National press coverage of UK general elections (1918-2010): end of project report for the Leverhulme Trust

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Metadata Record: [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/18150](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/18150)

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: Loughborough University

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National Press Coverage of UK General Elections (1918-2010)

(Cartoon by W.K. Haselden published in the Daily Mirror on 31st October 1922)

End of Project Report for the Leverhulme Trust

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September 2014
Research Summary
The original aims and objectives

This report outlines the main findings of a systematic content analysis of General Election news reporting in the UK national press from 1918 to 2010. The research assessed five main questions:

1. To what extent has election news reporting become increasingly dominated by the main party leaders over the last century (‘presidentialisation’)?
2. Has political coverage become more focused upon the personalities and personal qualities of candidates (‘personalisation’)?
3. Is negative coverage of politicians increasing (‘negativity’)?
4. Has electoral coverage become more focused upon the process rather than content of the election campaign (‘meta-coverage’)?
5. Have General Elections become less newsworthy (‘Media engagement’)?

Broad findings/ conclusions

The research identifies a complex overall picture of continuity and change in electoral reporting in the UK. The findings reveal that ‘presidentialisation’ has increased, but the main impetus for this has been the increasing presence of the main party opposition leaders. (Prime Ministers have always commanded considerable prominence in election reporting.) Civil society actors have come to attract more prominence in the mediation of the campaign in recent years (celebrities, opinion pollsters, experts, etc.) There has also been a shift in the representation of citizens, suggesting a greater individuation of public opinion. References to the private lives and/or personalities of politicians (whether by journalists directly or the sources they access) have increased, albeit not as dramatically as some might suppose. Moreover, this growth has not displaced commentary about their public credentials and credibility. Negative editorial commentary about politicians shows general, if inconsistent, increases in relation to a range of measures. However, this is counter-balanced in some areas by increased levels of positive commentary. ‘Meta-coverage’ was not found to have increased, indeed, ‘policy’ coverage has marginally increased over recent periods. The prominence of specific policy issues varied considerably over different elections, but coverage of the economy was consistently dominant across all elections. Amongst many thematic variations, the research demonstrates a dramatic increase of coverage of ‘immigration/race’ in the most recent election campaigns. Measuring the scale and amount of press engagement proved the most challenging aspect of the analysis, given changes in the format of newspapers and their content. Although quantifying the total amount of coverage did not prove possible due to technical and time limitations, other results confirm that journalists have come to occupy a more central role in mediating political information during elections, revealed by declining levels in the length of direct quotation of politicians and higher levels of commentary and analysis pieces.

Publications and other outputs resulting

The time pressures of this grant have been intense and the content coding took the entire duration of the 1 year grant period. For this reason, publication plans are just being developed. The grant holder and Research Associate are planning the production of at least six refereed articles in leading journals in the next 8 months (including Political Communication, Harvard Journal
of Press/ Politics, Parliamentary Affairs and European Journal of Communication) and numerous conference papers. We anticipate the forthcoming 2015 General Election will offer several fruitful opportunities for publicising the research findings in other public locations.

**An assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the research**

This research provides a unique historical perspective upon contemporary concerns about the mediation of election campaigns and political communication more generally in the UK. Historical comparisons of any kind are very rare in political communication research in the UK, and none has ever extended beyond 1945. This research demonstrates that many trends identified as a recent feature of political communication have a longer pre-history than is often supposed. The study also helps broaden the ways in which we think about communication processes during election periods, moving the terms of debate beyond obvious interest in partisanship and party political balance. We recognise that statistical evidence can only ever provide part of the story and additional qualitative textual exploration will be required to check that quantitative similarities are not obscuring qualitative differences.
Detailed Report

Introduction

This report presents the findings of a detailed content analysis of General Election news reporting in the UK National press, from 1918 to 2010. The one-year project began in May 2013 and was budgeted at £38,700. The award holder was Professor David Deacon and the Research Associate employed on the project was Dr Emily Harmer. The content analysis design was developed collaboratively between both, drawing upon the research objectives outlined in the initial research proposal. Dr Harmer was solely responsible for all the content coding (5468 items in total). Professor Deacon engaged in coding for inter-coder reliability tests, supervised all aspects of the project and was responsible for the initial data analysis which forms the basis of this jointly-authored report. The research was conducted at Loughborough University, using the Communication Research Centre’s digital and microfilm archives.

