National and Local Party Election Agendas

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In the saliency theory of elections parties compete to set the agenda. Rather than confronting one another with different positions on the same issues, they talk past each other, emphasising different priorities. In selecting their priorities parties play to their strengths, stressing the issues they 'own'. Having built a reputation on an issue, parties seek to convert the credit earned in the past into votes in the present. In their campaigns each party seeks to prime voters to prioritise the issues they own. The more important an issue is, potentially, the more advantageous it is to the party which owns it. But parties may have to attend to issues they do not own because they are important to so many voters that they are unavoidable. Such issues will have to be addressed but will command less attention than those the party owns. Moreover they will interpret such issues in ways which draw on their strengths so they are not disadvantaged by raising their salience. For example, a party of the left might interpret crime as a consequence of deprivation to be remedied through enhancing social rather than criminal justice (Budge and Fairlie 1983, Petrocik 1996, Petrocik et al, 2003).

In this interpretation of elections parties are seen as monolithic. A single strategy exists for each party. They 'speak' with one voice. There are no rival agendas appearing from within the different factions of a party or the territorial sub-divisions of the organisation. This assumption is common beyond saliency theory. It is also pervasive in the literature on spatial theories of elections, party organisation, political marketing and communication. Commenting on works on spatial theory, but applicable to a much broader party literature, Ware observes that they 'presume an 'it'—the party—that has objectives and alternative strategies for obtaining those objectives' (1996: 328). In spatial theory a party occupies a single position on individual issues or an ideological dimension (Downs 1957). This holds true even for

authors who acknowledge factional conflict within parties. At an election these conflicts are compromised to make the party a unitary actor which locates a position in issue apace (Roemer, 2001).

Studies of party organization describe the party in the singular. A curious recent example is the tautology of *the* cartel party (Katz and Mair, 1995).Though much of the literature on parties deals with elite rivalries, different territorial units and ancillary organisations, in the treatment of electioneering this multiplicity disappears. Then the party becomes an organisation, running a campaign with an appeal directed at the electorate or segments of it. This can be seen as the party fulfilling its textbook function of aggregating interests in which they 'bundle together the demands of a variety of social groups', the 'bundle' being the product of the aggregating process (Webb, 2002: 12). At times this quest to express singularity lapses into the naturalistic fallacy, treating the party as a human individual. Referring to the campaign of the catch-all party, Kirchheimer, says 'it may have a reasonable expectation of catching more voters in all those categories whose interests do not adamantly conflict' (1966: 186). The individuality of the party precludes the possibility of alternative expectations or factional conflicts over how to realise them.

The application to election campaigning of concepts derived from marketing and communications also results in the representation of parties as unitary actors. In these characterisations the party acquires some of the qualities of a firm. 'It' devises a product, identifies a potential market and implements a campaign to attract support (Lees-Marchment, 2000). In communicating its campaign, the party has a brand, a

message and a strategy for delivery to targeted sections of the electorate (van Heerde 2007).

In this article we test the assumption that national and local parties have identical agendas in the 2005 British general election. Our evidence of the national agenda draws from three sources -- party election broadcasts, the manifestos and the leaders' speeches. Some variation might be expected in their emphases between these sources because they differ in length and the stage of the campaign in which they are delivered. But we expect considerable overlap between them, an assumption supported by previous research (Norris et al 1999).

From three national and one local source we identify the three issues given greatest coverage by each party. For the party leaders' speeches and election broadcasts, we draw from the work of Green and Hobolt (2006). We conducted a content analysis of party manifestos. Using the same methodology, we performed a content analysis of local election leaflets in one region, the South West of England.[1] In the latter analysis we treated each constituency party as a separate unit.[2]

Though the South West is not a political microcosm of the country, in that the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are electorally stronger and Labour weaker, for the purposes of this study we do not regard these untypical features to be problematic. The region contains a variety of competitive environments even if their proportions do not replicate the entire country. At the time of the 2005 election, Labour held sixteen seats, the Conservatives twenty, and the Liberal Democrats fifteen and each party had a mix of safe and marginal seats. Over 40 per cent of the seats were marginal as a

result of the 2001 election (defined as a winning margin below 10 per cent) so the potential benefits of playing to party strengths were high in a larger proportion of seats in this region than most others. Our concern is whether the local and national agendas differ. If they do, we suspect the region will not be unique. One national study of local election literature found the South West to be typical of other regions on most counts (Robinson and Fisher, 2005). At one point in our discussion we refer to the region's distinctiveness but otherwise we think that it is a sound test case of a more general phenomenon.

