The effect of post-electoral communication frames on attitudes towards government: Evidence from a survey experiment after the 2015 British election

Gabriel Katz, Ekaterina Kolpinskaya, Susan Banducci, Travis Coan and Daniel Stevens

Abstract:

The 2015 UK General Election produced a clear, yet unexpected result; the Conservative Party won the parliamentary majority despite most of pre-election polls pointing towards a ‘hung’ parliament (Hill, 2015). The contrast between the expected and actual election outcomes might result in conflicting assessments of the newly elected government’s ability to govern and its legitimacy among the public, especially considering the role of the news media in promoting the prospect of a coalition. This provides a unique opportunity to examine how alternative media frames of the General Election outcome resonate with the public attitudes towards the newly elected government and their assessment of its capacity to govern.

Using data from a survey experiment conducted after the 2015 British general election, we manipulate the content and the source of news stories about the size of the parliamentary majority achieved by the Conservative Party and estimate the effect of these manipulations on respondents’ opinions about their capacity to deliver on their electoral pledges.

We find no evidence of framing effect on average. However, the perceived decisiveness of the new government majority substantially affects attitudes towards government in marginal constituencies. Subjects in these constituencies exposed to information indicating that the new Conservative government had only a slim parliamentary majority were less likely to believe that the government was able to deliver on its campaign promises and to have an impact on the lives of the British people. These subjects were also significantly more likely to believe that it is important to have a powerful government in office in order to hold it accountable in elections.