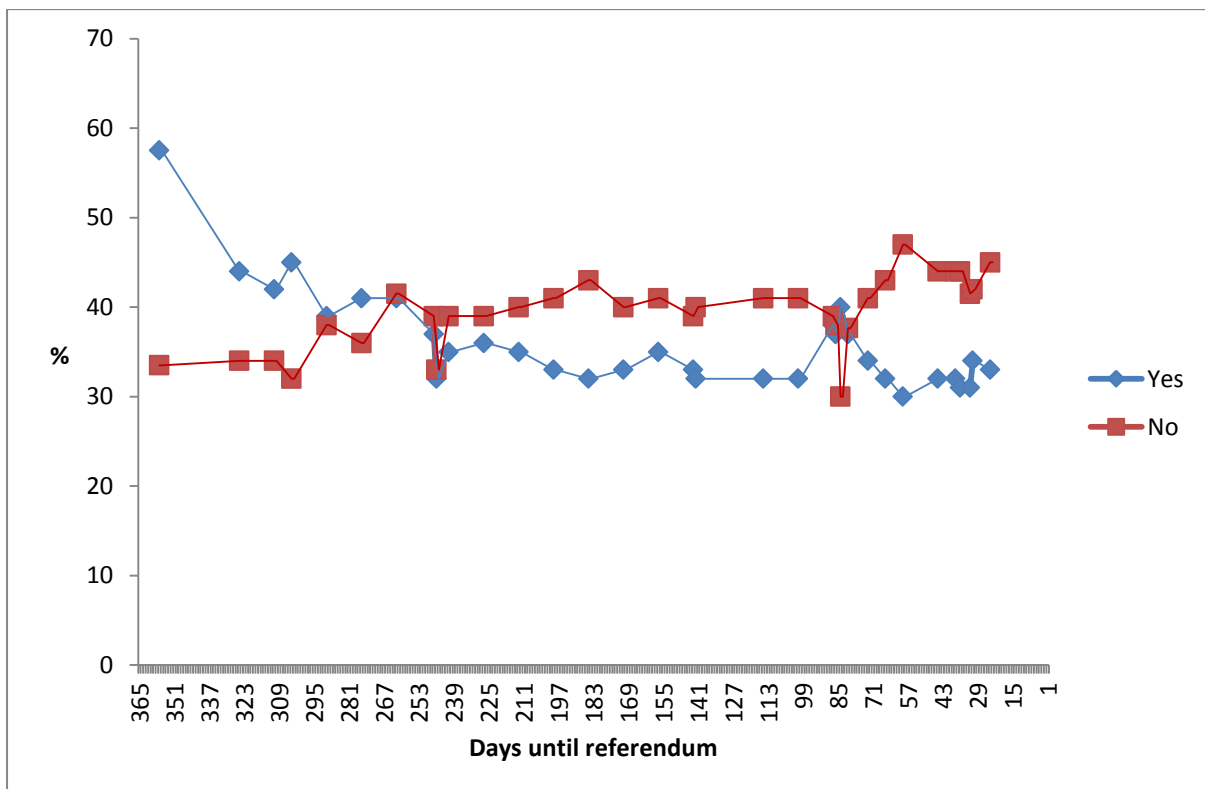


Figure 2: Polls explaining the Alternative Vote



b. Regional Elections

The devolved elections to the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Irish Assembly had a variety of different kinds of incumbent governments, with varying degrees of popularity. The Northern Ireland Assembly elections were perhaps the least eventful in terms of party composition because of the absence of the Liberal Democrats, whose unpopularity elsewhere would mean a redistribution of many of their votes. The Democratic Unionist Party/Sinn Fein coalition was relatively popular and expected to endure with little change to the parties' share of seats at Stormont.¹ And so it proved, with the DUP gaining two seats and Sinn Fein one but little overall change. At 55.6%, turnout was, however, down substantially on 2007.

The Welsh Assembly elections also took place in the context of an incumbent coalition government, in this case of the Labour Party with Plaid Cymru. Opinion polls for several months leading up to the elections suggested that Labour's vote and seat share would increase, possibly giving Labour an overall majority. In fact, the polls slightly overestimated Labour's share of the constituency and regional votes but its seat share increased to exactly half the seats in the Welsh Assembly. The losers in Wales were the junior partner in the incumbent coalition, Plaid Cymru, who lost four seats and were replaced by the Conservatives as the second largest party in the assembly, and the Liberal Democrats, whose vote went down by about a third, translating to a loss of one seat. Turnout in these elections was 41.5% (for the constituency vote), down slightly from 2007.

The Scottish Parliament elections provided the most dramatic campaign and results. The elections were held with the SNP as the incumbent minority government. A TNS-BMRB survey in early March showed Labour 15 points ahead of the SNP. This began to change after the Parliament dissolved, as Alex Salmond and the SNP proved to be far more effective campaigners than Iain Gray and the Labour Party. Polls in mid- and late April showed the SNP ten points ahead of Labour. On May 5th the difference was even larger, especially in the regional ballot, allowing the SNP to form a majority government. Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats all lost votes and seats but the Liberal Democrats' loss was the greatest—roughly half the votes and two-thirds of the seats they had held. One of the reasons given for Labour's defeat was that disaffected Liberal Democrat votes went to the SNP rather than to Labour. Turnout, at 50.3% (for the constituency vote) was, like Wales, down slightly on 2007.

Local elections in Britain were held in 279 local authorities. For the local elections in England the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition in Westminster provided the national backdrop, as elsewhere, along with cuts, including cuts to local government. *The Times'* prediction on April 16th was typical: the Conservatives would lose about 900 seats on councils, Labour would gain about 1000, and the Liberal Democrats would lose about 300 seats. The only caveat was that if Liberal Democrat votes in the South went to the Conservatives rather than Labour the Conservatives might not have such a bad night. In fact Labour gained about 850 councillors—a solid but not spectacular result—the Conservatives surprisingly *gained* almost 100 councillors in total, while the Liberal

¹ Sinn Fein could have replaced the DUP as the largest party and thus supplied the first minister but it would have needed a net loss to the DUP of at least 4 seats and a net gain to Sinn Fein of at least 5. As it was, the DUP gained 2 seats and Sinn Fein 1.

Democrats lost over 700 councillors, more than one-third of its total. It was an unequivocally bad night for the Liberal Democrats.

c. The Importance of the Media

Research on the UK's media shows two characteristics that it shares with the US (and other nations) when it comes to coverage of politics and elections. First, the news media have a tendency to focus on the "horserace" and the campaign process—who is ahead and who is behind and the strategies that they see as a response to who is ahead and who is behind. Second, the impact of media coverage on the public in terms of the issues they care about, their preferences, and so on is limited. The picture is typically of a disconnect between what the media highlight in elections and what the public considers important, for example (Miller 1991; Butler and Kavanagh 2002, 249; Deacon et al. 2001; Kavanagh and Butler 2005; Norris 2006).² Despite such attitudes and the sparse evidence, there is a growing recognition of the *possibility* of media effects in British elections. British consumption of news media is high: about nine in ten people (89%) reported using television as their main source of information on political issues during the 2005 general election campaign and more than half (54%) said they read their local newspaper for the same purpose (Electoral Commission 2005, 31). Indeed, our own work on the 2005 election shows that the media had a real effect on the extent to which the issue of Iraq influenced voters' perceptions of Tony Blair (Stevens, Banducci, Karp, and Vowles forthcoming).

Research in the US and the UK also suggests that the public learns about matters such as a government's record and the positions of respective parties and candidates during campaigns. Indeed this learning has been offered as an explanation for why political scientists are frequently able to predict election outcomes quite accurately months before election day, based on such information as the state of the economy, while opinion polls of voter preferences fluctuate dramatically. Voters gain information such that their preferences fall into line with what would be expected given fundamentals like the state of the economy. Thus campaigns "enlighten" voter preferences (Andersen et al. 2005; Gelman and King 1993). Similarly, other research has shown how campaigns serve to reduce voter uncertainty on issues (Alvarez 1998; Peterson 2009).

News media are likely to play at least some part in the provision of information from which voters learn during campaigns. This influence has been clearest where media accounts of factors such as the economy have been at odds with reality, as in the 1992 election in the US and the 1997 election in the UK. Media influence on perceptions of the economy as in a worse state than the objective indicators suggested appears to have contributed to the defeats of the incumbent governments in these two instances. More generally, we are likely to see learning where levels of information are low to begin with. Thus there was certainly the potential for large media effects in the referendum given low levels of knowledge and high levels of uncertainty at the outset of the campaign.

² Notwithstanding *The Sun's* claims to have swung the election in 1992 (McKee 1995). There is evidence that *The Sun's* change of allegiance between 1992 and 1997 affected its readers (Curtice 1999; Ladd and Lenz 2009). This is notable precisely because such influence is rare.

Of particular interest in the build-up to May 5th was the effect on media coverage of having more than one ballot to cast in most regions of the UK. How would the media cover parliament, assembly or local elections with a referendum vote due to take place on the same day? Would we see the national level competition, the referendum, crowding out coverage of other races or the opposite—with attention to regional elections pushing the referendum into the background? In the United States voters consistently have the opportunity to cast votes in concurrent elections. For example, in a midterm election such as 2010 a voter might be able to cast a vote for Governor, US Senator and the US House of Representatives, as well as state and local offices and in ballot initiatives. This affects media coverage. The media cannot cover all races. One possibility is a “division of labour”, with national media focusing most on national races and regional and local media on regional and local races. However, research on this question in the US has shown that there is no such division of labour (e.g., Franklin et al. 2003; Stevens et al. 2006). Media of all kinds—local and national—tend to focus on the elections at the top of the ballot, ignoring House and local races, meaning that information on down ballot races is minimal.

Past research on the role of the media in Europe in providing information in concurrent elections, suggests that second order elections tend to be pushed down the agenda because parties are less likely to contest them and campaigns are thus not as robust and issues not as important. With less at stake in second order elections, media tend to pay less attention to them and when media does cover them, the framing of them tends to be in terms of the main agenda of the first order election (Reif and Schmitt 1980) Thus, in the context of the UK, national elections would be considered first order elections as more policy making power lies with the UK government whereas local elections would be considered second or third order (Rallings and Thrasher 2005), while devolved elections to the national parliament of Scotland and the national assemblies of Wales and Northern Ireland would be considered second order (McAllister 2004). A referendum vote would also be considered second order (see Svensson 2002, for example). Research on the second order elections Reif and Schmitt (1980) used as the example of second order elections, European Parliamentary Elections, demonstrates conclusively that there is a paucity of news coverage on these elections and it tends to be focused on national (first order) issues rather than European issues (de Vreese et al. 2009, de Vreese et al. 2006, de Vreese et al. 2005). We note that the devolved elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have not been held concurrently with national elections. In general, second order elections receive less coverage than first order elections even if not held concurrently. Thus we would not expect as much coverage of the devolved elections as we would of a general election. But in addition, higher order elections—even second order ones—receive greater media attention and we would therefore expect to see these effects when elections are held concurrently. The question was which of the referendum or devolved elections would be regarded as higher order.

When concurrent elections are held, second and third order elections may benefit from voters who are engaged by the first order election and are thus more likely to vote than they may otherwise have been. On the other hand, less important elections or offices ‘down the ballot’ may suffer from an information deficit as attention is diverted to the putatively more important contests. Much of the research on concurrent elections has inevitably taken place in the US because of the frequency with which concurrent elections occur there. Although it is important to bear in mind that the US has a very different political system from the UK’s the findings are suggestive. In the US, where first order elections such as presidential elections are routinely held at the same time as races for state

and local level government, national, state *and* local media pay more attention to first order contests due to the competitiveness or importance these races are accorded (Fridkin Kahn 1995). This differential media coverage has implications for levels of knowledge and interest in the different contests (Wolak 2009).

As indicated above, the richer the information environment (i.e., the more media attention) the greater the potential for learning and also engagement in the campaign. Therefore, where information is great in one of the concurrent elections, voters will be more informed about that election. However, the trade-off is that those voters will be less informed about the other elections yet may still cast a vote due to engagement in the first order election. The result, one might assume, is that this second vote is less informed. In the specific context of May 5th 2011, where elections to national assemblies were held the PVS referendum may have been treated as less important. On the other hand when the PVS referendum was combined with local elections, we might expect them to receive equal treatment in the local media. However, giving a conclusive answer about trade-offs between engagement in the less important election due to being combined with a more salient election and casting a potentially uninformed vote in that election is difficult because we have no comparison.

3. Sampling: News & Information Sources

Our study of the impact of the concurrent elections on media coverage in the UK investigated a range of media outlets. Given the range of sources used by voters both in terms of types of outlets and national and regional focus, it was important to gain a representation of sources. Furthermore, it was necessary to examine coverage under different contexts – where the referendum vote was held concurrently with other elections and where the referendum was held on its own. This allows us to draw conclusions across a range of contexts as well as types of media. In the section below we describe the methods we used to select the media outlets, the locations for analysis, and the methods for collecting and coding the data. We report on the reliability tests conducted to ensure the data are of high quality in the Appendix.

For our sample of media and information outlets we covered a broad range in terms of medium (print, broadcast, online and advertisements) nationally and in regions of the United Kingdom. We captured and coded content from 16 March until two days after the election (53 days). We covered 41 outlets every day after March 16th, including regional radio news, newspapers and television. The table below shows the specific media outlets coded. Our selection of outlets was intended to capture: 1) The range of sources in terms of types of national news content in particular (e.g., more in depth and serious news compared to the more sensationalist coverage in black top and red top newspapers and between commercial and public broadcasting); 2) The largest audience shares for national and regional media; 3) A regional range of outlets in order to assess differences due to the mix of scheduled elections (e.g. assembly elections in Wales and local elections in some areas of England).

For print we coded the major national press (broadsheets, mid-markets and tabloids) and the major Scottish editions of national newspapers which were included in the regional sub-set of papers for our analysis. Other content analysis of press tends to focus on certain pages of press coverage only (see Deacon et al. 2001) and selects for analysis only election related stories. We felt that in order to meet the aims of the Commission it was necessary to scan the entire news section and to code (at least for topic) all news stories. This approach allows a comparison of the election agenda to the total news agenda and permits us to make reliable comparisons across the different outlet formats.

For television and radio broadcasts we covered all national news broadcasts and broadcasts in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and Manchester. Our strategy in selecting national and local media outlets was to capture those most read, watched or listened to in the national media systems and local outlets in cities that were holding local elections such as Manchester or the PVS referendum alone (London). The online sources were three of the most popular blogs in the UK according to Alexa traffic ranks (www.alexa.com), and the BBC website because, along with *The Guardian*, it is the most visited news site. In addition to the online, print and broadcast news sources, we captured paid and free advertising as well as a sample of campaign literature. Our scan of newspapers captured advertising in print whilst scheduled party broadcasts were captured via the same procedures as the daily news broadcasts. Party campaign literature (directly mailed or delivered to voters) represents a significant source of campaign information and we therefore captured this content for the same areas as our coverage of regional press and broadcasts. Our methods for capturing this content are explained in an Appendix at the end of this report.

Table 1: Media Outlets

Description	Name	Description	Name
Print		Print	
National	<p><i>Broadsheets</i></p> <p>The Daily Telegraph The Guardian The Times</p> <p><i>Black Top</i></p> <p>Daily Express Daily Mail</p> <p><i>Red Top</i></p> <p>Daily Mirror Sun</p>	<p>Scottish Edition of National</p> <p>Scottish newspapers</p> <p>Northern Irish newspapers</p> <p>Welsh newspapers</p> <p>London</p> <p>Manchester</p>	<p><i>Black Top</i></p> <p>Scottish Daily Express Scottish Daily Mail</p> <p><i>Red Top</i></p> <p>Scottish Sun</p> <p><i>Broadsheet</i></p> <p>The Herald</p> <p><i>Tabloid</i></p> <p>The Daily Record</p> <p><i>Broadsheet</i></p> <p>The Belfast Telegraph</p> <p><i>Tabloid</i></p> <p>Irish News News Letter</p> <p><i>Tabloid</i></p> <p>Western Mail Daily Post South Wales Evening Post</p> <p>Evening Standard</p> <p>Manchester Evening News</p>

Broadcast		Online	
TV	BBC News at 10pm ITV News 10pm Channel 4 7pm Sky 9pm	Online only	Conservative Home Guido Fawkes Left Foot Forward
Radio	BBC Radio 1 Newsbeat Radio 4 Today 7.30-8.30am Radio Good Morning Wales 7.30-8am BBC Radio Scotland 7.30-8am BBC Radio Ulster 7.30-8am	Online news	bbc.co.uk/news
Regional TV	BBC Wales 6.30-7pm BBC Scotland 6.30-7pm BBC Newsline (N. Ireland) 6.30-7pm BBC London News 6.30-7pm BBC North West Tonight 6.30-7pm Ulster 6-6.30pm BBC2 Newsnight Scottish Newsnight	Advertising	Paid Newspaper Free TV Campaign Literature

4. Results I: National Media Coverage

a. The News Agenda

Our approach to studying the media content was to analyse all news stories for topics in order to determine the place of the elections and the PVS referendum in the overall news agenda. Without placing election and referendum coverage in the context of other news, it is difficult to determine whether there was substantial coverage or not. By assessing the weight given to election and referendum stories relative to other stories, we can demonstrate the potential exposure of citizens to news and information about the referendum and election. The news agenda is measured by counting the stories devoted to particular topics during a particular time. About 7% of the “newshole” across all media—defined as the total amount of news devoted to the elections or referendum as a proportion of the total space or time where such news could appear—was devoted to election or referendum stories. We cannot say how this figure compares to a general election but

we can contextualize its meaning by comparing the amount of news about the referendum and elections in comparison to other topics during the period of our study.³

Table 2a below shows the placement of the topics of the referendum and elections in the press, television and radio broadcast news. The table shows the top 8 topics covered in each of the outlets. Where the election and PVS referendum were not among the top 8 topics, we indicate their rank in the news agenda.