Objectives

The research assessed five main questions in its comparison of election news reporting:

1. To what extent has election news reporting become increasingly dominated by the main party leaders over the last century (‘presidentialisation’)?
2. Has political coverage become more focused upon the personalities and personal qualities of candidates (‘personalisation’)?
3. Is negative coverage of politicians increasing (‘negativity’)?
4. Has electoral coverage become more focused upon the process rather than content of the election campaign (‘meta-coverage’)?
5. Have General Elections become less newsworthy (‘Media engagement’)?

Research activity:

The research used thematic quantitative content analysis to quantify relevant aspects of coverage (see Deacon et al, 2007: 117-136). More details about these measures are provided in the discussion of the research findings below. The content was coded manually and all of the findings presented have been met appropriate thresholds for inter-coder reliability. The units of analysis for the study were individual items produced by journalists (news reports, features, commentaries etc.) Readers letters were excluded. It was not feasible to analyse all campaigns and all national newspapers, so sampling strategies were developed to target particular campaigns, campaign periods and newspapers.

Sampling of election campaigns and campaign periods

There have been 25 General Elections held in Britain since 1918. These campaigns have occurred unevenly across the sample period, as Britain did not until very recently have fixed term elections. For example, four elections were held between 1918 and 1924 and four between 1950 and 1959. Since October 1974, however, there has been a minimum of four year intervals between elections.

In this study, a single campaign from each of the eleven decades covered by the research was selected for detailed analysis. There were obvious logistical benefits to this sampling, but more importantly a greater time interval between the campaigns analysed permitted greater opportunity
for longitudinal change to become evident in news reporting practices and ensured evenness in the
temporal spread of the sample. For each decade, the election with the highest voting swing was
selected for analysis. The table below lists the specific campaigns that were be on this basis, and
reveals an elegant effect of this sampling strategy. Excluding the most recent election, five of the
selected campaigns resulted in a Labour victory and five in a Conservative victory. Similarly, five
campaigns saw a swing to Labour and five to the Conservatives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Victor</th>
<th>Swing</th>
<th>Electoral outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 1918</td>
<td>Conservative led coalition</td>
<td>11.2% &gt; Labour</td>
<td>Change of administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1929</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>6.1% &gt; Labour</td>
<td>Change of administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1931</td>
<td>Conservative led coalition</td>
<td>15.05% &gt; Cons.</td>
<td>Change of administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1945</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>12.05% &gt; Labour</td>
<td>Change of administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1951</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>3.7% &gt; Cons.</td>
<td>Change of administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1964</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>3.05% &gt; Labour</td>
<td>Change of administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1979</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>5.3% &gt; Cons.</td>
<td>Change of administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1983</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>5.45% &gt; Cons.</td>
<td>Increase in incumbent’s majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1997</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>10.2% &gt; Labour</td>
<td>Change of administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2005</td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>3.2% &gt; Cons.</td>
<td>Reduction in incumbent’s majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2010</td>
<td>Conservative led coalition</td>
<td>5.2% &gt; Cons.</td>
<td>Change of administration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The length, conduct and protocols of British General Elections have changed considerably
since 1918. To deal with these differences, two periods were sampled from each campaign. The first
period was the week commencing on the day of the formal announcement of the dissolution of
parliament and the second period was the week that ended on the day of the vote.

Newspaper sampling

The newspaper titles selected for analysis were: The Times, the (Manchester) Guardian, the Daily
Mail, the Daily Express, the Daily Mirror and the Daily Herald/ Sun. These titles were selected because
of their continuity (all titles have been published for the entirety of the sample period), political
diversity (the selection encompasses a wide range of editorial opinion) and market orientation (the
selection covers ‘quality’, ‘mid market’ and ‘popular’ titles). The content analysis coded all election
related content on (1) the front page, (2) the next main domestic news page, (3) the pages containing
and facing the paper’s leader editorial.