For the assumption of saliency theory to hold, the national and local agendas should have the same priorities. We hypothesise, first, that the more national sources an issue appears in, the greater the probability it will be a local priority. Second, there should be no local priorities that are absent from the national agenda. As we go on to show, these hypotheses are confirmed for Labour but not for the other two parties.

The National Agendas

The issues each party owned, and their relative salience, measured by the percentage of voters saying it would be very important in deciding how to vote at the start of the campaign in early April 2005, are reported in Table 1. Labour had the advantage in owning the most issues, including the two salient for most voters. There was sufficient range to their issue ownership to enable the campaign to rely largely on the party's strengths. In addition, the range and saliency of Labour's strengths would force other parties to address their issues. The Conservatives did have some countervailing strengths. They owned only four issues but they were ranked third through sixth in importance to voters. The Liberal Democrats' advantages were meager. They owned

two issues, the environment and council tax, but both were low in salience to voting intentions. The party also had the advantage of having the preferred position on Iraq. (On new issues parties have not had time to develop reputations based on their past performance so it does not appear in polls asking which party is best at handling it.) However, its value was qualified by its low importance to most voters. At the start of the campaign it was considered very important to the voting decision of 18 per cent of voters, giving it a lower salience than eleven other issues (Worcester et al 2005: 25).

(Table 1 about here)

The parties differed in their national campaigns in their emphasis on issues they owned. Labour largely played to its strengths. Education and health featured in all three national sources. The economy featured in two. They contributed to a campaign which sought re-election on the government's domestic record. The party proclaimed its achievements in economic management, investment in public services and improvement in the quality of life, particularly for families and pensioners. The promise to build on this progress, and the dangers of reversal under a Conservative government, were signaled in the manifesto title and campaign slogan, *Forward Not Back*. Another slogan, *If You Value It, Vote For It* solicited an endorsement for success combined with a warning to complacent voters of the risk of losing what they had gained.

Blair addressed the issue of immigration in his speeches, which put it high on the agenda for that one source. He sought to blunt the Conservative attack partly by discrediting it for scaremongering and presenting an unworkable alternative to current

policy. But he also made a positive case for immigration, including the contribution made by immigrants to the country's economic performance. This can be seen as an attempt to draw the issue towards Labour's strength in economic management. Crime was salient in the manifesto where the party sought to challenge the Conservatives' ownership of the issue. Labour's law and order credentials were certified in the government's record in crime reduction, and increased numbers in the police force and prisoners. Performance since 1997 was compared to the previous Conservative government's record of failure and broken promises (Butler and Kavanagh, 2005, Fielding 2005, Wring 2005, Cook 2007).

The national Conservative campaign was fought on a mix of party strengths and weaknesses. The party's six-point agenda, *Are You Thinking What We're Thinking?* pinpointed deficiencies in the government's performance on hospital hygiene, the scale of immigration, tax increases, discipline in schools and police numbers accompanied by a call for greater accountability in government. All three national sources prioritised crime, an issue the party owned. Immigration, another strength, was prioritised in party election broadcasts and Howard's speeches. Education, an issue owned by Labour, was a priority in every source. As saliency theory predicts, the party dealt with the issue in a way that played to its strengths. The specific education item on which the party centred the campaign was school discipline, connecting to the party's strength on law and order. The manifesto also gave prominence to health, again taking the party onto Labour's territory. The document acknowledged that record amounts of money were being spent by the government without delivering improvements in care. The government had not provided value for money. To account for the discrepancy the party drew on its strengths, arguing that

the NHS was beset by bureaucracy and waste which needed to be curbed to improve the service to patients (Butler and Kavanagh, 2005, Cowley and Green 2005, Seldon and Snowdon 2005, Barwell 2007, Canzini 2007).

Fighting on the terrain of the other parties was unavoidable for the Liberal Democrats because they owned only two, low profile issues. The party's advertising campaign offered *10 Good Reasons to Vote Liberal Democrat*, presenting ten issue proposals, each matched by an item it opposed. All three sources prioritised health and education. Given their salience to voters, these issues can be seen as the least avoidable. Forced to address Labour's issues, the party identified unattractive features of the government's record and proposed more appealing alternatives, such as the reduction of school class sizes and the abolition of higher education top-up fees. Prominent in Kennedy's speeches and election broadcasts was Iraq, where the party's opposition to the war gave it the position voters preferred and one which distinguished it from the other two parties. The environment, an issue the party owned, was prominent only in the manifesto (Butler and Kavanagh, 2005, Russell 2005, Fieldhouse and Cutts 2005, Rennard 2007).