There were many other events that dominated the news agenda in the lead up to the elections. Event driven news tends to dominate and this campaign period was no exception. The civil unrest and suppression in Middle East and North African countries, for example, dominated broadsheet and national television coverage. Other events such as the Royal Wedding also consumed space in the news. In newspapers, it was these stories rather than election stories that tended to dominate. In the newspapers, news agendas were fairly similar across the broadsheets with the election and PVS referendum stories outside the top 10 topics covered.

³ We do not have comparable data from the British General election as past studies have only captured and coded election related stories rather than analyzing the entire news agenda. We do note that in the previous European parliamentary election, approximately 6% of news stories on national outlets (BBC and ITV news and the Guardian, Sun and Telegraph in the 3 weeks prior to the election in June 2009) focused on the European election (see Schuck et al. 2011). We caution against direct comparisons given the limited sample of outlets that do not include local and regional outlets. Furthermore, the newspapers stories focused on a limited number of pages but do include all stories mentioning Europe from any page. Despite these limits it does provide some context for understanding the 'newshole' in a different election context.

Table 2a: National News Media Agenda – Newspapers

Rank	Daily Telegraph	Guardian	The Times
1	Crime	MENA civil unrest/developments	MENA civil unrest/developments
2	Royal Wedding	Crime	Crime
3	Celebrity News	Economy	Economy
4	MENA civil unrest/developments	NHS	NHS
5	NHS	Celebrity News	Celebrity News
6	Education	Political Propriety/scandal	Political Propriety/scandal
7	Economy	Education	Education
8	Political Propriety/scandal	Royal Wedding	Royal Wedding
	13th PVS Referendum	11th PVS Referendum	11th PVS Referendum
	16th Elections	13th Elections	13th Elections

Rank	Daily Mail	Daily Mirror	The Sun
1	Celebrity News	Celebrity News	Crime
2	Crime	Crime	Celebrity News
3	Royal Wedding	Local Interest	MENA civil unrest/developments
4	MENA civil unrest/developments	Royal Wedding	Royal Wedding
5	Political Propriety/scandal	MENA civil unrest/developments	Local Interest
6	Economy	NHS	Economy
7	NHS	Political Propriety/scandal	Military/ Defence
8	Local Interest	Economy	Political Propriety/scandal
	12th PVS Referendum	12th PVS Referendum	13th PVS Referendum
	17th Elections	18th Elections	21st Elections

The agenda across the tabloid press was also similar but focused most on crime and celebrity news and also devoted a lot of space to the Royal Wedding. Like the broadsheets, the elections and the PVS referendum were far down the list. It is clear, however, that in both the tabloid and broadsheet press the PVS referendum was higher on the agenda than the regional elections.

Table 2b: National News Media Agenda – Television Broadcasts

Rank	BBC News 10pm	ITV News 10pm
1	MENA civil unrest/developments	MENA civil unrest/developments
2	Crime	Japan (tsunami/earthquake)
3	Elections	Crime
4	Economy	Royal Wedding
5	Japan (tsunami/earthquake)	Military/Defence
6	PVS Referendum	Economy
7	NHS	Celebrity News
8	European Union	PVS Referendum
		13th Elections

Rank	Channel 4	Sky News
1	MENA civil unrest/developments	MENA civil unrest/developments
2	Crime	Crime
3	Economy	Japan (tsunami/earthquake)
4	PVS Referendum	Royal Wedding
5	Royal Wedding	Economy
6	Natural Disasters	Military/Defence
7	Political Propriety/scandal	PVS Referendum
8	Education	Celebrity News
	9th Elections	10th Elections

In Table 2b above we show the placement of election and PVS referendum stories in national television news broadcasts. As in national newspapers, the PVS referendum was higher up the agenda than the regional elections. Across all broadcasts, the referendum vote was in the top 8 topics in the news. Given fewer stories are covered in news broadcasts than newspapers, it is expected that the agenda is contracted and less diverse than in newspapers but it is worthwhile noting that the rank order of referendum to election stories is consistent with newspapers, except for the BBC where election stories outnumbered referendum stories. This appears to be because the BBC devoted attention to each of the regional elections which, in total, meant that they outnumbered stories on the referendum. When comparing the agenda of television news to newspapers, there are two issues, the NHS and education, that newspapers focused on that for the most part did not appear among the top issues covered by television news (with the exception of Education at number 8 position on Channel 4). It seems to be the prominence of these two issues in newspapers then that pushed election and referendum news further down the agenda in newspapers.

Greater coverage of the referendum than the regional elections is also consistent across radio and blogs, as shown in Table 2c. Moreover, unlike the traditional media, in the blogs the PVS referendum was the top topic covered. Rather than being beyond 10th place or at the low end of the top 8, it was the most frequent topic of stories on blogs. Therefore, citizens reading blogs would have been exposed to a lot of information on the PVS referendum (though see below on the very low exposure to blogs in the UK).

Table 2c: National News Media Agenda – Radio, Blogs and Web

Rank	Radio	Blogs	bbc.co.uk (see note)
1	MENA civil unrest/developments	PVS Referendum	Elections
2	Crime	Economy	PVS Referendum
3	Royal Wedding	Political Propriety/scandal	Other
4	Economy	Elections	Crime
5	Japan (tsunami/earthquake)	NHS	MENA civil unrest/developments
6	NHS	MENA civil unrest/developments	Local Interest
7	PVS Referendum	Education	Economy
8	Elections	Local Government/Planning	NHS

Table 2d: Sub-Themes in Election and PVS Referendum Stories: Top 6 Themes

	<u>PVS Referendum Stories</u>					<u>Election Stories</u>				
	<u>Newspapers</u>	<u>TV</u>	<u>Radio</u>	<u>Blogs</u>	<u>bbc.co.uk</u>	<u>Newspapers</u>	<u>TV</u>	<u>Radio</u>	<u>Blogs</u>	<u>bbc.co.uk</u>
Campaigning Strategies (pro/anti AV groups & political parties)	30.7%	16.3%	30.3%	34.4%	43.2%	19.0%	20.0%	14.8%	30.4%	32.5%
Opinion Polls, Focus Groups, 'Horse Race' Issue	18.7%	23.3%	6.1%	17.6%	14.7%	26.4%	15.6%	14.8%	22.8%	9.7%
positions/agendas of political parties	25.7%	39.5%	24.2%	31.3%	29.5%	27.3%	48.9%	25.9%	40.5%	40.9%
Tensions/infighting within political parties	10.7%	23.3%	15.2%	7.6%	10.5%	14.9%	8.9%	3.7%	8.9%	7.6%
Tension/infighting coalition government	30.1%	34.9%	21.2%	7.6%	23.2%					
describe AV/other electoral system (FPTP)	22.3%	20.9%	36.4%	22.1%	48.4%					
Polling Day						9.9%	22.2%	37.0%	6.3%	19.7%
Running/Conduct of Elections						11.4%	6.7%	18.5%	11.4%	18.4%

Table 2e: Actors in Election and PVS Referendum Stories: Top Five Actors Mentioned

<u>PVS Referendum Stories</u>					<u>Election Stories</u>				
<u>Newspapers</u>	<u>TV</u>	<u>Radio</u>	<u>Blogs</u>	<u>bbc.co.uk</u>	<u>Newspapers</u>	<u>TV</u>	<u>Radio</u>	<u>Blogs</u>	<u>bbc.co.uk</u>
Clegg	Cameron	Milliband	Anti-AV Campaign	Cameron	Clegg	SNP	Professional Group	Conservative Party	Political Parties
Cameron	Clegg	Professional Group	Clegg	Clegg	Lib Dem Party	Clegg	Milliband	SNP	SNP
ProAV Campaign	Voters	Cameron	Pro-AV Campaign	Professional Group	SNP	Milliband	Voters	Other Political Parties	Voters
Anti-AV Campaign	Lib Dem Minister	Clegg	Cameron	Labour MP	Cameron	DUP	SNP	Other conservative candidate	Other Labour MP
Milliband	Pro AV	Pro AV Campaign	Professional Group	Pro AV Campaign	Milliband	Cameron	Clegg	Lib Dem Party	Criminals

b. The Election and PVS Referendum Agenda

Within each election and PVS referendum story we coded the sub-themes in order to capture how the election or vote was being framed. In Table 2d we show the top 6 sub-themes in each of election and PVS referendum stories. In the table, the numbers do not sum to 100 per cent as more than one sub-theme could be covered in a single news story. Therefore, the percentages are the proportion of stories mentioning that particular sub-theme. Within election and referendum stories in the national media, the main themes were campaign strategies, the horse race, party positions and tensions within parties. In addition to those topics, in PVS referendum stories infighting within the coalition also featured as well as descriptions of the alternative vote and FPTP electoral systems. The description of the electoral system, which would provide voters with the most practical information, was a prominent sub-theme in PVS referendum stories. Indeed, it was the most popular sub-theme amongst bbc.co.uk and radio stories. Therefore, those being exposed to referendum stories in the national media would have had information both about party positions and also factual information about the alternative systems. Polling day and the conduct of the elections round out the top 6 sub-themes in election stories. For each of these, they do not feature prominently and are mentioned in fewer than 20 per cent of stories with the exception of polling day on UK wide television and radio. The sub-themes of polling day and the conduct of elections did not feature prominently and were mentioned in fewer than 10 per cent of stories,

In Table 2e, we list the top five actors mentioned in election and PVS stories. We are interested in national (UK wide) outlets and we have therefore grouped all elections, whether national, regional or local, together. We are thus more likely to see national actors than those leading parties contesting the devolved elections, such as Alex Salmond of the SNP. The main actors in both election and PVS referendum stories were mostly the prime minister and the deputy prime minister. The pro and anti AV campaigns featured prominently in PVS stories while the leader of the opposition Ed Miliband featured prominently in election stories (in addition to the leaders of the coalition government). Professional groups, such as unions and professional association such as NHS doctors, also featured as top five actors in some outlets. NHS reform was covered in a number of stories as a related election issue so NHS doctors did feature in these stories.

c. The Amount of Coverage

We next turn to the question of the relative amount of coverage at the national level. The figures below show the change in the attention the media gave to the election and the referendum. As with most event led coverage, we expect the attention to have increased as May 5th drew closer. Of course the news agenda is finite and when coverage increases on one or two topics, we expect it to be relative to declines on other topics. The figures presented below are structured such that the coverage for a week is summed together and the week furthest to the left is the first week of our data collection and furthest from election date. We also report the coverage in the two days after the election (-1). The data are disaggregated and then reported by type of outlet and we report the actual number of stories rather than proportions as we are interested in change at this point rather than relative levels.

We see in Figure 3a that across all media there was an increase in the number of stories on the PVS referendum in all national outlets. The increase was most marked among newspapers. Of course, the number of stories possible in newspapers is greater. However, if we compare (see Figure 3b) we see that the increase over the campaign in election stories was smaller than the growing interest in PVS referendum stories. Therefore, while the national press paid relatively equal attention to the election and PVS referendum seven weeks out from voting day, the increase in attention to the PVS referendum was greater than for election stories. This was particularly marked in national newspapers. The exception to this general trend is *bbc.co.uk*. We used a different selection criterion for stories from *bbc.co.uk*, so we naturally have higher numbers of election and PVS referendum stories compared to other topics, but we should be able to track the evolution of media attention to the election and referendum comparatively. We see that contrary to other outlets, the number of election stories featured on *bbc.co.uk* increased dramatically in the last weeks (and in the post-election period), jumping to almost 80 in the week prior to the election/referendum and then over 100 after the election (see Figure 3b). In contrast the number of PVS referendum stories was constant at around 20 during the same period on *bbc.co.uk*. These results should be taken in context with the finding in the public opinion section that a large share of the population claims to use *bbc.co.uk* as a source of information.

Figure 3a: Number of PVS Referendum Stories During Campaign in National Media

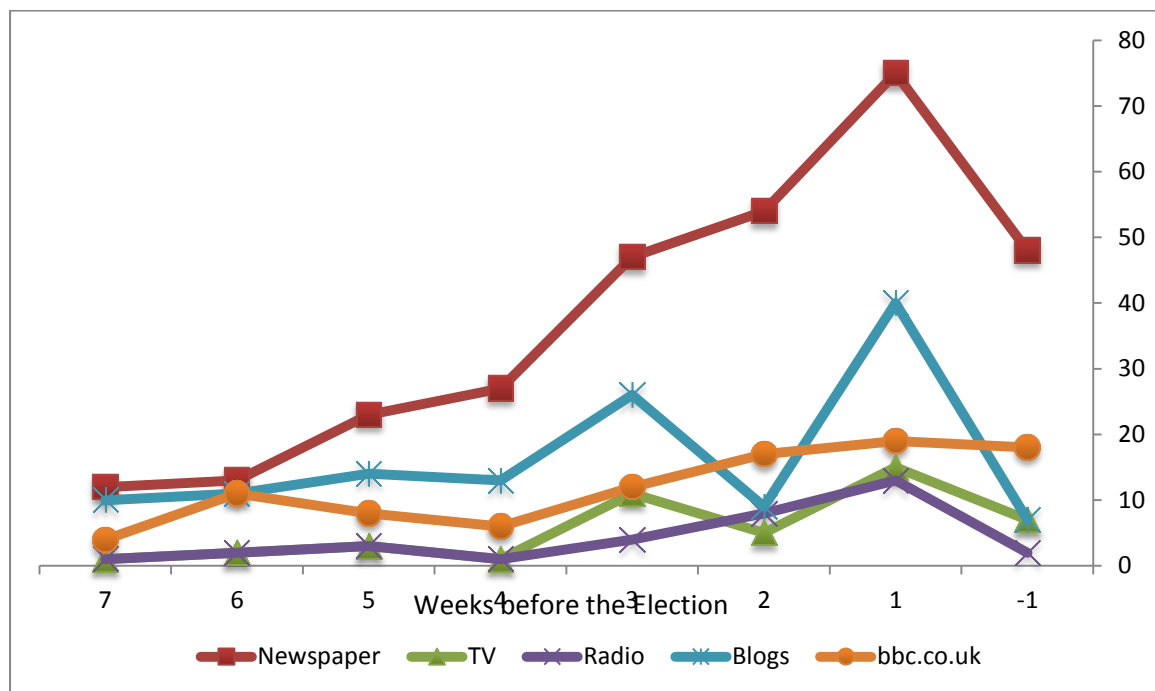
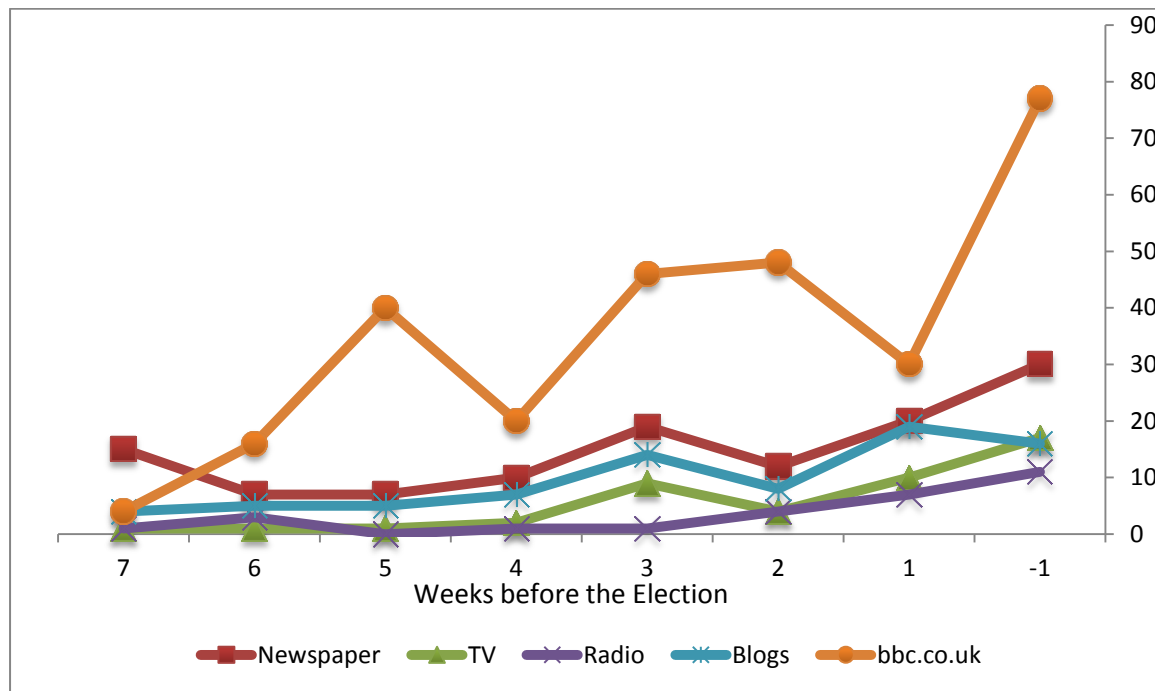


Figure 3b: Number of Election Stories During Campaign in National Media



Beyond the frequency of stories about the referendum and elections, another indication of how salient these stories were in the media is to examine the amount of space or time devoted to the topics. Each outlet has a finite space in which to present stories and an indication of the story's importance is not just whether the story is covered but also how much space or time is devoted to it. We show the length of stories on the parliament and assembly elections and the referendum in Figures 4 and 5. Each bar in the figures represents the proportion of stories on the election and referendum as we advance in story length. Thus if the height of bars is greatest on the left-hand side of the figure and declines as we move along the x-axis, it indicates a higher proportion of shorter stories; bars whose height increases as the x-axis values increase indicates that there was a higher proportion of relatively long stories. To provide some guidance about what, for example, a 200 word story implies, a broadsheet like *The Guardian* will regularly feature half page stories, including photographs, of 4-500 words on the front page, while inside pages contain about 1500 words of text, often split between two or three stories. A tabloid like *The Daily Mail* has fewer words on the front page—often about 100—while a full page of news on an inside page contains about 1000 words of text.