Research Problems

Overall, the research has progressed very well but, we were aware from the outset that we
faced major challenges in completing all content coding within the tight budget and timetable
limitations. For this reason, we carefully monitored the progress of the coding and had to make
some alterations to the scope of the study as originally set out in the research proposal to ensure its
timely completion. It was originally envisaged that a global count would be made of the number,
size and type of election related items in each edition, to give a basic measure of the amount of
election news. It soon became clear that this would be a far more time consuming and trickier
exercise than originally envisaged. A particular problem we struggled to overcome was trying to find
ways of accurately measuring content coverage without having access to hard copies of content (our
archives use microfilm and pdf records). For these reasons, we abandoned this part of the exercise
and focused instead upon developing a more detailed and thorough coding schedule for the second
stage of the research. (Up to 130 variables could be coded for each item of coverage.)
Conclusions and achievements:

This summary can only present the main results of the content analysis. There is little space in these confines to explore and explain the reasons for these trends, but these matters will be the focus of our future research. The analysis of the eleven elections identified 5468 items that met the terms of inclusion of the content analysis. In this section we present some of the main findings to emerge in relation to the five research questions mentioned previously.

Many of these temporal comparisons reveal high levels of election-by-election variation. This is to be expected, as the specific dynamics of particular campaigns can cut across, even countermand, deeper trends and tendencies in political communication practices. Therefore, to try to ascertain the direction and extent of longer term trends we have included in the graphs (a) polynomial trend lines and (b) their accompanying R squared (R²) values. The former is a mapped line that identifies the general direction of change over the sample period (i.e. have trends increased, decreased, re-emerged or remained constant?). The second is a statistic that measures the ‘goodness of fit’ of the actual data to the trend line identified. The closer this statistic is to 1.0, the stronger the relationship between the two.

1. The ‘Presidentialisation’ of Coverage

The concept of ‘presidentialisation’ in political coverage doesn’t just apply to presidential political systems. It refers more generally to the claim that mainstream political leaders are commanding an ever increasing proportion of media coverage, thereby excluding other politicians and minor political parties.

To assess the prevalence of this process in UK election news over the last century we coded up the four main political ‘actors’ for each electoral item¹. Figure 1.1. charts the proportional presence of the leaders of the three main parties across all the elections since 1918. The results reveal some degree of variation on an election-by-election basis. For example, the prominence of main party leaders reduced between 1945 and 1951. However, the overall trend is upwards and fairly consistent (R²=0.7618), being particularly pronounced in the 2010 General Election. This recent increase is to a large extent explained by the introduction of the first televised leadership debates, which inevitably focused considerable levels of press attention onto the three main leaders (Deacon and Wring, 2010).

¹ The term ‘actor’ is used here to describe any individual, group, business or institution reported in connection to the electoral process (n.b. our definition of political ‘actors’ extended well beyond the party political arena and included representatives from other civil and corporate domains). Where there were more than four actors in a piece, we coded the most prominently featured, mentioned, quoted and/or pictured. To be included as an ‘actor’, the individual, group, business or institution had to have some active status within the article, that is, they were not just the subject of comment by another political source.
Figure 1.2 disaggregates these figures further, to examine whether there is any evidence of an emerging ‘incumbency effect’, by which we mean evidence that the sitting Prime Minister has come to command a greater share of media attention over recent elections. The results show a slight increase in the proportional presence of the PM, but this trend is weak ($R^2=0.3353$) and confounded by earlier periods of prime ministerial dominance (e.g. 1918 and 1945). There appears to be a more pronounced increase in the proportional presence of the other main party leaders over the sample period, although this is influenced to an extent by the atypical prominence of other main party leaders in 2010 coverage ($R^2=0.6749$).
A further way of assessing the plurality of political debate is to assess the extent to which the two main electoral parties dominate the media stage (sometimes referred to as ‘the two party squeeze’). Figure 1.3 shows that the marginalisation of other parties became most pronounced in the post war period, but that this process has abated somewhat recently. Figure 1.4 details the respective prominence of political parties. To some extent the prominence of particular parties reflects their wider political fortunes. For example, the electoral decline of the Liberals is matched by a steep decline in press attention by the 1930s that only recovered to any significant extent in 2010, largely as a consequence of the party leadership debates and perceptions of Nick Clegg’s successful performance in these media events. It is also striking to note the consistent marginalisation of the minor parties, despite their growing share of the electoral vote. The only slight exception to this pattern occurred in 1983, as a result of coverage given to the new Social Democratic Party, created in 1981 when four senior politicians broke away from the Labour party.