(Table 2 about here)

The Local Agendas

Our analysis of local leaflets confirms both hypotheses for Labour. Most constituency parties reproduced priorities which appeared in most national sources and no issues absent from the national agenda were common in local campaigns. Following the national example, local campaigns were fought on issues the party owned. The

economy, education and health, the issues which appeared in most national sources, were also the three most common priorities in the constituencies. Local parties campaigned on the government's record. Leaflets touted the local level benefits of Labour in office. Local gains were displayed in headlines, such as 'New Dentist for Cinderford' (leaflet from the Forest of Dean), 'Improving Education in Dorset' (North Dorset), and 'A modern NHS for Swindon' (Swindon North). Figures enumerated the local increases in doctors and nurses in hospitals and the fall in unemployment.

No other issue was prominent in more than a third of constituencies, showing a local cohesion around the principal national priorities which played to the party's strengths. Immigration, the issue prominent in a single national source and the only national campaign priority on which the party was vulnerable, was ignored at constituency level. It was not prominent anywhere and in only one constituency was it even mentioned.

Both hypotheses were contradicted by the Conservatives. Though local parties followed the national emphases on crime and education, immigration was not salient in local campaigns. Contradicting the second hypothesis, health was prioritised in many constituencies although it had been salient only in the manifesto. In neglecting immigration local parties failed to exploit an issue the party owned. In promoting health they gave prominence to an issue owned by their opponents.

There was a fragmentation to local Conservative campaigns. There was both considerable diversity in priorities between constituencies and widespread separation from the national agenda. Only one in seven local parties made immigration a salient

issue. Nearly as many made no mention of the issue. It had similar prominence to a scattering of issues which had not been national priorities such as Europe, pensions and the environment. Health was prioritised as often as crime although the latter was prominent in all national sources but the former in only one. No other issue was prioritised in a majority of constituencies. Education had been prominent in all three national sources but it was not in the top three issues in a majority of constituencies.

The Liberal Democrats also contradicted both hypotheses. Local parties followed the national lead in prioritising education and health. But they deviated from it in giving low visibility to Iraq. In less than 6 per cent of constituencies was it amongst the top three issues. Nearly all local parties referred to the issue but most did not make it a priority. Contradicting the second hypothesis, tax, which had not been salient in any national source, was prominent in most constituencies.

(Table 3 about here)

Explaining National and Local Differences

Contrary to the assumptions of saliency theory, differences were found in the agendas of national and local parties. Local Labour parties largely echoed the national emphases on education, health and the economy. But Local Conservatives gave more attention to health than the national campaign whilst underplaying immigration. Local Liberal Democrats did not reproduce the prominence afforded to Iraq at national level. Unlike the national campaign, they prioritised tax. Whilst local Labour parties played to the party's strengths, the other two parties did not. Immigration was a Conservative issue. But local parties did not emphasise it. Rather they prioritised the Labour issue

of health. Local Liberal Democrats did not make Iraq salient despite the party's popular position on the issue.

(Table 4 about here)

Possible systematic explanations for these differences would be that the South West differs from the rest of the country, causing local Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties to behave in distinctive ways. This might be attributable to regional differences in issue salience, issue ownership or electoral competition. The absence of regional surveys prevents a full test of issue salience. But it does seem unlikely for the issues concerned. Had issues more important to the South West's economy, such as agriculture or tourism, had a higher electoral profile a regional effect might have been plausible. But it is difficult to see any reason for issues such as Iraq and immigration to be less prominent in the region than elsewhere.

The absence of the appropriate survey evidence also precludes an accurate test of regional distinctiveness in issue ownership. But in February 2005 YouGov did report results of a survey of issue ownership for five regions (South, London, North, Scotland, Midlands and Wales). For fifty cases (ten issues, five regions), the same party owned the issue at both national and regional level 82 per cent of the time. Most of the exceptions were in London and Scotland (YouGov 2005b). We therefore think it unlikely that a regional distinction in issue ownership could provide a comprehensive account for the South West's divergences from national campaign priorities.