For the PVS referendum stories and election stories in Figures 4 and 5, national newspapers tended to present stories about both topics in less than 500 words. In both figures, a majority of stories were less than 500 words with the proportion of stories declining as the length increases. Because we have grouped stories of 1000 words or more into a single category, the proportion in this category tends to be larger. However, if we did break this down into smaller categories we would see the proportion of stories declining. In general, this category is made up of election and PVS referendum stories in the broadsheets. In comparing election to PVS stories, there is a small difference with more election stories of shorter length but these are not substantial. However, these are only small differences, using length as an indicator, in the salience attributed to the different

topics by the national media. Therefore, while we saw a greater frequency of PVS referendum stories, election stories when they did appear were of equivalent length in national newspapers. We provide a more in depth comparison across the types of stories in the next section.

Figure 4: Length of PVS Referendum Stories in National Newspapers During Campaign

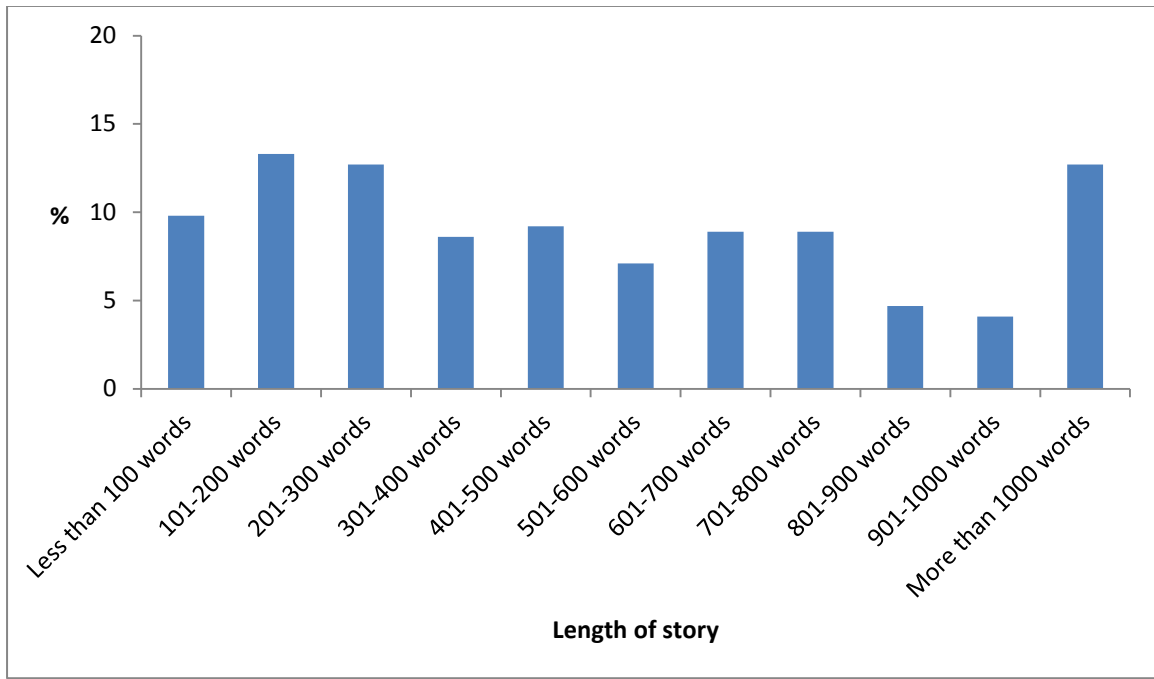


Figure 5: Length of Election Stories in National Newspapers During Campaign

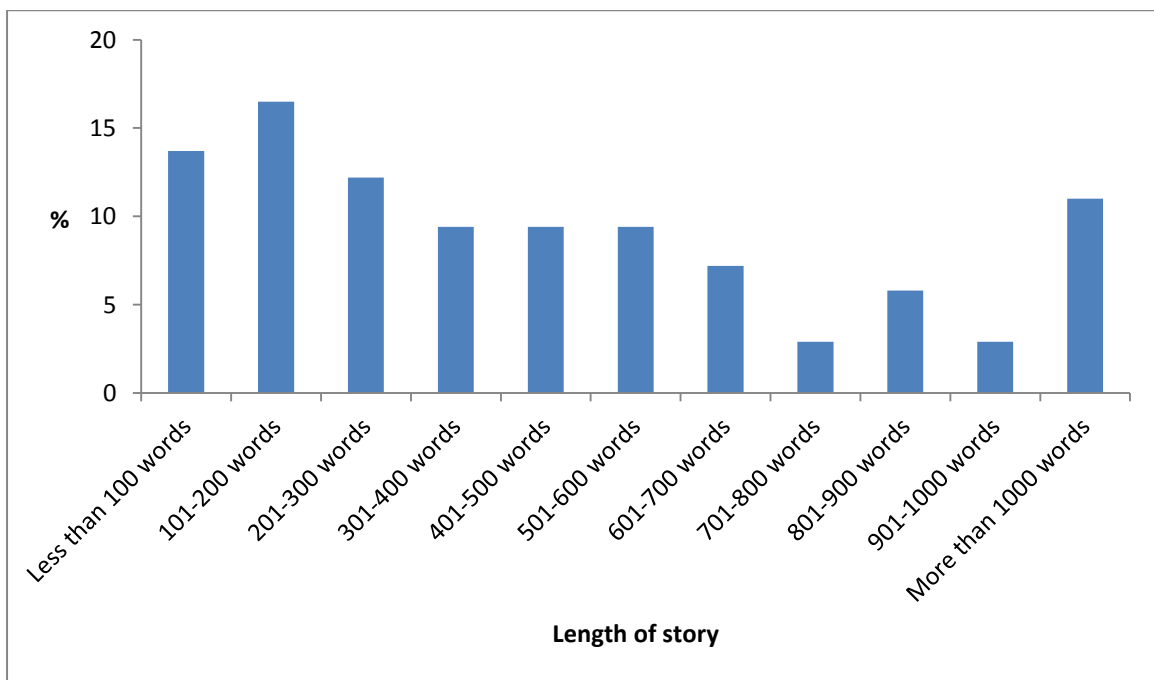


Figure 6: Length of Referendum Stories on TV and Radio During Campaign

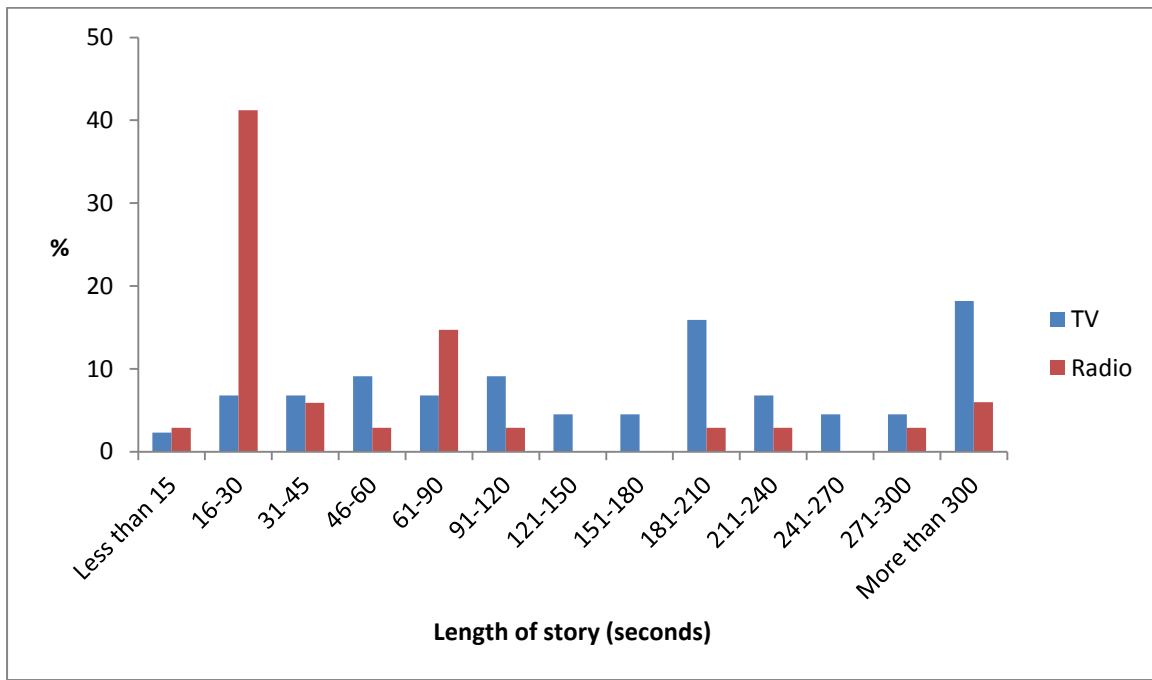
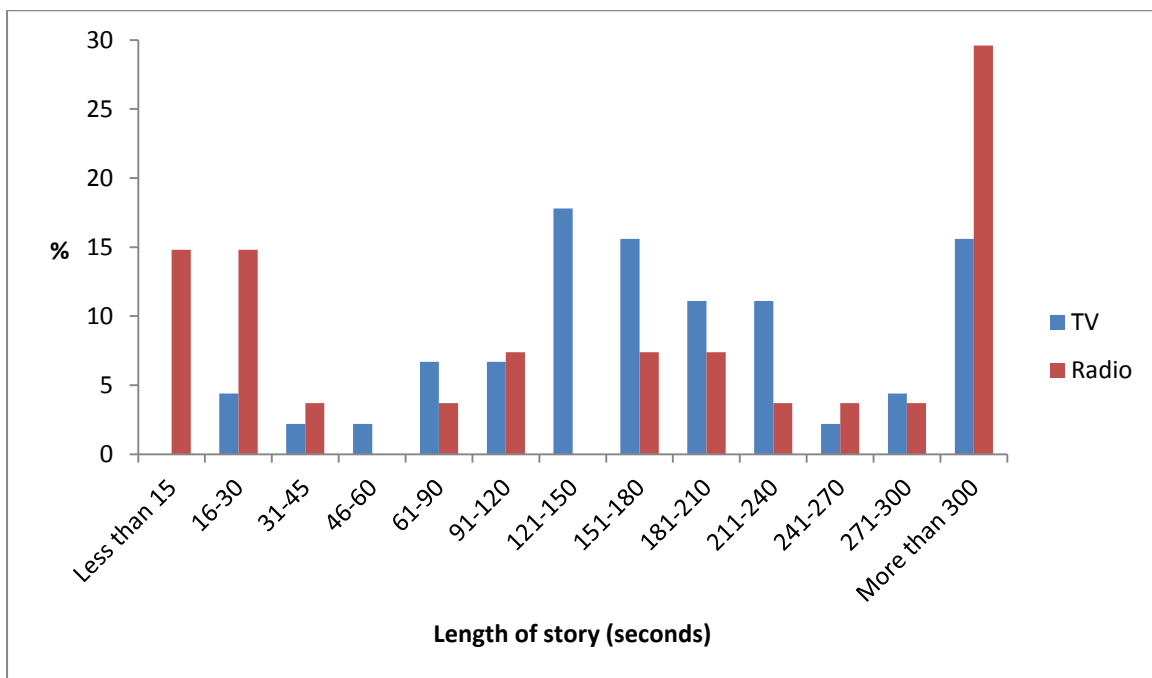


Figure 7: Length of Election Stories on TV and Radio During Campaign



In television and radio stories that focused on the elections or PVS referendum (see Figures 6 and 7), we see a slightly different trend. Radio stories tended to be shorter with a majority of both election and PVS stories taking up less than 30 seconds of airtime. Given that TV and radio formats differ we do not want to make much of the differences across the medium as for TV and radio the proportion of stories declines as the length increases. We do note that in election stories, particularly for TV stories, there was a higher proportion of medium length stories (between 121 and 240 seconds). If we compare the PVS referendum stories we see that most stories were shorter at 30 to 180 seconds. As with newspapers, there was a high proportion in the final category that combined all stories over the length of 300 seconds.

d. Comparing Coverage of Elections vs. the Referendum in National Media

Thus far we have focused on where the elections and the PVS referendum were on the news agenda in the national media and the attention paid to the stories in terms of length. We can think of this as an indicator of “agenda setting”—the idea that consumers of media draw inferences about the importance of a public issue from the attention it receives in the media. In this section we more explicitly compare the coverage of the two topics to assess the relative coverage. In terms of agenda setting, the attention paid by the media to a topic is likely to be reflected in the how important the public think it is (Semetko et al. 1991). In Table 6, the closer a ratio is to 1:1 the more equal coverage of the election and referendum is and the more the public might draw the conclusion that they are equally important.

Table 3 shows how many PVS referendum stories compared to election stories there were across each type of national outlet. In order to capture changes in the ratio of stories over the course of the campaign, these figures are broken down into three time periods leading up to polling day. Across all outlets and in each week, PVS stories outnumbered election stories with the exception the mid-campaign period on blogs and the entire campaign period on bbc.co.uk. Overall, we see a fairly close relationship between election and PVS stories. However, the ratio of election to PVS referendum stories does skew toward referendum stories in the national press as voting day nears. A similar, though to less of an extent, is evident on national radio. The salience of both the elections and referendum increased, as seen in Figures 3a and 3b, but in the national news outlets the salience of the referendum increased to a greater extent relative to local and regional elections. When taken together with the results on regional media (for example, Table 5), we see evidence of the ‘division of labour’ with regional outlets picking up election coverage and the national outlets focusing on the PVS referendum.

The exception to this is the data from bbc.c.uk. Our analysis of the online news coverage on bbc.co.uk shows that the regional and local election coverage gained more attention throughout the campaign than the PVS referendum. This result reflects the structure of bbc.co.uk which has regional and local pages and that we selected stories that mentioned the elections and PVS referendum rather than coding all stories. Therefore, we are only examining a subset of all possible new stories. The three blogs we analysed were similar to national radio in the ratio of coverage of elections to the referendum. As with the other types of outlet this ratio narrowed as polling day approached, with stories running at 1:1.5 in the period prior to the election.

Although we present the results for the online news source (bbc.co.uk) and the blogs alongside the traditional media, it is worth noting some of the elements of coverage on the BBC’s news website and on three of the most popular right and left of centre blogs: Conservative Home, Guido Fawkes and Left Foot Forward. There are some important differences between these online news sources in terms of readership and thus potential for impact on perceptions of the campaigns. On the one hand, readership of blogs remains very much a minority activity in UK politics. The Electoral Commission’s post-election tracker shows fewer than 2% of the sample claiming to have visited one of the three blogs ‘over the past several weeks.’ Perhaps as a result blogs in the UK do not appear to wield the kind of influence over mainstream media that outlets such as the Drudge Report and Huffington Post wield in the United States. On the other hand, one-third of the sample claimed to have visited the BBC’s website, more than the numbers reading the UK’s most popular newspaper, The Sun, or watching BBC television news. The blogs vary in the number of stories they tend to publish each day: Conservative Home is far more active in this sense than Guido Fawkes or Left Foot Forward.