![Figure 1.3: Dominance two main electoral parties](image)

![Figure 3.4: Comparison of the amount of coverage of political parties](image)
It is inevitable that politicians will dominate election campaigns, but we also measured the extent to which other civil society actors have been able to participate in mediated electoral debates, and whether their presence has increased. One might suppose this to be the case, given claims made about the increasing promotionalism and professionalism of diverse pressure groups, think tanks, non-governmental organisations and corporate sources. Figure 1.5 suggests that, despite these developments, the limited presence of non-party political actors has remained fairly constant, with only a weak and inconsistent upward trend ($R^2=0.3983$). Table 1.1, however, breaks these figures down by type of civil society actor, and shows these general figures mask some notable internal fluctuations over more recent campaigns.

‘Citizens’ were by far the most consistently featured civil actors across all elections, but this proportional prominence has reduced somewhat since 1964, as other arenas have come to command more attention. Polling organisations started to attract significant, if fluctuating, amounts of press attention from the 1964 election. Even more recently, there has been an increase in the accessing of other ‘expert sources’ (e.g. academics, think tanks, political specialists etc). Non-Governmental Organisations commanded most prominence in 1979 and 1983, which is mainly explained by the amount of coverage given to trade union sources, and which has since reduced significantly in stark reflection of their declining power and influence (see figure 3.5). The results also confirm the comparatively recent advent of the so-called ‘celebritization’ of electoral politics (Wheeler, 2011), with famous people engaging in the campaign commanding a consistent, if modest, amount of press attention from 1979 onwards.

![Figure 1.5: Other civil society actors in coverage](image)

**Table 1.1: Civil actors in coverage by category**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizens</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrities</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollsters</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To return to the representation of citizens in coverage, there is a further aspect of modest change in their representation over the sample period. When coding ‘citizens’ we differentiated between those occasions when they were specifically named and/ or quoted individuals and where they were referred to in a more collective and imprecise way (e.g. as ‘voters’, ‘constituents’ etc.). Figure 1.7 shows that there has been a minor, weak increase in the featuring of individual citizens in coverage, while at the same time that there has been a more pronounced decline in general/ collective referencing to citizens. We need to explore the details of this further, but it does raise interesting questions about the changing editorial status of lay opinion newspaper discourse and, possibly, perceptions about the volatility and fragmentation of public opinion.
2. Personalisation of coverage

The concept of ‘personalisation’ has attracted much discussion within contemporary political communication research. It is claimed that political communication is more focused on promoting the personalities of politicians than their policies, as ideological differences between parties have reduced, and as the mainstream media have assumed an ever more central role in electoral processes whilst becoming progressively disinclined to cover politics for its own sake, (Deacon, 2004). Linked to this is the concept of ‘intimization’(Stanyer, 2012), which posits a developing process by which ‘values from the private sphere are transferred to the public sphere’ (Van Zoonen, 1991: 233).

To assess the extent and emergence of these changes, we developed a detailed set of coding categories that were completed for each political actor included in the analysis. First, we distinguished between instances where (a) the featured actor referred to the personality or personal qualities of another political actor, (b) referred to their own personality or personal qualities, and/or (c) were the subject of direct editorial comment by the journalist on these aspects. Second, we noted whether these comments were positive, negative, mixed or non-evaluative. Third, we focused on 5 topics that could be the subject of personal comment: ‘competence and experience’, ‘integrity/ probity’, ‘personality’, ‘style/ deportment’ and ‘personal life’.

Discussion of these personal qualities relates to public and private sphere concerns, to differing extent (see diagram below). Commentary about the competence of people standing for office are self-evidently ‘public sphere’ concerns, whereas discussion of a politicians’ personal life or innate personality traits are essentially private sphere issues whose public relevance needs to be demonstrated. Questions about their integrity, style and deportment, to our reckoning, are best conceived as being located in the overlap between these two spheres, linking as they do to who people are, how they seem and the direct implications these hold for their suitability to public office.

