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# **AGENDA BUILDING**

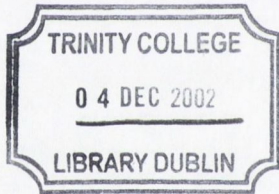
**A Time-Series Analysis of the Changing Issue Priorities of Parties and Media During the 1997 General Election Campaign in the UK**

Heinz Brandenburg

PhD in Political Science

Trinity College, Dublin

2002



THESIS

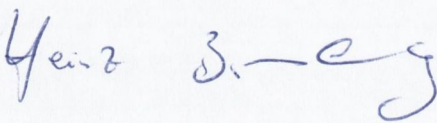
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# DECLARATION

This thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at any other university.

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## Acknowledgements

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## Summary of methods and findings

This is a study of agenda building during an election campaign, which is a dynamic process and hence calls for the application of time-series analysis. The data, from the 1997 General Election campaign in the UK, consist of repeated observations at regular time intervals. The variables are political parties and media actors (television and the press), whose daily attention to different issues and policy dimensions was content analysed and then quantified. While some simple methods can be applied to the quantification of changing attention to individual issues, a more sophisticated time series model can be applied only when data are aggregated to the level of policy dimensions. For the 1997 campaign, issues were grouped into nine separate policy dimensions. Instead of treating policy dimensions separately, a time-series cross-section (TSCS) design was applied, with policy dimensions as cross-sections and campaign days as time units. The main purpose of time series analysis is to establish Granger-causality between different variables, which have repeated observations on each cross-section. In order to accomplish this, separate regressions, with either parties or media as dependent variables, were carried out. The regression model that applies to TSCS designs uses panel-corrected standard errors and requires the inclusion of policy dimension dummies as well as a lagged dependent variable. The regression estimates confirm that agenda building is unidirectional causal process. The media, most notably the electronic media, were systematically responding to issue emphasis from the parties while themselves not causing change in the composition of party agendas. Of the political parties in Britain, only the big and pivotal ones, Labour and Conservatives were found to exert influence on media agendas. Amongst the media, neither did press partisanship moderate

the ability of parties to build the media agenda, nor were public broadcasters more amenable to party stimuli than private ones.



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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In some sense, the most immediate opponents of political parties or candidates during election campaigns are not their competitors for office but the journalists on the campaign trail and their news editors. There is a battle over who sets the electoral agenda, and this is a quantitative study into who (the parties or the media?) got the upper hand during the 1997 UK General Election campaign.

The basic structure of this thesis can be outlined in the form of four simple questions:

- What do politicians/parties expect to gain from controlling the media agenda?
- What makes them think that they can exert influence over the media?
- What were their respective strategies during the 1997 campaign?
- Did they succeed?

Before outlining in more detail which parts of the thesis deal with each of these questions, I will begin by discussing the apparent and explicitly stated importance of electoral agendas to politicians and the undeniable eagerness of journalists not to allow themselves to be instrumentalised by political actors.

## 1.1 ‘Oh no, not health again’

Electoral campaigns are exercises in political communication, attempts to influence public opinion in a way that will enhance electoral prospects. While clearly the ultimate objective is to outdo one’s competitors in this regard, the more immediate task is to instrumentalise the media, to ensure that the content of daily campaign coverage approximates an unfiltered account of prefabricated messages. From the viewpoint of campaign strategists, the

reworking of campaign events into news stories is a form of distortion of political meaning. Hence, in dealing with the media the goal is to minimize distortion by maximising control. The news producers, journalists, and editors, on the other hand, are adamant in their refusal to be instrumentalised. And even though some newspapers and their staff may be partisan in their approach, which means that they aim to bolster the electoral prospect of the endorsed party via their coverage, media workers in general claim that they want to avoid having their agenda dictated by political actors:

“... politicians seek, in the main, favourable publicity whilst broadcasters seek to hold politicians to account. During election campaigns, this conflict becomes more pronounced as political party strategists work to obtain as much favourable television coverage as possible and to ensure that the setting and the content of that political coverage is determined by them rather than by the broadcasters. Broadcasters though have long abandoned any pretence that their main role during election campaigns – and in political communication generally – is to replay the political struggle without comment. Their suspicions that political parties and politicians would seek to control the political debate and agenda to the detriment of a proper informed public debate have fired their oppositional, public service, stance.”  
(Negrine 1989:191)

One of the key battlegrounds for campaigning politicians and campaign-covering journalists is the agenda, the issue priorities. It has been stated repeatedly by campaign strategists and politicians that one of the prime objectives of political communications is to raise the salience of particular issues.<sup>1</sup> In order to do so they develop daily game plans for their dealings with the press and television - in the short run aiming to restrict proceedings during press conferences and other staged events to the themes of their choice, in the long run aiming to keep in control of developing agenda dynamics. At the same time, we find newscasters and journalists on the campaign trail emphasising that one of their core objectives is to

---

<sup>1</sup> For the UK, see for example the statements on Conservative and Labour campaign strategies by Lord Wakeham (Wakeham 1995: 4f.) and Robin Cook (Cook 1995: 14 ff.).

evade attempts from the parties or candidates to dictate the themes of concern (McQuail 1987; Shoemaker and Reese 1991; Shoemaker 1991; Davis 2000).

The fact that both party strategists and media practitioners emphasise the importance of electoral agendas and of who sets and controls them is in itself not a sufficient motivation for a political scientist to adjudicate the winner. Competition between politicians and journalists or editors for agenda control is an important study subject because of its possible consequences for electoral choice.

The fact that both sides put so much emphasis on agenda control is a reflection on their jointly held belief that electoral agendas are indeed of consequence for social choice and that they are determined by the interplay between campaigners and newsmen. The rationalisation by the involved players of the potential of agendas to affect election outcomes reflects on the practitioners' reading of theories and empirical evidence from communication and political science research.

Political science, in particular theories of voting and party competition, have informed party strategists about the potential gain to be derived from manipulating the salience of issues. In addition to that, communication studies, and here in particular agenda-setting research, has fostered the widespread belief in the power of news media to determine the composition of public agendas, i.e. the public salience of issues. From there, party strategists and media workers have drawn their own conclusions about the crucial role of their interactions during election campaigns.

As a result of this, success and failure of campaigns does not have to be assessed in terms of direct vote gains or electoral victory but more indirectly in terms of the rate with which the salience of issues that are expected to prove beneficial has been raised during the cam-



paign. A statement from Robin Cook in his post-hoc rationalisation of why the Labour campaign of 1992 was not to blame for the loss of the General Election that year epitomizes this modern interpretation of the purpose of political communications:

“... we did win the war. The object was to raise the salience of the health issue. At the start of the campaign it was 32 per cent, at the end of the campaign it was 50 per cent.”  
Cook 1995: 15)

From the point of view of the campaign-covering journalists, any such ‘success’ in proactively raising an issue during a campaign is accomplished on the back of their (the journalists’) interests. And apart from the suspicion of journalists that they are the objects of instrumentalisation by the political actors, such persistent focus on an issue that is important to the party because it is expected to turn out to be beneficial, can produce actual frustration amongst journalists, amply documented by Kavanagh and Gosschalk (1995) in their study of the use of press conferences during the 1992 campaign. Labour’s incessant focus on health, while providing, according to Cook (1995) with the result that Labour hoped for, it also accounted for “the subsequent boredom with which health was greeted as a topic for press conferences later in the campaign (‘Oh no, not health again’ was the response of several journalists)” (Kavanagh and Gosschalk 1995: 169).

Political communications and agenda control is of course not mere *l’art pour l’art*. It is a means to an end, the end being to plant concern with a particular problem in the minds of the voters that would not have played such a primary role in their evaluations of parties otherwise.

However, issue salience is not the sole and, in all likelihood, not even the most important determinant of vote choice. In addition, the measurable consequence of agenda manipulation by political strategists in terms of vote gains is contingent upon factors that are beyond the control of the salience manipulator. Hence, the battle between parties and media for

agenda control has to be put within a broader theoretical framework. It is both necessary to establish how much can be gained by manipulating salience, i.e. how important a parameter of vote choice salience is, and how likely it is that to instrumentalise the media will result in sizeable effects on public salience.

## 1.2 Endogenising salience: a causal sequence

The campaign strategies of political parties or candidates, and in particular their efforts to raise issues, constitute a determinant of individual vote choice only if three independent and structurally (not temporally) sequential conditions are prevalent.

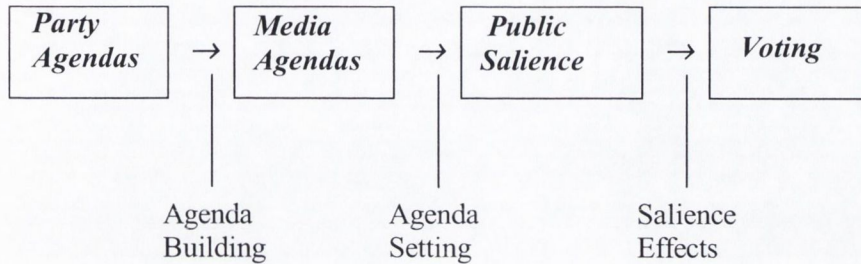
Figure 1.1 displays the basic model that links political communication with vote choice: a causal chain that connects sources and effects of salience, the starting point of which is party behaviour and the end point of which is voting behaviour.<sup>2</sup> This model interprets issue salience and, to the extent that salience impinges on party evaluations, vote choice, as a function of party and media behaviour. Political communication is regarded as the process from which salience originates, filtered through the patterns of campaign coverage in the media.

While this study focuses on the immediate effects of party behaviour, namely on the first link in the causal chain, the *agenda building* process, an understanding of the other two links and the likelihood of their prevalence is of paramount importance. Successfully setting the media agenda is only beneficial to the extent that media agendas do indeed determine salience, and to the extent that salience in turn affects voting.

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<sup>2</sup> Each of the involved causal links is not necessarily understood as a unidirectional process, nor is the possibility of exogenous factors influencing the chain of events excluded. Figure 1 only leaves out feedback loops or external effects for the sake of simplification in the presentation of the sequential causal model.

**Figure 1.1: The study of salience, its causes and effects**



The very basic idea of this model is that parties, through emphasizing chosen issues in their daily communications, partly determine the amount of coverage in the news that the respective issues receive, and that this coverage increases awareness and problem concerns in the public. In turn, the public, once concerned with issues (and indeed more concerned with the respective issues than it would have been in the absence of party efforts), will evaluate the competing parties more strongly on the basis of their policy proposals or general reputation for handling the issues in question. That means that, by successfully manipulating salience, political actors can themselves define the criteria on the basis of which they are evaluated. Some criteria of evaluation will invariably produce positive evaluations of one particular political actor at the expense of his competitors, which is an incentive to try and raise the salience of such an evaluative criterion.

### *Conditionality of campaign and communication effects*

The manipulation of salience is a strategic objective of political campaigners because of its *potential* to be beneficial. *It does not constitute in itself a necessary and sufficient condition for electoral success.*

Only under certain circumstances can salience manipulation succeed in producing detectable electoral benefits. The most obvious necessary condition for manipulation of salience to matter is that a party needs to be in reasonable reach of its objective.

Many studies of electoral behaviour have pointed out that campaign effects in general tend to be largely outweighed by either long-term predispositions to vote for a particular party (party identification and class or religious voting) or by the referendum character of elections, which means that incumbents are judged retrospectively on their, mostly economic, performance (Key 1966; Fiorina 1981). The more asymmetrically party preferences are distributed in electorates or the more unequivocally positive or negative the retrospective evaluation of incumbents turns out, the less potential for campaigns to have a decisive effect. But that of course means that campaign effects are more likely in a close election and then even only marginal shifts produced by the campaign can suffice to alter the balance.

But even in the case of a close election, there are further *imponderables* in the sequence of causal links, i.e. conditions that are independent of salience manipulation and general party strategy. Political actors cannot themselves ensure that a sufficient number of voters (sufficient to make a difference in the outcome) will base their party choice on policy considerations or that, in the particular instance, public opinion will be significantly shaped by the media.

In my theoretical approach to the subject I follow largely the rationale that appears to motivate party strategists in their eagerness to manipulate salience: namely that, more often than not, salience is a relevant and independent determinant of vote choice, and that the agenda-setting function of the media is the rule not the exception. Agenda building is a rational objective of campaign strategy because it is likely to be of consequence to the vote choice of individuals. Not only is it reasonable for political communicators to try and instrumentalise the media for their purposes, but also it is also important for political scientists to study this particular aspect of party strategy.

While agenda building can only be a successful strategy if the aforementioned conditions apply, a case study of agenda building does not derive its scientific relevance from the actual prevalence of those conditions. The scope of a study into agenda building is limited. It does not need to result in a precise estimation of how many votes a party gained by manipulating the media. Just as with the scientific study of the other two causal links in the chain - salience effects and media effects research - the general hypothesis is concerned with the causal relationship between the involved independent and dependent variable, not with the imponderable ultimate consequences of that causal effect. This study should rather be understood as a step towards filling a gap in our understanding of campaign dynamics and campaign effects.

## 1.3 Theoretical framework and empirical scope of the present study

The original contribution of this study lies in its systematic analysis of campaign dynamics and in particular of the unfolding of the party-media relationship over the course of the 1997 UK General Election campaign. This is, however, not meant to be a traditional campaign study. The specific political context and the eventual outcome of the 1997 campaign are of minor interest. The choice of the 1997 UK campaign as a case study was made for reasons of data availability. From that campaign, we do have a fairly comprehensive data set that contains information about the daily agenda choices of the main political parties as well as of a substantial sample of media outlets (TV channels and newspapers).<sup>3</sup> That allows for the empirical testing of the hypothesis that “party emphases bring issues to the fore, rather than simply reflecting issues already prominent among electors” (Budge and Farlie 1983: 140).

The study divides broadly into four parts, each of which deals with one of the questions raised at the beginning of this introduction: **the first part (Chapters 2 and 3)** explains why media agendas are a target for party strategy. Chapter 2 deals with how salience affects voter evaluations and Chapter 3 summarizes the evidence from agenda-setting research about media effects on the public. In combination, these two chapters provide the theoretical backdrop against which the following theoretical model and empirical analysis becomes relevant. Parties can gain from influencing the media agenda by indirectly influencing problem concerns in the electorate and hence defining the evaluative criteria of social choice. **The second part (Chapter 4)** discusses the process of news production and the

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko: *1997 Election Party and Media Agenda Content Analysis*

pivotal role of campaigning parties and candidates as reliable and quasi-institutional sources for news production during campaign periods. The reliance of mass media on politicians as sources for news production during campaigns may allow parties to instrumentalise the media in the process, i.e. to build the media agenda. **The third part (Chapters 5 and 6)** summarizes and disaggregates the data from the 1997 campaign in the UK (to the level of individual campaign days and individual issues), in order to make descriptive inferences about party and media behaviour. **The fourth and final part (Chapter 7)** moves stepwise from case studies into how the major issues of the campaign were raised by parties, through a large-scale analysis of the conditions under which agenda building occurs during the campaign, to a rigorous time-series analysis of causality and direction thereof in the agenda building process.

The theory parts of the thesis proceed in backward fashion through the model outlined in Figure 1.1. Prior to modelling the party-media relationship, Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the necessary conditions for agenda building to matter for vote choice.

### ***Saliency***

Chapter 2 reviews how different theories of voting have considered saliency as an independent parameter of electoral choice. It is argued that every theory of voting that emphasizes policy considerations has to take into account variations in the importance of individual issues or policy dimensions. This holds for Downsian, spatial theories as well as for *saliency* or *issue ownership theory*. Spatial theories assume that a voter evaluates parties on the basis of how strongly their policy platforms correspond to his or her set of preferences.

In order to take into account the relative importance of different issues or policy dimensions, distances between voters and parties within dimensions have to be weighted by salience. The role of salience in *issue ownership theory* is more straightforward, since here it is assumed that voters judge on the basis of relatively stable attitudes towards parties that are derived from beliefs into the competence or reputation of political actors to handle a particular social problem. This means that voters have sets of party preferences (a stable preference order within each policy dimension) the synthesis of which depends solely on the relative importance of the various issues involved. The difference is mainly that party preferences within policy dimensions can either be treated as a variable (in the Downsian model) or as a constant (in the saliency model). While spatial theories consider salience as a parameter of choice, few have concerned themselves with the consequences for campaign strategy that follow from the role of salience for social choice.

Schattschneider's (1960) theory of party politics and the origin of political conflict, and Riker's (1986) theory of *heresthetics* provide the core inspirations for modelling the ability of political actors to shape the electoral context by manipulating the dimensions of social choice. The theory of heresthetics and its various applications can serve to model the effects of (or expected gains to be derived from) salience manipulation.

### ***Agenda-setting***

The idea that "altering the criteria can alter the choice" (Iyengar and Simon 2000: 157) explains *why* the manipulation of salience is considered to be a crucial element of campaign strategy. The notion that "[t]he press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*"



(Cohen 1963: 13) explains *how* campaign managers expect to accomplish the manipulation of public salience: namely by controlling the content of campaign coverage in the news.

Chapter 3 sums up the findings and methodological approaches in agenda-setting research as they developed over the past three decades. While there is much disagreement as to how media effects can be measured, there is also overwhelming evidence confirming the intuitively appealing hypothesis that the more news about an issue one is exposed to the more concerned one will become with the issue in question. The implication for party strategy is that whoever controls the content of issue coverage in the media will by the same token dictate the criteria of public choice.

### ***Agenda building***

Chapter 4 discusses the process of news production and the role of sources. During election campaigns, political candidates and parties are in a position to influence the media because they provide the media with a constant influx of news material. Theories of agenda building have argued that the reliance of mass media on sources allows the sources to dictate the priorities of coverage. However, evidence from agenda building research is far from conclusive. This is mostly so because inadequate research designs have been used. Chapter 4 gives a critical examination of the state of the art of agenda building research and proposes to draw methodological insights from recent advances in agenda-setting research. The important step forward to be taken in the study of agenda building is to move from cross-sectional campaign data to the collection and analysis of time-series data in order to establish *Granger-causality* (the concept will be discussed in detail in Chapters 3 and 4). Chapter 4 culminates in the formulation of a set of testable hypotheses.

## ***Data and methods***

The dataset that is used from the 1997 UK General Election campaign has been analysed previously, most comprehensively by Norris et al. (1999). However, and this is the shortcoming of almost all previous studies into agenda building, methodologically the campaign has been treated as an event not as a process. That means that information from daily party and media output was aggregated into campaign agendas, ignoring information about when exactly particular issues were emphasised, how the agenda developed and changed over the course of the campaign, and how different agendas influenced one another over time. This is the prime objective of empirical analysis in Chapters 5 through 7. Chapter 5 summarizes the data and provides to some extent a replication of the agenda building analysis provided by Norris et al. (1999: 79-84) in their original treatment of the data. It does, however, move beyond mere replication by questioning the method applied by Norris et al. (1999: 81, Table 5.5) to measure issue attention from event count data and offers a different approach that uses data more efficiently and measures agenda composition more consistently across actors (parties and media).

Chapter 6 is an exercise in disaggregating data, which, according to King et al. (1994) is a means to further increase efficiency in the use of data. It is argued that, since the agenda building hypothesis refers to an essentially temporal relationship, disaggregation into smaller time units is necessary in order to investigate causality. The following section introduces further disaggregation of the data, in this case to the level of individual issues, accounting for the possibility that observed co-variation between parties and media in the treatment of policy dimensions may over-exaggerate actual relationships. Since it is possi-

ble that two actors who mention identical policy dimensions are actually talking about different and inherently unrelated issues within those policy dimensions, it is necessary to investigate the content of policy dimensions in their treatment by different actors. This tests whether policy dimensions are valid and meaningful units of analysis.

Chapter 7 moves from descriptive towards causal analysis. The three most prominent issues of the campaign, *Personal Taxation*, *Jobs/Unemployment* and *EU* (which is actually an intrinsically related complex of issues) recur sufficiently often on all involved agendas to merit case studies into their issue careers and into the dynamics of agenda building in these cases. The second section uses disaggregation to the smallest possible units, i.e. attention to individual issues on campaign days, in order to investigate how the likelihood of media or parties to attend to an issue at a particular point in time changes under the condition of immediately preceding emphasis given by the other side.