The distinctive regional competitiveness of the parties is a third possible source of the South West's divergence from the parties' national agendas. As already noted, compared to the country, Labour is weaker and the other two parties stronger. Most marginal seats were contests between the opposition parties rather than Labour. This could have encouraged the selection of issues aimed at the vulnerabilities of the local competitor and bids to squeeze the Labour party vote by adopting its priorities. However, the lack of systematic variation between seats within the region leads us to discount this possibility. The Conservatives emphasised health in the great majority of seats, irrespective of the competition. Similarly, local Liberal Democrats' stress on Iraq occurred in only two seats. Immigration was emphasised by Conservatives in six seats, of which three were marginal and three were not.

In the absence of a single comprehensive account of national-regional differences in campaign priorities, our explanations differ across issues. We identify four sources of disparity between national and local campaigns. First, opposition parties can exploit deficiencies in local services although their party has no policy proposals to rectify them (the Conservatives on the health service). Secondly, local and national campaigns differ in the scope for adapting a campaign once it has started. The former has resources to effect changes which the latter lacks. In consequence the two diverge if mid-campaign changes are implemented at national level (the Liberal Democrats on Iraq). Thirdly, local and national strategists differ about the ethics and utility of selecting particular issues (the Conservatives on immigration). Fourthly, local policies diverge from the national norm in ways which heighten their regional salience (the Liberal Democrats on tax).

In emphasising the health service local Conservatives drew on performance issues unavailable at national level. To national themes of deficiencies in hygiene and bureaucracy, they added cuts in local services. Many local Conservative campaigns drew on threatened local hospital closures or downgrading in services or shortage of local provision, such as NHS dentists. In these ways the party sought to impinge on Labour's superior reputation for handling the service by exposing actual or threatened shortcomings. In local leaflets candidates referred to their efforts in preventing cuts or enhancing provision. These efforts were expressed in terms such as 'campaigning', 'fighting' and 'supporting'. No candidate promised that a Conservative government would make a difference to these aspects of local provision. The party manifesto had no commitments to reverse planned cuts, guarantee existing services or enhance existing services such as dental provision. Local campaigns thus aimed to tap local concerns without mentioning the national party policies on these issues. The national campaign could not have exploited these concerns without exposing the absence of alternative policies.

A source of divergence between local and national Liberal Democrats was the latter's mid-campaign switch in emphasis to focus on Iraq. The original assumption of the campaign was that the impact of the war had already registered in depleting Labour support and that there were few additional gains to be made. The plan was to devote the early weeks to domestic issues and to focus on Iraq at the end of the campaign. This timetable was brought forward following leaks of and subsequent publication of the Attorney General's letter to the Prime Minister, advising him on the legality of the war. When the former appeared to show that the PM had been advised that war would be illegal, the campaign began to focus on Iraq earlier than planned. In the days

following the leak the party focused "relentlessly on the Iraq war" (Russell, 2005: 748). Much of the final two weeks of the national campaign focused on the issue, according to two authors (Fieldhouse and Cutts, 2005: 75). The consequence was that Iraq rose in status on the party's national agenda. However, local campaigns lacked this flexibility to make a similar response. At national level the campaign was shifted through the leader speeches, election broadcasts and newspaper advertising, facilitated by a large budget. However, local campaigns lack this adaptability. They have small, legally restricted expenditures which are devoted to print orders prepared at the start of the campaign. Therefore there was little scope to intensify the attention afforded to Iraq from that planned at the start of the campaign. We saw 99 local Liberal Democrat leaflets. None referred to the Attorney General's letter.

Divergences between national and local agendas can also occur through disagreements in calculating the advantages gained by prioritising a particular issue. Immigration was such an issue for the Conservatives. The national campaign was premised on the assumption that the issue of immigration was an asset for the party. Its importance had risen sharply in polls since the 2001 election and the Conservative were shown to be the preferred party to handle it. The recruitment to Conservative central office in 2004 of campaign strategist Lynton Crosby was a signal that immigration was likely to be prominent in the campaign. Crosby had used the issue to revive the electoral fortunes of the Australian Liberal party in 2002. The issue duly obtained prominence in Howard's speeches and party election broadcasts. In these formats the Conservatives concentrated on government mishandling and promised effective control over immigrant numbers in future whilst attempting to pre-empt accusations that raising the issue constituted racism. But its prominence aroused

discontent within the party. Senior figures such as Kenneth Clark, Michael Portillo and Lord Parkinson criticised how much attention the issue was being given. In the face of such criticisms, the national campaign retreated from the issue in the final week.