![Venn Diagram showing the overlap between public and private spheres with categories of personalisation measures](image)

Figures 2.1 – 2.6 present the percentage of items that contained at least one instance where a reference was made to each of the personalisation measures in relation to a featured actor (n.b. the reference could be made by the actor about themselves or someone else, or could be a matter...
of direct editorial comment by the journalist). The results show:

- The frequency of references to the ‘competence/ experience’ of politicians demonstrates a strong and consistent upward trend, particularly over the more recent period (see Figure 2.1).
- There is no evident pattern of change in relation to references to the integrity or standards of political actors (see Figure 2.2).
- References to the personality of political actors show a fairly strong upward trend in coverage over time (see Figure 2.3).
- There is also a strong upward trend in the frequency of references made to the ‘style/ deportment’ of political actors (see Figure 2.4).
- References to the ‘personal lives’ of politicians shows a more complex pattern, declining in the immediate post WW2 period, then increasing to a peak in 1997 and levelling off in the period since (see Figure 2.5). Overall, though, there is considerable election-on-election variation ($R^2=0.273$). As a supplement to this particular measure, we also quantified the extent to which politicians’ family members featured in press coverage. The results show that that the referencing of family members is anything but the preserve of recent campaigns (Figure 2.6). Matching the trend in Figure 2.5, we see a post WW2 dip and then an increase from 1979 onwards.

**Figure 2.1: Percentage of items containing any mention of actor(s) competence**

**Figure 2.2: Percentage of items containing any reference to actor(s) integrity/ standards**
Overall, these patterns suggest a complex pattern of continuity and change in relation to personalisation in British electoral news coverage. References to the private credentials of politicians (whether by journalists directly or the sources they access) have increased, albeit not as exponentially as some might suppose. Moreover, these do not appear to have displaced coverage of their public credibility. Of particular interest here is the lack of any consistent pattern regarding the political integrity and standards of politicians. There are some recent spikes in 1997 and 2005 (reflecting debates respectively about political sleaze and the war in Iraq), but these levels are not unprecedented. For example, there were frequent references made to these matters in 1945 (although the prominence of this particular peak may to some extent be accentuated by the considerably reduced size of newspapers in this election).
3. Increasing Negativity?

Another aspect that is claimed to becoming ever more prominent in contemporary electoral reporting is increasing journalistic negativity towards, even disdain for, politicians and their motives. The causes of this are said to reside in several developments, including, journalistic frustration with the growth of parties' 'spin' and news management activities, which are said to have created a culture of political confection rather than conviction, and market pressures that compel journalists to apply an ever more ‘pragmatic’ approach to political reporting, requiring electoral stories to fit within their own news priorities.

To assess the extent to which journalists’ evaluations of politicians has changed over the last century we examined the extent of negative, positive and mixed editorial commentary made by journalists about politicians and other political actors in relation to the personalisation variables presented in the previous section. Table 3.1 shows the overall amount of overtly evaluative commentary made by journalists over the sample period. The results show that:

- Direct evaluative editorial commentary of any kind by journalists, and in relation to any measure, occurred comparatively infrequently.
- Most of the overt editorial commentary tended to focus on the ‘public realm’ issue of ‘competence/ experience’.
- Positive editorial commentary tended to exceed negative commentary in all but one of these measures (standards/probity)

Table 3.1: Percentage of items that contained evaluative editorial commentary upon political actors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competence/ Experience</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style/ deportment</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal life</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The further question is whether evaluative commentary of these measures has changed over time, and this is assessed in relation to each of the personal measures in Figures 3.1 – 3.5. Overall, some significant temporal variations were evident:

- There was a very strong, consistent and exponential increase in negative editorial comments about the competence/ experience of political actors. In the pre-WW2 elections, positive commentary was by far the most predominant evaluative trend, levels declined then increased steeply post 1983 (see Figure 3.1).
- There were no clear increases or decreases in positive or negative evaluations of the standards/ integrity of featured actors (Figure 3.2).
- Positive references to the personal lives of politicians reduced considerably in 1951 and afterwards (see Figure 3.3). Negative references were evident in the pre-WW2 era, but have become more prominent over more recent elections. However, it is important to note these fluctuations occurred across a low and narrow percentile range (see Figure 3.3).
- Negative references to the personality of political actors have increased strongly and fairly consistently since 1983, but there is a less clear cut trend over time in positive references to personality. Here again, it is important to bear in mind the low and narrow percentile ranges involved in the fluctuations (see Figure 3.4).
- There is a strong and consistent increase in negative editorial comments on the ‘style/ deportment’ of political actors. The apparent upward trend in positive referencing is solely an artefact of unusually high levels of positive commentary in the 2010 campaign (see Figure 3.5).