For the eventual time-series analysis, data has to be aggregated again to the level of policy dimensions. A time-series cross-section (TSCS) design is used, with policy dimensions as cross-sections and campaign days as time units. The regression model includes policy dimension dummies to control for *heteroscedasticity* and reports panel-corrected standard errors as a control for *contemporaneous correlation*. A number of regressions are carried out with parties and media alternating as dependent variables. This allows establishing Granger-causality in the interaction between party and media agendas.

The importance of the findings from descriptive and causal analysis for our understanding of political communication and electoral choice are discussed in the concluding chapter.

## CHAPTER 2: SALIENCE MATTERS

“It is difficult to change people’s preferences; it is easier to affect the priorities or weights they give to subpreferences bearing on the central decision. A voter may assess the political situation from several standpoints; from one, the Democrats appear better to him and, from another, the Republicans do. His decision is likely to follow the aspect given greater weight by him – with no change in the substance of his own opinions. Thus the voter’s feeling about what is critical in the political situation enables him to find a way out of a potential ‘conflict’ over the issues and hence facilitates political integration within the individual.” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954: 202)

This first theoretical chapter discusses the rationale behind efforts from campaigning parties or candidates to alter public salience of issues. While the remainder of this thesis will be concerned with the theoretical discussion and empirical investigation of *how* to use the mass media in order to gain control over public agendas, one first needs to establish *why* this is a crucial strategic objective of electoral campaigning. It will be argued in this chapter that the strategic purpose of trying to control and change the composition of electoral agendas is to alter the criteria of choice.

As pointed out in the quote from Berelson et al. at the beginning of this chapter, salience considerations can help solving a conflict over issues *within* the individual. If one has conflicting preference orders in two or more policy dimensions, the relative importance of the dimensions alone may determine choice.

The role of salience for vote choice can best be understood in terms of counterfactual analysis, which refers to “the mental construction of events, which is altered through modifications in one or more conditions” (Weber [1905] 1949). The causal effect of changes in salience is the difference between observed electoral behaviour under a given electoral

agenda and the likely vote in the counterfactual situation with a different agenda composition (for a discussion of counterfactual analysis, see King et al. 1994: 77ff.).

From the viewpoint of campaign strategists, different possible compositions of electoral agendas can yield changing distributions of votes. The possibility of a causal link between issue salience and vote choice provides the motivation for salience manipulation and agenda control. That is why a discussion of the treatment of salience as a parameter of choice in theories of voting is of paramount importance for any study into the agenda building process.

The chapter divides into two parts, the first of which reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on voting behaviour in order to substantiate Iyengar and Simon's claim that "altering the criteria can alter the choice" (2000: 157). It discusses the role of salience as a determinant of vote choice. The second part summarizes how political scientists, largely influenced by Schattschneider's (1960) theory of party politics and the origin of political conflict and by Riker's (1986) theory of *heresthetics*, have modelled the ability of political actors to shape the electoral context by manipulating the dimensions of social choice. The theory of heresthetics and its various applications can serve to model the effects of (or expected gains to be derived from) salience manipulation, but this still leaves open the question of how to accomplish the manipulation of salience in the arena of electoral competition in the first place. Hence, the ultimate function of this chapter is to explain why research is needed into the origins of issue salience and into the communication processes that allow political actors to alter salience.

## 2.1 Issue salience as a determinant of social choice

### *Defining salience as a prerequisite for issue voting*

Salience can be a determinant of vote choice only to the extent that issues are. That means that only voters who do actually base their party or candidate evaluations on policy considerations can ever be in a position where they have to weigh conflicting candidate evaluations across policy dimensions against one another. However, the argument about the role of issues and their salience for vote choice is an almost circular one: while on the one hand salience effects are contingent upon the occurrence of issue voting, salience has on the other hand been identified as one of the prerequisites for issue voting.

*The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) is most renowned for its emphasis on party identification as the core determinant of electoral choice, but it also explicitly defined the concept of issue voting. The authors list four basic prerequisites for issue voting: (a) that a citizen needs to hold an opinion about a given issue, (b) that he has to have some understanding about the status quo of government policy on the issue, (c) that he must perceive differences in the stands of competing candidates or parties, and (d) that only if he cares enough about the issue in question will the first three prerequisites be of any relevance to his decision-making (Campbell et al. 1960: 170-4; see also Margolis 1977: 31).

The first three prerequisites are a paraphrase of what Berelson et al. formulated earlier as the basic requirements for democratic citizenship:

“The democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are.”  
(Berelson et al. 1954: 308)

The fourth requirement, an early notion of issue salience, however, was added by Campbell et al. While not using the term *salience* itself, Campbell et al. do discuss in some detail what it takes to 'care enough about an issue'; a discussion that also suggests that salience is not separable from issue opinions or preferences. They differentiate between the concepts of "issue familiarity" (171-176) and "intensity of issue opinion" (176-179). Familiarity explicitly relates to the first three prerequisites of issue voting in that it consists of having an opinion about a social problem and its current policy treatment, and of being able to relate that opinion to perceived policy alternatives (174f.). They define familiarity as "awareness of the issue and awareness of the political relevance of the issue" (177).

However, familiarity with an issue is not a sufficient condition for issue voting. A voter also needs to be personally involved in the question at hand. This becomes clear when considering the definition of "intensity of issue opinion", which is explicitly utilitarian: Campbell et al. argue that the scale of the perceived benefits or losses to be derived from alternative policies determine the intensity of opinion towards them (178). A voter's intensity of opinion is argued to depend on three distinct factors: (a) he needs to have strong specific personal interests or values that (b) he expects to be heavily affected by particular policy decisions, and (c) he requires to perceive the competing parties or candidates in conflict so that he can deduce closeness between his own preference and either of the alternative policies (178, 180). For an issue to be "politically important", to "create the drama of popular politics and provide the analyst with a vantage point for viewing mass political behaviour", it has to be widely familiar to the electors *and* to arouse intense feelings (176). Issue familiarity in combination with intensity of opinion constitutes "issue involvement that may lead to issue-oriented political behaviour" (*ibid.*).

This can be used as a working definition of salience. For an issue to qualify as salient, voters have to be widely aware of it, and voters and parties alike have to be politicised over goals and over the content of alternative policies as means for the attainment of those goals. The concept of familiarity indicates that voters may hold opinions on numerous salient and non-salient, or more or less salient, issues. Salience defines the conditions under which these attitudes inform behaviour. It determines inclusion of issues into the criteria of choice.

Salience is a prerequisite of issue voting insofar as only if at least one issue becomes salient, i.e. only if voters and parties become politicised over some goals and policy remedies, will preferences and policies matter for choice. That means that issues qualify as criteria of social choice only if they are salient. And in turn, only if issues are criteria of choice can the alteration of those criteria, i.e. changes in salience, impact on choice.

### ***The issue voting controversy***

Do issues matter then?

Gant and Davis (1984) summarized that voting studies preceding *The American Voter* invariably “found that citizen information levels were so low, a reexamination of the requirements for the ‘ideal’ democratic citizen was called for” (134). And Campbell et al. (1960), who explicitly introduced the concept of issue voting, effectively dismissed it as not a very important explanatory variable of voting behaviour in the U.S. Voters appeared in large majorities not to fulfil the basic requirements for issue voting, i.e. they did not hold strong opinion of most of the issues of the 1956 election, they did on average not perceive



major differences between parties and were not very knowledgeable about current government policies (180ff.).

The core explanatory variable, according to the authors of *The American Voter*, was party identification, which refers to a long-standing attachment to one of the major parties. The party identification model is a social-psychological approach which posits that voting is a largely a function of one's social background and upbringing. For example, American voters appeared in large numbers to simply adopt their parents' party affiliation. According to the estimates in *The American Voter*, 74 percent of those whose parents were party identifiers supported the same party (Campbell et al. 1960: 147). While Campbell et al. concede that party identification is "not the sole determinant of the attitudes supporting behaviour" (138), it nonetheless emerged as the strongest and most stable influence on voting - typically formed before entry into the electoral process and unlikely to change much during a voter's lifetime.

A strong argument in *The American Voter* against a substantive role of issue voting is that observable relationships between issue opinions and party choice seem to be a mere projection of party identification. It is argued that party identification has not only direct effects on vote choice but also indirect effects by causing voters to adopt issue positions held by their party's candidate (see discussion of this point in Asher 1983: 342). Party identification is said to raise "a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favourable to his partisan orientation" (Campbell et al. 1960: 133). The tendency of individuals to try and avoid cognitive dissonance means that "only rarely will the individual develop a set of attitude forces that conflicts with his allegiance" (Campbell et al. 1960: 141). This means that party identification is responsible for some of the apparent rationality in vote choice: if voters either adopt positions taken by the candidate of the party they identify

with or project their own preferences onto the candidates by perceiving them to take respective positions, an observable relationship between issue evaluations and party choice will emerge. Already before *The American Voter*, Berelson et al. (1954) made a strong point about projection effects by arguing that the average voter tends to perceive campaigns and issue debates in a way “that maximizes agreement with his own side and maximizes disagreement with the opposition” (231). In a later study, RePass (1971) found that only a ten percent minority of those who mentioned to be concerned with more than one issue in the 1964 election study actually named different parties to be best able to handle particular issues. He concluded that there is “a strong tendency towards ‘issue alignment’, which apparently lends order and meaning to the political world” (399).

The argument against issue voting in *The American Voter* was strengthened even further by the finding that issue awareness and opinions appeared to be most developed amongst the strongest party identifiers. The unaligned group of American voters, those who Campbell et al. labelled *Independents*, on the other hand, appeared to

“have somewhat poorer knowledge of the issues, their image of the candidates is fainter, their interest in the campaign is less, their concern over the outcome is relatively slight, and their choice between competing candidates, although it is indeed made later in the campaign, seems much less to spring from discoverable evaluations of the elements of national politics.” (Campbell et al. 1960: 143)

This suggests that voters are either socialised into preferring one of the parties permanently and tend to develop affirmative political attitudes along the line, or else are fairly ignorant towards the political process, indifferent towards the parties and disinterested in current political debates. A picture of the political world in which voters fall into predominantly these two groups - politicised partisans and indifferent Independents - seemed to warrant at the time a disillusioned view of the state of mass democracies - at least insofar as

an informed, interested, competent, and rational electorate was thought to be needed for the proper functioning of the democratic process:

“In truth, the more I study elections the more disposed I am to believe that they have within themselves more than a trace of the lottery. That of course, is not necessarily undesirable so long as all concerned abide by the toss of the coin. Be that as it may, the moral for our purposes is plain. Even when the public in manifest anger and disillusionment throws an Administration from office, it does not express its policy preferences with precision. The voice of the people may be loud, but the enunciation is indistinct.” (Key 1961: 487)

The concept of issue voting was, however, not solely born out of normative concern with the “the requirements for the ‘ideal’ democratic citizen” (Gant and Davis 1984); it also followed logically as the mode of electoral choice from the emerging economic and spatial theory of voting. In his *Economic Theory of Democracy*, Anthony Downs proposed a basic logic of voting (Downs 1957: Ch.3) that does not depict the voter as an “ideal democratic citizen” but as *homo economicus*. Here, the voter is depicted as a self-interested individual who aims to maximise his material benefits. Downs argued that “the benefits voters consider in making their decisions are streams of utility derived from government activity” (36). This means that in their evaluation of competing candidates voters will be largely guided by concerns with economic and social policies. Voting is instrumental behaviour, which means that by voting a citizen wants to affect his future utility income. A voter’s choice is considered to be *rational* in the sense that he “moves toward his goals in a way which, to the best of his knowledge, uses the least possible input of scarce resource per unit of valued output” (Downs 1972: 5).

Ideally, then, a voter should gather political information about expected policy changes in each possible issue area and about how these might affect him, and base his candidate choice on these evaluations (208ff.) Downs points out, however, that a voter has indeed

little incentive to invest in political information. The gathering of political information is a means to ensure that a citizen votes 'correctly', i.e. in a way that maximises his utility income. But the cost of "voting incorrectly ... cannot be measured by his party differential, since this mistake may not alter the outcome" (244). This is so because the chance to affect an election outcome "is infinitesimal under most circumstances", (245).

*That means that while the Downsian voter is by definition an issue voter, he is also by definition unlikely to fulfil many (or even any) of the prerequisites for issue voting.*

And ironically, empirical research in the aftermath of *The American Voter* appeared to confirm that increasing levels of issue voting since the 1960s coincided with the largely remaining feature of uninformed voters:

"A striking paradox of voting research is that, despite persuasive theoretical explanations of why voters are likely to be ignorant and empirical confirmation of voter ignorance, there has been substantial evidence of 'issue voting' by large segments of the American electorate." (Gant and Davis 1984: 135)

With levels of partisanship appearing to be on the decline not only in the U.S. but also in many established Western democracies (Dalton 1984), patterns of issue voting could increasingly be detected (Key 1966; RePass 1971; Pomper 1972; Aldrich 1975; Jackson 1975; Page and Jones 1979; Carmines and Stimson 1980). While some studies suggested that voters were actually becoming more sophisticated, or more voters better educated, allowing them to vote more consistently on the basis of policy considerations (Nie et al. 1976: Ch. 7; Dalton 1984), others contended that the cognitive requirements for issue voting had been grossly overstated by the authors of *The American Voter* as well as by Downs (Carmines and Stimson 1980; Gant and Davis 1984; Popkin 1991).

Carmines and Stimson (1980), for example, argued that some issues are more conducive than others for widespread inclusion in the vote calculus. They labelled these issues “easy issues”. The characteristic of an easy issue is that it “becomes so ingrained over a long period that it structures voters’ ‘gut responses’ to candidate and political parties” (78). And they could indeed show that for an issue like desegregation in the U.S., which had been on the political agenda throughout the 1970s and on which competing candidates took unambiguous and easily identifiable positions, meaningful relationships between issue position and vote choice emerged across the entire spectrum of educational groups (83). In contrast, a “hard” issue like Vietnam appeared to offer less clear-cut solutions and could be shown to demand more sophistication from a voter in order for his issue positions to be systematically related with candidate choice (84f.).

Ware (1987) sums up the most compelling arguments for why issue voting has emerged more strongly since the 1960s as a determinant of vote choice even in the absence of a marked increase of voter sophistication:

“Studies such as V. O. Key’s demonstrated that, irrespective of the knowledge that American voters could articulate about politics, when they did switch their vote from one party to another this was compatible in most cases with their views on issues or politicians. Thus, even the relatively uninformed voter was not usually an irrational voter. [...] Even by the mid-1970s there was evidence that the particularly low levels of voter awareness found in the studies of the 1950s and early 1960s in the United States was more a reflection of the relatively apolitical environment of the time. Moreover, since the 1960s the weakening ties of voters to parties in most liberal democracies has made competition for votes that much more difficult and has made parties even more aware of the different ways in which they could attract voters. The need to compete for the marginal vote has always been a factor weighing in party strategies but now there are many more marginal voters.” (Ware 1987: 78)

### *Measuring salience effects*

While most of the issue voting controversy centred around the first three prerequisites, i.e. the cognitive basis of issue voting, a number of studies have also given renewed attention to the fourth prerequisite: salience. Krosnick (1988: 197) has pointed out that despite the “strong theoretical rationale for the expectations that more important policy attitudes (a) shape candidate preferences more powerfully, (b) facilitate perception of between-candidate differences, and (c) are more accessible in memory, previous research offers little support for them. And indeed, the findings from studies that were carried out in the 1970s and 1980s were altogether rather inconclusive. RePass (1971), Rabinowitz et al. (1982), and Niemi and Bartels (1985) all used a similar research design, introducing salience as a dummy variable, testing whether evaluations on salient issues bear more strongly on candidate choice than those on non-salient issues. On the one hand, RePass (1971: 400) comes to the conclusion that, if one singles out the most salient issues in an election, issue-based evaluation can be shown to have “*almost as much weight as party identification in predicting vote choice*” (italics in the original). Rabinowitz et al. (1982: 53) found that “salience plays a substantial but not overwhelming role in determining candidate evaluations”. On the other hand, Niemi and Bartels (1985) suggest that, on the basis of their findings, salience of an issue does not affect the extent to which within-issue evaluations bear on vote choice.

One explanation for the mixed findings from these studies lies in the indiscriminate treatment of voters with regard to the overall sensitivity of their choice function towards differences in salience. One has to bear in mind that cross-dimensional differences in salience can only ever affect voters who have conflicting preference orderings in the first

place. A voter who is closest to the same party on every single dimension in the policy space (effectively a spatial definition of partisanship) is logically incapable of acting on salience. This is not to say that partisans do not have salience perceptions; it only means that they cannot act upon them: given a deterministic choice function, a voter who is closer to the same party on each dimension (a “pure” partisan) will invariably prefer that party. He can prefer it more or less to alternatives (there can be cardinal but not ordinal variations in his preference ordering), depending on salience, but he cannot vote more or less for his party.

Niemi and Bartels’ (1985) empirical analysis of salience effects clearly suffers from misspecifications in their model. By not excluding partisan voters from their sample, they seriously confound the data with misleading and irrelevant cases, thereby systematically underestimating true salience effects. Every voter who is consistently partisan will expose an identical relationship between the rank-order of his party preferences and party choice for each individual policy dimension, irrespective of salience. This creates numerous cases that do not allow for variation on the dependent variable, which are therefore irrelevant for estimation of the salience coefficient, but will invariably decrease the overall estimates.

Krosnick (1988: 197) points to a further source of model misspecification, namely the “omission of main effects in regressions”. He argues that previous studies were incapable of detecting major salience effect because they introduced salience by multiplicatively weighting attitudes with attitude importance (salience). That way they omitted, according to Krosnick, main effects. Krosnick argues that instead of using only the interaction term between preference and salience, one has to include in the regression the individual effects of salience and preference plus their interaction term. “Omitting the main effects confounds

them with the interaction, so these tests of the importance hypothesis are inaccurate and may well have underestimated the magnitude of the interaction.” Krosnick 1988: 197).

Recent studies of presidential elections in the US, starting with Krosnick’s (1988), have repeatedly produced strong evidence in favour of the hypothesis that salience of issues systematically affects their impact on public evaluations of incumbent presidents (see also Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Edwards et al. 1995). Using 1968, 1980 and 1984 data from the American National Election Study (NES), Krosnick (1988: 200-1) found that proximity to a candidate on a given policy dimension systematically becomes a better predictor of candidate choice the more important the policy dimension is deemed by the voter. These findings hold almost without exception across a set of three presidential elections and a total of 13 different policy dimensions.

While it has since been repeatedly established on individual level that salient attitudes towards presidents, candidates or political parties matter more for electoral choice or popularity functions than do those on non-salient dimensions (Young et al. 1987; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Hutchings 2001), a similar linkage between issue salience and vote choice has also been confirmed on aggregate level: Kleinnijenhuis and de Ridder (1998), Dorussen and Taylor (2001), and Petrocik et al. (2001) have all provided with evidence from different political systems (Netherlands, Germany, US) confirming that the distribution of party preferences or political trust within salient policy dimensions is a better predictor of electoral outcomes than the distribution of political support within non-salient dimensions.

Others have found that subjective salience to the individual guides evaluation on domestic political issues, while national salience, which the individual deduces from the amount of media coverage he is exposed to, leads him to take foreign policy issues into account for



his candidate evaluation (Lavine et al. 1996). Others again have attempted to link the salience hypothesis with models of directional issue voting, arguing that strong opinions about policies are only developed in salient issues areas, which means that the optimal strategy in multi-issue campaigns is to take on non-centrist positions on salient issues. This approach implies that most issues will only be salient to strongly feeling minorities, which results in campaigning platforms assembling heterogeneous voter coalitions. It also means that salience effects are dispersed and may hence not always be traceable at the aggregate level (Bernstein 1995).

### ***Salience and Issue Ownership***

A much-simplified concept of issue voting has been put forward by proponents of *salience* or *issue ownership* theory (Robertson 1976; Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996; Narud and Valen 2000; Petrocik et al. 2001). Instead of assuming that voters evaluate current party or candidate platforms by estimating whose policy proposals match most closely one's own preference or ideal point, evaluations are, in the framework of saliency or issue ownership theory, said to be either retrospective or even almost as stable as are psychological attachments. The concept of issue ownership evokes the notion that political actors are temporarily or permanently associated with the handling of certain social or economic problems.

