

People, parties and parliaments: Election campaigns, media and their impact

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Michaela Maier, Jesper Strömbäck and Lynda Lee Kaid (eds), *Political Communication in European Parliamentary Elections*, Ashgate: Farnham, 2011; 268 pp.: £60.00

Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore and Simon Atkinson (eds), *Political Communication in Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2011; 349 pp.: £19.99

The idea of an election is much more interesting to me than the election itself. (Jeff Melvoin)

The only thing we learn from a new election is we learned nothing from the old. (Gerald Barzan)

An election is a moral horror, as bad as a battle except for the blood; a mud bath for every soul concerned in it. (George Bernard Shaw)

Election campaigning, voter behaviour and forensic analysis of the results are at the core of the industry of political science. Political communication studies, in particular, place a special emphasis on the contests to determine who will be the people's representatives on the national and international stages. Elections in themselves are short periods of collective political history, and though campaign lengths vary, they are periods of the suspension of politics. Yet, increasingly, they are one of the central performances within our political calendar, the main event perhaps. The centrality of elections thus makes them of key importance for the protagonists – the parties and candidates who seek public mandate; the media, who report on the crests and troughs of the campaign and who should translate the language of politics into common parlance; and the public, who must play the key role of choice-maker, decide whether or not to vote, and if the former, for whom to vote. The quality of a democracy is often measured by its elections (consider perspectives on democracy in Iran for example), therefore understanding the nature and style of the campaign, its mediation and the combined impact are of central importance when trying to understand the legitimacy of representatives, parliaments and governments.

The quotes at the beginning of this article perhaps reflect three perspectives, all of which relate to the studies of the elections which are the subject of this review. First, there is a philosophical view of elections, the election as a concept, a core event in the process of democracy. Second, elections can be approached from a comparative perspective, assessing how they become more professional, more marketized and yet often less engaging. Third, the focus can be on the micro-issues, the blood sport of the battle between parties and candidates on the airwaves and the pavements. The collection drawn together by Michaela Maier, Jesper Strömbäck and Lynda Lee Kaid (Maier et al.) entitled *Political Communication in European Parliamentary Elections* blends the philosophical, comparative and processual elements. Through a micro- and macro-analysis of the 2009 campaign across the 27 member states, they re-evaluate the second-order election thesis focusing on the legislative framework, campaign conduct, mediation and impact. *Political Communication in Britain*, the collection edited by Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore and Simon Atkinson (Wring et al.), approaches the British 2010 general election more from the micro-level. The authors focus on key issues relating to the campaign in terms of the parties' approach and mediation; both the wider theoretical frameworks for understanding elections and questions of impact are largely sidelined. The review of these collections, therefore, allows us to explore the nature of elections in their widest contexts, the macro- and micro-issues, while also offering some thoughts on the value of the contrasting approaches to their study.

Maier et al. explicitly test hypotheses set out by Reif and Schmitt in 1980, which suggested that elections to the European parliament (EP) would see a lower level of participation, with greater numbers of invalidated ballots, therefore smaller or new parties would have brighter prospects. These elections, it was hypothesized, would also be framed by national politicians and media as contextualized within the first-order arena. So European parliamentary elections would become referenda on national governing parties or coalitions, so often leading to those parties having heavier losses, while the EP itself would largely be ignored within the campaign (p. 4). Perhaps this was appropriate for the level of influence enjoyed by MEPs and the groupings that exist within the EP following the first direct election in 1979; however, over the last 30 years the powers of the EP, as well as the number of member states and so MEPs, have increased significantly (Jones, Ch. 2). Therefore, the second-order election thesis which has dominated understandings of these contests is worthy of re-evaluation.

The hypotheses are first explored within the framework of campaign professionalism (Ch. 3), finding that the Strömbäck party-centred model of professionalism applies although this cannot guarantee electoral success. Given that the focus was on the party campaigns this is perhaps not surprising, and perhaps suggests a standardization of campaigning at this level. Furthermore, as the chapter only focuses on Sweden and Finland, it is hard to make a case that the findings are generalizable. The following chapter shares the same limitations in this respect. Focusing on the 'transformational' democracies, a synonym for the newer nations within Eastern Europe, Raycheva and Roka (Ch. 4) find clear evidence to support the second-order election thesis, in particular that the EP, or European issues more generally, plays little role in the campaign messages. The smaller sample for a case study is more justifiable when exploring the campaigns within Eurosceptic nations. The findings presented by Negrine, Stetka and Fialova, based on their analysis of the party