Overall, the results to a general rise of negative editorial commentary upon the personal attributes and/ or actions of political actors, particularly since the 1980s, but there is quite a high degree of fluctuation and noise in these patterns. There is also evidence of a pre-history to negative editorialising that has perhaps been underappreciated to date.
Figure 3.1: Comparison of the percentage of items containing any positive/ negative and/or mixed editorial references to the competence/ experience of political actors.
Figure 3.2: Comparison of the percentage of items containing any positive/negative and/or mixed editorial references to the probity/standards/integrity of political actors.
Figure 3.3: Comparison of the percentage of items containing any positive/ negative and/or mixed editorial references to the personal lives of political actors

R² = 0.6924
R² = 0.7111
R² = 0.8943
Figure 3.4: Comparison of types of editorial commentary on the personality of political actors

Percent of items

- Negative
- Positive
- Mixed
- Poly. (Negative)
- Poly. (Positive)
- Poly. (Mixed)
Figure 3.5: Comparison of the percentage of items containing positive/negative and/or mixed editorial commentary about the style/deportment of any political actors.
4. ‘Process’ coverage over time

There have been recurrent complaints in recent UK elections that election news coverage is more focused on the process rather than substance of the campaign. ‘Personalisation’ can be seen as an indicator of this ‘hollowing out’ of electoral debate. To assess the extent to which there has ever been a time when newspapers have privileged ‘real issues’ over the day-to-day drama and uncertainty of the campaign, we noted each occasion an item contained a substantive and specific reference to the policies of any of the political contenders. To be coded, the item needed to provide descriptive information about policy issues that amounted to at least 20 percent of the item length (fleeting references to manifesto commitments were not counted). Figure 4.1 shows the proportional distribution of policy content across the eleven campaigns. The results reveal quite a bit of election-by-election variation, and a couple of outlying campaigns (1951 and 2005), but also that there has never been a time when policy coverage has commanded the centre stage in electoral coverage. Table 4.1 identifies the main foci for process debates during the elections and again finds no clear evidence of changes in the broad parameters of these debates. Coverage of ‘Party strategies’ has consistently attracted the greatest share of process commentary, and attention to voters and their intentions predate the first arrival of the substantial use of opinion polling in election coverage (first noted in the 1959 election).

If this evidence shows that journalists have always been interested in communicating the process of the campaign, it does not follow that the focus and manner of process content has remained unchanged. For example, we were struck by the large amount of constituency profiling in earlier campaign coverage, which had a dry and descriptive quality far removed from the more analytical and evaluative commentary of the contemporary coverage. Examining these qualitative changes will be the focus of future analysis in our work.

**Figure 4.1: Percentage of items that contained substantial references to policy content**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Political Standards/Propriety</th>
<th>Party activities and strategies</th>
<th>Voters and voting intentions</th>
<th>Media coverage</th>
<th>other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1931</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1979</td>
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<td>75%</td>
<td>21%</td>
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<td>1983</td>
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<td>16%</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<td>18%</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: These are row percentages. Percentages = frequency of appearance of theme as main process theme/ number of items that had a process theme coded

There were, however, related areas where notable changes were evident in process coverage. It is said that journalists occupy a more central role in the mediation of the campaign, ‘writing themselves into the story’ by rewording and reworking the messages of political sources. This is revealed, for example, in the reduction of direct quotation of political sources and the growth of commentary and analysis at the expense of straightforward reporting of campaign related matters. Figure 4.2 compares the average word length of the lengthiest single direct quotation provided in each electoral item and shows there has been a significant and consistent decline over recent elections. Figure 4.3 indicates the proportion of items that were commentary pieces rather than straightforward news items (i.e. editorials, commentaries, diary pieces, op-eds, etc) and also reveals a consistent increase in ‘views’ relative to ‘news’ for the sample period.