Parties gain reputations of better handling particular issues, either because they are traditionally or ideologically linked to particular issue areas, which Petrocik defined as "party constituency ownership" (1996: 827), or because of the track record of the outgoing gov-

ernment, which can create short-term “performance-based ownership” - particularly of economic issues (827f.).

In Budge and Farlie’s (1983) formulation of saliency theory, issue ownership - in particular the kind of ownership that Petrocik later framed “party constituency based ownership” - appears to be to some extent an antecedent of party identification. Partisan voters, those who tend not to (or indeed do never) change parties between elections are said to be permanently concerned with a stable set of issues, or indeed with one single issue that constitutes a central cleavage in society (78-83; 124-128) - a notion that refers back to the religious or class cleavage model proposed by Lipset and Rokkan (1967).<sup>4</sup>

All voters in the saliency model are essentially issue voters. Those who are not partisans, i.e. those who are not permanently concerned with the same issue(s), which they have learned to trust one party with, are sensitive to changes in the electoral agenda between elections. While issue ownership is either a long-term property of parties or an incumbency-bonus, salience<sup>5</sup> is the crucial independent variable in the model. With different issues becoming salient from one election to the next, the net gains for competing parties are likely to change. Each salient issue holds a net gain for the owning party, which means that

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<sup>4</sup> Although we don’t find explicit references to Fiorina’s (1977; 1981) work on retrospective voting in any of the major publications on saliency or issue ownership theory, there is an apparent link between the two. Dorussen and Taylor (2001) have pointed to the fact that, within saliency theory, “voters are mainly retrospective” (401).

Fiorina’s formal model of retrospective voting shares clear similarities with all of the crucial elements of the not formalised concept of issue ownership. Performance-based ownership is captured in the “incumbency bias” that Fiorina enters into the basic issue-voting model; the bias being multiplied with the issue vectors and hence directly related to the issue content of past government performance (Fiorina 1977: 603). Later in his model, Fiorina adds the variable “past political experiences”, which accounts for the phenomenon that voters may support a current candidate for the reason that he represents a party that has proven its ability to handle certain economic and social issues in terms in office that may lie further back than the immediately past administration (610). From the concept of past political experiences, Fiorina attempts to model party identification as a direct function of issue-based long-standing bias in favour of one particular party (610f.), which is very similar to Budge and Farlie’s (1983) interpretation of partisanship as continuous voter concern with cleavage-issues (78-83; 124-128).

<sup>5</sup> Budge and Farlie (1983) use the term saliency, but essentially salience and saliency are interchangeable terms, which is why I only use the term saliency whenever I refer explicitly to Budge and Farlie’s “saliency theory”.

the composition of the agenda determines the likely winner (for the discussion of how net gains are calculated, see Budge and Farlie 1983: 78ff.).

The *cleavage voters*, i.e. those who are insensitive to changes in the electoral agenda, provide each party with their so-called *basic vote*, which is understood as the distribution of party support in the absence of salient issues or in the case where competing parties derive equal net gains, i.e. whenever competitors own an equal number of salient issues (for the discussion of *basic vote* see Budge and Farlie 1983: 77). Volatility is understood as “the speed of transition of support from one party to another” (123), and explained largely as a result of sensitivity to salience, which means that voters have stable preferences or perceptions of issue ownership but apply these to changing agendas.<sup>6</sup>

While their findings from post-war elections in twenty-three democracies support the notion that changing agendas are related to the net gains and losses of major parties or blocs in the different systems (Ch. 6), their specific operationalisation of salience effects is less warranted, especially when it comes to predict patterns of vote shares in elections that are not part of the sample from which they calculated the basic votes.<sup>7</sup> Their predictions improve on best guesses, which are either based on average support for a party over the post-war period or on the immediately preceding election result, but still, on average, deviate by around 3 percent from observed vote shares.<sup>8</sup>

Both saliency theory and *issue ownership theory*, Petrocik’s application of the idea to the U.S. context (Petrocik 1996, Petrocik et al. 2001), provide valuable but imprecise empirical

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<sup>6</sup> According to Budge and Farlie, there will only be a minority whose preferences actually change between elections: “idiosyncratic changers” (79).

<sup>7</sup> Budge and Farlie use, for example, data from post-World War II elections in the UK up until 1974 to calculate the basic vote per decade for Labour and Conservatives and attempt to predict the outcome of 1979 on that basis, assuming that the partisan vote remained stable throughout the 1970s (Ch. 4).

<sup>8</sup> With the average vote shares of the major parties in the observed countries ranging around 40 percent, this amounts to an error factor of .075.

support for the general notion *that* salience matters, but cannot be regarded as comprehensive explanatory models of *how* salience matters. Budge and Farlie explicitly refrain from trying to formalise their theory, on the grounds that “the conditions which must be stipulated for a fully mathematical theory to apply in this area are so stringent that they certainly cannot be met by our subject matter (and possibly not by any that can conceivably be developed)” (Budge and Farlie 1983: 149). And, apart from a brief dissociation from rational choice theory (157-159), they fail to take into account the treatment of salience in spatial models of voting, fail to even refer to either Downs himself or any formal theory of issue voting. This ignores that Downs himself was the first rational choice theorist to consider salience effects and outline the consequences of multiple issue concerns for the individual choice function.

### ***Downs on salience***

Although Downs proposed a one-dimensional spatial model of voting, his single left-right dimension does not implicate that only one policy dimension (*economics*) matters. The collapse into one dimension is to be understood as a heuristic device with which to demonstrate the properties of the spatial analogy (Downs 1957: 116). He subsequently reintroduces issue diversity by redefining the meaning of the left-right scale:

“[W]e must remove the assumption that each party’s platform contains only its stand on the proper degree of government intervention in the economy. Let us assume instead that each party takes stands on many issues, and that each stand can be assigned a position on our left-right scale.” (*Ibid*: 132)

Voters then judge on the basis of perceived positions, allowing them to give different weights to different issues, depending on their personal issue involvement. It follows that a party does not take on a “unique, universally recognised net position”. Only a general con-

sensus as to the identities of left, right, or centrist parties will persist (*Ibid*: 133). Rational parties are expected to spread policies as far as possible across the one-dimensional space in order to increase their appeal. The evaluation of parties that are ordered along one dimension becomes two-dimensional: a voter judges on the basis of his proximity to what he perceives to be each party's *mean* position on the left-right scale, but also takes into account the spread (*variance*) of the party's positions across all different issues.

"If some party has a mean identical with his own position (which we assume single-valued) but an enormous variance, he may reject it in favor of another party with a mean not as close to him but with a much smaller variance. In short, voters choose policy vectors rather than policy scalars, and each vector is really a weighted frequency distribution of policies on the left right scale." (*Ibid*: 133)

Saliencies, i.e. the relative weights given to issues by a voter, affect both the mean and the variance of a party's distribution of policy positions on the left-right scale, which, in turn, means that both dimensions of policy evaluation are partly determined by the composition of voter agendas. Whereas the collection of perceived policy positions of a party on all issues the voter is aware of produce the overall mean and total variance of the distribution, the salience weights determine the parts of that distribution a voter actually cares about and how strongly he takes each of those parts into account.<sup>9</sup>

The difficulty with this approach is that it presupposes that one single, all-encompassing dimension is underlying a multitude of issues. One of the critical assumptions of Downs' one-dimensional model is that while cardinal orderings of individual policy positions of

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<sup>9</sup> If a voter only has *one* issue on his agenda, he will judge a party solely on the basis of its mean position, which is its position on that one issue. With more issues becoming salient, the distribution of salience weights will have a differential effect on variance. Where the mean salience per issue approaches  $1/n$  (with  $n$  = the number of salient issues) with a high and positive kurtosis, i.e. salience values cluster around the mean, so that many issues become equally salient, perceived positions alone almost exclusively determine the mean and the variance of the frequency distribution of party policies. In contrast, where the mean salience approaches  $1/n$  with negative kurtosis, i.e. salience values are evenly spread, so that few issues are highly salient and many issues lower on salience, the variance in the distribution of policy positions will reduce and the mean, determined by the more salient issues, will become more critical for evaluation.

parties might vary between voters, the ordinal relation between parties must remain uniform (1957: 132, fn. 15). That means that if one party is to the left of another on one issue, it can in no instance leapfrog but has to remain to the left on all issues. Apart from unwittingly forcing a common denominator onto the universe of policy-making, it poses a logical problem for Downs' theory and his predictions about party strategy. On the one hand, Downs argues that, in a two-party system, policies will converge on the median voter position. On the other, he states that parties are expected to spread their policies as widely as possible in order to maximise their appeal. Converging parties can only ever spread out in a direction *away* from the median position.<sup>10</sup> By doing that, a party would necessarily shift its mean position away from the centre. Therefore, from a strategic point of view, the party that locates itself on all issues as close to the median as possible, i.e. spreads positions as little as possible, gains a competitive advantage. This is even more critical given that voter positions are assumed to be single-valued (133), which means that voters have the same ideal point across different issues. If the distribution of voters and hence the median position remains stable across issues, then appealing differently to the electorate from issue to issue cannot pay off.

### ***Salience as a parameter of choice in multi-dimensional theories of voting***

The treatment of different issues in a one-dimensional solution complicates the initially elegant and parsimonious model, a remedy for which is to disentangle issues and treat them separately, as independent dimensions. Riker (1980: 438) has argued that

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<sup>10</sup> This condition applies because they cannot leapfrog one another.

“scholarly efforts to describe real politics on one dimension seem always to break down. Indeed, once Downs set forth his model, it seemed so inadequate that other theorists soon developed an  $n$ -dimensional analogue.”

Logically, within multi-dimensional spatial models of voting (Davis et al. 1970; Hinich et al, 1973; Enelow and Hinich 1984) not only parties but also voters are placed independently on different issues. Voters form their party differential in multi-dimensional spaces from distances to policies on different dimensions, which translates into the concept of Euclidian distances. In a two-dimensional space, holding salience constant, voter  $x$  will prefer policy  $\theta$  to policy  $\psi$  only if the sum of the squared distances between his own ideal point and  $\theta$  on the two dimensions is less than the sum of his squared distances from  $\psi$ :

Formally,  $x$  prefers  $\theta$  to  $\psi$  only when

$$(x_1 - \theta_1)^2 + (x_2 - \theta_2)^2 < (x_1 - \psi_1)^2 + (x_2 - \psi_2)^2 .$$

Subsequently, salience is introduced by weighting dimensions differently. The vote calculus is the *sum of weighted proximity scores* (Davis et al. 1970; Hinich et al, 1973; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Humphreys and Garry 2000). Davis et al. (1970: 433) propose to calculate the weighted sums of squared distances in an  $n$ -dimensional space in terms of an *individual loss function*:

$$\sum_{m=1}^n \sum_{k=1}^n a_{mk} (x_m - \theta_m)(x_k - \theta_k) \quad (1)$$

where  $x_{m/k}$  indicates a voter’s ideal point on issue  $m$  or  $k$ ,  $\theta_{m/k}$  denotes the loss voter  $x$  derives from a candidate’s position on issue  $m$  or  $k$ , and  $a_{mk}$  are the relative weights allocated to different issues. Equation (1) contains the squared distances between  $x$  and  $\theta$  in the terms where  $k = m$ , i.e. the squared Euclidian distance between voter ideal point and party position for each individual dimension; and the interaction terms between issues (how

losses on one dimension are discounted against losses on another dimension) in the terms where  $k \neq m$ .

It is clear that the more variation between preference orders and magnitudes of party differentials across dimensions, the more sensitive a voter will be to changes in salience. However, in most instances, spatial theories of voting have failed to give explicit attention to how changes in salience can determine outcomes.

Salience has not only been treated as an exogenous variable that cannot be manipulated by political actors (which will be the topic of the next section), it has also only been allowed to vary between issues or individual voters but not over time. Invariably, Downsian approaches have only considered the effects of party movements in the space, either estimating equilibrium constellations or specifying conditions under which electoral cycles occur.

*One could of course also hold party positions constant and estimate equilibrium saliences instead of equilibrium positions.*

Accordingly, the prescriptive conclusions from Downsian and later spatial modelling remained limited to advising parties to move towards the median, or the dimension-by-dimension median. An alternative strategy would be the manipulation of policy dimensions, which should appeal to political actors since it allows maximising electoral returns without compromising policy positions.

## 2.2 Manipulating the dimensions

“All politics deals with the displacement of conflicts or efforts to resist the displacement of conflicts. The substitution of conflicts looks like an argument about what the argument is about, but politicians are not as confused as they seem to be. [...] All forms of political or-



ganization have a bias in favor of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others because *organization is the mobilization of bias*. Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out. [...]

To understand the nature of party conflict it is necessary to consider *the function of the cleavages exploited by the parties in their struggle for supremacy*. Since the development of cleavages is a prime instrument of power, the party which is able to make its definition of the issues prevail is likely to take over the government.” (Schattschneider 1960: 68-9, 73)

### ***Issues, cleavages, and vote production***

E. E. Schattschneider proposed that electoral politics is a question of taking sides in a conflict and that “the outcome of the game of politics depends on which of a multitude of possible conflicts gains the dominant position” (1960: 60). He argued that at any given point in time political alignments are organized along the dominant line of cleavage in a society and that

“a change in the direction and location of the line of cleavage will determine the place of each individual in the political system, what side he is on, who else is on his side, who is opposed to him, how large the opposing sides are, what the conflict is about, and who wins” (61).

The process is not driven by natural self-selection of cleavages but by the strategic behaviour of political actors who have a vested interest in emphasising the cleavage that promises a winning coalition to rally behind them:

“The evolution of a major conflict (important enough for a mobilization of opposing forces) involves an effort to consolidate people on both sides.” (62)

This theory of partisan politics shares similarities with the Lipset-Rokkan model, which suggested that major social - religious or class - cleavages in Europe have led to the emergence of polarized party systems and that these cleavages become frozen, meaning that they continue to structure the party system even in the event of erosion of the underlying pattern of social division (Lipset and Rokkan 1967).

Wellhofer (1990) argued that cleavage-based partisanship could also be understood as a market model of politics. Wellhofer distinguished between two market models of electoral politics: the Downsian *vote maximization* model and the class-based *vote production* model (14-8). He argues that while vote maximization involves adaptive strategies of parties and candidates, vote production is instead achieved by what Rokkan (1962: 79) had described earlier as “organizational encapsulation”. This means that class organization and class-based party support does not develop naturally out of social division but is driven by parties, who tend to create, mobilize and continuously reinforce partisan ties by “organizing as many of the day-to-day life activities as possible” (Wellhofer 1990: 16). In the interpretation of Przeworski and Sprague (1986) perceived class membership itself is a product of party activities: “parties [...] organize workers as a class” (59-60). The vote production model has been outlined most clearly by Przeworski (1985: 101-2) who claimed that “individual voting is an effect of the activities of political parties. More precisely, the relative salience of class as a determinant of voting behaviour is a cumulative consequence of strategies pursued by political parties of the Left”.

### ***Cross-cutting cleavages and partisan realignment***

Poole and Rosenthal (1993: 13) interpreted Schattschneider’s theory as an attempt to write “U.S. political history ... almost entirely as a conflict *between* and *within* political parties”. Schattschneider developed his theory of party politics as an alternative to pluralist theories of special interest and pressure group politics. He argued that

“one possible synthesis of pressure politics and party politics might be produced by describing politics as the socialization of conflict. That is to say, the political process is a sequence: conflicts are initiated by highly motivated, high-tension groups so directly and im-

mediately involved that it is difficult for them to see the justice of competing claims. [...] Conflicts become political only when an attempt is made to involve the wider public.” (Schattschneider 1960: 39)

Pluralist theories argue that societies are characterized by dispersed preferences, which means that “some societies, especially larger and more complex ones, are divided by a pluralism of cleavages that are often related to one another in a cross-cutting rather than reinforcing pattern” (Miller 1983: 735; see also Latham 1952 and Rae and Taylor 1970).

Pluralists hold that societies gain stability and that political attitudes and behaviour will be moderated by the prevalence of multiple and crosscutting cleavages<sup>11</sup>. In contrast, Schattschneider treated societies as potentially divisible across many different cleavages, but argued that, at any given point in time, political elites consolidate support along one dominant line of cleavage. He accepted the notion of crosscutting cleavages but concluded that on the level of electoral politics pluralism cannot prevail. That means that, in his view, national politics is a process of competition for mass alignment along one particular line of cleavage at the expense of all other crosscutting cleavages that could have the potential to produce different majorities:

“[P]olitical cleavages are extremely likely to be incompatible with each other. That is, the development of one conflict may inhibit the development of another because a radical shift of alignment becomes possible only at the cost of a change in the relations and priorities of all of the contestants.” (Schattschneider 1960: 63).

National politics in Schattschneider’s view is inherently volatile. The consolidation of a cleavage produces losers, who could turn into winners under a different constellation. This results in a permanent struggle for change in issue priorities, which is quite the opposite of

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<sup>11</sup> Bailey (1970: 129) pointed out that “those who are enemies in one situation are sometimes required to act as allies in another situation. With an eye on future cooperation, they restrain their behaviour in present competition”.

the pluralist notion that crosscutting divisions are counterbalancing and hence stabilizing forces.

This model of political change, driven by national political parties, is mirrored in theories of *realignment* (Sinclair 1977; Brady 1982; Sundquist 1983; Poole and Rosenthal 1993). Realignment theory adopts the notion from Schattschneider that party affiliation is brought about by the emergence of a dominant cleavage, which is to say that partisanship means to take a side in a national political conflict. Realignment theories argue that patterns of partisanship in the U.S., i.e. the distribution of Democratic and Republican identifiers, have been subject to major shifts over time.<sup>12</sup>

“[T]he party system has a new rationale, an old conflict has been displaced by a new one for a segment of the electorate, and that segment of the electorate has formed ... new party attachments on the basis of that rationale. If the segment is large enough ... a new party system supplants the old one.” (Sundquist 1983: 37)

Most realignment studies have, however, neglected the role of political parties in bringing about the emergence of a new crosscutting cleavage. Much of the empirical studies of realignment focus on legislative behaviour, and these studies tend to treat dimensional shifts in the roll call voting in Congress as a symptom of - or a reaction to - preceding shifts in mass electoral behaviour (Poole and Rosenthal 1993: 36-8; also Sinclair 1977). Carmines and Stimson (1986) challenge this view by modelling more rigorously the sequence and direction of causality in the evolution of new issues.<sup>13</sup> They explicitly argue that partisan

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<sup>12</sup> Poole and Rosenthal (1993: 13) note that the “prevailing view in this literature is that there have been three major realignments: one in the 1850s over the extension of slavery to the territories; one in the 1890s over the creation of inflation either by abandoning the gold standard or by monetizing silver; and one in the 1930s because of the collapse of the economy during the Great Depression”. Poole and Rosenthal themselves, however, develop a model of realignment, based on spatial theory of party competition, and come to the conclusion that only the first noted case from the 1850s can count as realignment in that it produced a new spatial division, while the other two are characterized as mere “perturbations”, since “they occurred along the line of cleavage that solidified in the 1870s” (14).

<sup>13</sup> Carmines and Stimson apply a dynamic time series model to investigate how the desegregation issue produced realignment in U.S. politics in the 1960s. They show that the mean position of Republican and Democ-

realignment is a response to cues from elites. Elites initiate the process of realignment, which goes through subsequent stages of increasing voter awareness about policy shifts and increasing issue salience and eventually results in a redistribution of partisans in the electorate.

### *The disequilibrium of tastes*

Social choice theory can serve to formalize Schattschneider's contention that for any society at any given point in time exist multiple cross-cutting cleavage lines many of which could have the potential to produce a new majority were they to become the salient dimension of political conflict. In an early critique - or reinterpretation - of spatial theory, Stokes (1963) illustrated how the equilibrium is upset, not by voters or candidates moving in the space, but by restructuring the space:

“For example, between the elections of 1948 and 1952 a far-reaching change took place in the terms in which the parties and candidates were judged by the electorate. Whereas the voter evaluations of 1948 were strongly rooted in the economic and social issues of the New Deal-Fair Deal era, the evaluations of 1952 were based substantially on foreign concerns. A dimension that had touched the motives of the electorate scarcely at all in the Truman election was of great importance in turning the Democratic administration out of power four years later. If the difference between these two elections is to be interpreted in spatial terms, we would have to say that the intrusion of a new issue dimension had changed the structure of the space in which the parties competed for electoral support.” (Stokes 1963: 371-2)

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ratic Senators and Representatives, estimated from roll call votes, reversed during the course of the 1960s, with Democrats becoming increasingly liberal, i.e. in favour of desegregation (904-5). Similarly, from the mid-1960s through 1980, survey respondents developed respective perceptions of party stands, i.e. they managed to identify the liberal position of the Democrats on race and the increasingly conservative position of the Republicans. Also, citizens identified as liberal on the race issue became increasingly attached to the Democrats, leading eventually to a new stable pattern of distribution of partisans (905-9). Time-series analysis shows that the repositioning of parties actually preceded and hence caused the evolution of new issue publics and eventual realignment (910-5).