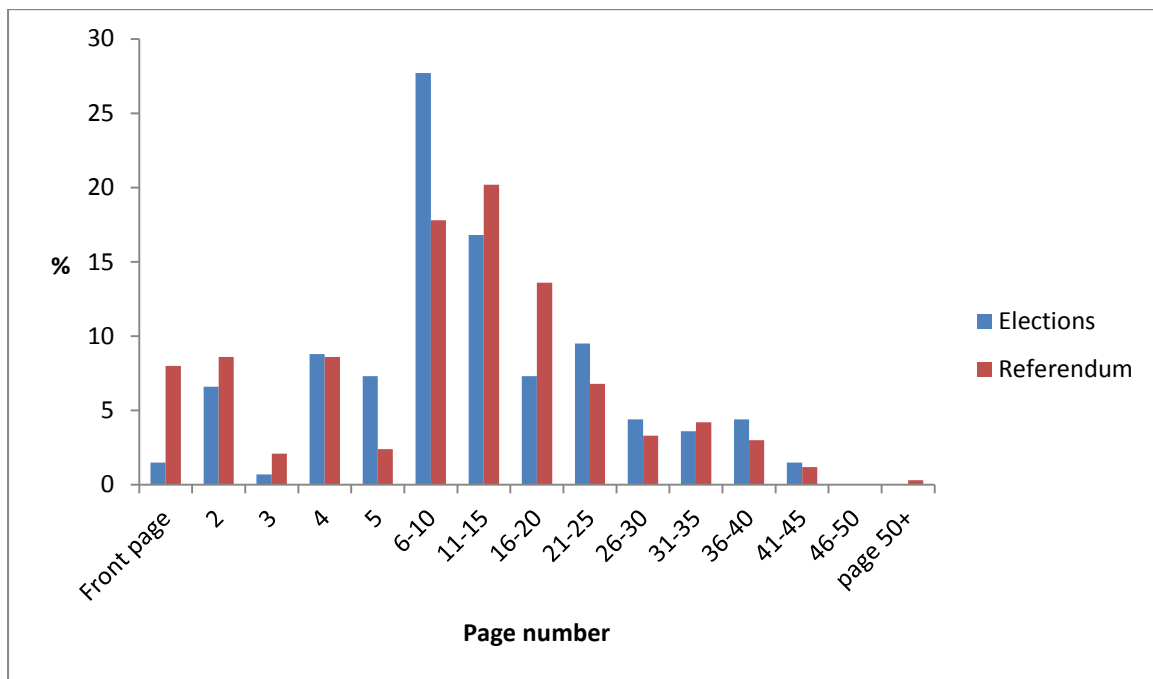
Table 3: National News Media Coverage – Change in Ratio of Election to Referendum Stories During the Campaign

	Number of Election to PVS Referendum Stories (total)	34 – 50 Days before vote	17 – 33 Days before vote	0 – 16 Days before vote
Newspaper	105:282	1:1.2	1:2.2	1:3.8
Television	28:37	1:2	1:1.4	1:1.2
Radio	16:32	1:1.7	1:1.5	1:2.2
Blogs	108:200	1:2.5	1:0.3	1:1.5
bbc.co.uk	365:114	1:0.3	1:0.3	1:0.3

e. Prominence of Coverage

Another indicator of the salience given to a news story is where it occurs in the broadcast or newspaper. Figures 8a-c compare the prominence of PVS and election stories in newspapers and broadcast outlets (TV and radio presented separately). The bars on the left of the graph, in particular the bars representing the proportion of stories on the front page or the bars representing the lead off or one of the top 3 stories in a news broadcast, indicate that prominence was given to the story. Editorial teams, in general, decide which stories will lead so these bars reflect what editorial teams decided were the leading stories of the day (McCombs 2004). In the national press, PVS stories featured more prominently on the front page and front sections of newspapers. Therefore, there was more coverage of the PVS referendum (for example, see in particular Table 3 on this point) and it tended to be more prominent. While the majority of both type of stories were relegated beyond the front section of newspapers (beyond page 5), in the national press, referendum stories were more likely to appear on the front page than election stories.

Figure 8a: Prominence of Coverage in National Newspapers



The same is true of television as newspapers, with more prominence given to the PVS referendum. However, we note that national radio tended to be an exception. Election stories were more prominent, appearing as the leading story in a broadcast more often than on television. Indeed, in the sample of broadcasts we coded, the PVS referendum story did not lead a broadcast (see Figure 8c). Furthermore, far more PVS referendum stories appeared at the tail end of the broadcast than on television news broadcasts. We do note that early on in the campaign radio devoted more stories to the PVS referendum, but as polling day neared and the outcome was more certain, the balance shifted and there was increasingly attention paid to both issues. Therefore, for radio programmes, it appears there was a trade-off between prominence and the amount of coverage. While they devoted more time to PVS than the election, election stories were given prominence in the broadcast when they did air.

Figure 8b: Prominence of Coverage on National Television

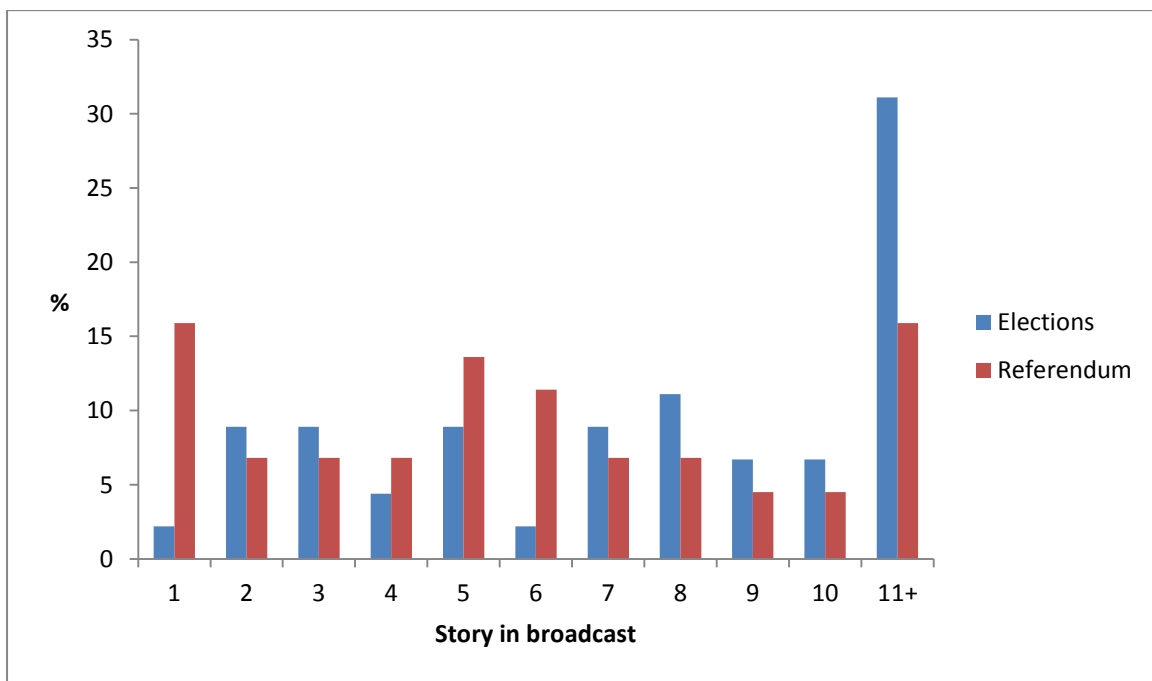
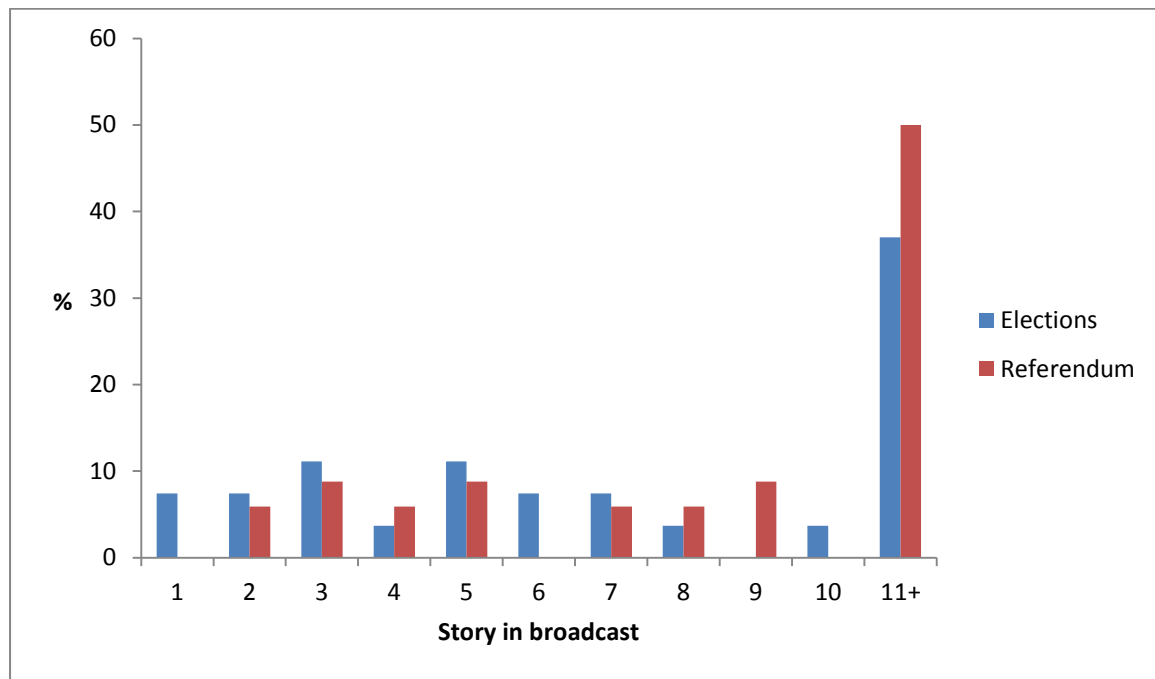


Figure 8c: Prominence of Coverage on National Radio



5. Results II: Regional Media Coverage

a. The News Agenda

As with national coverage, for regional media coverage we look at the amount of attention paid to the parliamentary or assembly elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland compared to the PVS referendum, and in England for the local elections.

As mentioned above, about 7% of the “newshole” across all media was devoted to election or referendum stories. By comparison, there was more coverage of events in the Middle East and of the economy, perhaps understandably, but also more coverage of crime, much more, and of celebrities. If we look at each region separately, the proportions were 8% in Scotland and Northern Ireland and 7% in Wales. Crime and celebrity news were also more prevalent in the regional media, along with stories of local interest. Thus, there was somewhat more attention paid to May 5th in the regional media than in the national media, but were they paying attention to their elections, to the referendum, or to both equally?

We examine the content of coverage by showing the five most common themes in election and referendum stories in regional media. Stories could contain more than one theme. We see from this

that while there was a good deal of focus on the process of the elections in the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish media there was also a substantial proportion of issue-related coverage. For the referendum, however, there was a somewhat different pattern. Media in these nations were less disposed to discuss the issues and stances surrounding the Yes and No campaigns, i.e., the arguments the campaigns were making, more often limiting themselves to a bare description of the different electoral systems in referendum stories.

In London and Manchester, on the other hand, coverage of both the local elections and the referendum lacked substance. For example, the Manchester Evening News' coverage of the local elections was dominated by stories on the running of the elections rather than about the substance or what was at stake in the local elections. Similarly the most common theme in the Evening Standard's coverage of the referendum—there were no local elections in London—was the campaigns' strategies (although this was equalled by stories pertaining to the positions of the two campaigns—see see Table 4b).

Table 4a: Top Five Themes in Election Stories (%)

Scotland	Wales	N. Ireland
Issue positions/agendas of parties (40)	Issue positions/agendas of parties (49)	Issue positions/agendas of parties (34)
Campaign strategies (30)	Campaign strategies (27)	Campaign strategies (23)
'Horserace' (22)	Description of campaign event (26)	Polling day (14)
Description of campaign event (17)	'Horserace' (18)	Description of campaign event (14)
Party spin/public relations/news management (12)	Party spin/public relations/news management (13)	Running/conduct of elections (13)
	Running/conduct of elections (13)	
London	Manchester	
Issue positions/agendas of parties (40)	Running/conduct of elections (65)	
Polling day (40)		
'Horserace' (30)	Issue positions/agendas of parties (13)	
Issue positions/agendas of parties (20)	Tensions/Infighting within parties (10)	
Campaign strategies (10)	Campaign strategies (7)	
Coalition tensions (10)	'Horserace' (7)	
Running/conduct of elections (10)		

Table 4b: Top Five Themes in Referendum Stories (%)

Scotland	Wales	N. Ireland
Description of AV/FPTP (34)	Description of AV/FPTP (39)	Description of AV/FPTP (35)
Issue positions/agendas of parties (30)	Campaign strategies (33)	Campaign strategies (24)
'Horserace' (23)	Issue positions/agendas of parties (26)	'Horserace' (19)
Coalition tensions (19)	'Horserace' (21)	Coalition tensions (19)
Campaign strategies (18)	Coalition tensions (15) Description of campaign event (15)	Issue positions/agendas of parties (14)
London	Manchester	
Campaign strategies (29)	Issue positions/agendas of parties (26)	
Issue positions/agendas of parties (29)	Coalition tensions (22)	
Description of AV/FPTP (27)	Description of AV/FPTP (21)	
Coalition tensions (22)	Description of campaign event (16)	
Description of campaign event (22)	'Horserace' (16)	

b. The Amount of Coverage

In examining the amount of coverage given to the election and PVS referendum in regional and local outlets, we begin with newspapers. We show the length of stories on the parliament and assembly elections and the referendum in Figures 7 and 8, employing the same method as for the length of stories in national media. Figures 7 and 8 show that when the referendum was covered in newspapers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the length of stories was similar. About 50% of stories were 300 or more words long, i.e., about one-third of a tabloid or one-fifth of a broadsheet page, and about one in five were longer than 500 words. In sum, although there were far fewer stories about the referendum than the elections in the regional press when they did appear they were of similar length.