campaigns within the UK and Czech Republic (Ch. 5), reinforce those of the previous authors. When a chapter does approach this with a wider comparative approach, there are some interesting contrasts. The exploration of campaign strategies using videostyle to analyse televised advertising across a representative sample of 10 member nations (Ch. 6) finds contrasts between the established and newer member states in terms of the emphasis on candidates, issues and parties, with issues dominating the established members' communication. Furthermore, citizens in newer member states will on the whole get far more positive messages about the EU than those in the established member states. These data indicate that there are contrasts in EP campaigning and perhaps the uniformity found in 1979 can no longer apply. The section on party campaigning is rounded off, sadly, with a single-nation case study. While appearing to test the hypothesis that 'everyone ignores Europe' through an analysis of party campaigns and media coverage, the data are only from the Portuguese context. However, Jalali and Silva (Ch. 7) make an important point that follows on from the previous chapter. This is that 'the messenger matters' (p. 124); all media and all parties do not offer a homogeneous message on the election and so while there is a 'Europe-shaped hole' on average across the campaign, this can depend on the party or media to which the citizen becomes most exposed.

The next section of the book focuses on the role of the media in EP elections, starting with Roncarlo's study of the media coverage of the contest in Italy (Ch. 8), followed by a similar study by Dobek-Ostrowska and Lodzki in Poland (Ch. 9). These chapters highlight that the elections were framed within domestic politics and the inter-party conflicts surrounding European integration, thus the second-order thesis is maintained here. The wider study of the framing of the election across 13 member states (Ch. 10) reinforces a sense of uniformity, in particular the dominance of the journalist within coverage. However, again there is a noted divergence over the positive or negative framing of the EU. The nuances are reinforced by the cross-national and longitudinal study of coverage (Ch. 11). Shuck et al. find that actually the EP was more visible, on average, and that while the coverage was more polarized there was a positive evaluation of the EU particularly within newer member states. However, while this seems positive, the conclusion notes that the media choose to shine their spotlight upon the aspects of the EU/EP which fits their agenda (p. 194) and so the citizen may be fed a single perspective if they are reliant on one medium for election news.

The studies of party campaigns and media coverage find qualified support for the second-order thesis. This is reasonably well-trodden academic ground. The innovative aspect of this collection is the exploration of the impacts in the third section. Marsh (Ch. 12) offers a comparative perspective on turnout and the underlying motivations for voting in EP elections. Perhaps reflecting the effects of second-order campaigns with 'Europe-sized holes', we find turnout lower for these contests. Governments tend to lose these elections but there are more mixed findings in the case of successes for smaller parties. Marsh finds a further contrast between the established and new member states, that while there is greater volatility between domestic and EP elections, it is only in the established states that minor parties find their support enhanced. The issue of turnout is revisited by Seeber and Steinbrecher (Ch. 13) with a study across all 27 states comparing EP elections to the national parliamentary counterparts. The authors discover turnout is lower for the EP contests but that this can be explained by the dynamics of support for European integration

before the election (p. 225). However, a further group of dynamics, relating to campaign strength and the issues the contest is fought on, are uncovered. These suggest that Euroscepticism acts as a turnout depressant. This finding appears to be corroborated by Maier et al.'s study (Ch. 14) of the relationship between turnout and the exposure to campaign messages. Using an experimental design across 11 member nations, it was found that campaign messages shape attitudes towards both participation and the EP. This effect is, however, mediated by perceptions of communication as informative, therefore suggesting that if a process of learning was taking place then there would be a clear effect on the attitudes of those citizens towards the nation's integration with European partners.

The final chapter puts the notion of a second-order election into perspective. If citizens receive scant information regarding the EP or EU, and if the campaigns follow a party-centric model and largely focus on domestic issues, messages regarding European integration become marginalized or left to parties created simply to undermine the integration project. Hence, while the major parties in the UK battle over the economy, management of public services or perceptions of competence, it is the UK Independence Party that is able to lead the agenda on Europe, build negative perceptions and depress turnout; coming second place overall in the process. This pattern seems to hold true for many of the established member states' campaigns, should the newer states follow this pattern there will be negative consequences for the legitimacy of a parliament that is a locus of legislative power. This appears to be the wider contribution of this project; however the collection lacks a conclusion that discusses the implications in detail or how lessons for future elections, EP or domestic, could be developed from the findings. The strands are connected at the end of the introduction but a final discussion would have been a valuable addition to what is an important collection of work that offers significant insights into the conduct, coverage and impacts of European parliamentary elections.

