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Did the campaign matter?

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The leadership helicopters have stopped whirling. The politicians have stopped kissing babies. The party rallies and morning press conferences and broadcasts and TV interviews are done. The heated arguments over immigration, Iraq, and health are over. It's the lull before the storm. Or at least the pause before polling day. So has all the effort been worthwhile? Has the general election campaign made a difference?

Trends in party fortunes recorded in all the published national opinion polls by the major companies suggest that there was some net impact on voting support but the campaign was far from decisive. The Conservative vote appears to have slid a few points during April, from around 35 to 32 percent, with some fluctuations in different polls. Despite many predictions of a strong late surge in Liberal Democrat support, so far they appear to have gained a few percent, from 20 to 22 percent. And Labour started at around 36 percent, went up during the first stage, then fell back again to about 37 percent.

This net shift in support may appear modest but it does make a significant difference for Westminster. Projections based on these polls using a uniform national swing suggest that an election held at the start of April would have produced a Labour majority of 90. By the end of the month, despite all the hoo-ha about Iraq, the accusations that Blair lied and that Labour failed to deliver on its promises, if the polls are correct, the equivalent majority would be 130. In both cases, a Labour government would be returned comfortably for a historic third administration. The campaign polls also indicate that the Conservatives remain stranded in the electoral Siberia of semi-permanent opposition, making minimal gains from the disastrous results experienced in 1997 and in 2001. In a closer race, such as in 1992, even a few seats changing hands may determine who enters No 10. But Labour started the race this spring with such a towering majority, produced by their 1997 landslide, and the main parties present such a familiar image, that no month-long campaign could be expected to bring the Conservatives to victory. In this regard, few British elections are won during the official campaign.

But this does not mean that all the posters and rallies and interviews were insignificant. In particular, campaigns in a democracy help to shape how voters learn about party politics and, even more importantly, how parties learn about voters. Effective campaigns involve intense activity which attempts to connect the vast gap between citizens and their representatives.

Now this interpretation is often greeted with cynicism in the era of spin. After all, it is said, with their carefully stage-managed photo ops, political leaders don't really get many chances to meet 'real' voters. How can they be expected to listen to public concerns, still less to learn from them? And as for the public, given that campaign news and party broadcasts were turned off by thousands of households, what information do most people acquire?

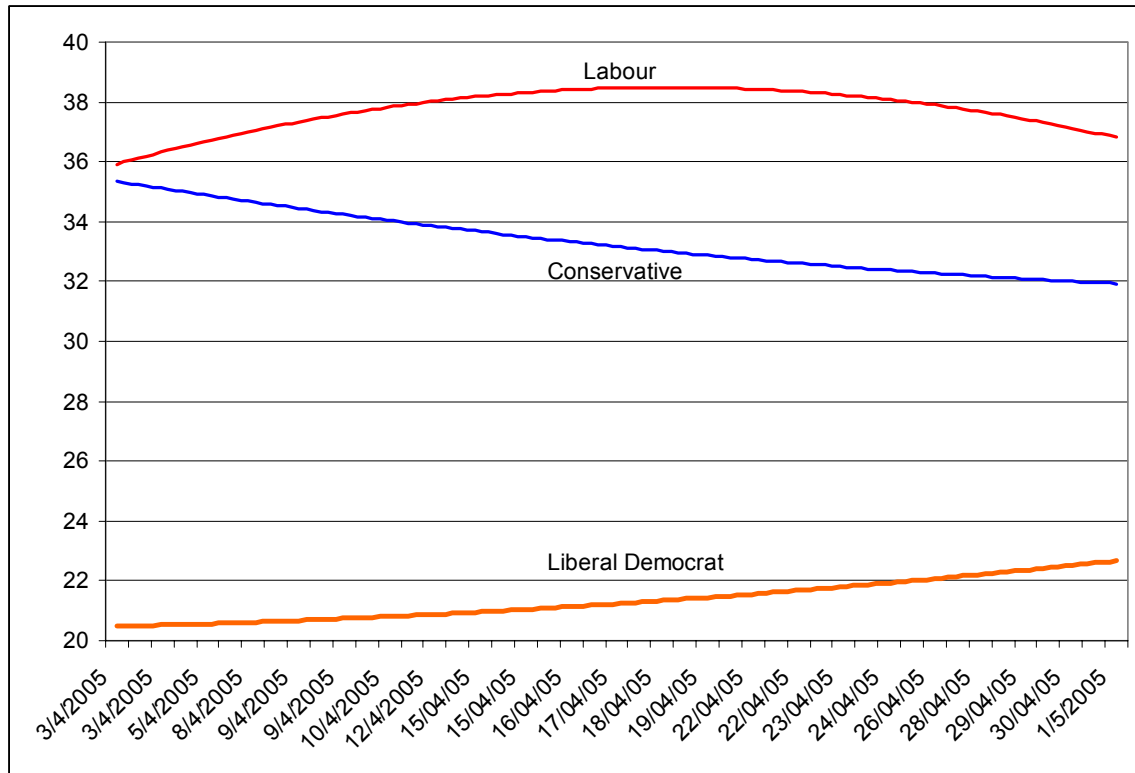
But the campaign is the main opportunity in a democracy for the public to learn about what the parties have to offer, what the leaders stand for, and to distinguish some of the core contrasts among Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. This does not mean that voters have to slog through the dry details of the party manifestoes, or even watch the party political broadcasts and campaign news. But given the intensity of the month-long campaign, it is difficult