As long as a single line of cleavage dominates, i.e. in a one-dimensional policy space, there always exists a unique equilibrium, a stable outcome of social choice.<sup>14</sup> However, the occurrence of equilibrium becomes highly unlikely in the presence of additional salient policy dimensions<sup>15</sup>, unless it is institutionally induced.<sup>16</sup> Riker (1980) concluded from Arrow's (1951) theorem about voting cycles and subsequent studies into the equilibrium conditions of multi-spatial competition that "[d]isequilibrium, or the potential that the status quo be upset, is the characteristic feature of politics" (Riker 1980: 443). Some social choice theorists have argued that Riker exaggerates the likelihood of cyclical majorities (Tullock 1981; Schofield 1993), while empirical research into the composition of policy spaces has found strong support for Schattschneider's notion that political conflict tends to be organized along a single cleavage line and only rarely and temporarily becomes two-dimensional (Budge 1993; Poole and Rosenthal 1993).

However, one can interpret Riker's notion concerning the "disequilibria of tastes" (Riker 1980: 445) in a way very similar to the earlier argument in Schattschneider (1960: 60ff.): namely that any existing equilibrium, any status quo of politics which is brought about by the dominance of a particular cleavage, is constantly *threatened* to be upset by the introduction of a new and cross-cutting dimension. The disequilibrium condition is an always-

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<sup>14</sup> Riker (1980) refers to Duncan Black who discovered that in a one-dimensional policy space, "if voters' preference curves are single-peaked, then an equilibrium exists in the sense that one alternative can beat or tie (n-1) others. ... It should be noted that this equilibrium at the median optimum is characterized by a balancing of opposites, a feature found in all other geometrically defined equilibria of voting. There are an equal number of voters on either side of the median, which is why it is the equilibrium." (Riker 1980: 436-7)

<sup>15</sup> See discussion of equilibrium conditions in Riker (1982: Ch. 5 and 7).

<sup>16</sup> Institutionally induced equilibria mostly apply to legislative bodies, which can decentralise decision-making by dividing into committees, each of which is concerned with an individual subset of issues, or by imposing *germaneness* rules on parliamentary debates. That means that issues have to be treated separately and that considerations of bills are restricted to directly related amendments (Shepsle 1979; Riker 1980: 444 and 1982: 188ff.; Feld and Grofman 1988; Humes 1993).

prevalent potential for change, but it does not necessarily result in continuous change and cycling.

As quoted earlier from Schattschneider, “the party which is able to make its definition of the issues prevail is likely to take over the government” (73). Once a party has succeeded in defining the dominant cleavage, it may well benefit from a substantial realignment and a protracted period of political stability. Riker himself notes that politics is not a world of complete chaos and permanent change:

“Our ordinary experience indicates, however, that there is some stability in political life: Issues persist and similar outcomes repeat themselves. There must be more to the world, therefore, than the almost complete disequilibrium suggested by the Black and Newing, Plott, McKelvey and Schofield analysis.” (Riker 1982: 188)

He goes on to argue that disequilibrium theory is a model of political change, not necessarily a model of political instability. And political change can range from incremental change in the distribution of votes between elections - that does not disturb existing majorities and the composition of governments - to full-fledged revolution or civil war.

“Indeed, it seems likely that most of the apparent stability we see in the world, such as generation-long periods of dominance by one political party, is really incremental disequilibrium in which party composition changes slightly while always maintaining some cyclicity of values.” (*Ibid.*)

The fact that alternative issues or cleavages have the potential to upset an existing equilibrium, to produce new divisions and new winning coalitions, is identified by Riker as the incentive for politicians who are currently on the losing side, i.e. out of government, to almost ceaselessly introduce new issues.

### *Heresthetics or the art of political manipulation*

Riker (1982) uses two very different analogies in order to outline what he calls the “fundamental dynamic of political life” (209). He first argues that politicians are like entrepreneurs who offer new products in order to constantly improve their market position:

“New alternatives, new issues, are like new products. Each one is sponsored as a test of the voting market, in the hope that the new alternative will render new issues salient, old issues irrelevant, and, above all, will be preferred by a majority to what went before. This is the art of politics: to find some alternative that beats the current winner. Such an alternative almost certainly exists, given disequilibrium.” (209)

The market analogy, however, has limitations, insofar as politicians can rely less on market research that may guide entrepreneurs in their introduction of new products. In contrast with consumer goods, issues and values are less tangible, and politicians act under uncertainty about which issue may at any given point in time have the potential to catch the imagination of the electorate, and hence gain sufficient salience to upset the status quo. This produces a situation in which “the politician must try out alternatives more or less randomly” (210).

Riker then shifts the analogy from that of consumer markets to that of organic nature and the selection of species.<sup>17</sup> He argues that just like only “some few of the animal and vegetable recombinations find a niche in the environment and survive and flourish”, so too do most issues in the political world “find no significant audience and fail; but some are responded to enthusiastically and flourish, even to the point of completely reshaping the envi-

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<sup>17</sup> In similar fashion, Carmines and Stimson (1993) propose a model of issue evolution that is based on Darwin’s theory of biological evolution. They point out that evolutionary biology does not consider Darwinian ‘fitness’ to be an absolute property of a species but to be “relative to the evolving ecological niche”. Just as species evolve and flourish because of adaptive qualities, so do issues “come to influence the life of a political system, not so much because they are fundamental to the system but because they fundamentally fit well to an opportunity provided by the evolving political environment” (152).



ronment in which they arose” (210). Issue evolution does appear, however, to be less stable than biological evolution, insofar as

“... issues do not have long lives and may disappear even though social conditions remain fairly stable. In this sense, the natural selection of issues is somewhat more random than the natural selection of species” (211).

The more crucial difference between the selection of species and the selection of issues is, however, that issue evolution is almost always actively and deliberately initiated by political actors, more precisely by political losers.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, Riker argues that losers, i.e. political actors who are at a disadvantage under the current status quo or equilibrium, are indeed the forces of political change:

“... the tastes of the winners are the values that are authoritatively allocated. That is, the tastes of the winners are the actual content of social decision and thus the content of the immediately subsequent present time. ... The dynamics of politics is in the hands of the losers. It is they who decide when and how and whether to fight on. Winners have won and do not immediately need to change things. But losers have nothing and can gain nothing unless they continue to try to bring about new political situations. This provides the motivation for change. ... Losers are the ones who search out new strategies and stratagems and it is their use of *heresthetics* that provides the dynamics of politics.” (Riker 1983: 62-3)

Whereas spatial models almost invariably prescribe losers to change their policy positions in order to improve their electoral prospects, Riker offers a variety of strategies that can serve the same purpose without compromising stands on policies. Riker subsumes the array of such strategies under the headline of *heresthetics*. Indeed, he spent the last decade of his life promoting the concept and study of *heresthetics*, and applying it as an explanatory tool

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<sup>18</sup> Again, this argument by Riker - that issue evolution is almost always triggered by political actors with a vested interest - mirrors an argument by Schattschneider, namely that “[t]he evolution of a major conflict (important enough for a mobilization of opposing forces) involves an effort to consolidate people on both sides” (62). It is an altogether striking fact that Riker does not once refer to Schattschneider in any of his books and papers dealing with the disequilibrium of tastes and the manipulation of policy dimensions (Riker 1980, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1990, and 1993).

to various contexts of political decision-making (Riker 1983, 1984, 1986, 1990, and 1993).<sup>19</sup>

Riker defined heresthetics as “a study of the *strategy* of decision” and argued that the “modern impetus to heresthetics comes from game theory and social choice theory, both of which are methods of describing social decisions abstractly” (1983: 55). Its applications can cover a wide range of different contexts of decision-making, just as is the case with game theory and social choice theory in general.<sup>20</sup>

Riker argues that “had heresthetic been properly recognized as an art by some of its practitioners, it would have been, from classical times onward, one of the liberal arts, which are the arts that free men use to control their surroundings” (1986: ix-x). He goes on to state that there are three recognised liberal arts of language - logic, grammar, and rhetoric. Logic is concerned with the truth-value, grammar with the communications-value, and rhetoric with the persuasion-value of sentences (1986: x). Heresthetics, as the fourth liberal art of language, is concerned with the “strategy-value of language to accomplish some purpose”, the purpose of using language in this case being “to manipulate” (1986: x). Heresthetics

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<sup>19</sup> Riker points out that the word *heresthetics* or *heresthetic* is an artificial construction to refer to political strategy, and that “its source is the Greek *αἰρεσθητοί*, which has to do with choosing and electing” (Riker 1983: 55).

Riker is inconsistent in the spelling he uses. He introduced the concept as *heresthetics* (Riker 1983; 1984) but subsequently used the spelling *heresthetic*, which highlights a grammatical correspondence with the established concepts of rhetoric and logic (Riker 1986; 1990; 1993).

*Heresthetics* is the spelling that has been adopted in most of the publications that explicitly refer to Riker’s concept (Epstein and Shvetsova 2002; Feld and Grofman 1988; Kaminski 2001; Johnston et al. 1993; Nagel 1993; Weimer 1992), with only few exceptions that quote directly from *The Art of Political Manipulation* (Riker 1986) and subsequently keep referring to the concept as *heresthetic* (Hammond and Humes 1995; Paine 1989).

Throughout this thesis, I will adopt what was Riker’s initial proposition and has since become the majority position, namely the spelling *heresthetics*. However, I will not interfere with quotes from works that use the alternative spelling.

<sup>20</sup> Riker and others have used heresthetics as a framework for the study of dynamics and strategies in decision-making bodies of varying sizes, including supreme courts (Epstein and Shvetsova 2002), parliamentary committees (Riker 1986: Ch. 2), private clubs (Riker 1986: Ch.3), legislatures (Kaminski 2001; Nagel 1993; Riker 1986: 7, 9-12), and electorates (Feld and Grofman 1988; Hammond and Humes 1995; Paine 1989; Riker 1983; 1986: Ch. 1; 1990).

differs from rhetoric in that its purpose is not to persuade, not to alter preferences, but to manipulate or restructure the choice context in a way that exploits the disequilibrium of tastes and produces a different outcome even from an unaltered set of preferences:

“... the essential feature, qua rhetoric, is [to] convince. With heresthetic, on the other hand, conviction is at best secondary, and often not even involved at all. The point of an heresthetical act is to structure the situation so that the actor wins, regardless of whether or not the other participants are persuaded.” (1983: 60)

Riker identifies three heresthetical devices<sup>21</sup>: *agenda control*, *strategic voting*, and the *manipulation of dimensions* (Riker 1986: 147-151). This categorization follows his earlier distinction into three methods of manipulating social choice (Riker 1982: Chapters 6 through 8). Both agenda control, which refers to the sequencing of decision-making, and strategic voting apply rather to the context of smaller voting bodies like supreme courts or

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<sup>21</sup> Kaminski (2001) added the notion of manipulation of electoral laws as a further heresthetical strategy, arguing that “a political player supports an electoral system that maximizes his expected share of seats” (2001: 1-2). He suggests that in newly democratising countries like Poland, where electoral laws after the drafting of the new constitution in 1989 were revised twice (in 1991 and in 1993), political actors bargain over electoral systems with particular benefits to be derived from constitutional choices in mind.

And logically, attempts to manipulate constitutions and, in particular, electoral laws, are not confined to periods of regime change. Riker himself, a few years before introducing the concept of heresthetics, pointed out that “[o]ne can expect that losers on a series of decisions under a particular set of rules will attempt ... to change institutions and hence the kind of decisions produced under them” (Riker 1980: 445). Clear illustrations of this point are the repeated attempts of the Liberal Democrats in the UK to raise the issue of changing the electoral law towards proportional representation. Since under the current electoral law the Liberal Democrats tend to win a substantially smaller percentage of seats in parliament than percentages of the vote, and since both the political culture and the electoral system render the formation of coalitions unlikely, the Liberal Democrats are effectively permanent losers under the current electoral system and could benefit from constitutional change.

In one of his essays in *The Art of Political Manipulation*, Riker implicitly adds gerrymandering to the list of heresthetical manoeuvres (Riker 1986: Ch. 6). Although he focuses in this essay on the strategy of “fixing dimensionality” (1986: 66) by camouflaging the gerrymander and hence not allowing the opposing party to add the dimension of gerrymandering to the context of decision-making, he also demonstrates that drawing the boundaries of voting districts can affect social choice just as effectively as can the choice of electoral laws, the manipulation of dimensions, strategic voting, or agenda control (1986: 68-72). He points out that courts in the United States have “condoned and encouraged gerrymanders” and that it would be “morally asking too much of any group of people, I believe, to require that they assign territory in a way disadvantageous to themselves” (1986: 76). He himself does not go so far as to actively condone gerrymander, but concludes that the gerrymandering and its camouflage exercised by the city manager in his case study “was innocuous and her heresthetic brilliant” (1986: 77).

parliamentary committees.<sup>22</sup> Manipulating the dimensions is not only “just about the most frequently attempted heresthetical device” (1986: 150), but qualifies also as one of the core campaign strategies at the disposal of competing candidates.

### ***Driving the political market: the heresthetics of electoral campaigning***

There are good reasons to believe that *rhetoric* does not work in campaigns. The agenda-setting paradigm, which I will review in the following chapter (Ch.3), has received so much attention because of its core argument that media effects are not persuasive but cognitive. This means that people are influenced by mass communication, but that they are influenced in a way that does not change their opinions but their problem concerns as a result of increasing information about a new issue. Similarly, most theories of voting refrain from contemplating or indeed explaining the sources of political preferences. At the very least, few approaches would argue that there could be significant short-term change in political attitudes or preferences as a result of campaign proceedings.

Campaigns are unlikely to *persuade* people into changing their vote. They are much more likely to *manipulate* people into changing their vote, which is an entirely different thing. For example, it may be impossible for a Social-Democratic party to ever convince a member of the managerial class that it is in his interest to raise taxes for the purpose of increasing welfare spending. It might instead be more promising to try and distract him from the

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<sup>22</sup> Strategic voting is of course an important feature of electoral behaviour, and can indeed be encouraged by campaigning parties and candidates. Within the theory of heresthetics, however, strategic voting applies to a manipulative strategic choice of a decision maker by means of which he tries to affect the outcome. Voters in a mass electorate are not in a position to use their individual votes in heresthetical fashion because of the little impact individual votes have in that setting. The individual vote of a decision maker in a supreme court or a parliamentary committee, however, has much more value, so that the individual can make realistic computations of how outcomes may be influenced by his strategic voting. For examples of the heresthetical use of strategic voting, see Riker (1986: Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 11) and Epstein and Shvetsova (2002: 113-8).

tax question by raising a foreign policy or an environmental issue on which his position may just be closer to the Social Democrats than on the economic dimension.

It has indeed been argued that campaigning parties or candidates have no inclination to enter open debates with one another about conflicting policy stands on particular issues. Budge and Farlie (1983) posit that parties should and will exclusively focus on issues they *own*. It follows that parties or candidates essentially talk past one another, and that voters do not compare different stands on the same issue but instead vote on the platform that reflects their own problem concerns.

The task of campaigning is to get voters concerned with issues that can be beneficial to the party. Budge (1993 and 1999) goes even further and argues that essentially salience equals position. He claims that almost all issues are *valence issues*, a concept introduced by Stokes (1963) and referring to social problems the solution of which is uncontroversial, insofar as neither candidates nor voters differ in the position they take on the issue:

“... many of the issues that agitate our politics do not involve even a shriveled set of two alternatives of government action. ... I will call ‘valence-issues’ those that merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate. If the condition is past or present, ... the argument turns on where the credit or blame ought to be assigned. But if the condition is a future or potential one, the argument turns on which party, given possession of the government, is the more likely to bring it about.” (Stoke 1963: 372-3)

The idea that, in essence, all issues are valence issues, is a stronger statement of the original idea within saliency theory, namely that with regard to each issue only one side is ever going to win from its salience.

Riker (1993) makes a related point about the structure of campaign communications: he introduces two principles, the *Dominance Principle* and the *Dispersion Principle*. The *Dominance Principle* states that “when one side successfully wins the argument on an is-

sue, the other side ceases to discuss it while the winner continues to exploit it". On the other hand, the *Dispersion Principle* states that "when both sides fail to win the argument on an issue, both sides cease to discuss it and search for some other, more profitable issue" (81-2).

If candidates cannot gain from confrontation with their competitors, campaigns are essentially about raising the salience of issues. Hammond and Humes (1993), in one of the few attempts at formalizing Riker's theory of heresthetics<sup>23</sup>, outline their understanding that candidates can manipulate voters into perceiving them to stand closest to their ideal point by emphasizing an issue on which this is actually the case while ignoring issues where they would be at a disadvantage:

"In effect, the campaign takes place not by candidates moving their actual positions to optimal spatial locations, which is the essence of the traditional Downsian model, but by using campaign rhetoric and emphasizing issues in such a way that each candidate's spatial location is perceived by the voters to be closer to theirs than the other candidate's. Instead of candidates trying to figure out what positions to take, then, political campaigns are turned into contests about what the issue dimensions of the campaign will be. In the Downsian model, the voters move the candidates around; in our alternative model, the candidates can be said to move the voters around." (Hammond and Humes 1993: 142)

Their "spatial model of issue framing" (144) is not developed far enough to reveal equilibrium conditions, but they do come to the conclusion that "except under rare circumstances, the optimal strategy of candidate 1 will differ from the optimal strategy of candidate 2" (153). Their proposition of nonconvergence between candidate strategies supports the notion that "'the candidates are talking past each other' and that 'the candidates are not joining in a genuine debate with each other'" (153).

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<sup>23</sup> Only other attempts have been undertaken to model equilibrium conditions when positions are fixed but salience is allowed to vary, namely by Feld and Grofman (1988) and Humphreys and Garry (2000).

### *Endogenising salience*

The literature reviewed in this chapter provides strong support for the two notions that (a) salience is an independent parameter of social choice and (b) that parties have strong incentives to manipulate agendas in order to gain a competitive advantage.

What is needed, however, is to propose a mechanism by which political actors can actually influence public salience. This is what Humphreys and Garry (2000: 2) ask for when they point out that political science needs to *endogenise* salience, which means to “examine the ability of political actors to change the relative importance of different issue areas”.

Budge and Farlie (1983: 140) argue that “party emphases bring issues to the fore, rather than simply reflecting issues already prominent among electors” (Budge and Farlie 1983: 140). But they fail to outline how exactly issues are brought to the fore. Page (1976: 749) suggests that “the salience of a given issue is not entirely independent of candidates’ behaviour”. He makes the valid point that candidates “not merely take stands; they also allocate their speaking time, their press releases, and their media budgets so as to vary the emphasis on different appeals”. And by those means, “by varying the emphasis he puts on an issue, a candidate can manipulate the extent to which that issue is taken into account in evaluating him” (*ibid.*).

The core argument in this study will indeed be that by means of their press releases, their daily campaign communications, political parties can affect the composition of the public agenda. But it will also be argued that in order to do so, the parties will need to get their issue emphases reflected in day-to-day media coverage of the campaign. This is, especially with regard to press releases, an obvious point, since these are not addressed to the voters directly, but use the mass media as transmitters. It will also be argued, in the following

chapter, that parties are in need of mediation, since voters are more likely to follow the themes set by the media, who are supposedly objective actors in the campaign, than to respond directly to the stimuli coming from parties through party election broadcasts, televised speeches, poster campaigns, or any direct contact.



## CHAPTER 3: SALIENCE DEPENDS

If, as suggested in the previous chapter, electoral change is to some extent a function of changing issue priorities, then unravelling the causes of issue priorities and change thereof will enhance our understanding of the electoral process. This chapter sums up the findings of an entire research tradition that is devoted to the systematic study of the causes of public salience, namely agenda-setting research.