In contrast to the European-wide project led by Maier et al., Wring et al. offer a micro-study of the British 2010 general election. This collection of studies is part of a series dating back to 1979, so offering not only forensic studies of each campaign but also great potential for comparative work over the last eight contests. The collection is divided into six sections, each focusing on a particular area of interest within the context of the single campaign. The campaign event that is placed front and centre of the discussion is that of the first televised leaders' debate in Britain. This overshadowed most other events of the campaign and dominated not only the media coverage but also the time of all three major party leaders. The first two chapters offer the perspective of the journalist. The first focuses predominantly on the negotiation process that led to the debates and the controls and constraints imposed by the parties from the BBC perspective. Sky's Adam Boulton follows this up with the perspective of the organization that pushed for debates and whose threat to hold one regardless of whether all party leaders participated is claimed to have led to a consensus that the debates were to take place and only for the detail to be the subject for negotiation. The final chapters in the first section focus on the way in which the debates were mediated and what impact they had. Coleman et al. contend that, to engage citizens, media should offer a combination of game and substance reporting. Therefore, media reports should highlight aspects regarding the performance and underlying strategy as well as the substantive policy issues raised by each of the leaders. Editorial interpretations of both in combination should offer a richer understanding of the events

and their role in both politics and democracy. Their analysis, presented in Chapter 4, found there was a mixture of game and substance; however, this was undermined to a point by the strongly partisan cleavages demonstrated across the newspapers. This may not, however, be problematic. Given that the main broadcasters lead with more balanced and objective coverage, and not only gain the greatest share of the audience but have the power to determine later interpretations due to the immediacy of their analysis overall, the media audience may have been well served. This point is perhaps reinforced through analysis of the impact on voters of the polls and media coverage. Lawes and Hawkins argue the first debate led to a shift in public support for the leaders, in particular that of Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, who prior to these events had no substantial public profile. The effect was not confined to those who viewed the debate; their analysis finds a cascade effect where non-viewers' support matched that of viewers to an extent. The debates are thus placed as a central, perhaps even pivotal, event of the campaign; it is fair to say that they were a game-changer in terms of campaign conduct and yet, in terms of the overall result, these media events seem to have had little impact. This conundrum is at the heart of the analysis in the second section of the collection.

While it would be unfair to say that in 2010 the opinion pollsters got it wrong, one phenomenon of the contest suggests a disconnect between recorded support, actual vote share and representative capacity. The first leaders' debate catapulted Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg from obscurity to front runner and he remained a serious contender for people's choice of prime minister. Yet the final result saw only a 1% increase in vote share and a net loss of five seats. Clegg's position in the coalition is more the result of Labour's vote not collapsing in key seats than a surge of support for the Liberal Democrats. IpsosMORI pollsters Atkinson and Mortimore (Ch. 6) raise interesting points regarding the accuracy of poll measures. However, they note minimal inaccuracies in reality and suggest that a 'spiral of noise' (p. 92) surrounded Clegg following the first debate, partially due to personal attacks from Conservative leaning media and a backlash via Twitter. In reality Clegg won the first debate, but support for him as a potential prime minister soon diminished. Kellner et al. support these conclusions, though point to a 'spiral of eloquence' (p. 107), referring to responses to polls that overstated support for Clegg due to him being seen as fashionable or cool, whereas the pencils hovered in doubt when the same person entered the voting booth. Overall the pollsters are given a clean bill of health, with YouGov's Kellner suggesting that biases that had plagued previous contests were now resolved. The analysis is of course from the perspective of the pollster, who has a vested interest in demonstrating that the polls were accurate.

Section 3 focuses on the wider voter experiences of the campaign. Mortimore et al. (Ch. 8) find first that the campaign had little impact upon voter choices. The polls showed little movement across the campaign, suggesting that much of the effort was wasted. This lack of impact overall is matched among voters in the battleground seats where the campaign was most intense. Voters in the marginal seats, where under a first-past-the-post election system, victory or defeat can mean the difference between a party winning a workable majority in parliament or not, did show some changes in preference but with no net winner. Hence, they conclude, the stability reflects competition between two equally effective campaigns (p. 124). This analysis is followed with a discussion on the broader issue of confidence in elections. Watson highlights the concerns of the Electoral

Commission regarding management of elections, showing that confidence is high and corruption low, but that monitoring is needed to ensure this remains the case.

Sections 4 and 5 focus first on the insider perspectives of the party and then the conduct of the campaign. Of the three chapters from party insiders (Chs 10–12), the offering by Alex Wilson representing the Conservative Party is the most honest and enlightening. The target seats strategy is in particular discussed openly with interesting descriptions of their voter segmentation. The chapters on Labour and the Liberal Democrats present brief histories which contextualize the contest from an insider perspective but offer little that is new to the political anorak; sadly, the other parties are not allowed space to discuss the more insurgent campaigns they might have pursued. These chapters are followed by more academic evaluations of the campaign with analyses of posters, constituency-level campaigning and the use of the online environment (Chs 13–15). The posters chapter demonstrates the continued role of the static visual in a campaign, though largely describing each of the party strategies without any holistic or comparative dimension. Fisher et al. follow on with analysis of the constituency campaign dimension. Drawing on data going back over several contests they note strong continuities but an increased overall interest in e-campaigning, or use of the Internet, as well as the Conservatives having a more differentiated strategy based upon the chances the party had of victory locally. This chimes well with the insights from Wilson (Ch. 10) as well as reflecting much broader trends in campaigning. Southern and Ward offer a more in-depth account of local e-campaigning finding a more sporadic picture. Consistent with campaign imperatives and the professionalization of campaigning thesis, e-campaigning is largely centralized and about ‘wanting to be seen’ rather than ‘wanting to engage’ (p. 234). Though this analysis is based purely on the websites and use of social media at the candidate level, more sophisticated innovations were found in studies of party use of the Internet (Lilleker and Jackson, 2011).