At national level differences over the appropriate emphasis for the issue surfaced when the campaign was under way. Across the constituencies these differences were evident from the start of the campaign. Examples from the South West include South Dorset, where the Tory candidate went to the length of using a fake photograph in an attempt to exploit the issue, whereas in neighboring West Dorset it was a minor theme in Oliver Letwin's literature. In some seats immigration only appeared in party literature where the bullet points of the national agenda were reproduced. In others it was never mentioned. Similar variations appeared across the country. In St Albans the party's literature connected illegal immigrants to crime and in Enfield North the strain on state schools was attributed to bogus asylum seekers (Geddes 2005: 286). But in other constituencies the issue was given less prominence than other national issues or shunned as potentially counter-productive, risking alienating potential supporters. Justine Greening in Putney, made no mention of the issue in her literature, reiterating only four of the five issue commitments of the *Are You Thinking What We're Thinking*? agenda. Despite his involvement in running the national campaign, David Cameron was reported to share concerns about the prominence given to immigration. His own election literature gave greater attention to "the party's commitment to public services, tackling crime and rural post offices" (Sylvester 2005). Robinson and Fisher have shown that throughout the country immigration appeared in fewer Conservative leaflets than education, crime, health and tax (Robinson and Fisher 2005). Our

research confirms it was unusual for it to be made salient in most constituency campaigns.

Where policies exhibit local variations they have the potential for greater salience than the norm in particular locations. The council tax is such an issue. It was this form of taxation that was more prominent in the Liberal Democrats' South West campaigns than at national level. Of the total attention to tax in the constituency campaigns, an average of 89 per cent was devoted to council tax. The national campaign, in contrast, was more balanced in its treatment of national and local taxes. The *Ten Good Reasons to Vote Liberal Democrat* included statements on income tax and hidden tax increases as well as council tax. In the manifesto, council tax accounted for 62 per cent of the total coverage of taxation. There is also evidence that taxation was more pervasive in the Liberal Democrats' campaign literature in the South West than elsewhere. Robinson and Fisher found mention of any form of taxation in 55 per cent of the party's leaflets in their national survey (2005: 14). We found the council tax in 85 per cent of the party's leaflets in the South West.

In the absence of polls for the South West we have no direct measure of the salience of the council tax to voters in the South West. But there is evidence that the burden of tax is higher in the South West and that it had been a subject of keen interest to the region's MPs. The tax is higher in the South West than the English norm. In 2004-05 the median payment per dwelling was £130 a year more in the South West than in England as a whole although average incomes were lower below the national average. In 2004-05 the 6.5 per cent average increase in the tax in South West local authorities

was the highest for any region (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2005, South West Observatory 2007). The sensitivity of the issue in local politics was signaled in the frequency of parliamentary questions on the subject asked by the region's MPs. In the year before the election they accounted for 20 per cent of all questions about the tax although they constitute 8 per cent of the membership of the House (Hansard 2005).

Conclusion

We have shown that the local campaigns of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats did not reiterate the national agenda. Two of the three parties did not speak with one voice, confounding the assumptions not only of saliency theory but also a considerable literature on party organisation, political marketing and spatial theory of elections. All of these works take parties to be single actors, coherent in the pursuit of objectives. The 'reality' appears more complex. Parties contain multiple actors, pursuing different ends.

Our findings also challenge the vote-maximising assumption of saliency theory which sees parties emphasising issues they own and finding advantageous niches on unavoidable issues owned by opponents. Contrary to the theory, few local Conservative parties made immigration a priority although it was an issue the party owned. Even rarer were the instances of local Liberal Democrats emphasizing Iraq, one of the few issues on which the party had an advantage. However, many local Conservative parties emphasised the Labour-owned issue of health. Given its salience, it may be regarded as an unavoidable issue and, as saliency theory would predict, Conservative campaigns exposed local shortcomings in the government's

performance. But the unavoidability of the issue did not compel local parties to make it as salient as they did.

Parties are constrained from acting on the vote-maximising assumption of saliency theory by ethical considerations and practical obstacles. Many Conservatives regarded the use of immigration as undesirable, concerned at the social tensions it might aggravate. For local Liberal Democrats, lack of resources prevented an adjustment in issue priorities once the campaign to focus on Iraq. By election day, 16 per cent said it was one of three issues important in deciding how to vote, an increase from 9 per cent at the start of the campaign (Worcester et al, 2005: 158). Despite the issue's increased importance local parties were unable to capitalize on the opportunity.