The agenda-setting paradigm introduces the mass media as shapers of public issue priorities. The systematic evidence from agenda-setting research about the strength and direction of this relationship, which will be reported in this chapter, identifies the agenda-setters - the mass media - as the prime target for salience manipulation by political actors.

### 3.1 Communicating salience

One of the core propositions of Riker's theory of heresthetics, which I dealt with at length in the previous chapter, is that political leaders – or, rather, political losers! - can shape the choice context to their advantage by altering the composition of the policy space. Most analytical narratives that Riker presents in *The Art of Political Manipulation* (Riker 1986) concern heresthetical manoeuvres in small-sized electoral bodies like parliaments, committees, or courts. In these cases, individuals in open debate can introduce new dimensions of decision-making.<sup>24</sup> To alter the structure of the policy space becomes an entirely different

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<sup>24</sup> Riker's sole example of heresthetics in a campaign setting is Lincoln's introduction of the anti-slavery issue in the Illinois senatorial election campaign of 1858 (Riker 1986: Ch. 1). Lincoln's strategic move, according

proposition when it comes to mass audiences during national election campaigns. In order to manipulate the dimensions of social choice, political leaders are in need of means to communicate their positions and priorities to a mass audience that is not continuously participating and physically present at an open venue of debate like the members of parliaments or committees are.

### ***Party and voter agendas***

*Saliency theory* posits that “party emphases bring issues to the fore, rather than simply reflecting issues already prominent among electors” (Budge and Farlie 1983: 140). In their discussion of party and voter agendas, Budge and Farlie hint at a unidirectional causal relationship. Only in passing and without discussing how exactly parties manage to alter the priorities of voters, Budge and Farlie discuss the process of *societal agenda-setting* that determines the set of salient issues on the basis of which the electorate chooses a government (1983: 138-144; 159-162).

Their empirical findings from post-war elections in Britain and the U.S. reveal that, consistently, the majority of publicly salient issues in any single election campaign corre-

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to Riker, was to force the Democratic candidate, Stephen Douglas, to take a position on whether slavery had to be dealt with at federal level, or whether legislation on slavery could remain decentralised, in the hand of the states. The story is not quite an appropriate example of how a new dimension is introduced to the public agenda, however. The heresthetics here lie in the capacity of the slavery issue to split the Democratic party, which it indeed did, prompting the Southerners to nominate their own presidential candidate in 1860, thereby allowing Lincoln to win the presidency for the Republicans. It also broke the dominance of the Democrats, their stronghold on the presidency and produced a new alignment with Republicans winning most presidential elections until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (1986: 3-5).

But Lincoln did not create public salience of the slavery issue; he rather forced the issue onto the agenda of intra-party debates. The Democrats had been split over the issue before, but managed to “paper it over, to push it back into the localities so that it could not be agitated nationally” (4). That allowed the Democrats to keep their winning platform intact for decades. By forcing their designated next presidential candidate, Douglas, to take a stance on federal anti-slavery legislation, Lincoln broke the internal cohesion of the Democratic Party. The Democrats did not lose their majority because voters became concerned with an issue that re-aligned them along an alternative line of cleavage, but because the party had to internally deal with an issue that would cause a schism.

sponded with issues heavily emphasised in election manifestos of the two main parties<sup>25</sup>. In general, public agendas appear to constitute a subset of more varied party agendas. Leaving out a candidate's personality or background which features heavily as an evaluative criterion for voters but "by its nature cannot find a parallel in the manifesto" (138), around 80% of the remaining publicly salient issues corresponded with manifesto topics in both countries, while only about half of the manifesto topics, in turn, corresponded with salient issues (139: Table 6.4).

Budge and Farlie compared the set of publicly salient issues in British and US elections between 1945 and 1980 with the agendas of the two dominant parties in both countries for the respective years and found a sizeable overlap, more so for Britain than the US. Policy agendas were found to differ between parties - with Labour and Conservatives, Democrats and Republican, all tending to emphasize 'owned' issues. The combined set of issues proposed by the competing parties contained therefore more issues than the public agenda. They concluded that each party is successful in bringing some of its issues to the fore and that the public draws predominantly from party sources to arrive at their concerns but that "a process of selection is at work, not uncritical digestion of party appeals" (160). Budge and Farlie drew the optimistic conclusion that "one cannot characterise the process as completely manipulative or wholly circular (that is, parties determining the salient issues which they then act upon as governments, ignoring electors' 'real' preferences)" (159).

Budge and Farlie inferred causality from the pattern of agenda overlaps. Public issues appeared to be almost exclusively drawn from party agendas, while the composition of party

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<sup>25</sup> Budge and Farlie set the cut-off point for issues to be considered important manifesto topics at more than 5% of sentence references (1983: 137: Table 6.3).

agendas could, for two reasons, not be explained as caused by public priorities. First, agendas differed in composition *between* parties, and second, party agendas repeatedly contained a sizeable number of issues for which there was no correspondence in public agendas.

Their general finding concerning the degree of correspondence between party and public agendas was replicated and even strengthened in a more recent and more comprehensive study of U.S. elections by Petrocik et al. (2001). Petrocik et al. elaborate on Budge and Farlie's contention that parties compete over issue salience. For US presidential campaigns between 1960 and 2000 they show that whenever the two parties, Republicans and Democrats, campaign on their own turf, emphasizing solely their owned issues, the campaigns balance each other out which tends to coincide with the American electorate being equally divided in their concern over Democratic and Republican issues. This, in turn, tends to produce close election outcomes.

In contrast, if both parties compete predominantly over Democratic issues, like in the 1992, 1996, and 2000 election, voters are equally more concerned with Democratic issues, producing a Democratic majority (although not always a Democrat as President). If, in contrast, the Republicans manage to dominate political debates with their issues, forcing their Democrat counterparts to deal with more Republican issues than they would usually like to, the public also evaluates on the basis of Republican issues and a majority votes Republican, as seemed to be the case most clearly in 1984 and 1988. They argue that in general "Democrats and Republicans, but especially that latter, were issue ownership campaigners" (Petrocik et al. 2001: 9). Whenever one side deviates from this dominant strategy, the campaign tends to be more concerned with its opponent's issues, and so do the voters. They

find a .74 correlation “between the content of the campaigns and the issue concerns of the electorate” (17).

Neither study, however, is ultimately capable of establishing a causal relationship between agendas. Budge and Farlie (1983) and Petrocik et al. (2001) use cross-sectional designs to evaluate party and voter agendas. Differences between elections and asymmetrical relationships between the two sets of agendas hint at the possibility that party agendas affect voter agendas. The underlying hypothesis is, however, that voter agendas *changed* in response to the stated campaign priorities of the parties. In order to establish causality, it is not enough to show that voter agendas differ from one election to the next and that this difference is related to altered party priorities. Instead, one would need to show that over the course of an election campaign voter concerns shift towards issues that are prioritised by the political elites.

Prior to that, one needs to specify how political elites communicate their positions and priorities to a mass audience.

### ***The need for mediation***

It has repeatedly been argued by political theorists - such as Joseph Schumpeter (1950) or Robert Dahl (1971) - that mass democracies cannot be participatory, simply because of physical restrictions on communication between all members of society. Hence, representation and the election of political elites is a necessary feature of modern democracies. Also, the selection of political elites cannot be the outcome of an open public debate. Social choice differs from decision-making in committees and legislatures in that political leaders

are not able to communicate their positions and priorities directly to their potential followers.

Although campaigns do invariably produce some physical contact between candidates and citizens, the scale of that contact is limited.

While the Anglo-Irish systems of single or multi-member constituencies still call for the practice of large-scale door-to-door canvassing in addition to mass rallies, proportional representation with party lists, as employed in many continental European democracies, delimits, if not altogether dispenses with, individual constituency campaigning. And even where canvassing is part of the campaign process, it is not a sufficient means for political leaders to communicate their issue priorities to the mass electorate.<sup>26</sup>

Other forms of immediate contact - for example methods of direct marketing - introduce a mass medium (phone or mail) and tend to involve either party activists with a possibly idiosyncratic agenda or else employed agents who act as intermediaries between political actors and the electorate.

In order to diffuse messages nationally, parties use the mass media for placing election broadcasts or ads, but, just as is the case with canvassing, rallies and direct marketing methods, these campaign methods have the announcement character of propaganda or at least commercial advertising, which means that they will affect citizens differently, entirely depending on the willingness of the individual to even take notice, let alone give attention to policy details.

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<sup>26</sup> Canvassing cannot reach every single household, it will result in varying intensity of contact between candidates and voters, and it involves personal communication between many different candidates and party members and the electorate, which renders it unlikely that identical positions and priorities will be communicated to all parts of the public.

In order to communicate their campaign messages, parties and candidates need to make the news. They need to 'employ' the mass media as pervasive and obtrusive channels. Similarly, voters have to rely on the mass media in order to collect balanced and approximately comprehensive information about different party platforms.

The "shared 'public arena', [...] in modern societies, is the mass media" (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 2). Press and television provide the stage where "candidates go before the people [...] rather than in person". And, in turn, for citizens, "the information in the mass media becomes the only contact many have with politics" (McCombs and Shaw 1972: 176).

Mass media are not only a useful means to overcome the physical distance between political elites and masses; they also serve as mediator between the two sides. It is obvious that campaigning parties or candidates on the one side and citizens on the other are driven by not only different but potentially conflicting interests in their use of communication: a voter requires unbiased information in order to make a choice that turns out to be beneficial to him, while a campaigning political actor wants to maximise the likelihood that the information available to voters produces a social choice that will benefit him - the candidate or party.

From a voter perspective, at least some elements of the mass media - in particular non-partisan ones like public television - are more likely to provide with an unbiased account of competing party platforms than the parties themselves. From a party's point of view, influencing voter perceptions in its favour is more likely to succeed if it is attempted via the media than through direct communication.

The rationale of either side - voter or party – to rely on mediation is born directly out of an understanding of the motivation of the other side. Voters will rather trust the media for information than the parties because they understand that parties have a vested interest to give information that biases in their own favour. Parties will rather try to use the media as channels through which to influence voters because they understand that voters are likely to perceive a direct approach by a party as propaganda but to treat information emanating from the media as fact. The mass media, and in particular their news coverage of campaign proceedings, provide both sides with a potential means to pursue their different objectives.

In her *constructionist* model of political communication, Pippa Norris identified the mass media as providing "the essential linkage mediating between parties and voters" (Norris 1996: 126). She argued that political parties "seek to attract, reinforce and mobilize supporters through prioritising issues", while voters "actively employ established schema to sift information and weigh choices within a campaign" (*ibid.*).

The missing link in Budge and Farlie's (1983) briefly sketched model of societal agenda-setting is the channel that enables communication between parties and voters. The degree to which this process is manipulative and circular, i.e. the degree to which parties create public problem concerns upon which they then will act whilst in government, depends on the responsiveness of the media to stimuli (issue priorities) from the parties together with the media's ability to shape public agendas.

### **3.2 The agenda-setting hypothesis**

In their seminal article, *The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*, McCombs and Shaw (1972) empirically investigated the hypothesis that the amount of news coverage al-



located to a social problem determines public concern with it. This hypothesis was formulated earlier by Cohen (1963) in what has become probably the most quoted aphorism of political communication research:

“The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*.” (Cohen 1963: 13)

Dearing and Rogers (1996) claim that mass communication research underwent a paradigm change in the 1970s. Referring to Kuhn’s theory of scientific progress (Kuhn 1962), they argue that, prior to the publication of McCombs and Shaw’s article, mass communication research stagnated as a discipline. Ever since Lippmann (1922) maintained that the mass media provide the general public with the authoritative projection of real-world occurrences and thus create public images and interpretations of events, mass communication research had failed to provide conclusive empirical evidence for such directional, persuasive media effects (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 8-15).

### ***McCombs and Shaw (1972): the hierarchy approach***

Inspired by Cohen’s argument, McCombs and Shaw set out to demonstrate that the media do indeed exert significant influence on the public, but that these effects are cognitive not persuasive. After a long period of trying to prove that citizens derive their *opinions* and *attitudes* towards issues from media exposure - which only resulted in mass communication scholars having to settle for a “minimal-effects model” (e.g. Bauer 1964) -, the new agenda-setting paradigm alleged that the public instead derives general *awareness* about

issues and differential *priorities* among issues from their news consumption and has since been relatively successful in substantiating this hypothesis.<sup>27</sup>

The research design used by McCombs and Shaw, the “hierarchy approach” (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 40-54), was to correlate the rankings of issues on the media and public agenda.<sup>28</sup> Their findings contain a respectable attempt at setting the world record for the highest ever recorded statistical relationship between two variables, with a rank-order correlation “between the major item emphasis on the main campaign issues carried by the media and voters’ independent judgments of what were the important issues” of .967 (McCombs and Shaw 1972: 180). Even when disaggregating either variable, i.e. distinguishing between partisans and/or individual media outlets, they produce, with few exceptions, correlations above .8 (181: Table 3; 183: Table 4). They conclude that “interpreting the evidence from this study as indicating mass media influence seems more plausible than alternative explanations” (185).

McCombs and Shaw may be right to argue that it is unlikely that the strong relationship they found were a spurious one, or a purely coincidental preoccupation of both media and citizens with the same issues during the same short period in time. And even their small sample size (n=100) does not necessarily invalidate their impressive findings - sample size affects reliability not validity. However, they can do no better than arguing instead of proving their point when stating that not only do the related variables have to influence each

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<sup>27</sup> Dearing and Rogers (1992, 1996) report that two thirds of the empirical agenda-setting studies since the McCombs and Shaw (1972) article confirm their findings (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 49).

<sup>28</sup> McCombs and Shaw used data from a survey with 100 respondents, conducted in the Chapel Hill community, North Carolina, over two and a half weeks during the 1968 presidential election, and content analysis from 4 local and one national newspaper, two weekly magazines, and two national TV stations, covering three and a half weeks’ news coverage and overlapping with the entire survey period (McCombs and Shaw 1972: 178).

other “one way or the other” (*ibid.*), but that it has to be the media that influences public opinion rather than vice versa.

It is most reasonable to assume that political information is acquired from media exposure and that, accordingly, media-driven formation of public opinion resulted in the observed correlations. The cross-sectional design employed by McCombs and Shaw, however, is in itself incapable of substantiating their intuition about the direction of causality; it is “seriously flawed because it only measures synchronous relationships (relationships at the same point in time) and therefore cannot directly assess time-based causality” (Gonzenbach and McGavin 1997: 116).

Whereas McCombs and Shaw’s initial study ignored time as a structuring variable of the agenda-setting process, Gonzenbach and McGavin rightly argue that “agenda-setting is by definition a time-related process” (1997: 115).<sup>29</sup> The agenda-setting hypothesis identifies the media agenda as the independent and the public agenda as the dependent variable, which presupposes that change on the media agenda has to systematically precede change on the public agenda.

Also, while McCombs and Shaw point out the advantages of restricting their study to an individual community, namely that it controls for “regional differences or variations in me-

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<sup>29</sup> In particular, consider McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) method of gathering their survey and media content analysis data in overlapping time periods. They have to assume an extraordinary degree of stability in media coverage when treating all their respondents as though these were setting their priorities under equal conditions, i.e. the same set of stimuli. In their data analysis, McCombs and Shaw relate the agendas of all respondents, whether they were surveyed early on in the campaign or towards the end, to the media agenda that was aggregated over the entire elapsed time period. This procedure either introduces reciprocity of the causal relationship, i.e. models the media reacting to parts of the public while influencing others, or even allows respondents to react to future coverage in the media, or else implies that media coverage was a constant over the entire 2 ½ weeks during which the survey was carried out. As Eyal et al. point out, “an overlap of two and a half weeks of simultaneous media and public agenda gathering accounts for the lack of time lag in that study” (1981: 213). What is missing in the original research design is the notion of an *effect span*, of “the amount of time necessary to bring [issues] to a position of importance in public opinion” (Eyal et al. 1981: 215f.).

dia performance” (1972: 178), it raises doubt over the reliability and generalizability of their findings.

### ***Funkhouser (1973): trend analysis***

The agenda-setting hypothesis was somewhat substantiated by a simultaneous study of U.S. public opinion and its responsiveness to issue coverage in the media by Funkhouser (1973). This study turned out to be less influential than the McCombs and Shaw article<sup>30</sup>, in all likelihood because it was not theoretically or methodologically embedded in the tradition of mass communication research, and because it used secondary data - from the “most important issue currently facing the U.S.A.” (MIP) question in the Gallup polls - instead of more controlled and in-depth surveys. Nevertheless, Funkhouser’s research design appears superior, in so far as he investigated the same relationship but with a larger sample, a more comprehensive set of issues, and over a longer time frame (1964-1970).

The general relationship between media and public salience, measured in terms of the rank-order correlation between coverage and publicly stated issue importance, aggregated over the entire time period, is somewhat less than the one reported by McCombs and Shaw, but still impressive at .78 (Funkhouser 1973: 66). In addition, for the eight dominant issues of the 1960s, Funkhouser finds that, predominantly, there was “a strong connection between media attention to an issue and the appearance of that issue as ‘the most important issue’” (68). As Dearing and Rogers point out (1996: 42), Funkhouser did already treat time as a variable in the agenda-setting process, although annual aggregations still do not allow for a determination of the direction of causality. His study constitutes the “seminal

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<sup>30</sup> According to Dearing and Rogers (1988), only 24% of all agenda-setting studies after 1972 quoted Funkhouser while 59% referred to McCombs and Shaw, making their article the seminal work on agenda-setting.

trend analysis in agenda setting” (Gonzenbach and McGavin (1997: 117). A trend analysis allows one to trace change in one or more variables over time, and to eyeball whether change in different agendas is related. Again, it does not enable one to establish causality.

Funkhouser’s most important finding is that media and public agendas were throughout the 1960s more closely related to one another than was either responding to real-world cues (Funkhouser 1973: 67-74). Neither the unfolding of the Vietnam War or of the student protests towards the end of the decade, nor changing crime, drug or inflation statistics were consistently mirrored in the annual media attention to either issue. Funkhouser concludes that only inherently “*newsworthy* events – the war, urban riots, student unrests, and crime – seemed to involve a sort of ‘adaptation’ of the media to the stream of events” (73), but that even in these cases no linear relationship emerges. Media attention to the major issues of the 1960s appeared to systematically and consistently die down “before the events themselves reached their peak”.

For *non-newsworthy* events, e.g. health, ecology, or racial discrimination, Funkhouser defines news as “artificial”, i.e. as staged either by institutions or policy-makers via public announcements or by political groups or individuals producing “pseudo-events” like demonstrations (*ibid.*).

The independence of media agendas from real-world indicators confirms that the media-public relationship is not coincidental to underlying trends by which both variables are simultaneously driven. These findings make it more likely that correspondence between media and public agenda results from some form of interaction between the two.

### *Downs (1972): attention-cycles*

Again almost simultaneously with McCombs and Shaw (1972) and Funkhouser (1973), Anthony Downs (1972) introduced the idea of an issue-attention cycle, proclaiming that the public attention to at least some political issues<sup>31</sup> is a dynamic process which goes through different stages<sup>32</sup>. Downs only articulates the idea of an attention-cycle, rather than modelling it mathematically or providing evidence from public opinion research. But it adds to the original agenda-setting hypothesis the notion that public attention moves systematically over time, that it can be triggered at some point and reinforced later on, and also that public concern is not an inexhaustible resource (see also Blumer 1971).

The agenda-setting hypothesis suggests that it is the media and their news coverage that trigger and reinforce issue-attention cycles. Funkhouser's finding that media coverage more often than not runs out of sync with real world indicators about the relative severity of social problems suggests that while newsworthy events may trigger attention cycles by instantaneously producing media interest and coverage, it is the media who subsequently give shape to the attention cycle.

Agendas, then, are the results of "a dynamic interplay" of different issues, each of which moves through its unique attention-cycle. Composed of simultaneously moving issue careers, an agenda is, by definition, in constant flux. The agendas that we can measure at any given point in time are no more than "snapshots of this fluidity" (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 2). Agenda-setting research has to unravel the interplay of fluid media and public agendas.

