Survey Experiments during the 2015 General Election

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ES/M010775/1 ‘Media in Context: and the 2015 General Election: How Traditional Media Shape Elections and Governing’
Experimental Design

• **4,026 respondents across 3 waves**
  – Wave 1: 5-7 May
  – Wave 2: 8-11 May
  – Wave 3: 28 May – 1 June

• **571 constituencies across the UK**
  – all English regions
  – Scotland
  – Wales
  – 178 marginal, 393 safe
Survey Experiments

4 survey experiments embedded in the panel

– Experiment 1: Effect of post-electoral communication frames on attitudes about government efficacy
– Experiment 2: Perceptions about the fairness of elections and electoral reform
– Experiment 3: Audience costs and the EU referendum
– Experiment 4: The effect of news exposure on the dynamics of political opinions
Our Sample

• Good match to the population along various socio-demographic dimensions (e.g., age, gender, economic activity, regional distribution similar to the 2011 Census)

• Political preferences closely matched the official voting returns in the 2015 election.

• However:
  – our subjects were more educated
  – ethnic minority under-represented
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (in years)</td>
<td>53.22</td>
<td>47.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (%)</td>
<td>48.31</td>
<td>50.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University education</td>
<td>49.04</td>
<td>27.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>32.87</td>
<td>38.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time</td>
<td>14.05</td>
<td>13.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>5.48</td>
<td>4.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote choice (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>36.94</td>
<td>36.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>29.14</td>
<td>30.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKIP</td>
<td>9.34</td>
<td>7.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lib-Dem</td>
<td>14.91</td>
<td>12.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Geographical distribution of the sample and the population

% of Sample and Population in different regions:
- E Midlands
- East
- London
- N East
- N West
- S East
- S West
- Scotland
- Cumbria
- Wales
- Yorkshire

Legend:
- Red: Sample
- Blue: Population
Experiment 1: Communication frames, marginality and perceptions about government
Experiment Design

Online panel – 1,830

Competitive (marginal) constituency – 21.6%

Guardian
Telegraph
‘Narrow majority’
‘Decisive majority’
Control

Safe constituency – 78.4%

Guardian
Telegraph
‘Narrow majority’
‘Decisive majority’
Control
Treatments (1): Guardian vs. Telegraph

The Telegraph

David Cameron wins majority for Conservatives in Election 2015 victory

Prime Minister returns to Downing Street victorious as Ed Balls leads the list of Labour and Lib Dem losses.

By Steven Swinford, Peter Dominiczak, and Barney Henderson
11:25AM BST 08 May 2015

David Cameron has won the general election with an outright majority after Labour was virtually wiped out in Scotland and the Liberal Democrat vote collapsed.

Mr Cameron hailed the “sweetest victory” as his party secured the 323 seats needed to form a government without needing to go into coalition. It came after an electoral earthquake in Scotland, with Nicola Sturgeon’s SNP seeing unprecedented swings and decimating Labour north of the border.

Ed Miliband, the Labour leader, is set to resign after saying that he was “deeply sorry” about the result in Scotland. Ed Balls, the Shadow Chancellor was the biggest scalp of the night, losing his Leeds seat to the Tories.

The Guardian

Cameron prepares to form Conservative government after election victory

Unexpected results deliver Tories overall Commons majority and claim leadership scalps of Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage

David Cameron began to form his first government comprised solely of Conservative cabinet members on Friday after being delivered an overall Commons majority by a tumultuous election. The result claimed the scalps of an unprecedented three party leaders in one day as Labour’s Ed Miliband, the Liberal Democrats’ Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage of Ukip announced their resignations.

Cameron and his wife, Samantha, travelled to Buckingham Palace where he accepted the invitation of the Queen to form a government. He later reappointed George Osborne as chancellor, Theresa May as home secretary, Philip Hammond as foreign secretary and Michael Fallon as defence secretary.

In an election suffused with historical and political significance, the Tories won 330 seats, four more than the required 326 for an overall majority, while Labour collapsed to 232, worse than its dismal 2010 performance. The result confounded a string of opinion polls that suggested Labour and the Conservatives were neck and neck, and that Britain was heading for a constitutional stalemate.
Treatments (2): ‘Narrow’ vs. ‘Decisive’ Majority

Conservatives win narrow majority in the general election

David Cameron's party won an unexpected and slim majority on one of the most dramatic nights in British electoral history.