for most people to be unaware of some of the basic arguments between the government and the opposition, whether about Iraq, or immigration, or the economy.

And the focus on the party leaders in a protective bubble overlooks all the intense effort in each local constituency as candidates and volunteer activists try to mobilize their supporters, fighting the door-to-door war, especially in marginal seats. It gets the MPs and Ministers out of the cosy club of Westminster to visit the Cheadles and Dorset Souths and Batterseas. Even more significantly, all the paraphernalia of the professional campaign, the focus groups and opinion polls, is a sophisticated attempt to monitor the public pulse with ever greater precision. What parties learn from these efforts shapes not just their presentation but also their policy priorities and their awareness of public concerns.

What parties learn from the outcome, particularly the lessons from electoral failure, is critical in how they adapt and reinvent themselves in the long years between campaigns. The Conservatives do not appear to have learnt the lessons of 1997 or 2001. It remains to be seen whether and how all the parties learn from the result on May 5th.

Smoothed trends in voting intentions in the published national opinion polls by all major companies, April 2005



Data for this chart:

Company	Date	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrat
ICM/Guardian	3/4/2005	34	37	21
NOP/Independent	3/4/2005	33	36	21
Populus/Times	3/4/2005	35	37	19
MORI/FT	3/4/2005	39	34	21
YouGov/Sky News	5/4/2005	36	36	21
YouGov/Telegraph	6/4/2005	35	36	21
ICM/Sunday Telegraph	8/4/2005	34	38	20
YouGov/Sunday Times	9/4/2005	35	37	21
MORI/Observer/Mirror	9/4/2005	33	40	19
BPIX/Mail on Sunday	9/4/2005	37	37	20
ICM/Mirror	9/4/2005	33	38	22
YouGov/Telegraph	10/4/2005	36	36	20
NOP/Independent	10/4/2005	32	38	21
MORI/Evening Standard	11/4/2005	35	39	21
ICM/Guardian	12/4/2005	33	39	21
YouGov/Telegraph	14/04/05	33	38	22
BPIX/Mail on Sunday	15/04/05	36	35	20
ICM/Sunday Telegraph	15/04/05	30	40	22
CommRes/Independent on Sunday	15/04/05	34	40	20
YouGov/Sunday Times	16/04/05	35	36	23
ICM/Mirror/GMTV	16/04/05	33	41	20

YouGov/Telegraph	17/04/05	32	36	23
NOP/Independent	17/04/05	32	37	21
Populus/Times	17/04/05	31	40	21
MORI/FT	18/04/05	32	40	21
ICM/Guardian	19/04/05	33	39	22
MORI/Sun	19/04/05	32	39	22
YouGov/Telegraph	21/04/05	34	37	22
ICM/Sunday Telegraph	22/04/05	33	39	21
CommRes/Independent on Sunday	22/04/05	35	40	18
BPIX/Mail on Sunday	22/04/05	34	36	22
YouGov/Sunday Times	23/04/05	33	37	23
ICM/Mirror/GMTV	23/04/05	33	39	20
YouGov/Telegraph	24/04/05	33	37	24
NOP/Independent	24/04/05	30	40	21
MORI/FT	25/04/05	34	36	23
ICM/Guardian	26/04/05	33	40	20
YouGov/Telegraph	28/04/05	32	36	24
CommRes/Independent on Sunday	28/04/05	31	39	23
ICM/Sunday Telegraph	29/04/05	31	39	22
BPIX/Mail on Sunday	29/04/05	33	37	21
MORI/Observer/S Mirror	29/04/05	33	36	22
YouGov/Sunday Times	30/04/05	33	36	23
YouGov/Telegraph	1/5/2005	33	36	24
MORI/FT	1/5/2005	29	39	22

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