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<sup>31</sup> Downs names three characteristics which social problems that do go through an attention-cycle generally possess: first, that "the majority of persons in society are not suffering from the problem nearly as much as some minority", second, that a problem is "generated by social arrangements that provide significant benefits to a majority or a powerful minority of the population"; and third that "the problem has no intrinsically exciting qualities" or at least has exhaustible news value (Downs 1972: 41)

<sup>32</sup> *Pre-problem stage* → *Alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm* → *Realizing the cost of significant progress* → *Gradual decline of intense public interest* → *The post-problem stage* (Downs 1972: 39-40).

### 3.3 Methodological advances in agenda-setting research: modeling and measuring media effects

A significant step forward from McCombs and Shaw's research design, which could only ever confirm synchronicity in agendas, was provided by lagged measurements of media agendas prior to the sampling of public opinion, introduced by McLeod et al. (1974) and Stone and McCombs (1981). But still, the mere temporal precedence of measured media output in relation to measured public opinion only constitutes a necessary and not yet a sufficient condition for the occurrence of agenda setting. As long as public agendas are assessed for only one unique point or period in time, the causal processes that produced these agendas remain unidentified.

A first valid and reliable test of the direction of causality can be accomplished by using repeated measurements of media and public agendas at different points in time. Measurements of the media agenda at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  and the public agenda at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  allow for assessing *Granger causality* (Granger 1969). The media agenda can be said to 'Granger-cause' the public agenda if two separate conditions apply, namely (a) that its influence on temporally subsequent states of the public agenda ( $media_{t1} \rightarrow public_{t2}$ ) remain sizeable and significant when controlling for autocorrelation of the public agenda variable ( $public_{t1} \rightarrow public_{t2}$ ); and (b) that the media agenda itself is not independently influenced by previous states of the public agenda ( $public_{t1} \rightarrow media_{t2}$ ).

Shaw and McCombs (1977) made some headway towards establishing Granger causality in agenda-setting processes. They used panel data from the 1972 U.S. presidential election

campaign and estimated cross-lagged correlations between public agendas measured in June and again in October and media agendas of the respective time periods. They found strong agenda-setting effects at least for the print media whose June output was a better predictor of public priorities in October than the public agenda in June was for the press agenda in October. However, they did ignore the extent to which public agendas determine themselves, i.e. how good a predictor of public concerns in October the June priorities are. By not controlling for autocorrelation in the dependent variable, they arrive at unreliable measures of media effects, as Kessler and Greenberg (1981) and Gonzenbach and McGavin (1997) point out.

Independent media effects can instead be estimated by regressing the media agenda at time  $t_1$  onto the residuals that result from regressing the public agenda onto their own previous state. Alternatively this can be accomplished by specifying a regression model that decomposes causal predictors in a single step and explains public agendas at  $t_2$  as a function of two independent variables, namely the public agenda at  $t_1$  plus the media agenda at  $t_1$ , hence isolating media effects from public agenda continuity. Only if the inclusion of the media variable improves the explanatory power of the regression, can we talk of evidence supporting the agenda-setting hypothesis (Kessler and Greenberg 1981).

Panel designs are attractive for the study of agenda-setting since they enable to estimate cross-lagged correlations between *entire* agendas over two points in time, which *appears* to substantiate the hypothesis that the amount of attention given by the public to different issues is determined by the relative amount of media coverage issues have received. While cross-lagged correlations may provide some evidence for cognitive media effects, this evidence will always be imprecise.



This is so for at least four reasons: First, the well known “ecological fallacy” applies (Liebersohn 1985; Robinson 1990), which refers to the problem of making inferences about individuals from aggregate data. The problem in agenda-setting studies is that estimators of media effects result from an aggregation of public concerns from a possibly heterogeneously responding population.

Second, effects are averaged across an array of issues that might well be differently conducive to media impacts.

Third, they are estimated for some (perhaps arbitrarily chosen) period between two samplings of public opinion. As long as neither *time frames* nor proposed *effect spans* provide the rationale for the timing of repeated measurements (Eyal et al. 1981), there will be uncertainty about what is being measured. It leaves uncertainty about the point in time at which the media effect took place or reached its peak, and about how the effect takes shape over time and how much of it is eventually being measured.

And fourth, if issue attention goes through cycles, as suggested by Downs (1972), it might be expected that media effects vary, depending on how far through its cycle each of the issues currently on the agenda has progressed at the time of measurement. Measuring agenda-setting effects by means of cross-lagged correlations assumes *stationarity*, i.e. consistency of effects over time. But the observed relationship will not be stationary if media effects over time are not additive but cumulative, i.e. if responsiveness of individuals to media coverage is a dynamic process in itself.

The discussion of the differential nature of media effects will proceed in two parts, the first dealing with how context, i.e. audience and issue characteristics, influence the respon-

siveness to media stimuli, while the second part is concerned with the temporal nature of agenda-setting.

### ***Variation between individuals***

One possible cause for variation of media effects between individuals was taken into consideration by the initial research, conducted by McCombs and Shaw (1972), namely partisanship, which, as they argued, might be expected to lead to selective perception. McCombs and Shaw only selected uncommitted respondents, those who, while they might articulate candidate preferences, were still undecided in their vote. And for this sampled group, the authors found that “voters who were not firmly committed early in the campaign attended well to *all* the news” (1972: 182). That means that voter agendas correlated highly with the overall news agenda, rather than with only the news items that dominated coverage of their preferred candidates’ campaign. McCombs and Shaw could not investigate the role of additional intervening variables because of their small sample size of 100, which did not allow for much disaggregation. Later replications of their study, by McLeod et al. (1974) and Tipton et al. (1975) used larger samples that could be segmented into “subaudiences” (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 51), differing with regard to socio-economic characteristics or amount of media exposure. These were shown to have some effect, rendering the agenda-setting hypothesis less universal than originally proposed. But it remains an almost trivial statement to say that the more exposed to news a respondent is, the more detectible the influence of media selection will be.

A more challenging set of hypotheses can be derived from the concept of *issue publics* (Converse 1964, 1970; Davis et al. 1970; Krosnick 1988). Within this approach, the aver-

age citizen is said to be marginally interested in national politics and more concerned with a small and stable set of personally relevant issues. This does not necessarily presuppose that citizens are not paying any attention to public debates and priorities that are conveyed in the news, but rather that they tend to filter media stimuli on the basis of their varying personal concerns.

An unresolved issue in agenda-setting research is whether prior personal importance attached to an issue or personal experience with an issue (being unemployed, having to pay high taxes, being black, etc.) increases or instead decreases the likelihood of being affected by media coverage. Zucker (1978) concluded that “the less direct experience the people have with an issue ... the greater is the news media’s influence on public opinion on that issue” (245).

In apparent contrast, Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found that the higher the probability of being personally affected by policy-making, the more attention is paid to media coverage of the respective issue, which implies that personal concern is positively related to agenda-setting effects.

The two findings are not necessarily contradictory, if one considers different meanings that can be attached to the notion of *cognitive* media effects. Personal concern or experience can be negatively related with media effects if the media provide information about the nature of an issue, making a citizen aware of *what is in question*. A positive relation instead occurs where the media convey information about alternative remedies (policies) concerning a social problem that is generally well-understood by the individual, who is, in that case, made aware by the media of *what is at stake*. Necessarily, the more an individual is already aware about an issue, the less he is attentive to explanations of what is in question. In turn, those who are less aware about an issue will be less attentive to explanations

of what is at stake. The scale of media effects can thus be a function of audience characteristics as much as of the content of media coverage.

### *Variation across issues*

The concept of issue publics not only suggests variation of media effects across individuals but also across issues. As Budge and Farlie argued (1983), some issues have a generally higher propensity than others to become salient, depending on how the costs and benefits that can be derived from policymaking are distributed.<sup>33</sup> Increasingly, agenda-setting research in the 1980s and 1990s has concentrated on breaking down agendas into their constituent parts, which are individual issue careers, and on tracing these either in case studies (Winter and Eyal 1981; Smith 1987; Shoemaker et al. 1989; Dearing 1992; Dearing and Rogers 1992) or comparatively (Behr and Iyengar 1985; Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

The influence of media coverage on public opinion has indeed been found to vary between issues, which can to some extent be attributed to the relative sizes of different issue publics and the controversial qualities of an issue - see in particular Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) definition of society as an 'issue processor'.

The competitive environment of the agenda-setting process can also determine differential effects. An implicit notion of agenda-setting is that different issues are constantly competing with each other for public attention, which is an inherently limited resource. Zhu (1992) introduced the notion of agenda-setting as being a zero-sum game, which means that

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<sup>33</sup> Media effects can also be related to the individual characteristics of a social or political issue: while according to Funkhouser (1973: 73) the presence or absence of inherent newsworthiness determines the way in which media coverage relates to real-world indicators, Downs (1972: 41-43) stipulated that the character of issues also determines whether or not they are subject to public attention cycles. Both Funkhouser and Downs agree that inherent newsworthiness results in adaptation of media and public attention to real-world occurrences, while non-newsworthiness results in an artificially created pattern of attention distribution over time.

public salience of an issue is not an unconditional function of its rank on the media agenda. In order for salience of one issue to increase, other issues have to decline in importance. Brosius and Keppliner (1995) build on this notion and argue that some issues, labelled *killer issues*, are more likely to displace previously salient issues than others. Again, as did Funkhouser (1973) and Downs (1972), they refer to the concept of newsworthiness and argue that issues have to be unexpected, unusual, to carry personal consequences, to change previously held public perceptions about the nature of a problem, and to contain significant symbolic value in order to remove other issues from the agenda (Brosius and Kepplinger 1995: 215). They also argue that not only the sheer amount of media coverage but also a large variance - which refers to an unevenly distributed amount and significant increases at certain points in time - are needed to create enough public awareness for a more than just gradual change in public agendas.

In addition, McCombs and Zhu (1995) argue that an aggregate learning effect occurs whereby society becomes increasingly more educated and sophisticated, which increases the *carrying capacity* of agendas, as well as more volatile, which increases the rate of turnover between issues on the agenda. That implies that as the general attention span of the public decreases over time, media effects will become more short-lived. The rate of issue displacements (agenda diversity) should then be a function also of educational standards. This relates to the more general argument that well-educated individuals are more capable to understand the complexity of the political world and to concern themselves with a wider array of policy attitudes (Neuman 1986; Stimson 1975). McCombs and Zhu basically translate this notion into a dynamic effect whereby education increases the capability and frequency of shifting attention between issues.

In this regard, however, Krosnick (1988) has found some counterfactual evidence, namely that issue importance in general is unrelated to the level of education of an individual. He instead reconfirmed the issue publics hypothesis, which holds that individuals are similar in terms of the number of issues they are concerned with but differ with regard to the composition of their personal agendas. Agendas of more educated respondents were not found to contain more issues than those of less educated individuals (1988: 204). And although McCombs and Zhu find supporting evidence for their hypothesis that issue diversity increases over time, their evidence is less conclusive with regard to the idea that this is the case because educational levels have risen. Clearly, for all educational groups, the same trend is noticeable, and indeed increased diversity over time is more pronounced than increased diversity by education (see McCombs and Zhu 1995: 512, Table 3). And with regard to differential agenda-setting effects, it has not been tested yet whether less educated citizens rather tend to stick to the same issues over long periods while more educated ones are more volatile and thus more short-term in their response to media stimuli. Some research has even suggested that education should render individuals altogether resistant against agenda-setting because the more educated an individual the less his need for guidance and orientation (Weaver 1977; 1984).

### *Time*

Agenda-setting is, as Gonzenbach and McGavin (1997) remind us, “by definition a time-related process” (119). Not only is it important to note that individuals respond differently to media stimuli and that media stimuli cause varying responses for different issues and in different political or social contexts, but that these stimuli need to take effect in some trace-

able form, and that estimates of media influence measured at some point in time are themselves invariably a function of the time frame in which agenda-setting takes place. Brosius and Kepplinger (1995) identify agenda-setting as a three-dimensional process, the three dimensions of which are “the type of agenda, the type of issue and the time dimension” (212). While McCombs and Shaw (1972) initially only aimed at a general hypothesis about causality (who follows whom?), “a complete test of the agenda-setting notion” (Brosius and Kepplinger 1995: 212) needs to ask: who follows whom in which aspects at what rate? The concept of agenda-setting is necessarily concerned with the concept of change. Agendas are not only set, but they are *reset*, and continually so.

In general, causal processes are characterised by a temporal order. This has been acknowledged early on in agenda-setting research with the introduction of panel designs, cross-lagged correlations and tests for Granger-causality. But, apart from the simple condition that a cause has to temporally precede its effects, causality also requires a mechanism through which effects are produced: “any coherent account of causality needs to specify how its effects are exerted” (King et al. 1994: 86).

*The causal mechanism in agenda-setting is the processing of information by the individual.* The public agenda, measured at one point in time, is the aggregate, momentary materialisation of the ongoing processing of information by individuals. News, media coverage of issues, is a substantial part of the information that is processed. Individual and issue characteristics together with contextual influence may determine how (potentially biased) the individual processes information. The causal mechanism itself, though, adds temporal structure to the process of agenda-setting. The central questions in this regard are how long it takes for the individual to process information and thus to amend his issue agenda so that it reflects on the most recent changes in received information; and how long memory of re-

ceived information is stored and continues to contribute to the individual's assessment of priorities.

Any empirical investigation into the causal mechanism that enables the media to set the public agenda needs to elaborate on the temporal properties of the hypothesised relationship. Eyal et al. (1981) identify "five distinct temporal features" of the agenda-setting process:

"(1) The *time-frame*, which is the total period under consideration, from the beginning to the completion of the data gathering process; (2) the *time-lag*, which refers to the elapsed time between the independent variable (the media agenda) and the dependent variable (the public agenda); (3) the *duration of the media agenda measure*, which is the total interval during which the media measure is collected; (4) the *duration of the public agenda measure*, referring to the overall time span during which the public agenda measure has been gathered; and (5) the *optimal effect span* or peak association between media emphasis and public emphasis of an issue. (Eyal et al. 1981 : 212f.)

Agenda-setting research has been characterised by almost arbitrary decisions about the used time frames, duration of intervals for agenda measurement, and choice of lags between cross-correlated measurements (Eyal 1981: 214f.). Especially with regard to lags, which allow for some time to pass during which information can be processed and materialise at the level of public agendas, different studies have either made idiosyncratic choices or neglected the issue altogether. The original piece of research (McCombs and Shaw 1972) gathered media and survey data in overlapping time periods, which results not only in a lack of time lag but even in a majority of respondents being surveyed before some of the media coverage occurred, yet correlating their priorities with those of the media over the entire time period. The authors have to assume a high level of media agenda stability by treating respondents as though they were acting upon equal amounts of information and equal media agendas. A large number of what, according to Eyal et al. (1981) "can only loosely be termed 'replications', due to the numerous operationalizations, conceptualisa-



tions, and populations employed” (213) were at least true to the original by not incorporating time-lags,<sup>34</sup> while others employed time-lags between media stimuli and measured public responses of up to nine months (Sohn 1978).

The rationale for specifying time lags derives from the concept of an *optimal effect span* (the fifth temporal feature of agenda-setting noted by Eyal et al. 1981). In general, a time lag is a necessary requirement for any valid estimation of media effects. Effects of observed media output can only ever occur in a population that is sampled after the entirety of that output has been aired or published. Sampling a population at different lags from the observed media stimuli allows for the estimation of effect spans. The first investigation of effect spans was carried out by Stone (1975) who content analysed weekly magazines (Time and Newsweek) over a nine-month period and related monthly agendas to public opinion surveys conducted six months through the process of gathering media data. This served not only to show that public agendas are more related to media agendas from preceding than from following months, but also to test for cumulative agenda-setting effects. The media agenda from the survey period was significantly more weakly correlated with the measured public agenda than the stimuli from the preceding two months were. Through stepwise inclusion of additional months (aggregating media agendas over three preceding months, then four, and so on), Stone showed that effects increase monotonically, although less sharply with increasing distance between added months and the time of survey. Winter and Eyal (1981) conducted a study with a much longer time frame (22 years) for which the content of front-page stories of the New York Times from a six-month period prior to each Gallup poll was aggregated into monthly agendas. Estimating partial correlations between

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<sup>34</sup> Eyal et al. (1981: 214) list fourteen individual replications of the McCombs and Shaw approach that were carried out in the 1970s, which ignored the use of time lags altogether.

previous monthly media agendas and issue priorities estimated from the Gallup polls, they found effect spans to be much shorter, and significant effects only to occur within a period of two month immediately preceding the surveys, and decreasing rapidly when moving further backwards.

The concept of an *optimum effect span* has been referred to as “the time gap that produces the greatest association between the amount or prominence of media coverage at a particular date and the public salience of an issue at a later date” (Watt et al. 1993: 409). It remains problematic, though, to model variation in impacts from different days or periods prior to the observed response. On the one hand, the concept of an optimal effects span (Eyal et al. 1981) implies that media coverage from some particular time period prior to current values of salience account for the entire effect: using a lag means that coverage in the time period between the lagged measurements of media and public agendas are disregarded. On the other hand the alternative concept of a “time window” (Brosius and Keplinger 1990; Behr and Iyengar 1985; Funkhouser 1973) includes and treats equally all the coverage that accumulated within the time window and sets artificial temporal boundaries to the assumed causal mechanism: “it implies that all coverage of equal prominence within the time window has an impact whereas all coverage outside the window has no influence” (Watt et al. 1993: 409).

Watt et al. (1993) present a comprehensive model of how issues appear and remain on the agenda, and of how media effects are a function both of the scale of each individual stimulus and of the pattern of cumulative stimulation over time. In particular, they develop the notion of an issue attention cycle out of the interplay between immediate effects and progressively declining memory of past coverage. Audience members are characterised by *information inertia*, i.e. the less prior knowledge they possess about an issue the more af-

affected by information they will be. In the temporal process of agenda-setting, that means that the longer an issue has been on the agenda, the more additional coverage it needs to receive in order to produce sizeable audience attention. Individuals become habituated by repeated coverage, which Watt et al. (1993) model as “moderating effects of accumulated coverage of issues” (417). The impact of additional information is understood as “maximum at the point of exposure to communication“, while it also entails a dynamic ingredient that helps to shape the issue attention cycle, the form of which is “a decreasing exponential, similar to simple memory decay” (420).

The mathematical expression of their “accumulated declining effects model” (421) is

$$Salienc_e_t = a \sum_{i=0}^t M_i e^{-ki}$$

where  $M$  is the original amount of mediated information,  $t$  is the time that has passed since exposure to the information occurred and  $k$  is a decay time constant. With the first news story on an issue released, its salience equals  $M_0$ . Every following news story adds  $M_0$  to its salience, but at the same time the effects of past stories exponentially diminish. Memory never completely vanishes, some remnants remain but they approach zero, so that if an issue is reiterated after a long period of no coverage, salience again approximates  $M_0$ . If the decay time constant is set at 0, perfect memory is assumed and every new instant of coverage has an additional, stepwise effect. If decay is approaching a factor of 1, memory is almost immediately lost, and new information creates attention from scratch. Small decay constants indicate long-term memory and slow decrease of attention, so that repeated coverage causes a systematic and continuous increase in public salience. Watt et al. (1993) test their model for the issue careers of inflation, Iran and the Soviet Union for the period of 1979 through 1983, and find ample support for the way in which they model attention cy-

cles. The decay constant  $k$  in their model allows them to specify the best-fitting time window for the remaining effect of past coverage. Setting the constant individually for each of the studied issues, they arrive at correlations between accumulated coverage and public salience of .58 for the inflation issue, .71 for the Iran issue, while only a maximum correlation of .34 for the Soviet Union issue (425f.).

The shortcoming of the approach is that it ignores the aspect of habituation, which should account for differential initial effects of new information. In Watt et al.'s model, the immediate impact of a news story is a linear function of its prominence (placement and length on front pages or in newscasts). The amount of prior coverage is modelled as having an independent effect on current salience. The more recent and current coverage an issue received, the more salient it will be. That means that the stage of the attention cycle at which the issue is currently located only matters for changes in salience if it is reflected in the recent accumulation of media coverage. However, habituation and with it decreasing attention to issues could better be incorporated into the model if the initial impact of a news story were to depend on previous coverage. Watt et al.'s (1993) model, as it is, clearly interprets attention cycles as created by the media, which can be considered an interesting hypothesis but at least one that should be tested, something that they refrain from doing.