Figure 9a: Length of Election Stories in Newspapers

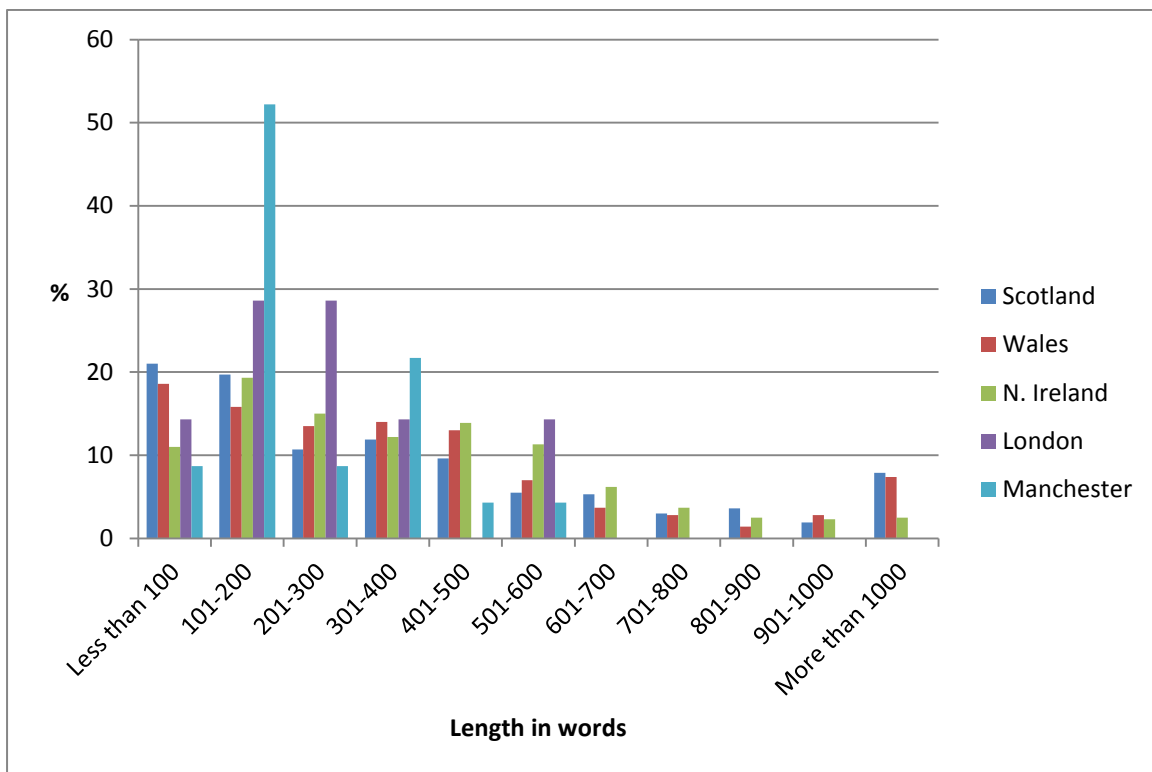


Figure 9b: Length of Referendum Stories in Newspapers

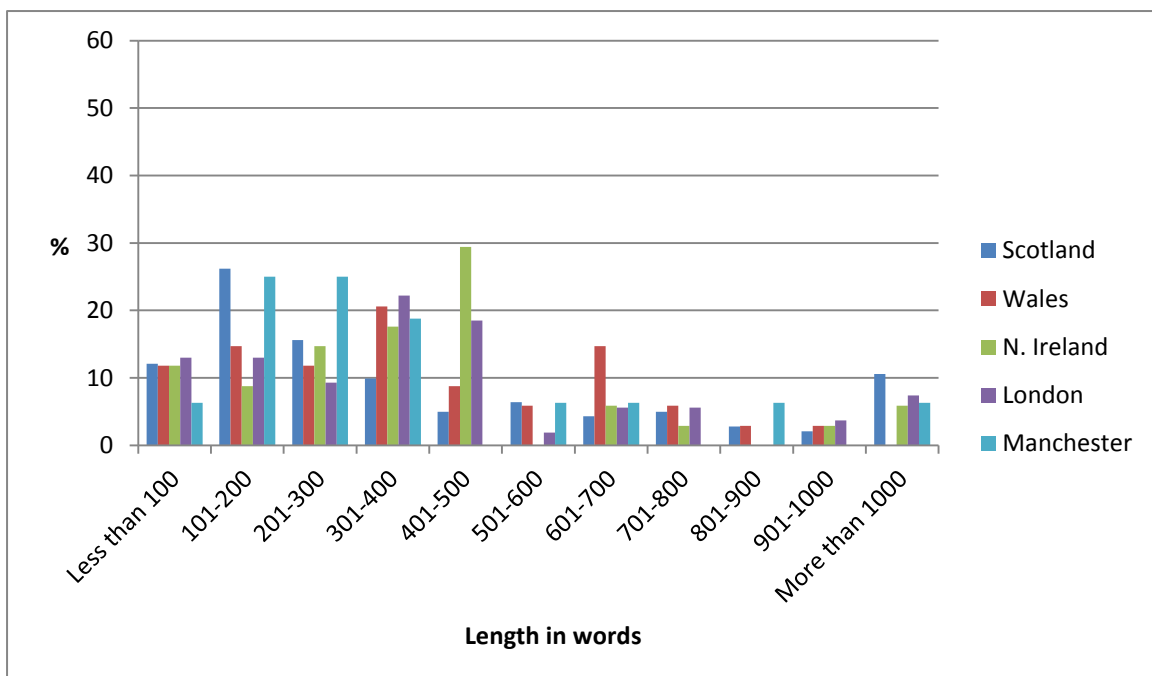
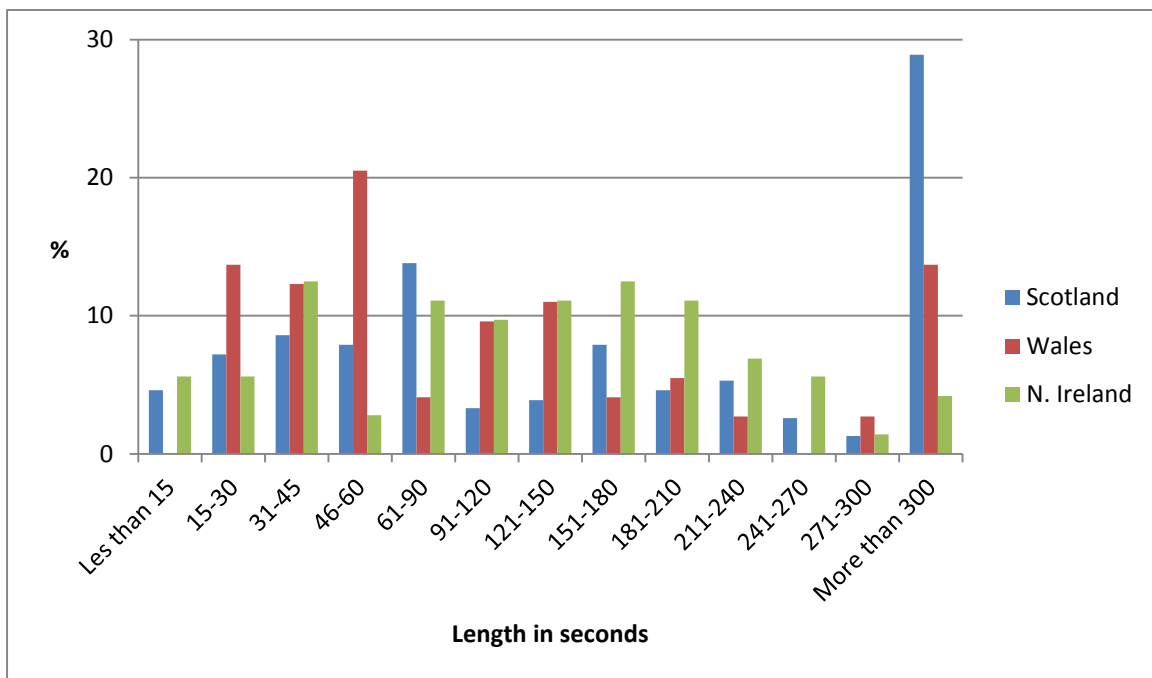


Figure 10: Length of Election Stories on Radio and Television



c. Comparing Coverage of Elections vs. the PVS Referendum

As with the national media, we take the number of stories about the elections, as opposed to the referendum, and compare the ratios. We do this in Tables 5-6c (excluding blogs), in total and split by different kinds of media.

Table 5: Ratio of Election to Referendum Stories

	Number of election stories	Number of referendum stories	Ratio of election stories to referendum stories
National (excluding blogs and bbc.co.uk)	211	416	1: 1.97
Scotland (all)	995	150	1:0.15
<i>Scottish versions of national newspapers</i>	<i>442</i>	<i>101</i>	<i>1:0.23</i>
Wales	321	39	1:0.12
Northern Ireland	425	37	1:0.09
<u>England</u>			
London (no local elections)	10	55	1:5.1
Manchester	31	19	1:0.58

Analysis of total coverage in Table 5 clearly shows the difference between the focus of national and regional media. National media paid more attention to the referendum than to regional and local elections—almost two stories were about the referendum for every one story about the elections—while regional media paid vastly more attention to the elections in their areas than to the referendum. Clearly, the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish media regarded their own elections as “top of the ballot” rather than the referendum (analysis confirms that the vast majority of stories about “elections” in each region were about their own elections; in Northern Ireland four times as many stories were about the assembly elections as about their local elections). In each of these countries for every referendum story there were at least eight stories about the elections.

This begs the question of whether these patterns of coverage were the result of a particular bias in regional media—the referendum would not have got much coverage even in the absence of other elections—or because the presence of other elections pushed the referendum, which failed to spark intense interest, to the background. Of course, we cannot definitively answer this question but the

contrast between London, where there was no election, and Manchester, where there were local elections for one-third of councillors, provides a clue. Manchester’s media looks more like Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland’s, with more attention to their elections than to the referendum, while in London there was a relatively large number of referendum stories. The figures for Scottish versions of national newspapers are also interesting. While the skew towards election coverage was not as great as for other Scottish media outlets election stories still outnumbered referendum stories in these newspapers by 4 to 1. This evidence from London, Manchester and Scotland is at least suggestive that there was no inherent disinclination to cover the referendum in regional media; rather, where regional media faced a pull in two directions of coverage, elections won out over the referendum

A further question is the extent to which this varied across television, radio and newspapers. Tables 6a to 6c provide this analysis. They show little variation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; regardless of the medium, coverage of their elections swamped coverage of the referendum. There is interesting variation, however, in national coverage. While newspapers paid far more attention to the referendum than to the regional and local elections, national television and radio media gave them a roughly equal focus.

Paucity of coverage of the referendum need not reflect a bias in one direction or another; it just suggests that there was relatively little information about the referendum out there in regional media and that the signals in the amount of coverage from regional media were that the referendum mattered less than the elections. If regional media saw their role as providing balance to a national media focus that they expected would be on the referendum, for example, coverage did not reflect a bias against the referendum but a tacit division of labour with national media.

Table 6a: Ratio of Election to Referendum Stories by Media Type: Television

	Number of election stories	Number of referendum stories	Ratio of election stories to referendum stories
National	45	43	1:0.96
Scotland	98	5	1: 0.05
Wales	51	2	1: 0.04
Northern Ireland	63	2	1: 0.03
<u>England</u>			
London	3	1	1:0.33
Manchester	8	3	1:0.38

Table 6b: Ratio of Election to Referendum Stories by Media Type: Radio

	Number of election stories	Number of referendum stories	Ratio of election stories to referendum stories
National	27	34	1:1.26
Scotland	54	4	1:0.07
Wales	22	3	1:0.14
Northern Ireland	9	1	1:0.11
<u>England</u>			
London	n/a	n/a	n/a
Manchester	n/a	n/a	n/a

Table 6c: Ratio of Election to Referendum Stories by Media Type: Newspapers

	Number of election stories	Number of referendum stories	Ratio of election stories to referendum stories
National	139	338	1:2.43
Scotland	843	141	1:0.17
Wales	248	34	1:0.14
Northern Ireland	353	34	1:0.10
<u>England</u>			
London	7	54	1:7.71
Manchester	23	16	1:0.70

d. Prominence of Coverage

We illustrate the prominence of coverage of the parliament and assembly elections and the referendum in Figures 11 and 12. Figure 11a shows the prominence of newspaper coverage of the elections and Figure 11b the prominence of newspaper coverage of the referendum, as indicated by the page number where it appeared. As above for the length of coverage, each bar represents the

proportion of coverage on a page or range of pages as we advance through the newspaper. Thus larger bars on the x-axis from pages 1 to 5, for example, indicate more stories appeared in the first five pages.

Figure 11a shows that the elections in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England were rarely front page news. In Wales, however, the assembly elections were often a page 2 story and about half of election stories there were featured in the first five pages of the newspapers we analysed. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, the elections were featured less prominently, with most coverage in pages 6 to 15 (there were too few stories in the Evening Standard and Manchester Evening News for reliable analysis).

Figure 11a: Prominence of Election Stories in Newspapers

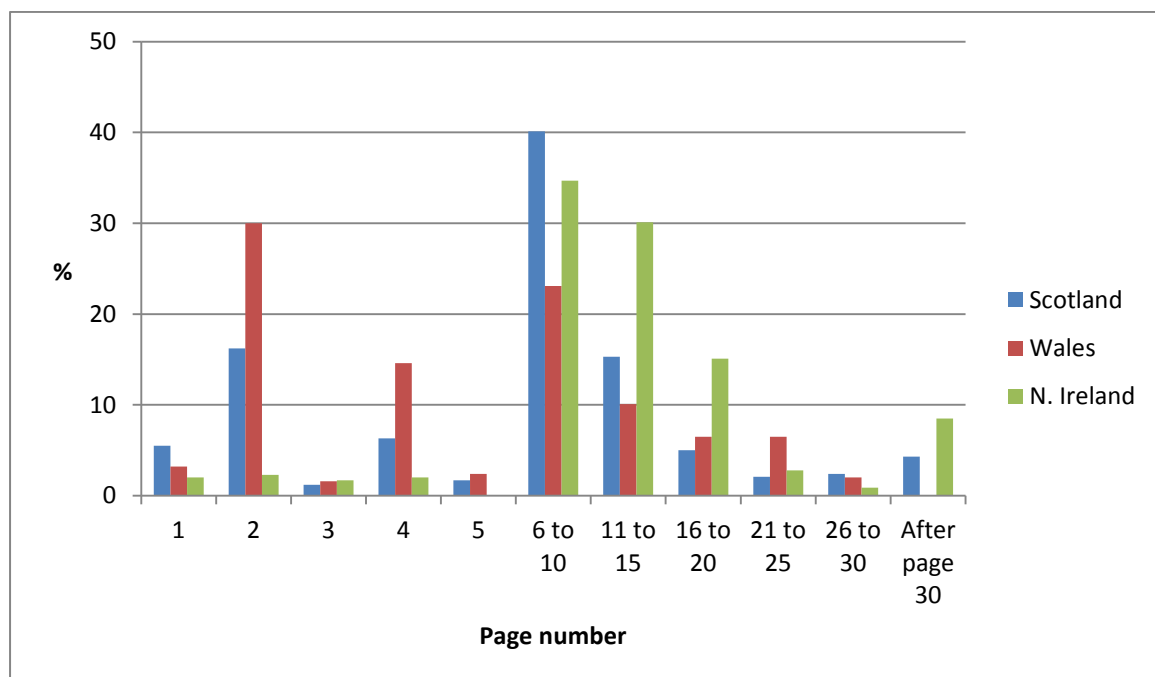


Figure 11b: Prominence of Referendum Stories in Newspapers

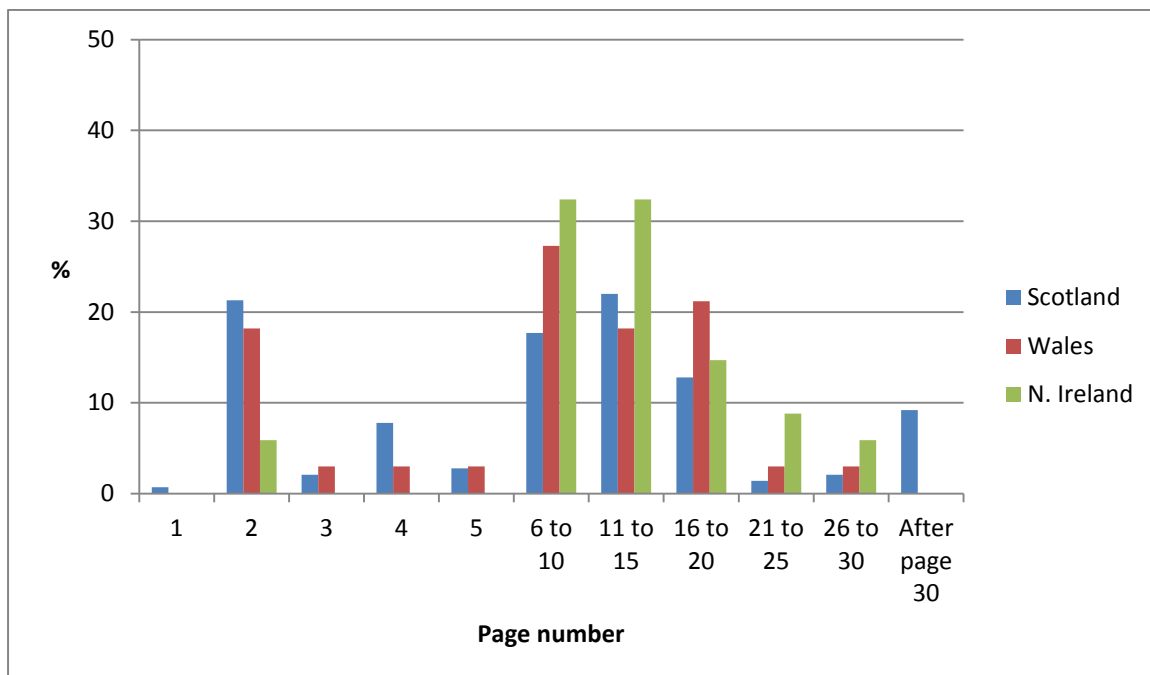
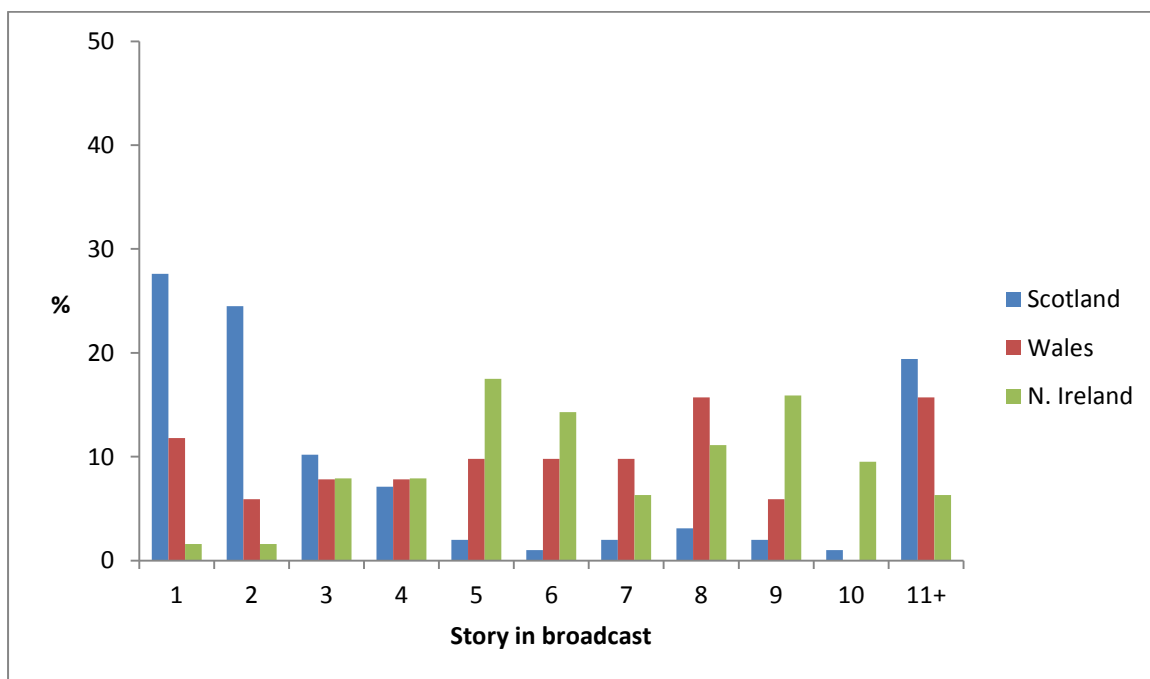


Figure 11b shows that the prominence of newspaper stories about the referendum did not differ much from those about elections. The referendum was not front page news and most stories appeared on pages 6 to 15.