The final section contains four chapters which are devoted to the mediation of the contest. First the impact of the UK MPs’ expenses scandal is reviewed and found largely to be negligible, though the analysis explores the demographics of those implicated with more scientific rigour than whether there were any significant relationships between being an expenses ‘saint’ or ‘sinner’ and being rewarded or punished by local electorates. Gaber follows this with an analysis of the contours of media coverage, making a very important division between the broadcasters and the newspapers. The debates became the media event, but he notes the broadcasters’ coverage became an extension of the event through follow-up news bulletins that contained instant analysis and reaction. The newspapers were largely sidelined to the role of critic but Gaber enquires whether this actually privileges them. It may be the case that the newspapers are more able to offer reflective and critical analysis as compared to the instantaneity of the post-debate news bulletins. Chapter 18 largely returns to the issues raised by Coleman earlier in the collection: the contribution to democratic discussion made by the media. While in the context of the debates Coleman et al. found some positive balance between game and substance reporting, Deacon and Wring offer less positive conclusions. They suggest that both parties and media sidestepped facing important issues relating to expenditure reform so leaving voters ‘poorly positioned to anticipate the scale, severity and radicalism of the statecraft that was to follow’ (p. 301). Although not stated as boldly, one can allude that some voters may have also been poorly positioned to make an informed choice on polling day had they

been reliant on the mass media for knowledge on the party stances on the major issues. This is an area worthy of greater exploration. The final chapter focuses on mediation of the election through satire. Richardson et al. raise interesting questions on the emotional impact of satirized visions of elections and the combatants. This is work in progress, however, so is not yet at the stage of measuring impact. The collection closes with an interesting discussion of the challenges for those reporting, competing in, polling or studying elections. The underlying theme is, perhaps, that much changed but the fundamentals remained in terms of the overall conduct of the players: be they journalists, leaders, candidates, pollsters or indeed voters.

The two collections of essays represent very divergent approaches to the study of political communication in the context of elections. Maier et al. analyse the 2009 European parliamentary election contest with a clear set of hypotheses. Although the chapters do not offer an equal level of analysis in terms of covering a cross-section of EU member states or drawing on data from previous contests, the collection demonstrates that while the second-order thesis largely holds its predictive power, there are nuances. In particular the newer member states demonstrate greater levels of interest in the European parliament and greater support for integration and so the dynamics of the contest are not identical across the region. However, due to the focus one does not get the broader sense of how the various campaigns were run as one would from micro-analyses. Yet broader dynamics of the campaign appear very similar to those found for a UK general election. The focus on the personalities and game elements of the campaign predominate in the media and party campaigns focus on image and broad statements rather than specifics. This may be justified in the case of an EP election that is contextualized within national politics; however, one would perhaps expect a greater focus on issues and the specifics of proposed reforms within the context of a general election contest. Perhaps the Deacon and Wring conclusion can be extended and expanded upon to capture the impact of these campaigns: that voters are generally poorly positioned to make their electoral choices unless they seek information independently of the official channels of broadcast news or party media events.

Election campaigns are unique moments which facilitate the understanding of the workings of democracies. Analyses need to focus on the strategy, its communication and mediation and the overall impact; something both these studies do well within their own frameworks. The challenge is to explore the wider implications of such studies and what they tell us about the legitimacy of the parliaments and the nature of engagement in the democratic process. Both collections could explore such matters further, for example asking whether second-order elections undermine the legitimacy of the EP, so contributing to lower support for European integration. Equally, did the UK's leader debates contribute to engagement and legitimacy or usher in an additional layer of presidentialism and personalization? Consideration of the wider implication cannot only offer insights into a past event but also offer guidance for future contests. Proving Bazan wrong, political science needs to consider more the normative questions and contribute positively to practice as well as knowledge. The different approaches within these collections offer very useful insights in their own right. The UK study is part of a series and so will be replicated in 2015; the EP study should also be repeated. Future studies might consider how these contests shape the broader political topography within the respective nations and across the EU. Sadly, any future project will not have the benefit of having Lynda Lee Kaid in the

editorial team. As the collection went into production the news of her passing shocked many of us who have followed her work over the years, gaining so much enlightenment from her thinking. The collection is a fitting eulogy, while encouraging us to continue and develop her work is the greatest memorial to her as an academic.

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