### **3.5 Moving from agenda-setting to agenda building**

Agenda-setting research has evolved, especially in its use of time-series methods, while repeatedly confirming the general hypothesis that the public derives its issue concerns mainly from news exposure. A remaining and possibly unsolvable problem is how to assess with some precision the short-term dynamics of issue evolution during an election cam-

paign. Studies like the one by Watts et al. (1993) rely on long time frames, which allows taking repeated measurements of public salience. But election campaigns are processes that take shape over a relatively short period of time. Most important problem (MIP) questions, from which public issue salience is usually calculated, are not asked at a frequency that would allow the use of sophisticated time-series methods in the analysis of issue evolution. That means that, at best, one can establish how the public agenda has changed between the beginning and the end of the campaign. It cannot be measured how issues ebb and flow on the public agenda.<sup>35</sup>

Several campaign studies from UK elections have indeed attempted to investigate the agenda-setting hypothesis. Miller et al. (1990: 204-15), Miller (1991: 57-64) and Norris et al. (1999: Ch. 8) used panel designs as well as experiments to test for the agenda-setting power of the media during election campaigns. All of these studies found at best moderate evidence for such a relationship, which led Norris et al. to the conclusion that “the public followed its own agenda” (1999: 128) and hence that even if parties were to drive the issue priorities in the media this would not make an impact on public issue concerns and hence ultimately on vote choice. All three studies however - or, rather, both studies, since Miller et al. (1990) and Miller (1991) use the same data from the 1987 General Election and present with almost identical analyses and findings - investigate the agenda-setting hypothesis with a research design that only improves slightly on the initial McCombs and Shaw study (1972). In the case of Norris et al. (1999), public salience is measured during an *early cam-*

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<sup>35</sup> Miller (1991) comes closest to an adequate measurement of change in public salience. Using a two-wave panel, he designed the sequencing of questioning in such a way “to make each day’s set of respondents an approximately random subsample of the wave as a whole” (8). From the 1987 election campaign, during which this study was conducted, we have, however, no data from party press releases that would allow investigating movements on party, media and public agendas over the course of the campaign. Also, daily subsets of the sample, which contained 1,120 respondents, become rather small (around 100), which raises questions about the validity and reliability of resulting agenda estimates and their use for sophisticated time series analysis.

*paign* and again a *late campaign* period and then compared with the accumulated television and press priorities from the same time periods. Miller's (1991) research design is somewhat more refined, using additional information about the timing of interviews in such a way that public salience, just as media agendas, can be measured separately for each of the five weeks of the campaign - Miller had information about daily subsamples (see discussion of this in fn.35) but decided to accumulate these into weekly samples instead of using daily samples in order to estimate effect spans and time lags. Hence, he was also relying, just as Norris et al., on a panel design which can only ever measure convergence between simultaneously measured agendas on repeated occasions. This way neither study is able to estimate causal effects, i.e. how exactly, with what time lag, and to what extent the public reacts to media stimuli. The only conclusion that can be drawn from this British evidence is that the level of convergence between voters and media during recent UK elections was considerably lower than that during the US presidential campaign studies by McCombs and Shaw. Agenda-setting research should, however, investigate patterns of change in convergence between media and public agendas over time, which campaign studies are unlikely to deliver, given the limitations set by the nature of panel surveys.

My study here will use much of the data that was initially analysed by Norris et al (1999), but only in order to challenge their claim that the media set their own agenda and were largely immune to agenda building efforts by the parties. The limited effects hypothesis put forward by Norris et al. and Miller et al. (1990) and Miller (1991) with regard to agenda-setting during British general election campaigns is not an object for reanalysis, since their findings appear immaterial to the argument presented in my study, given the panel design and its limitations which have been discussed at length in this study.

Hence, only part of the causal sequence of issue evolution as depicted in Figure 1 in the introduction can be empirically assessed here. The changing issue priorities of political actors cannot be related directly to changing public saliencies, since we do not have frequent estimates of those. The empirical study will hence focus on establishing the causal relationship between party and media agendas.

The review of the agenda-setting literature presented in this chapter serves to emphasize that, in order to manipulate the dimensions of social choice, political actors have to engage the media as channels through which the public can be reached. The accumulated empirical evidence from thirty years of agenda-setting research makes a strong argument in support of the notion that if parties are able to systematically drive the news agenda, this is likely to be relayed onto the public agenda.

The evidence in support of the agenda-setting hypothesis explains why the investigation of party-media agenda relationships can further our understanding of the democratic process. Clearly, the media play a major role in the process of issue evolution. Therefore, whoever can exert influence on the mass media gains access to the public and may be able to drive public opinion formation.

The methodological advances in the agenda-setting field - which were reported in the final section of the chapter - serve as a guideline for how to conduct the study of party-media interaction. What will be introduced in the following chapter as *agenda building* is again a temporal relationship between two sets of agendas. Hence, the analytical approach should follow the example given by agenda-setting research, in particular in terms of treating *time* as an important variable, which calls for an assessment of Granger-causality and of optimal effect spans.

## CHAPTER 4: WHERE SALIENCE ORIGINATES

“[T]here is a system and it involves the national parties and their candidates to supply the content, the media to transmit it, and the electorate to consume it.” (Berelson et al. 1954: 235)

“Newsmen do not write the score or play an instrument; they amplify the sounds of some of the music makers.” (Sigal 1978: 465)

This chapter serves to outline the hypothesis that the issue information that is transmitted by the media to the public - and that the voters have to base their party evaluations upon - will substantially and systematically be influenced by the campaign activities of political actors. While there is a vast amount of research into the role of salience for electoral choice and on the agenda-setting hypothesis, the initial relationship in the causal sequence that links campaigning with voting, i.e. the party-media nexus, has been chronically under-researched.

The dependent variable of this study is differential issue coverage in the mass media. This chapter models the party-media relationship as the mechanism that enables parties to control public salience by prompting media attention.

### 4.1 The news function: sampling reality

One of the functions of the mass media, for whatever reason, is to produce news. However, for the purposes here, it is not necessary to ponder too much about the reasons for why news is produced.<sup>36</sup> Instead, I intend to treat *news production as a logistic problem*.

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<sup>36</sup> Neither do I intend to offer any substantive definition of the concept of news. In this regard, mass communication theory has not progressed beyond Lippmann's (1922) early and vague definition of news as an “objective clear signal, which signifies an event” (quoted in McQuail 1987: 204). There is, however, a common



Identifying the nature of the dilemma and the dominant strategies of news producers to solve it leads to an explanation of why mass media are inclined to give extensive coverage to campaigns and under which conditions issues can be raised by campaigning parties.

Suffice to state that, for whatever reasons, a subset of the mass media - public and private television and radio channels, broadsheet and tabloid newspapers - devote a substantial part of their resources to the production of news.<sup>37</sup> The production of news can be understood as an end in itself. That means that the purpose of newsmakers is to fill a newspaper or a newscast, to successfully complete what is a “regular production cycle” (Negrine 1989: 139).

News production follows an asymmetrical demand function<sup>38</sup>. Newsmakers have a finite demand at regular intervals for reportable material. Real-world occurrences, on the other hand, are an infinite resource. Equally, any individual event may have almost indefinite characteristics, details or viewpoints to it, but as a reported event its properties become finite, which warrants the statement that “the entire process of journalism ... rests upon selection” (Leo Rosten, quoted in Shoemaker 1991: 16).

As news can never be a comprehensive account of social reality, some sampling method has to be applied. But even where news values are defined, sampling of reality remains problematic because while demand is highly structured, social reality remains inherently erratic (Negrine 1989: 144f.; Shoemaker and Reese 1991: 97f.). The regularity of news production suggest that each unit of time (day, week, or month) yields a constant amount of newsworthy occurrences, which is entirely a property of the reality *sample* that is taken -

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sense understanding of what distinguishes news from entertainment, propaganda, education or advertising, and news content is invariably announced as such (newspapers, newscasts, news magazines).

<sup>37</sup> Not all mass media do. The news function of film, which existed in earlier decades in the form of weekly newsreels, for example, has been replaced by television.

<sup>38</sup> Demand here refers to the demand for material to produce news from not demand as in consumption of news.

not of the *population* of real-world occurrences that is sampled. Only few events can transcend the normality of news production in the direction of increasing the amount of reported news, like the fall of the Berlin Wall or the events in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. This does not occur in the other direction. Lack of newsworthy events does not result in shorter newscasts and smaller or thinner newspapers.

To sum up, news production can be defined as the application of a sampling method that accommodates a demand for regular quantities of reportable material and enforces regularity and context to a haphazard process: news consists of reporting “unexpected events on a routine basis” (Tuchmann 1973: 111).

## 4.2 Gatekeeping: the sampling method

Ideally, at least from the viewpoint of some journalists, news ought to be “the neutral transmission of an objective reality to the audience” (Shoemaker 1991: 28; see also Johnstone et al. 1972). Since news can only ever be an extract of reality, given spatial and temporal constraints, the ideal of transmitting objective reality suggests that news should consist of a representative selection of real-world occurrences. It has even been suggested that news production consists of “random reactions to random events”<sup>39</sup>.

### *Non-randomness of news selection*

Mass media are technologies enabling widespread transmission of whatever content by whoever puts them to use to whoever is capable of reception.

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<sup>39</sup> J. Whaley, “News” in *The Listener* 15 October 1970, quoted by Negrine 1989: 143

The by now predominant metaphor for the mass media is that of a *gatekeeper* (Lewin 1947, White 1950, Bass 1969; Chibnall 1977; Gans 1979; Gandy 1982; Shoemaker 1991). The gatekeeping model evokes the notion that an input is transformed into an output. However, this is not meant as a mere technical process of transmission where dissimilarities between input and output result from unspecified properties of the transmission process. Instead, the gatekeeping metaphor suggests that transmission and with it the transformation of input into output and, most of all, the selection of output from input is a social activity.

The occurrence of selection as such is not at the discretion of the gatekeeper; it is necessitated by the fact that infinite input has to be boiled down into finite output:

“The very term gatekeeper suggests the idea of adapting to physical limits.” (Shoemaker and Reese 1991: 97f.)

But adapting to physical limits is not all there is to the function of gatekeeping – if it were, this would mean that all events, bits of information that reach the media, have an equal chance to become news. The gatekeeping metaphor instead presupposes that sampling has a method, and that this selection method is not randomness but a function of multi-level processes within and outside the mass media.

Selection criteria of news production are factors that define the chances of an item to be considered news, i.e. to pass through the gate. Hence, they are means to avoid random selection.<sup>40</sup> The core selection criterion is newsworthiness (or *news value*), which is difficult to define or to measure, but can be approached by listing a set of indicators or attributes, which of course in themselves are as equally amorphous concepts as newsworthiness. There are many lists of newsworthy attributes, and they generally include some or all of

the following: timeliness; proximity; importance, impact, or consequence; interest; conflict

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<sup>40</sup> While consistently using the analogy to the process of data collection, there is a significant difference between news production and data collection in science, and this is that while selection criteria can be set up to ensure or at least approximate random selection of, for example, survey respondents, any applied selection criteria in news production result invariably in non-randomness.

or controversy; sensationalism; prominence; novelty; oddity; or the unusual.” (Shoemaker 1991: 22)

The concept of newsworthiness or news values carries with it the implication that events should not have an equal likelihood of being selected for news since some events merit less attention than others, that some are too trivial or too ‘normal’, that some have less social relevance than others, in short: that random gatekeeping is not desirable.

News values are properties of events or information bits. The concept as such evokes the idea that objectiveness in news production is possible, that reality can be classified in the parts that should be reported and those that do not require media or public attention.

But imagine a scenario where a valid set of standard criteria for item selection had been developed, selection criteria that would be applied equally to all observable occurrences, guaranteeing that two items with equal properties have equal chances to become news, no matter what. That would ultimately demand news output to adapt to the ‘density’ of reality. It would require newspapers and news bulletins to vary (randomly) in size over time depending on how much newsworthy material could be sampled for any unit of time during which news is produced.

This does indeed not happen. It does not because news values are conditional criteria of selection - news values are context-dependent.

One of the ultimate objectives of news media is to de-randomise reality, to bring reality into shape, to enforce regular patterns onto the randomness of real-world occurrences so that the rationale behind news production can be a presumed stable public demand for news instead of the variability and unreliability of events.

### *De-randomising reality*

News production is a systematic, patterned enterprise. It can largely be planned, because the mass media choose sectors and aspects of social life that they regularly or continuously monitor and report on. Most obviously, a newspaper or news magazine does not decide on a daily basis which aspects it will cover in tomorrow's issue. It assigns permanent departments, reporters and editors to the coverage of particular aspects of reality. This is not mere division of labour, based on a general clustering and categorization of events into specialised areas of newsgathering. It is more systematic and reality shaping than that.

The mass media are actively and permanently categorising, prioritising and quantifying different aspects of social reality. This could be argued to be a fair reflection on how socially relevant various events and activities are, but that line of argument easily turns tautological, since the extent to which something or someone is conceived to be socially relevant is a function of visibility and publicity. Early on in the history of mass communication research, Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948, quoted in Real 1980: 248) argued that the media "confer status on public issues, persons, organizations and social movements". Some aspects of social reality are assigned permanent news value, and this reinforces if not creates in the first place social relevance. News production allocates *salience in permanence* to some aspects of social reality like crime, policy-making, or economic affairs.

The clue to explaining the selection of permanent news priorities lies in the relative degree of institutionalisation and organisation of different social activities and events. Policy-making, law-enforcement, public administration, economics, and even sports are all continuous and highly organised processes. The institutions behind these activities all have a vested interest in publicity and visibility and the mass media have established standing rela-

tionships with these organisations. Media workers, journalists and editors, from different news sections are not only specialised in their surveillance and information function but they organise their news-gathering around or coordinate it with the activities of the respective social, political, and economic institutions. Status-conferral occurs as a by-product of an effort by mass media to facilitate news-production:

“[T]he facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known. They must be given shape by somebody, and since in the daily routine reporters cannot give a shape to facts, and since there is little disinterested organization of intelligence, the need for some formulation is being met by the interested parties.” (Lippmann 1922: 218)

To place media personnel in the vicinity and in continuous contact with institutions that produce reliable output is a means to reduce uncertainty, to structure reality. The mass media have an interest to ensure a constant flow of events and reportable activities, a continuous supply with the raw material from which news is produced. The coverage of randomly occurring events like a natural disaster, an act of terrorism, or a coup d'état, are the exceptions from the rule of news making. The permanently news-covered institutions can themselves produce the odd random event, like a stock-market crash or a government crisis. In this regard, it can even be argued that the likelihood of a random event to make the news is partly a function of the context in which it occurs. Random events originating from institutions that are permanently under media scrutiny are more likely to become news:

“[T]he news is not a mirror of social conditions but the report of an aspect that has obtruded itself.” (Lippmann 1922: 216).

The established patterns of news production necessarily result in selection bias, but this is entirely rational, economical and convenient from the viewpoint of newsmakers. A central logistic problem of news production is the allocation of resources. The media need to produce a stable amount of daily content at the lowest possible cost. Reliance on sources is a

cost-saving device. By drawing a substantial part of their news content from prefabricated documents, statements, press releases from authoritative sources, the mass media practically manage to delegate part of the *news function* to sources. In general “sources have a tremendous effect on mass media content, because journalists can’t include in their news reports what they don’t know” (Shoemaker and Reese 1991: 150).

The media cannot work without sources. And their work is facilitated by an increasing degree of institutionalisation in source-media relationships. The more reliable and predictable the work of institutions and organisations and the more proactive their public relations activities, the less resource-intensive, hence the more economical becomes news production.

Not just the media but both sides expect to benefit from their interdependency. Institutional sources establish almost symbiotic relationships with newsmakers for a reason – that is the *agenda-setting function of the mass media*, which has been discussed in detail in the previous chapter. The expectation is that the more the news media rely on sources, the more likely it is that ultimately the sources shape public opinion via the media.

### **4.3 Agenda building**

#### ***Introducing the concept***

A scientific interest in the antecedents of media effects only developed in the early 1980s. For the first decade of agenda-setting research, “scholars took the media agenda as a given as they investigated the media agenda - public agenda relationship” (Dearing and Rogers 1996: 24).

The notion of agenda building in its present usage was introduced by Lang and Lang (1981).<sup>41</sup> They used the term in order to provide a concept that serves to distinguish the study of causes of media content from that of its effects, which had become permanently associated with the concept of *agenda-setting*. They argued that by exclusively focussing on media effects on public salience “the whole question of how issues originate is side-stepped, nor is there any recognition of the process through which agendas are built” (1981: 278).

The term agenda building as such has only sporadically been employed in the literature (Lang and Lang 1981; 1983; Weaver and Elliott 1985; Walters et al. 1996; Curtin 1999; Curtin and Rhodenbaugh 2001). Clearly, Lang and Lang’s work cannot be regarded as a seminal article like the one from McCombs and Shaw (1972) that instigated an entire research tradition. In general, communication science has largely ignored the study of external influences on media behaviour and news content, with only three main exceptions, by Gans (1979), Gandy (1982) and Shoemaker and Reese (1991: 147-182). Also, as discussed above, while there has been some emphasis in communication studies on how news is selected and produced, such studies of *gatekeeping* (White 1950; Shoemaker 1991) place substantially more emphasis on how structural, normative and psychological factors within media organisations and individual media workers shape the news product rather than assessing the role of external factors and forces.

Similarly, political science as a discipline has given little attention to how political actors can exert influence on the media, the exceptions here coming mainly in the form of studies

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<sup>41</sup> The term was borrowed from Cobb and Elder (1972) who had used it in more general (and not at all media-related) fashion as describing the process that “determines the agenda for political controversy within a community” (Cobb and Elder 1972: 905). Cobb and Elder introduced agenda building as an element of modern democracy that allows for mass participation despite institutional bias. Agenda building in their understanding described the work of pressure groups trying to access institutions, parties and other decision-makers and thereby altering the scope and focus of policy-making (1972: 905-10).



into how American presidents have handled the media and controlled patterns of national news coverage (see discussion in Bartels 1996: 2-5).

### ***Public relations and agenda building***

A perhaps fitting context within which much of the agenda building research to date has been carried out is the area of public relations research. The theory and practice of public relations (PR) is largely based on the assumption that interest groups, corporations, political parties, government departments and other institutions are capable of influencing public opinion in their favour through the use of communication.

Public relations has been defined as

“...a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management and problems of issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools.” (Harlow 1976: 40)

Hutton (1999) aimed at a more parsimonious definition and proposed “managing strategic relationships” to serve “as a paradigm ... for the field” (1999: 208). Just as with the related discipline of marketing, such definitions remain relatively vague and unscientific. Invariably, in both disciplines, much weight is given to altruistic goals like managing a relationship so that it remains beneficial for both the organization (which can refer to corporations, governments, non-profit groups, or political parties) and its clients. The difference is that public relations definitions put considerable emphasis on the goal of controlling and plan-

ning, whereas marketing theory rather stresses the adaptive character of organisational behaviour.

What in essence characterises public relations in theory and practice is its interpretation of organisational behaviour as proactive and market driving (Curtin 1999; see also Carpenter et al. 1995). And agenda building is undoubtedly a proactive measure by which economic and political actors attempt to shape the competitive environment. Although public relations efforts are ultimately directed at the public, the most likely immediate addressees of news releases and many other PR initiatives<sup>42</sup> are the mass media (Turow 1989; Cameron et al. 1997).

Gandy (1982) suggested that the news media have to rely consistently on *information subsidies* like news releases from interested parties in order to give reportable shape to real-world occurrences. It has been argued that to provide the media proactively (i.e. unasked) with information material is

“to influence the news [...] by providing the context within which all other information is evaluated, by providing usable information that is easier and cheaper to use than that from other sources, and by monopolizing the journalists’ time so that they don’t have an opportunity to seek out sources with alternative views” (Shoemaker and Reese 1991: 150).

The concept of information subsidies and the role of organisations and their public relations departments as suppliers of those subsidies was picked up more recently by students of public relations like Turow (1989), Cameron et al. (1997), Curtin (1999), Davis (2000) and Curtin and Rhodenbaugh (2001). Davis (2000) offers an explanation for why journalists and editors have to increasingly rely on information subsidies from political actors. He

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<sup>42</sup> Hutton (1999: 211) gives a summary of available PR tools which include “publicity, product placements, news releases, speeches, interpersonal communications, web sites, publications, trade shows, corporate identity programs, corporate advertising programs, etc.”

argues that while PR expenditures of governments and political parties in the UK have multiplied over the past 20 years or so,<sup>43</sup> the news gathering resources have over the same period sharply decreased.<sup>44</sup> Davis concludes that the relations between journalists and sources have been significantly transformed over the past two decades “by what, in effect, amounts to a massive transfer of newsgathering resources, away from ‘independent’ journalists and towards partisan sources” (2000: 44).