By Jennifer Rushmore
3:58PM BST 8 May 2015

It was the majority that shocked the nation. Months of polling had suggested that the Conservatives and Labour were neck-and-neck during the general election campaign. Victories for the Conservatives south of the border and a virtual clean sweep for the SNP north meant the Labour party did nowhere near as well as expected. The nature of the vote on 7 May determined that the Conservatives have a fragile majority holding only 4 seats more than necessary to govern on their own with Labour virtually wiped out in Scotland and Liberal Democrats losing all but eight seats from their 2010 line-up.

Conservatives win decisive majority in the general election

David Cameron's party stormed to an unexpected outright win on one of the most dramatic nights in British electoral history.

By Jennifer Rushmore
3:58PM BST 8 May 2015

It was the majority that shocked the nation. Months of polling had suggested that the Conservatives and Labour were neck-and-neck during the general election campaign. Big victories for the Conservatives south of the border and a virtual clean sweep for the SNP north meant the Labour party did nowhere near as well as expected. The nature of the vote on 7 May determined that the Conservatives are the clear majority party winner with Labour virtually wiped out in Scotland and Liberal Democrats losing all but eight seats from their 2010 line-up.
The article from "The Times" is about Whitbread turning to Lloyds for a new chief executive. Deirdre Hipwell authored the article at 8:58 AM on May 22, 2015.

Whitbread has found a replacement for its outgoing chief executive and has hired Alison Brittain from the retail division of Lloyds Bank. The leisure group said that Ms Brittain, 50, who has previously worked at Santander and Barclays and is also a non-executive of Marks & Spencer, would replace Andy Harrison in January.

Mr Harrison surprised the market when he announced his retirement from Whitbread in April citing the “relentless way of life” of a public company.

Market sources had thought the early favourite to replace him was Chris Rogers, the managing director of the leisure group’s Costa Coffee chain.
Experiment 1: Outcomes

- Will the new Conservative government be able to fulfil its campaign promises?
- Is a parliamentary majority important to govern the country?
- Is it important that one party governs on its own so that it can be held accountable in the next election?
  - Answers: 5-point agree/disagree scale
Distribution of the outcome variables

![Bar chart showing distribution of outcome variables for Marginal and Safe categories.](image)

**Outcome**
- Accountability
- Campaign Promises
- Majority Important

13
Experiment 1: Findings

1. No evidence of framing effects on average.

2. Treatment effects only significant in marginal constituencies.
   • ‘strong majority’ treatments $\rightarrow$ belief that the government would be able to fulfil its campaign promises and to have an impact on the life of British people;
   • ‘weak majority’ treatments $\rightarrow$ belief that, in order for voters to be able to hold governments accountable, it is important to have a strong single-party majority in office.

3. Results seem driven by the content of the frame rather than by the source.
Experiment 2: Electoral Unfairness and Electoral Reform

Share of overall vote
- Actual seats won
- Potential proportional seats

Inner seats: proportionally allocated
Outer seats: over-allocated

Conservative • 35.5% of vote (331 seats)
Labour • 30.4% of vote (231 seats)
Lib Dem • 11.0% of vote (27 seats)
SNP • 9.8% of vote (42 seats)
Green • 4.5% of vote (3 seats)
P. Cymru • 1.4% of vote (1 seat)
UKIP • 1.3% of vote (1 seat)
Other

Sources: Election Forecast; The Economist
Experiment 2: Questions

How does factual information about the distribution of votes/shares affect...
  - Perceptions about elections
  - Satisfaction with British democracy
  - Attitudes about electoral reform

Does this depend on partisan attachments? Socio-demographic characteristics?
Experiment 2: Treatments

(Control/Introduction): Conservatives received 37% of the vote and 50%+ of the seat shares

1. Intro+ but the Greens received about 4% of the vote and only 1% of the seats
2. Intro+ but UKIP received 12% of the vote but less than 1% of the seats
3. Intro + but SNP received 4.7% of the vote and 9% of the seat share
Experiment 2: Outcomes

1. Elections in the UK are conducted fairly
2. The country is governed by the will of the people
3. Satisfaction with the way elections are conducted in the UK
4. Should FPTP be replaced with PR?
Preliminary findings: Only UKIP matters?
And not only for UKIP voters...
Still, an electoral reform might be up for debate...