Our findings may also be of more than theoretical significance for they may contribute to explaining local election outcomes. It is now firmly established that local campaigning affects the parties' performance (Denver and Hands 1997; Pattie et al 1995; Whiteley and Seyd 1994). But research to date has been concerned with the intensity of the local campaign rather than its content. No attention has been given to the local agendas voters are exposed to. Yet many voters are exposed to local party agendas and some claim to be influenced by them. In 2005 89 per cent of adults claimed to have received leaflets and 8 per cent said they were an influence on their voting decision (Worcester: 196, 207). In 2005 there were also marked variations in results between constituencies and, as in other recent general elections, no pattern to the variations. Seats that were demographically similar behaved in different ways and swung in opposite directions (Curtice, Fisher and Steed, 2005, 236-38; King 2005, 172-74). Local influences on results have become more powerful but election analysts

have been troubled to explain what they are. Local agendas are a potential influence on election results worthy of further investigation.

Table 1 Issue Ownership and Salience, 2005

Party Best at Handling Issue	Very important in deciding how to vote (%)
Conservative	
Law and Order	56
Pensions	49
Taxation	42
Immigration and asylum	37
Labour	
Health	67
Education	61
Economy	35
Housing	27
Transport	26
Unemployment	25
Relations with Europe	19
Liberal Democrat	
Environment	28
Council tax	3

Source: YouGov (2005b); MORI (2005); CommunicateResearch (2005)

Table 2 Top Three Issues in National Party Campaigns

	Manifesto	**Party Election Broadcasts**	**Leader Speeches**
Cons			
	Education	Education	Education
	Crime	Crime	Crime
	Health	Immigration	Immigration
Lab			
	Education	Education	Education
	Economy	Economy	Economy
	Health	Health	Immigration
LD			
	Education	Education	Education
	Environment	Iraq	Iraq
	Health	Health	Health

Source: Green and Hobolt (2006); authors' analyses

Table 3 Top Three Issues in Local Leaflets

	% constituencies
Conservative	
Health	74.3
Crime	71.4
Education	37.1
Tax	25.7
Immigration	22.8
European Union	20.0
Environment	20.0
Pensions	17.1
Miscellaneous	28.5
(N=35)	
Labour	
Education	73.5
Health	64.7
Economy	58.8
Crime	35.3
Families and children	32.4
Pensions	29.4
Miscellaneous	20.6
(N=34)	
Liberal Democrat	
Health	75.0
Tax	55.5
Education	52.8
Crime	42.9
Environment	38.9
Pensions	25.0
Iraq	5.6
Miscellaneous	5.6
(N=36)	

Table 4 National and Local Priorities Compared

	National (No of sources)	Local (Y/N)
Conservative		
Crime	3	Y
Education	3	Y
Immigration	2	N
Health	1	Y
Labour		
Education	3	Y
Economy	2	Y
Health	2	Y
Crime	1	N
Immigration	1	N
Liberal Democrat		
Education	3	Y
Health	3	Y
Iraq	2	N
Environment	1	N
Tax	0	Y

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[1] We identified fourteen different issues: crime (policing, the criminal justice system, types and rates of crime, I.D. cards); economy (growth, unemployment, inflation, regulation,); education (school class sizes and discipline, educational performance, further and higher education, tuition fees); health (hospitals, doctors, dentists, quality, access, cost, medical conditions); Europe (EU powers and policies, Constitution, relations with UK); environment (climate change, planning and development, pollution); families and children (child poverty, childcare provision, state benefits); housing (availability, cost, promoting ownership); immigration and asylum (numbers, associated social problems, rights of entry); Iraq (case for involvement and withdrawal; human and financial cost); taxation (different forms of taxation, tax levels); transport and communication (road, rail and air travel, public transport, postal services); pensions (retirement age, benefit rates); other (all issues not covered by the foregoing). In both the manifestos and leaflets the unit of analysis was the sentence. Any sentence containing issue content was coded into one of the fourteen categories listed above. The number of sentences devoted to each issue was expressed as a percentage of the total content of the manifesto and the leaflets of each constituency party.

[2] Leaflets were obtained from constituency parties: 35 Conservative (68.6 per cent of the total), 34 Labour (66.7), 36 Liberal Democrat (70.6). The number of leaflets obtained was 88 Conservative (average 2.5 per constituency), 61 Labour (1.8), 99 Liberal Democrat (2.8).