![Figure 4.2: Average word length of longest quotation in items](image)

$R^2 = 0.7978$
We also identified the most prominent policy themes within content, and their prevalence since 1918. Table 4.2 lists the six most prominent themes found overall and shows:

- Coverage of the economy dominated almost all elections (1918 and 1945 were slight exceptions).
- ‘International Affairs’ were episodically newsworthy, but this category covers different issues at particular times. For example, in 1997 the peak reflected significant levels of debate about Britain’s membership of the European Union. By 2005, most of the coverage concerned Britain’s diplomatic involvement in uncertainties and conflicts created by the ‘War on Terror’. The peak in 1951 reflected high levels of coverage about the so-called ‘Abadan Crisis’ where the Iranian government nationalised the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and expelled western companies from its refineries.
- ‘Employment’ also commanded variable but significant levels of coverage, being most prominent in 1929, 1979 and 1983.
- Coverage of ‘Defence/ Military’ issues varied and did not map directly onto the proximity of British involvement in active military conflict (e.g. note the prominence of this debate in 1964).
- ‘Social Security’ has proved consistently newsworthy, being particularly prominent in the 2010 election.
- In contrast, debates about ‘Immigration/ Race’ have only appeared as a significant issue in the 2005 and 2010 campaigns.

Table 4.2: Six most prominent themes in press coverage (1918-2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Economy</th>
<th>International Affairs</th>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Defence/Military</th>
<th>Social Security</th>
<th>Housing</th>
<th>Immigration/Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>23%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>18%</td>
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<td>3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<td>%</td>
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<td>19%</td>
<td>48%</td>
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<td>33%</td>
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<td>19%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Notes: Up to two policy themes could be coded per item. Percentages=appearance of a theme/ total number of themes coded)

5. Disengagement

The final aim of the research was to assess the extent to which UK national press engagement with the formal election campaign had changed, in particular to see whether there was any evidence of growing disengagement with the electoral process. Figure 1.1 shows the average number of election news items produced by sampled newspaper titles for each of the campaigns.

![Figure 5.1: Average number of news items per newspaper by election](image)

(Notes: Average number=total number of items coded divided by the number of sampled newspapers. As The Times was not published in the 1979 campaign due to industrial action, the item total is divided by 5, rather than 6 titles.)

The trend suggests there has been a reduction in aggregate press coverage engagement with over the last century, with certain outlying campaigns disrupting the strength of the trend (N.B. The sharp reductions in press coverage of the 1945, and to a lesser extent in 1951, is explained entirely by the rationing of newsprint, which reduced the size of newspapers substantially.) Figure 5.2, breaks these global figures down by type of newspaper.

The results show:
• An exponential increase in popular press coverage in the inter-war years, and a reduced but sustained level of coverage since.
• A decline in mid-market coverage in the immediate post WW2 period that has since levelled off.
• A more consistent decline in the coverage given by the ‘quality’ newspapers

We would caution, however, against these figures being used as evidence of growing levels of press disengagement, particularly among the quality papers. These trends are to some extent an artefact of our sampling strategy and wider changes in newspaper formats. As noted earlier, our sampling strategy was to focus on measuring particular parts of newspapers, rather than aggregate content (front pages, editorial pages etc). Therefore, it is only possible to state whether there is more or less content in these targeted areas. Furthermore, there have been considerable changes in the formats of newspapers over the sample period, in which, at different dates, editions have reduced in size from broadsheet to tabloid formats (or variants thereof). This compression of news-space has inevitably reduced the amount of items that can be published on a page. Added to this, it is noticeable that many of the broadsheets have increased the length of their news reports and commentaries in the recent period. In these instances, the reduced number of items could signify a deeper engagement with the drama and detail of the campaign, rather than more disengagement.

The sustained level of popular press engagement, particularly over the recent period, should also be treated cautiously as a measure of this sector’s interest and engagement with the campaign in comparison with other items. For example, an item based count takes no account of the size of articles. Figure 5.3 compares the number of front page items counted in these papers for each election and suggests a consistent decline in the prioritisation of the election in this sector, at least until the 2010 General Election.
the extent to which objectives were met, the conclusions reached, the degree to which an original contribution
to theoretical and/or practical knowledge has been achieved, and an assessment of the significance for other
research in the field
• The **principal award-holder's personal evaluation** of the research project and which elements have been
the more successful and which less successful

- **Publications and other outputs**: list actual and prospective publications and other means of
disseminating results. Copies of published material, acknowledging Leverhulme support, should
be emailed to the Trust at grants@leverhulme.ac.uk. Please quote the reference number of your
grant. The Trust Board recognises that publication may take a considerable time, but wishes to
receive in due course copies of all publications resulting from the work
• **Future research plans** in this field for those involved in the project.