Figure 12: Prominence of Election Stories on TV



On regional television, on the other hand, as Figure 12 above illustrates, election stories were more often the first item of news, particularly in Scotland. Indeed, the patterns here appear to reflect the excitement of each election. In Scotland, where there was considerable movement in the polls, the election was prominently covered, in Wales less so, and in Northern Ireland even less. There were too few television news stories about the referendum for us to present a parallel figure but suffice it to say that the referendum was never the top story in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.⁴

6. PVS Advertising & Party Broadcasts

Starting on Monday, April 4th (in Northern Ireland) and ending on Tuesday, May 3rd each nation in the United Kingdom saw television advertising from major and minor parties about local (England), assembly (Wales and Northern Ireland) and parliament elections (Scotland). In addition, the Yes and No campaigns in the referendum each aired two advertisements nationally.

a. PVS Referendum

The No to AV campaign's advertisements aired on April 11th and May 2nd. The first ad focused exclusively on what the campaign argued were faults with AV, featuring 1980s fictional MP Alan B'Stard at its beginning. The second, although still pointing to many of the putative flaws of AV, also referred to the need to keep one-person-one-vote, indicating a positive feature of first-past-the-post as well as the flaws with the alternative on offer. The first advertisement, paralleling No to AV campaign leaflets, presented three vignettes to illustrate the arguments that AV would make manifestos meaningless, allow less popular candidates to win, and introduce incomprehensible complexity to voting, including allowing some voters more than one vote. The second advertisement featured MPs who supported the No campaign. The spokespeople heard from and the MPs who appeared in the background during the narration were principally Labour MPs such as David Blunkett, John Reid, Hazel Blears and Caroline Flint. It repeated the arguments from the first advertisement. David Cameron was the only Conservative to appear in the broadcast, presumably in an effort to emphasize the amount of cross-party support for the No Campaign.

The Yes Campaign's two advertisements were more different in character than the No Campaign's. While the first also featured its principal arguments that AV would make MPs work harder by making seats less safe, empowering voters while also making expenses scandal style corruption less likely, the second concentrated on countering the No Campaign's arguments about complexity and unfairness (while reiterating the principal arguments of the Yes campaign at its conclusion). With

⁴ We do not discuss our analysis of the main actors in regional, as well as national, media. It shows what we would expect given the preceding analysis: we again see the tendency of the media to focus on incumbent parties while opponents receive relatively short shrift, and that the amount of attention other parties receive is strongly correlated with their standing in the polls. The single exception to this pattern was Northern Ireland, where both unionist parties received more attention than the DUP's partner in government Sinn Fein. With regard to referendum coverage, we see again that the Liberal Democrats tended to be most strongly associated with the referendum, while the Yes and No Campaigns were barely mentioned.

television presenter and historian Dan Snow as narrator, it used the scenario of ten people of about university age who are trying to decide whether to go to the pub or a coffee shop. It tried to illustrate both that people incorporate second preferences when making group decisions in everyday life because it is fairer—a majority of the ten want to go to the pub but cannot agree on a particular pub but it would be unfair, the ad suggests, if the ten thus went to the coffee shop because it has the support of a plurality—and also that ranking preferences is not complex. Thus the Yes Campaign’s ads did not feature any known politicians (the first advertisement featured actors playing buffoonish MPs), seemingly to reinforce its anti-status quo message and the second advertisement appeared designed to appeal in particular to younger voters, who polls suggested were more supportive of AV.

b. Election Advertising

While there was considerable variation in advertisements across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there were also some common themes. For example, government at all levels and regardless of incumbency is currently taking place in the context of public expenditure cuts. Reference to these cuts was almost ubiquitous. We will thus begin by looking at television advertising as a whole.

There were a total of 68 party advertisements in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the 2011 campaigns. The main parties in each country had three broadcast slots while minor parties had one or two. Many of the major parties, including the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in England and Scotland, the Liberal Democrats in England and Wales, the SNP in Scotland, and all the main parties in Northern Ireland, aired the same advertisement three times. Other major parties, such as Labour and Plaid in Wales and the Liberal Democrats in Scotland aired one ad twice and another ad once. Thus Labour in England and Scotland were unusual in broadcasting three different advertisements.

Many of the ads, particularly for the major parties, were quite “presidential” in that the advertisement focused exclusively on the leader and his or her thoughts, be it Ed Miliband in England, Annabel Goldie in Scotland or Carwyn Jones in Wales. An exception was Iain Gray, who narrated and appeared in the first two Labour Party advertisements in Scotland. In the context of Labour’s falling numbers in the polls, partly attributable it seems to Gray’s relatively uninspiring leadership, the third Labour advertisement featured actor Richard Wilson speaking. While Iain Gray appeared in some of the film we did not hear from him at all.

- *Advertising Themes*

As Table 7 shows below, the issue most often mentioned in television advertising overall was public expenditure and the effects of cuts. In the devolved regions the cuts were either mentioned as part of the context—often by the incumbent government—or used by other parties who made the case that the incumbent government had been too meek in accepting cuts “from Westminster.” The economy also provided two of the other issues in the top five: taxation and job creation. Education and healthcare were also frequent themes, although it is important to note that they were often

merely mentioned in a list of concerns rather than being explored in detail. In addition, “education” refers to pre-university education—tuition fees or universities were mentioned in 28% of advertisements.

Table 7: Top Five Issues Mentioned (%)

	Total(68 ads)	England (10)	Scotland (20)	Wales (17)	N. Ireland (21)
Public expenditure/ Public services	62	80	30	53	91
Education/ Schools	59	70	35	53	38
NHS/Healthcare	49	60	35	77	33
Taxes/VAT	46	50	40	71	71
Job creation/ Employment prospects	43	10	45	29	67

Table 7 also shows that there was considerable variation across regions, however. Table 8, below, thus provides a different angle on the advertising content by listing the top five issues mentioned in advertising in each nation. This indicates some uniqueness in the issue agendas in each country, particularly in Scotland where the council tax freeze and the desire to keep tuition fees out of Scottish higher education for Scots was frequently mentioned.

Two other elements of the themes in television advertising are also worthy of mention. First, while the major parties very much stuck to the agenda we have discussed, minor parties such as the BNP, UKIP, the Scottish Socialists and People Before Profit (Northern Ireland), were more likely to raise issues such as the integrity of the mainstream parties and the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. Second, none of the advertisements for elections mentioned the voting system or referendum.

Table 8: Top Five Issues Mentioned in Advertising By Nation (%)

England	Scotland	Wales	N. Ireland
1= Public expenditure/ Public services	1 = Council tax 1 = Crime/ Police	1 = NHS/Healthcare	1= Public expenditure/ Public services
2 = Education		2 = Taxes/ VAT	2 = Taxes/ VAT
3 = NHS/Healthcare	3 = Tuition fees/ Universities	3 = Public expenditure/ public services 3 = Education	3 = Job creation/ Employment prospects
4 = Taxes/ VAT 4 = Elderly/Pensions	4 = Taxes/ VAT 4 = Elderly/ Pensions		4 = Crime/ Police
		5 = Unemployment/ job losses	5 = Education 5 = Union (with UK or Republic) 5 = Green issues 5 = Elderly/ Pensions

c. Pamphlets

We collected 81 pieces of campaign literature that had been posted or dropped through letter boxes in 6 different locations. Two areas were in London where only the PVS referendum was held (Ealing and Herne Hill). We also collected material in areas where there were concurrent devolved elections and the PVS referendum (Glasgow and Cardiff). We collected material in an area where in addition to the PVS referendum there was a local election (Manchester). Finally, we also collected material in an area that held local and national assembly elections, as well as the referendum (Belfast). The election material was largely comprised of candidate and party election leaflets in addition to PVS referendum material. However, there were a few pieces of material that were geared towards issues (Belfast City airport) and were informational (i.e. Electoral Commission leaflet). In general, we saw the highest levels of leafleting in areas where concurrent elections were held. Where only local elections were held concurrently with the PVS referendum the leaflets were evenly split. The table below shows the ratio of election leaflets to PVS leaflets.

In Belfast, the ratio of Northern Irish Assembly leaflets to referendum leaflets was 1 to 0.15 while the ratio of PVS leaflets to local election leaflets was 1:0.25. Therefore, election campaigning outstripped the PVS campaign material substantially. For the PVS referendum material was evenly split between the yes and no messages. There were also instances of crossover that we did not see in television advertising, where party campaign literature pushed a particular position on the PVS referendum. For example, a Democratic Unionist Party leaflet promoted a 'no vote'.

It is difficult to compare absolute numbers across the areas to gauge which areas had more intense leafleting because we have a small selection of households. Furthermore, factors other than the number of elections being held, such as the competitiveness of the race and the demographics in the area, would drive the level of leafleting and we do not have the means to control for this. However, we do note that the highest level of campaign material collected was in Cardiff where there was a highly competitive race between the Lib Dem and Labour candidates for the Welsh Assembly. The contest pitted Lib Dem candidate Nigel Howell against Labour candidate Jenny Rathborne. The seat had been vacated by a Lib Dem member. Much of the campaign literature from the Lib Dems focused on the viability of the Lib Dems as the most effective vote to defeat Labour. This was an attempt to counteract the negative consequences of the Lib Dem performance in the coalition. In this competitive election climate (less than .2% separated the candidates in the final vote) over 1/3 of the leaflets were collected. However, the ratio of election to PVS referendum leaflets was more even than that in Belfast at 1:0.33. In Cardiff, the leafleting was heavily skewed toward the No campaign. The ratio of No to Yes leaflets ran 3 to 1.

In Manchester, where there was a local election for the Manchester city council, the campaign material was evenly split between the PVS referendum and the local election. As in most other locations, the No and Yes referendum leaflets were evenly divided.

As expected, in Ealing and Herne Hill, both located in London where no elections were held, all leaflets were related to the PVS referendum. In Ealing, there was an even distribution between Yes and No leaflets. The Electoral Commission leaflet was also collected in Ealing during the campaign period. In Herne Hill, there was exactly the same distribution of Yes and No leaflets.

Table 9: Campaigning in Elections and PVS Referendum

Area	Ratio of Election to PVS Referendum Leaflets
Belfast	1:0.2
Glasgow	1:0.3
Cardiff	1:0.3
Manchester	1:1
Herne Hill	*:1
Ealing	*:1

*There were no election leaflets collected in these areas.

**Fiji's got it
Papua New Guinea's got it
Australia's got it**

And now, of all the things that he could do, Nick Clegg wants Britain to have it

So what is it?

Examples of Campaigning Leaflets

7. Results VII: Public Opinion

For this section we draw on three data sets: our own three-wave internet panel survey, written with colleagues at the universities of Exeter, Oxford, California-Riverside, and Western Washington (Wave 1 took place in early March, Wave 2 about 10 days before May 5th, and Wave 3 after “election day”); the Electoral Commission’s post-May 5th survey, hereafter referred to as the EC post-election survey; and the post-election survey from the Electoral Commission’s campaign tracker with GfK NOP, which we refer to as the EC tracking survey.

a. Information and Knowledge Levels

Given that there was less coverage of the referendum compared to the regional parliamentary and assembly elections, the results of the EC’s campaign tracker survey from before and after the campaign confirm what we would expect: while the campaign period saw increased awareness of the referendum and the elections, the gains in awareness of the elections were somewhat greater than those for the referendum. The EC’s post-May 5th survey is also confirmatory of this.

We might expect publics in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to be more aware of their own elections and less knowledgeable and aware of the referendum than the public in England because so much more attention was paid to the elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland than to the referendum in the regional media. Figures 13a to 13d present salient results based on agreement with various questions about knowledge and information, showing the per cent agreeing or disagreeing with each statement.

Figure 13a: Perceptions of Levels of Information and Media Coverage (England)

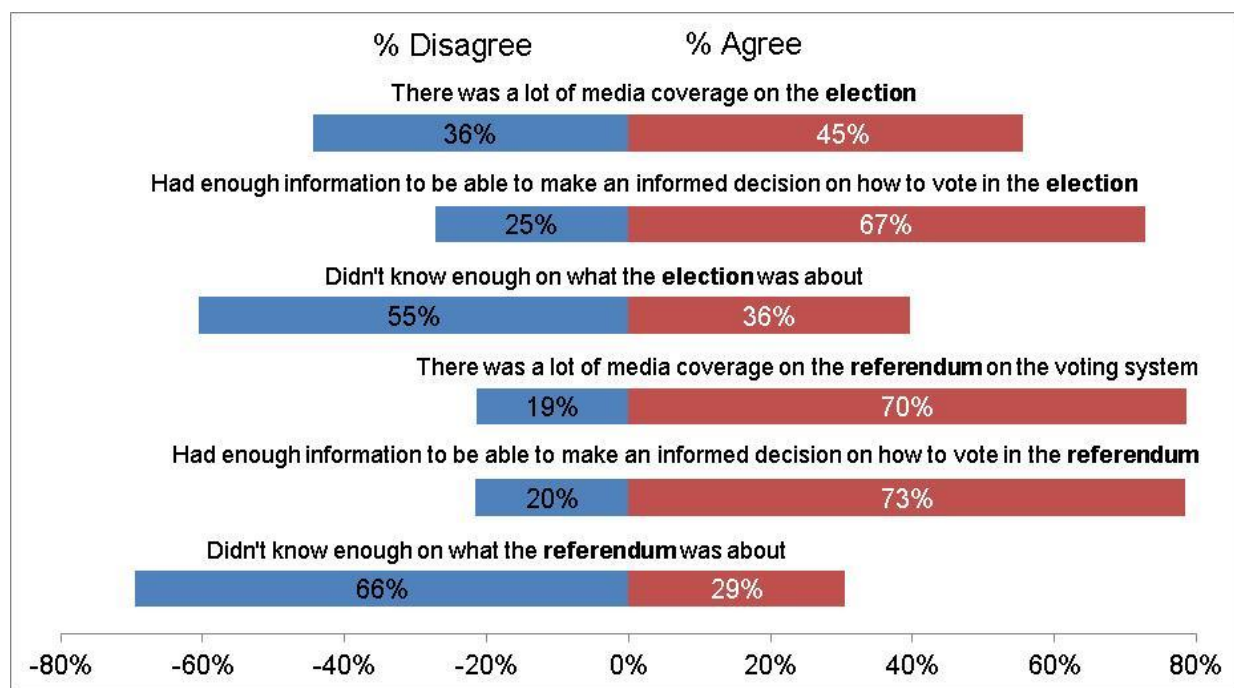


Figure 13b: Perceptions of Levels of Information and Media Coverage (Scotland)