Almost 45% unsatisfied with British Democracy
Still, an electoral reform might be up for debate...

Almost 70% agree that the system is broken
Still, an electoral reform might be up for debate...

Almost 80% Would prefer proportional representation
Experiment 2: Findings

1. Disproportional vote-seat distribution affecting UKIP undermined perceptions about the fairness of elections and government legitimacy
2. Not only among UKIP voters, but across electors
3. However, dissatisfaction with democratic procedures in UK is a more general phenomenon
   - 70% of respondents feel that the electoral system is “broken”
   - 80% would favour a change to PR
Experiment 3: Attitudes towards EU Referendum
Experiment 3: Attitudes towards EU Referendum

The promise to hold an in-out EU referendum was a key element of the campaign

- As many as 16% of voters may have changed their vote due to this pledge (BMG Research)
- The Sun: UKIP supporters began to “come home”
Experiment 3: Attitudes towards EU Referendum

But what if the referendum is not held after all?

- EU opposition
- Domestic political opposition (Labour, Lib-Dems)
- Only campaign promises (unlikely to be met)

- Would this hurt perceptions of Cameron/the government?
- Does the specific reason matter?
- For whom?
## Experiment 3: Treatments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>“During the election campaign, the Conservative party publicly pledged to hold an in-out referendum on the UK’s EU membership by 2017”</td>
<td>1,830</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Promise broken due to internal opposition</td>
<td>“Government will not be able to pass the referendum bill due to slim parliamentary majority”</td>
<td>458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Promise broken due to external (EU) opposition</td>
<td>“Government will not be able to pass the referendum bill due to strong opposition of most of the other EU members.”</td>
<td>458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Promise broken by Conservatives (“insincere” campaign pledge)</td>
<td>“Referendum was a campaign strategy to attract potential UKIP voters.”</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Control</td>
<td>“Referendum will be held as promised”</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Experiment 3: Outcomes

1. Do you approve/disapprove of the government’s handling of the situation?
2. What does this decision tell you about Cameron’s competence (very low/very high)?
3. What does this decision tell you about Cameron’s leadership (very weak/very strong)?
Preliminary Results

Effects on Public Approval of the Government’s Decision

- Treatment: Electoral promise, EU opposition, Internal opposition
- Y-axis: Public Approval Score
- X-axis: Treatment Categories

Graph shows the impact of different treatments on public approval, with the x-axis representing different types of opposition and the y-axis showing the approval score.
A better approach….uncovering underlying groups of respondents

The three outcomes might be related:
- perceptions about competence and leadership might affect approval
- treatments might affect the 3 outcomes simultaneously

Also, heterogeneous response to treatment
- does not necessarily make sense to estimate “average” effects
### Three groups or “classes” of subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Class 1</th>
<th>Class 2</th>
<th>Class 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approval</td>
<td>Always disapprove of decision, regardless of the specific reason</td>
<td>Only disapprove of the decision when they feel “betrayed” (i.e., false campaign promises)</td>
<td>Only disapprove of the decision if imposed by EU opposition or they feel “betrayed” (i.e., false campaign promises)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other outcomes</td>
<td>Treatments only affect approval, not Cameron’s (perceived) competence or leadership</td>
<td>Treatments only affect approval, not Cameron’s (perceived) competence or leadership</td>
<td>Cameron’s inability to stand up to EU or incapacity to overcome domestic opposition undermines his competence &amp; leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Prevalence of each class in the sample

Class 1: 0.5
Class 2: 0.1
Class 3: 0.3
Who are the members of each group?

• Right-wing (Conservative, UKIP) voters are significantly more likely to belong to Class 1 ("always disapproving")
• Similarly, subjects who use media more frequently AND who trust news outlets are more likely to belong to this class.
• In contrast, more politically knowledgeable and interested subjects belong to Classes 2 – "only disapproving if betrayed" – Class 3 – those who care about Cameron’s reputation and leadership
• The same applies to less “anti-immigrant” subjects
Experiment 3: Findings

1. Cameron would pay a high cost for backing down from his promise to hold an in/out EU referendum
2. But the particular explanation for backing down matters
3. And matters to different people
4. In particular, explanations based on internal/external opposition would not be terribly damaging for his reputation, and would even be “condoned” by a large segment of the electorate
Any questions?

https://mediaeffectsresearch.wordpress.com/research-output/

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