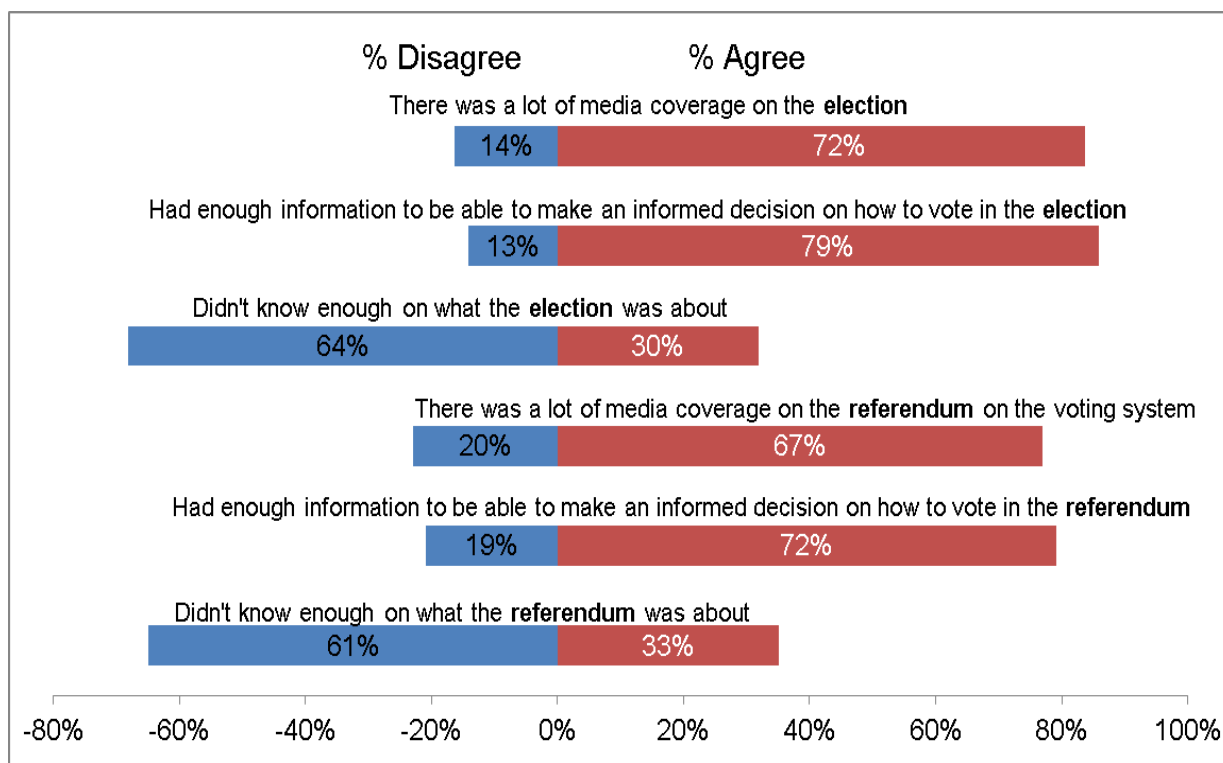


Figure 13c: Perceptions of Levels of Information and Media Coverage (Wales)

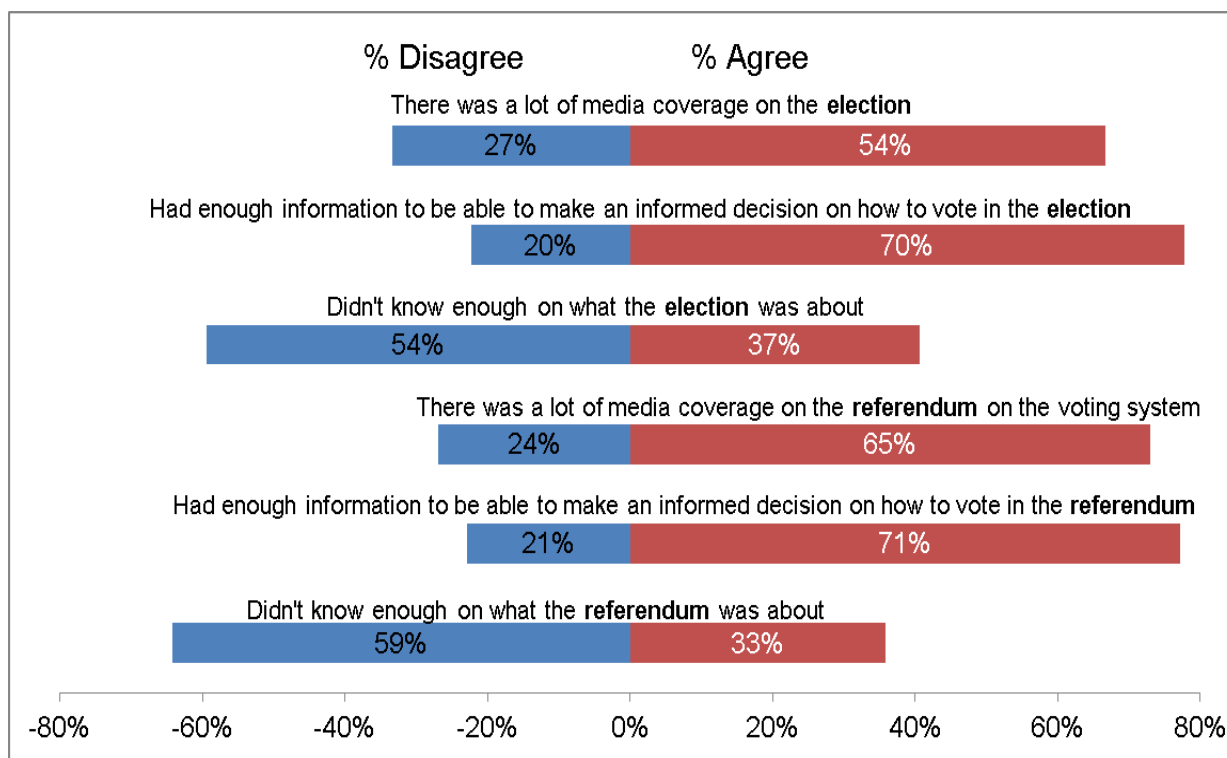
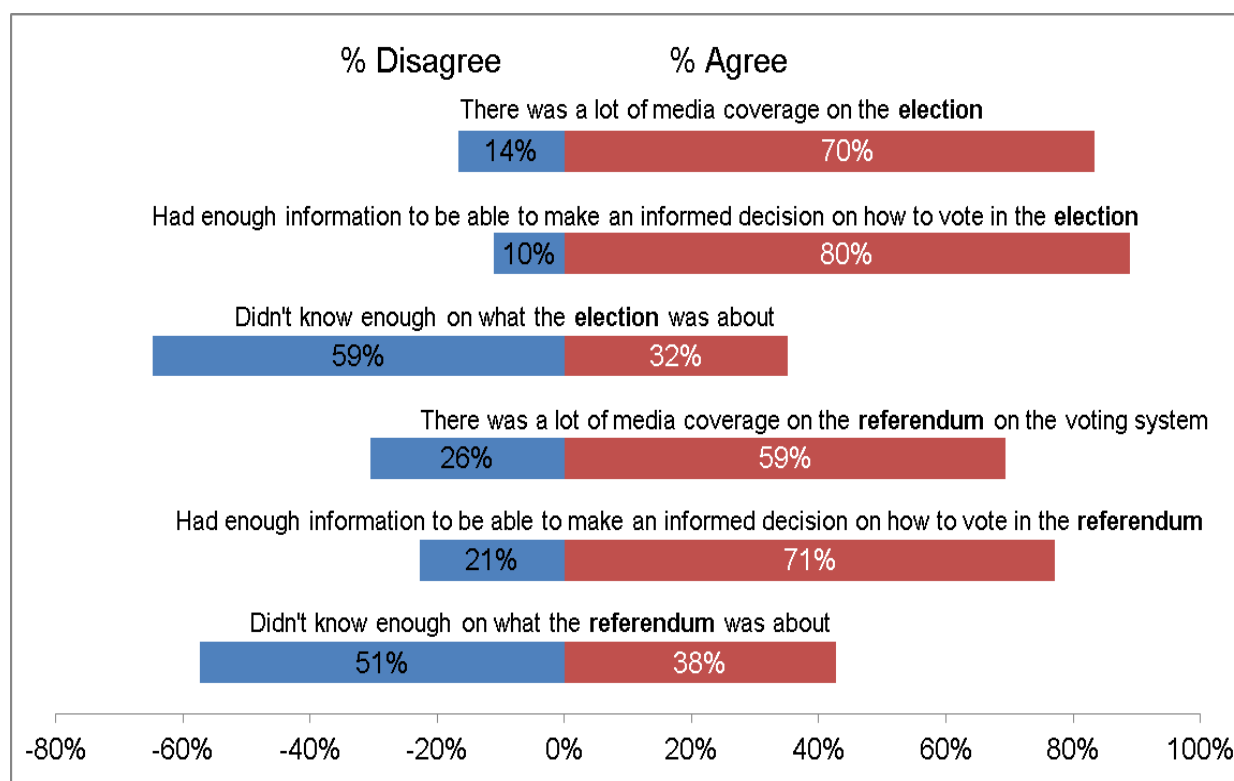


Figure 13d: Perceptions of Levels of Information and Media Coverage (Northern Ireland)



Source: May 5 post-polling day survey (ICM). ICM interviewed 3,961 voters and non-voters across the UK by telephone between 7-23 May, 2011. The interviews were stratified by devolved area. Data are weighted.

The results show that members of the public in the devolved regions were more likely to agree that they didn't know what the referendum was about than in England and, with the exception of Wales, less likely to agree that they did not know what the elections were about. The public in the devolved regions were also more likely to agree that they had enough information to make an informed decision on how to vote in the election. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, respondents also perceived that there was a lot of media coverage of the elections and, were more likely to agree that there was a lot of media coverage of the election than that there was a lot of media coverage of the referendum—an accurate perception, as we have shown, because the regional media ensured that there was more coverage of the elections in the devolved regions than of the referendum.

The Electoral Commission's tracking survey allows us to examine variation in information levels by media consumption. We separate national television, press and radio outlets because although the EC asked about regional outlets too there were generally too few consumers of regional media for analysis by different outlets. We can, however, look at broader categories: we combine Scottish versions of national newspapers (the Scottish Sun, Express and Mail), other Scottish newspapers (The Herald and Daily Record), English regional newspapers apart from the Evening Standard (the Manchester Evening News, Birmingham Evening Mail and Liverpool Echo), Northern Irish newspapers (too numerous to list here – see Appendix), and BBC/ITV regional television news. Unfortunately, combining readers of Welsh newspapers from the survey still left us with too few

respondents for analysis. There are three variables we examine from this survey: awareness of the referendum and parliamentary elections, perceptions among respondents that they had enough information to cast informed votes, and understanding of the referendum.

Tables 10 and 11 show awareness, spontaneous and prompted, of the referendum and regional elections by different media outlets. The difference between spontaneous and prompted awareness turns on whether respondents volunteered awareness of the referendum or elections or whether they claimed to have knowledge of them only after being reminded that they were taking place. Again, we see what we might expect given that the national media gave the referendum a relatively large amount of attention: there was mostly slightly higher awareness of the referendum than of the elections (and overall levels of awareness were also high, at 80% and more). The clearest exceptions to this pattern are among consumers of Scottish and Northern Irish newspapers, who were more aware of their elections than of the referendum, and of readers of the *Evening Standard*, for whom awareness of local elections was quite low, unsurprising given the absence of local elections in London. We also see variation between the tabloid press and other outlets, with lower awareness of events on May 5th among tabloid readers.

Tables 12 and 13 show respondents' subjective perceptions of how informed they were split by media use. We see similar patterns here: consumers of national media generally felt somewhat more informed about the referendum than the elections but readers of Scottish and Northern Irish newspapers—even Scottish editions of national newspapers—felt more informed about the Scottish parliamentary and Northern Irish elections. This makes sense given what we have shown about the ratio of election to referendum stories in Scotland and Northern Ireland. It is striking, however, that even readers of Scottish versions of national newspapers differed from their counterparts elsewhere.

Lastly, although coverage of the referendum in the national press was relatively high, the quality of this coverage, and the extent to which it may have *actually* informed the public, is open to question. Table 14 presents some evidence on this question with analysis of answers to a question about the way in which the referendum vote worked. On the whole, roughly 7 out of 10 consumers of most media understood the process but there were also strikingly high levels of misunderstanding or uncertainty among consumers of some media—readers of *The Sun*, Scottish editions of national newspapers (predominantly *Scottish Sun* readers), Northern Irish and English regional newspapers and Radio 1's *Newsbeat* audience. In all cases this would seem to be connected to audience characteristics combined with competition for coverage of the elections and the referendum with other news stories.

Table 10: Total Awareness (spontaneous + prompted) of the Referendum

	Newspapers								
								Scottish versions of	Other
	Sun	Mirror	Express	Mail	Times	Telegraph	Guardian	nationals	Scottish
Spontaneous awareness (%)	39	38	50	68	77	61	75	43	52
Total awareness (%)	77	79	90	94	99	94	97	72	79
	Newspapers			TV				Radio	
		English					BBC/ITV		
	E. Standard	regional	N. Irish	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	regional	Newsbeat	Today
Spontaneous awareness (%)	46	55	50	64	46	64	56	40	74
Total awareness (%)	73	91	80	89	80	91	88	70	96

Source: GfK NOP campaign tracking survey for the Electoral Commission, wave 3 (post-wave). GfK NOP interviewed 1,392 adults across the UK from 6-29 May 2011.

Table 11: Total Awareness (spontaneous + prompted) of Parliamentary/Assembly/Local Elections

	Newspapers								
								Scottish versions of	Other Scottish
	Sun	Mirror	Express	Mail	Times	Telegraph	Guardian	nationals	
Total awareness of parliamentary/assembly (%)	82	88	*	96	*	*	*	89	93
Total awareness of local (%)	84	89	85	93	88	94	84	n/a	n/a
	Newspapers			TV				Radio	
	English						BBC/ITV		
	E. Standard	regional	N. Irish	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	regional	Newsbeat	Today
Total awareness of parliamentary/assembly (%)	n/a	n/a	96	94	93	*	95	*	*
Total awareness of local (%)	49	91	100	88	85	84	89	85	89

Source: GfK NOP campaign tracking survey for the Electoral Commission, wave 3 (post-wave). GfK NOP interviewed 1,392 adults across the UK from 6-29 May 2011.

Table 12: Had Enough Information to Make an Informed Decision in the Referendum

	Newspapers								
								Scottish versions of nationals	Other Scottish
	Sun	Mirror	Express	Mail	Times	Telegraph	Guardian		
Agree (%)	70	72	89	86	93	90	92	67	75
Disagree (%)	30	28	12	14	7	10	8	33	25
	Newspapers			TV				Radio	
	English						BBC/ITV		
	E. Standard	regional	N. Irish	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	regional	Newsbeat	Today
Agree (%)	83	82	62	86	80	83	81	70	95
Disagree (%)	17	18	38	14	20	18	19	30	5

Source: GfK NOP campaign tracking survey for the Electoral Commission, wave 3 (post-wave). GfK NOP interviewed 1,392 adults across the UK from 6-29 May 2011.

Table 13: Had Enough Information to Make an Informed Decision in Parliament/ Assembly/ Local Elections

	Newspapers								
								Scottish versions of nationals	Other Scottish
	Sun	Mirror	Express	Mail	Times	Telegraph	Guardian		
Agree (%)	70	77	76	79	77	79	78	77	91
Disagree (%)	30	24	24	21	23	21	22	23	9
	Newspapers			TV				Radio	
	English						BBC/ITV		
	E. Standard	regional	N. Irish	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	regional	Newsbeat	Today
Agree (%)	88	59	91	77	77	83	77	68	88
Disagree (%)	12	41	9	23	23	17	23	32	12

Source: GfK NOP campaign tracking survey for the Electoral Commission, wave 3 (post-wave). GfK NOP interviewed 1,392 adults across the UK from 6-29 May 2011.

Table 14: Which of these best describes your understanding of the referendum?

	Newspapers								
								Scottish versions of nationals	Other Scottish
	Sun	Mirror	Express	Mail	Times	Telegraph	Guardian		
Single question with yes/no answer (%)	44	62	72	74	78	81	81	45	57
Could choose parts you agreed with (%)	13	11	12	7	12	7	4	6	4
Don't know (%)	43	27	16	19	10	12	15	49	39
	Newspapers			TV				Radio	
	English						BBC/ITV		
	E. Standard	regional	N. Irish	BBC	ITV	Channel 4	regional	Newsbeat	Today
Single question with yes/no answer (%)	73	48	58	71	62	68	64	45	85
Could choose parts you agreed with (%)	0	14	12	8	9	5	7	16	8
Don't know (%)	27	38	31	21	30	28	29	39	7

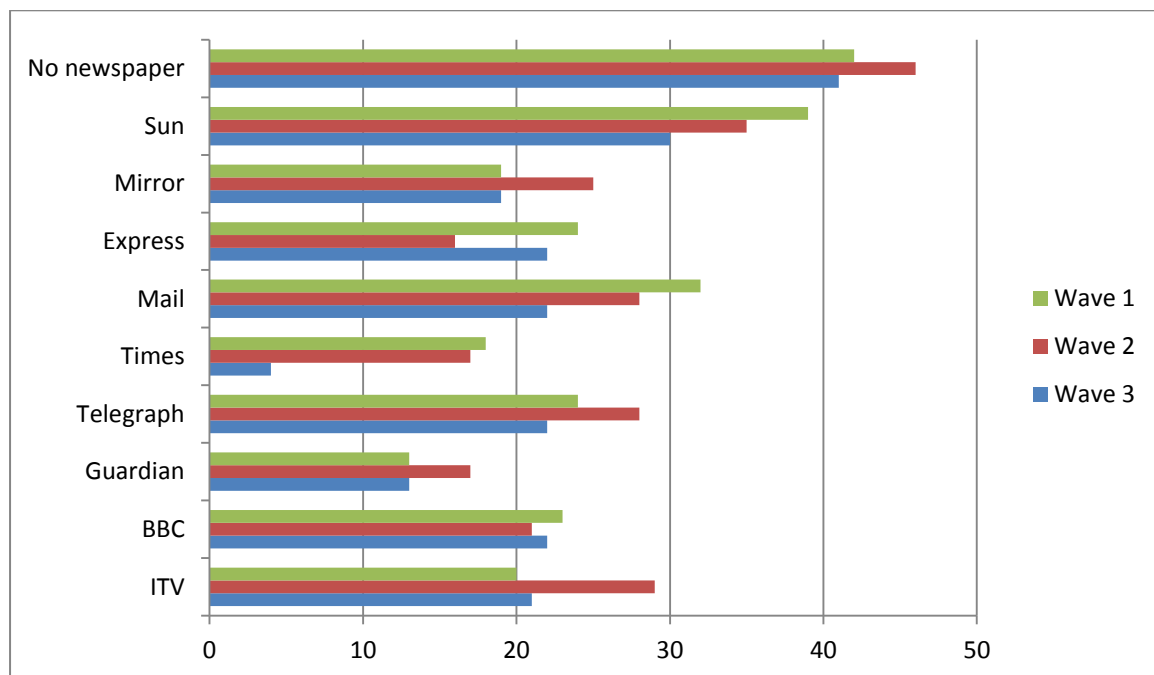
Source: GfK NOP campaign tracking survey for the Electoral Commission, wave 3 (post-wave). GfK NOP interviewed 1,392 adults across the UK from 6-29 May 2011.

b. Media Consumption and the Referendum Campaign

The evidence we have offered so far is from cross-sectional data. This tells us about the association of media consumption with attitudes towards the referendum and elections but cannot tell us the extent to which perceptions and levels of knowledge were affected by media consumption. In this section we use the Exeter panel data to ask what people were watching and reading during the campaigns and, given our previous analysis, what kinds of information different consumers of information were likely to have been exposed to. We examine the extent to which the public became more aware of arguments surrounding the referendum and of the implications of a yes or no vote.

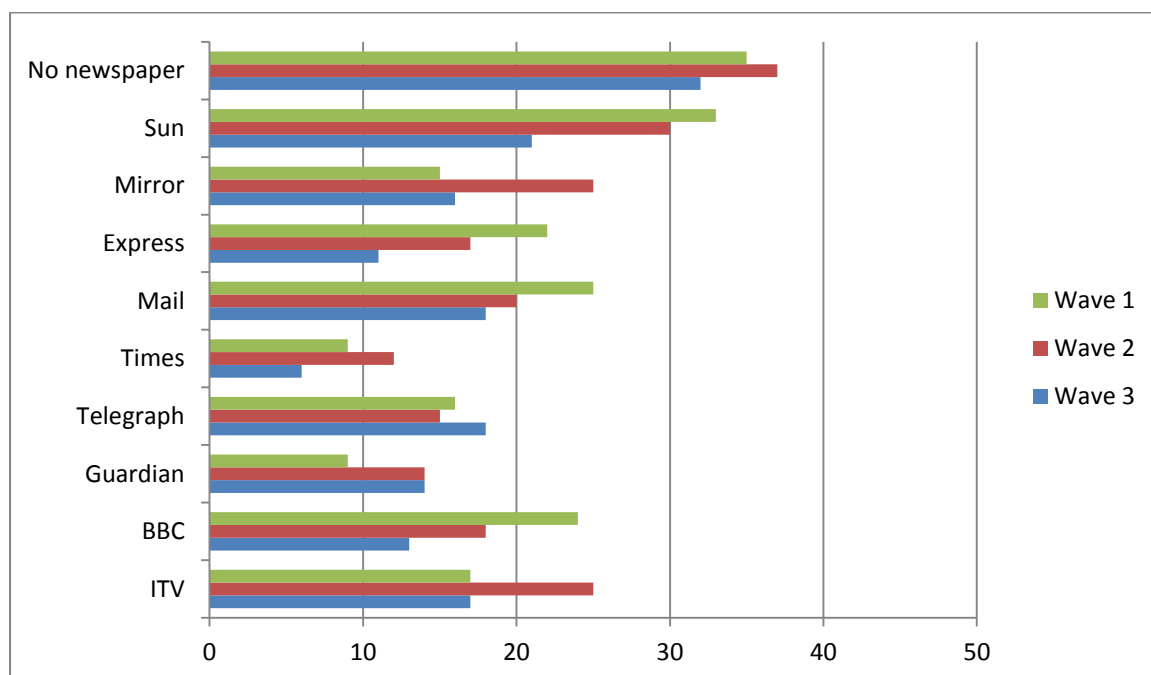
Figures 14 and 15 show the proportion of respondents who read certain newspapers and/or watched television news who responded “don’t know” when asked whether they agreed or disagreed with two statements about AV and the referendum. The results are illustrative of the pattern of responses to a fuller set of agree-disagree statements. One of the statements refers to a possible consequence of adopting AV – no more wasted votes – while the other is about perceptions of the referendum itself and whether it was a waste of money. We also show the responses of people who did not read a newspaper regularly for purposes of comparison.

Figure 14: Proportion of ‘Don’t know’ responses to the statement “Under AV there will be no more wasted votes”



Source: University of Exeter online three-wave panel survey. Wave 1 surveys took place between March 3rd and March 9th, 2011. Wave 2 surveys took place between April 24th and May 3rd, 2011. Wave 3 surveys took place between May 7th and May 11th, 2011.

Figure 15: Proportion of ‘Don’t know’ responses to the statement “The referendum is a big waste of money”



Source: University of Exeter online three-wave panel survey. Wave 1 surveys took place between March 3rd and March 9th, 2011. Wave 2 surveys took place between April 24th and May 3rd, 2011. Wave 3 surveys took place between May 7th and May 11th, 2011.

Figures 14 and 15 show a somewhat greater willingness for respondents to express an opinion about AV, in this case about expenditure, than to state their views on a characteristic of the AV system. We also see that respondents who did not read a newspaper regularly were far more likely to be don’t knows than consumers of the national press or television news and that these respondents did not become clearly more willing to express an opinion over time. If voters learned from media during the campaign we would expect to see fewer “don’t knows” as the campaign progressed.⁵ There is some evidence of this for some media—the Sun, Mail and Times in Figure 13, and for the Sun, Express, Mail, Times and BBC in Figure 14—but the pattern is by no means universal. In other cases, such as among consumers of the Guardian, Telegraph and ITV the level of uncertainty about aspects of the referendum did not appear to change.

In sum, the Exeter panel survey data indicate:

⁵ We cannot be sure that any learning that takes place is due to coverage by a particular media outlet as opposed to another factor but the lack of any pattern among those who did not regularly read a newspaper and the variation across outlets is consistent with media influence.

1. That consumers of most media outlets became more certain of their views of AV over time, consistent with the notion that the information supplied in the media allowed voters to learn.
2. However, there was variation across media outlets and fairly large numbers of the public continued to be uncertain of their views of AV and of features of the AV system.

c. Turnout

It was widely anticipated before the campaigns began that there would be lower turnout in London, where only the referendum was on the ballot than in other regions of England or in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. That proved to be the case though perhaps not as low as anticipated. Table 15 shows actual turnout at the 2011 PVS referendum with 35.3% turnout in London. Indeed turnout in London, where there were no local elections, was less than 10% lower than some locations with local elections. Turnout was highest in Northern Ireland and Scotland where the PVS referendum was combined with elections to the National Assembly and the Parliament. There is a clear pattern that combined elections did serve to boost turnout in the PVS referendum.

Our data do not allow us to make links between regional voting behaviour and media consumption but our analysis suggests that coverage of the referendum in England, while there was relatively more of it, did not focus on substance and fell short of substantially reducing uncertainty or correcting misperceptions about the alternative vote. Thus media coverage of the referendum does not appear to have informed and engaged prospective voters such that they were inclined to vote in large numbers.

Table 15: Turnout at the 2011 PVS Referendum

	Turnout in referendum
North East	38.6
North West	38.7
Yorks & Humberside	39.5
East Midlands	42.5
West Midlands	39.6
Eastern	42.9
South East	44.1
South West	44.4
Greater London	35.3
Scotland	50.4
Wales	41.5
N. Ireland	55.2

Source: Collin Rallings and Michael Thrasher. 2011. The 2011 Referendum on the Parliamentary Voting System: aspects of participation and administration

8. Summary and Conclusion

Our analysis focused on three key questions.

Does holding concurrent elections change the type of electorally relevant information available to citizens?

Clearly it does, particularly for the regional press. Critical to this question was whether the referendum or elections would be seen as the “down ballot” or second order election. The answer for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland was that the elections got far more coverage. And even in the national media, with the exception of newspapers, there was as much focus on the devolved and local elections as on the referendum particularly as polling day grew nearer. The public may have been affected in two ways: in agenda setting terms the relative lack of attention to the referendum—and the often superficial coverage of the referendum when it was the subject of stories—could have been taken as a signal that it did not matter and, relatedly, it is likely to have limited the amount of information voters in the referendum brought to the polling place. Had the referendum been held separately from the elections there would not necessarily have been more coverage, and it would not necessarily have been of high quality, but it would not have been competing for oxygen with elections that the regional press appeared to regard as more important.

Are information levels adversely affected by combined elections? Are second order elections given less attention?

The answers to these questions are not straightforward. On the one hand, people's perceptions of whether or not they had the requisite information to make an informed choice in regional elections and in the referendum were overwhelmingly positive. We also demonstrated that levels of uncertainty—the numbers of “don't knows” in response to survey questions about the referendum—decreased over the course of the campaign. On the other hand, individuals are not always the best judges of their own levels of information and some of the answers to factual questions about AV in the surveys we examined suggest that ignorance and uncertainty remained quite common. In addition, the movement in public perceptions seems to have been related more to whether an individual was pro- or anti-AV, and therefore wanted to respond in ways that they saw as positive or negative, than to a real understanding of the characteristics of AV.

It is also clear that in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland the referendum was the second order election and, as we have noted above, received much less media attention than their respective elections. The publics in these countries seem to have noticed, as evidenced by survey data showing that they were somewhat less likely to agree the media had paid a lot of attention to the referendum than to the elections and in slightly less agreement that they were sufficiently informed about the referendum.

Are there regular patterns in the variations of news coverage? Regional? Television vs. print?

The most interesting patterns in news coverage were less between different kinds of media than between national and regional media. However, there was a larger skew towards the referendum in the national press than in national television or radio. It is possible that this is a result of different audiences—that the national news sees its audience as genuinely more national than the more segmented newspaper market—or of the public service broadcasting remit of national television news. Regional media, on the other hand, appear to have seen the referendum as of very much secondary interest to their consumers, perhaps because this was about change to an electoral system for a Westminster parliament that is regarded as of decreasing relevance or, more simply, because the outcome of the elections, at least in Scotland and Wales, was in more doubt.

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Appendix

Media Content Coding Procedures

a. Material Collection

We captured news content across 41 outlets for a 53-day period. We employed several different methods for capturing and archiving the content. We outline these methods below. While our target was the capture 100% of the material, for technical reasons some broadcasts and newspapers could not be archived. These are infrequent and randomly distributed and a review of the results indicates there is no impact on the results presented.

Television News

Broadcasts were recorded online and transferred to disk for coding.

Radio News

Broadcasts were coded from iPlayer but back-up copies were also made and transferred to disk for coding where necessary.

Newspapers

Different actions were taken in order to obtain the different newspaper issues. Our main source to access and retrieve newspapers was through an online news subscription service. Where newspapers were not available through online subscription hardcopies were purchased and stored at Exeter, or, in the case of Scottish versions of some newspapers were sent to Exeter from Electoral Commission offices. Finally, newspapers that were unavailable by either of these means were either obtained through Nexis UK or via subscription (*Irish News* and *Manchester Evening News*).

Blogs

This material was obtained from the three respective blogs' archives. "Main stories" were coded, i.e., not hyperlinks or links to "most often read" etc.

bbc.co.uk

Obtained from the BBC online news archive with a search for any stories under "news" and, within news stories, for stories mentioning the referendum or any of the elections.

Campaign Leaflets

Contacts in London (Ealing and Herne Hill), Manchester, Glasgow, Cardiff and Belfast collected, dated and returned to us all campaign literature they received after March 16th.

Television Advertising

Election and referendum broadcasts were either recorded at the time or obtained via iPlayer.

b. Defining a News Story

A news story (our unit of coding) is an article in a newspaper or online website/blog and a news item in a TV or radio newscast. For television and radio a news item is defined by its **topic**. It consists of all story elements (films, interviews, statements etc. - see below) that are presented as belonging to the same topic UNTIL the main topic changes (this could be signaled by the anchorperson, a voice over or by a noticeable change in the main topic). A clear topic change always defines a new news story (e.g., from Middle East/North Africa crisis [MENA] to the elections). The news story **has to be longer than two sentence(s)**. *Note:* Headlines, summaries, teasers, announcements of other programs and commercials within the newscast are **not** coded. Several (sub-)topics may be combined into one “package” about an overarching topic, such as the EU Elections. This package then looks like one long story. For our analysis, however, a new story begins:

- a) once the background/backdrop of the anchorperson changes (e.g., the headline or the graph/photograph) *and/ or*
- b) once a topic is explicitly announced as different by the anchor: e.g., “Also today,” “Now to.”

For newspapers and online sources, the news story is the individual editorial news item (not advertising), including accompanying picture(s), or individual pictures or graphics or cartoons with or without text. There is no minimum length for an item to be considered a news story. If an article explicitly says that this same article is continued on another page, its continuation on the other page has to be coded as well, as one story. But: If there is a short story or bullet on the title page that has a beginning and an end, and only refers to another independent article within the newspaper this is coded as two separate stories. Articles that only consist of a headline, a short bullet without further concrete reference or are only announced in an index/table of contents (e.g., at the top row of the front page) are not coded. However, an exception should be made for big-font-size headlines that take up a (very) large part of the front page. (These articles should be coded '8' for NP3/type of story, also if a "screaming" headline is accompanied with a picture and caption.) A “side story” embedded within the body of a larger newspaper article (on the right or left side, or at the center top or bottom of the article) that carries its own headline and constitutes a related but nonetheless separate story vis-à-vis the larger newspaper article has to be treated as a unique story and be coded accordingly.

c. Coder Training & Reliability

Coding of the media content was conducted by a total of a core group of 20 coders at the University of Exeter. An additional 20 coders were employed at the Cornwall campus to improve our completion rate. Coders received five hours of intensive training in the specific requirements of this project, provided by the two investigators and the project manager. The five hours were held over two days. Additional follow-up meetings were held to resolve any remaining issues or problems arising during the course of the project. In the training sessions we worked through the coding sheet and the meaning of its questions and categories and then coded specific examples as a group.

Inter-coder reliability measures the extent to which the coders evaluate a characteristic of the news story and reach the same conclusion. It is widely understood in analysis of media content that this inter-coder reliability is a critical component of any content analysis project (Neuendorf 2002). If coders do not reach similar conclusions when evaluating the same material then the analysis may be flawed. Therefore, inter-coder reliability is a necessary for a robust content analysis. We assessed inter-coder reliability in two ways: informally during the coder training sessions and more formally by conducting a separate coding test.

Informally, following the design of the coding scheme and preliminary coder training, we assessed reliability with a small number of news items assessing agreement during the coding, refining the coding scheme and instructions until the informal assessment suggests an adequate level of agreement. Formal assessment of inter-coder reliability was conducted in the following manner: 20 coders completed the coding of the same 15 news stories. The stories were selected from a range of newspaper outlets and with varying themes. The analysis of the data shows that the coding scheme and the coders produced reliable data. We examined agreement across the first half of the coding scheme which included the topic and found agreement on all variables to exceed the acceptable level of 70%. There is no formally adopted lower-bound acceptable level of inter-coder reliability, but in the light of our research purposes and that we are using a fairly conservative test for multiple coders (kappa), we conceive of .65 (on a scale from 0.00 to 1.00) as an acceptable lower limit of reliability. Our analysis indicates that our top-line indicators met or exceeded this threshold for inter-coder reliability.