This asymmetry in resources and the resulting over-reliance of news-producers on interested parties that provide with information subsidies is certainly not only a trend in the UK, but has also been witnessed elsewhere, particularly in the unregulated news market of the US. Already from the 1970s onwards, it was noted that in specialised areas of news-gathering, the vast majority of correspondents and reporters tended to exclusively draw reportable material from interested sources:

“Early studies found that 85% of environmental reporters relied on press releases on information and 82% relied on brochures, pamphlets, and other reports.” (Curtin and Rhodenbaugh 2001: 180)

Although agenda building studies also found that journalists appear adamant to avoid instrumentalisation, that they “prefer information from sources whom they perceive as having no obvious self-serving economic purpose – that is, government agencies and nonprofits” (Curtin and Rhodenbaugh 2001: 180), it can nonetheless be deduced that an ever-increasing demand from news-producers for external subsidies facilitates exploitation of market asymmetries by increasingly more resourceful suppliers.

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<sup>43</sup> Party expenditures increased by around 500% between 1979 and 1992, and again doubled from 1992 to 1997 (Davis 2000: 41).

<sup>44</sup> Reduced profits for the news-producing media in Britain are the result of a combination of factors, like increased competition between newspapers and public and private television, dropping average sales as well as viewing figures for public channels, and price cutting wars between British tabloids. At the same time, competition has increased output demands. In a highly competitive market, especially British newspapers appear to feel pressured to increase variety of coverage “by adding new sections, a trend that has resulted in quite pronounced page inflations” (Davis 2000: 44).

The market analogy for the news production process has been acknowledged by public relations theory, epitomized in an article by Curtin (1999) who explicitly argues that PR is a *market-driving* strategy employed by organisations in order to manipulate and control their competitive environment. The concept of market-driving business strategies, developed by Carpenter et al. (1995), can be regarded as an economic application of Riker's theory of heresthetics. The core hypothesis put forward by Carpenter et al. is that

“if customer preferences and decision making are context dependent, then an important if not central objective of marketing strategy is to create the context – to shape the competitive environment and, consequently, the structure of preferences and decision making – so as to produce a sustainable competitive advantage” (1995: 527f.).

PR, especially when employed by non-commercial actors like non-profit organisations, government agencies, or political parties, is inherently issue-related. Shaping the context and gaining competitive advantage in these cases easily translates into increasing public awareness for the particular problem(s) or issue(s) one of these actors advocates. The further one departs from commercial competition, the more intensely public relations evolve around efforts to set the public agenda via building the media agenda (Cameron et al. 1997).

Agenda building as a PR exercise consists of the strategic use of press releases in order “to amplify themes and images stressed by the campaign. Some advocates believe that they can help stimulate media coverage to further advance those themes and images” (Walters et al. 1996: 9). Turow (1989) argues that news stories tend to overwhelmingly be initiated by press releases, that indeed “public relations is a driving force behind what gets on television and into print” (1989: 208).

While “the power imbalance between writers and sources” (Shoemaker and Reese 1991: 150) is undeniable, the empirical question remains to be answered whether any measurable consequences of this asymmetric media-source relationship can actually be observed in the real world. If the relationship between news producers and their sources is one of media dependency, this should materialise in substantial control of sources over media agendas. The theoretical concept of agenda building needs empirical evidence in support of the causal relationship it suggests.

### ***Shortcomings of PR effects studies***

It is important to note that while public relations research emphasises the role of agenda building, the resulting empirical studies are mostly concerned with a comparative assessment of who amongst the competing actors (government agencies, corporations and non-profit organisations) does “a more effective job of tying in to journalists’ preferred news values and needs” (Curtin and Rhodenbaugh 2001: 190). Instead of measuring agenda building effects directly (in terms of changes in the media agenda over time), these studies attempt to draw conclusions about the likelihood of success in agenda building from the qualities of the supplied PR material. Whoever amongst the self-declared agenda builders complies most with journalistic standards like newsworthiness, i.e. whoever provides journalists with material that is most likely to actually be used by them (Morton 1986), is declared to have gained a competitive advantage.

In similar vein, most of the communications research that occupies itself with media-source relationships tends to suggest media dependency rather than giving empirical evi-

dence for it. The intuitively appealing but effectively tautological assertion is that sources must have a significant effect on news content simply because journalists use sources:

“Sources have a tremendous effect on mass media content, because journalists can’t include in their news reports what they don’t know.” (Shoemaker and Reese 1991: 150).

Surely, if journalists base their news reports on source material, those who produce that source material will directly provide part of the news content. The agenda building hypothesis, however, goes further: it suggests that information subsidies like press releases give direction and structure to news content, and most of all that public relations efforts can affect the distribution of news content over time. This implies that providing the media with prefabricated newsworthy material can trigger and maintain coverage. It has been argued that this is indeed the intention of, for example, political actors, that this is their rationale behind providing the media with news releases, and that the interplay between political actors and the press is a constant struggle for agenda control:

“Presidents and reporters still jointly produce news, but it is no longer a collaborative undertaking. ... [T]he modern relationship is one in which each side anticipates and responds to distant actions of the other. ... With presidents increasingly going public and with a more assertive press, contention over control will remain a fixture of the modern system.” (Kernell 1993: 80f.)

In essence, agenda building research hypothesises a causal relationship analogous to that of agenda-setting. The difference between agenda-setting and agenda building is that the involved actors are displaced: in agenda building studies, the media agenda becomes the dependent variable instead of the public agenda, which is the dependent variable of agenda-setting research. The set of possible independent variables, however, covers a wide range of actors, from non-profit organisations, corporations, government agencies, through to presidents or political campaigners.

Agenda building can be investigated in different settings, for example as a process between single-issue proponents, who can either compete with proponents of other issues for media attention or instead with opposed interests for a beneficial framing of issue coverage in the media.<sup>45</sup>

Studies of competition between agenda builders, however, are to some extent already assuming the validity of the general agenda building hypothesis. For example, Curtin and Rhodenbaugh (2001) no longer question whether or not the media are responsive to PR initiative, but go a step further by investigating whose PR initiatives are most likely to succeed. With much of the public relations literature, it appears as though the general potential of PR is taken as a given, on the basis of which comparative studies can be carried out into whose PR is most successful (and why this is so).

### ***Who follows whom? Questioning the direction of causality***

The very idea of media dependency on sources, however, is a contested one and should be tested empirically by employing methods that allow for falsification of the theory. Political communications scholars who do actually concern themselves with media-source relationships have proposed competing hypotheses about the direction of causality: (a) that the media are following political actors in their agenda choices; (b) that the news media are not only setting the public but also the policy agenda; or (c) that politics and media are mutually interdependent and that the process of agenda building is an reciprocal one.

*(a) Media Dependence.* The agenda building hypothesis - that news agendas are driven by sources with a vested interest - finds its most pronounced support in Gans (1978) who con-

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<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Curtin and Rhodenbaugh 2001, who are investigating competition between environmental groups and trade organisations and corporations for the tone of environmental news coverage.

cluded, however without giving evidence, that “either sources or journalists can lead, but more often than not, sources do the leading” (1978: 116).

(b) *Media Dominance*. On the other hand, Cater (1959) argued that the reporter “as much as anyone ... helps to shape the course of government” (1959: 7). The notion of the news media as *the fourth branch of government* (the title of Cater 1959) has inspired a number of US studies into how responsive policy-makers are to news coverage. Most of these were based on interviews with Congressmen or government officials, together with a few case studies into how media attention to certain policy issues impacts on decision-making processes. Linksy (1986: 87), for example, reports from a mail survey of Washington officials, asking how they view the influence of the press on policy making, that “officials believe that the media do a lot to set the policy agenda and to influence how an issue is understood by policymakers, interest groups, and the public”. In similar vein, but in this case with regard to the main US television networks, Smoller (1990: 6) concludes that “the organizational routines of network news influence U.S. politics in a manner comparable with the influence exerted by the Constitution or the laws that govern the electoral process”. This line of argument is echoed in the notion that the agenda-setting function of the media extends beyond creating public issue salience by also giving shape to the policy agenda:

“The media agenda seems to have direct, sometimes strong, influence upon the policy agenda of elite decision makers, and, in some cases, policy implementation.” (Rogers and Dearing 1994: 91f.)

None of these studies provide with statistical evidence beyond the assessment from officials or the odd case study into how media coverage evolves over time and whether or not the respective issue is picked up by policy makers in Washington.

(c) *Reciprocity*. A third hypothesis about media-source relationships is that neither side is consistently leading the process, but that both sets of actors are mutually interdependent.



Blumler and Gurevitch (2000) gave the most pronounced formulation of this theory. They proposed that political communications is an interactive system that involves several sets of players. Their model suggests that the “different components of the system – media institutions and professionals; political institutions, parties and political advocates; audience members at the receiving end of the output produced by these institutions; and the surrounding socio-political environment – interact and impact upon each other” (2000: 4).

These competing hypotheses circumscribe the immediate task for agenda building research, which is to assess the direction of causality. Just as discussed in Chapter 3 with regard to the scientific evolution of agenda-setting research, the crucial step is to move beyond cross-sectional research designs in order to establish *Granger-causality* between two separate time series, the two time series here being the movements of the media agenda - changes in media attention to one or more issue(s) - and the movement of the source agenda - changing issues emphasis or varying intensities of PR efforts from sources.

### ***Policy-making and news production: two longitudinal studies***

To date, only two studies have been carried out that explicitly attempted to assess *Granger causality* between media and source agendas (Bartels 1996; Wood and Peake 1996). Both studies used vector auto regressions (VAR), which Bartels described as a model in which “the current value of each variable in a system of interrelated variables is regressed on lagged values of all the variables in the system,” (Bartels 1996: 11). This technique allows estimating whether issue attention by one actor is a response to previous

emphasis to the same issue by another actor, even in the presence of a multitude of actors and issues.

Wood and Peake investigated interactions between presidential attention to and network news coverage of two foreign policy areas - US-USSR relations and the Arab-Israeli conflict - over a ten-year period (1984 to 1994). They found evidence for the media domination hypothesis: while presidential attention did not produce any measurable media response, shocks and even gradual increases in television news coverage of any one of the two issues appeared to systematically prompt significantly increasing presidential activity and attention with a one-week lag, plus some modest cumulative effects in second and third weeks (Wood and Peake 1996: 18ff.).

Bartels (1996) used data from a shorter time period - January 1993 through December 1995 -, but improved on Wood and Peake's research design in several regards: with daily instead of weekly agenda counts; with a larger and more varied set of policy areas;<sup>46</sup> and with separate treatment of different branches of government,<sup>47</sup> as well as different media actors.<sup>48</sup>

Bartels' complex research design reveals an equally complex net of interrelationships, with clear patterns of reciprocal inter-media agenda-setting. He found television news coverage to be leading just as much as it followed the priorities set by the *New York Times* (17). There was strong agenda building competition and conflict between presidency and Congress - especially over Whitewater (13, Table 2). Also, he provided with substantial evidence for highly consistent behaviour, implying that the best predictor of any actor's

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<sup>46</sup> Bosnia, Medicare, NAFTA, and Whitewater.

<sup>47</sup> Congress and executive branch.

<sup>48</sup> The *New York Times* served to represent what he labels "elite newspapers" (Bartels 1996: 6). In addition, he sampled three different local newspapers from different US states, and *ABC 'World News tonight'*, representing network evening news broadcasts (5-8).

current behaviour is his recent past behaviour: “the clear dependence of each activity on its own past history” (*Ibid.*).

With regard to establishing causality in agenda building, Bartels finds much evidence in support of the hypothesis that the processes of influence between political and media agendas are reciprocal. He finds substantial differentiation in agenda building power between different actors as well as different agenda building dynamics. For example, the executive branch is in three of the four issue areas more successful than Congress in prompting media reactions, but it takes two to three days for the media responses to Congress activities to peak while media responses to the president are immediate, peaking on the same evening in the network news and on following days in the newspapers (18-21). With regard to the different media actors, Bartels finds that the *New York Times* is most influential. While interactions between *ABC* and the policy establishment appeared evenly balanced with similar effects detectable in either direction, and the local newspapers appeared at the receiving end of an asymmetric relationship, the “results presented here support the claim that, by and large, the Times led and the politicians followed” (1996: 25).

The two studies by Wood and Peake (1996) and Bartels (1996) set the stage for investigating long-term processes of agenda evolution, but to investigate agenda building during electoral campaigns is an altogether different proposition. While the time frame of election campaigns is limited to an extent that no longer allows for the application of complex time series models like VAR, the number of political actors may increase, depending on the party system under investigation, and also electoral agendas may contain a larger set of issues than can be observed in longitudinal studies. The different setting of electoral campaigns hence calls for a different research design - which will be discussed in detail in the following chapters -, but the principal research interest remains the same: to establish who

leads and who follows, i.e. whose agenda - that of parties or of the media - *Granger-causes* the other.

### *Previous campaign studies*

While a small number of studies have been carried out with the explicitly stated purpose of investigating agenda interaction between parties/candidates and the media during campaigns (Semetko et al. 1991; Walters et al. 1996; Norris et al. 1999: Chapter 5), none of these employed a research design that would make it possible to establish Granger causality.

Semetko et al. (1991) and Norris et al. (1999) made some headway towards investigating agenda building during election campaigns. The most important step forward made by these studies lies in their use of daily press releases, which, rather than party manifestos, contain information about strategic behaviour during campaigns (see extensive discussion of this point in the next chapter). However, they made somewhat ineffective use of the collected data by aggregating into campaign totals, thereby effectively treating the campaign as an event, not a process, and using a cross-sectional design without consideration of time lags, similar to that used in the seminal agenda-setting study by McCombs and Shaw (1972). The cross-sectional approach consists of summing up the total amount of times different policy dimensions were mentioned by parties and media during the campaign. This results in percentage distributions of attention across policy dimensions that can be compared - in both studies by means of rank-order correlations. This way, one can estimate correspondence between aggregate party and media agendas. The findings are as such of limited meaning, given that the differentiation in broad policy dimensions results in very

small *N*'s: Semetko et al. based the analyses of the 1983 UK General Election campaign and of the 1984 US Presidential Election campaign on a set of just 4 and 6 substantive policy dimensions, respectively (1991: 80; 108), whereas Norris et al. differentiated in their analysis of agenda correspondence during the 1997 UK General Election campaign into a set of 9 different policy dimensions (1999: 63; 80ff.).

Both studies do present some interesting findings: Semetko et al. compared the findings about party-press relationships in both countries (1991: Ch. 8) and found that inter-agenda correlations in the UK were on average more than twice as high than those in the U.S. This led them to conclude that “[i]t does not seem to be the case that the U.S. press is primarily passing on the priorities of the candidates, although that does seem to be more true for the British press” (1999: 173). Similar findings emerged from their comparison of television coverage of the campaign in both countries (1999: Ch. 7):

“Our comparison of party and media agendas in the two countries also lends support to the view that U.S. newspeople play a greater role in shaping the campaign agenda than do British reporters. There was much closer correspondence between party and media agendas in Britain than in the United States. The priorities of the British political parties were very much like the priorities of British television news.” (1999: 143)

Norris et al. (1999) compared their findings from the 1997 campaign with those from Semetko et al. (1991) and stated that the British press and television continue to allow parties to largely shape their campaign agendas, although “there has been some press-party dealignment” (Norris et al. 1999: 81f.), which they inferred from inter-agenda correlations being somewhat smaller in 1997 than back in 1983. One of the comparative elements in Norris et al.’s study lies in the relative assessment of party-TV and party-press relationships, where they found that party agendas were consistently higher correlated with those of the press than with television campaign agendas (1999: 82, Table 5.6). The other compara-

tive finding concerned the relative inability of the Liberal Democrats in “getting their message heard on television or in the press” (1999: 81), as against the predominance of the two bigger parties, Labour and Conservatives.

But even though cross-country, inter-party and inter-media comparisons are valuable, neither study actually used methods that would have allowed them to establish the temporal sequence and hence causal direction of agenda interaction. To some extent, these studies misread what the observable implications of and necessary tests for their theories would be, explicitly so in the case of Norris et al.:

“The key question to assess the success of each party’s strategic communications is how far the messages which the parties attempted to disseminate were actually picked up by the news media. [...] If parties are becoming more successful in using professional strategic communications to control the campaign agenda, then we might expect that the news would follow the party lead. On the other hand, if we are experiencing the rise of a more autonomous and dealigned media, [...] then we would expect to find considerable contrasts between the party and news agendas.” (Norris et al. 1999: 79)

Their methodology can only serve to test the second of their hypotheses, namely whether press dealignment has been taking place. An overall reduction in inter-agenda correlations from 1983 to 1997 is evidence in support of that hypothesis. Correlating aggregated campaign agendas is, however, not a meaningful test of the agenda building power of campaigning parties. Their cross-sectional design does not reveal the process that produced the observed levels of agenda correspondence.

Walters et al. (1996) point to the almost total lack of campaign related agenda building research and offer an explanation for why this is the case:

“[F]ew researchers have looked into the press releases of major national election campaigns. Research on public relations output within the context of a political contest has been limited, in part, because the press release has not been treated as important contributor to

the process of building the political agenda. Much of the work that does look at such materials seriously is dated, tied to concepts such as "The Selling of the President" of the 1970s, or slanted with anecdotal considerations of subjects like 'spin doctors'." (Walters et al. 1996: 11)

Walters et al. are using all press releases issued by Clinton and Bush during the final month of the 1992 Presidential election campaign. In contrast to Semetko et al. (1991) and Norris et al. (1999), however, in this study the media are sidestepped; instead candidates' agendas are directly put in relation with voter agendas, estimated from a Gallup poll taken four weeks ahead of the election. The timing of data gathering poses the most serious problem with their research design. Effectively, public agendas were estimated from a survey taken at the beginning of the period during which press releases were collected (Walters et al. 1996: 12). Effectively then, the statistical analysis carried out by Walters et al. relates candidates' agendas back to earlier voter agendas which clearly does not allow for a testing of agenda building processes. All it enables is to establish how much in line with existing public opinion the candidates were at the beginning of that final campaign period and how much in line they stayed during the following weeks.

The idea might be useful to relate public relations output to public opinion directly, as well as to polling data during the campaign. It could be a way towards establishing how changes in issue priorities impact on public assessments of issue salience as well on candidate preference (1999: 18-20). The research design, however, is seriously flawed because the time windows used for data gathering make it impossible to establish the direction of causality. The analysis finds that during weeks of the campaign in which Clinton's campaign agenda exposed higher correlations with that of voters, he also gained percentages in the polls. They conclude from this "that the Clinton-Gore campaign did not set an agenda for the voters. It rather matched the agenda of the voters" (1996: 21). This is however an

insufficient assessment, since the research design only ever allowed for this causal direction. Public opinion on salience was not sampled at any later stage, so that no statements can be made about the effects of the campaign. Also, the statements made about Clinton gaining in the polls whenever matching the public agenda seriously overstress the point: first of all it relates weekly assessments of inter-agenda correspondence to daily polling estimates. Secondly, inter-agenda correlations consistently remained low (below .35) and only changed in the range of up to .13 (1999: 14). Very small changes in low correlations were than compared with changes in candidate preferences for Clinton. These varied between 42 and 50% during the campaign, provided just as much variation during weeks as between weeks, and used polls from different polling institutes which may itself account for some of the variation (1996: 16, Figure 2). To conclude from this that complying with the public agenda gained votes does not seem warranted.

The direct estimation of effects of campaign communications on public issue salience may remain an almost impossible task, because of the unavailability of time-series data that can capture over-time changes of public salience during campaigns. However, collections of press releases together with daily assessments of media agendas allow devising a research design capable of assessing causality in agenda building between these two sets of actors - parties/candidates and the mass media. The fact that neither of the above discussed campaign analyses has employed an appropriate methodology underlines the importance of the present study which will be outlined in detail and carried out in subsequent chapters.

At this point, it is necessary to develop testable hypotheses that readily follow from the discussion of agenda building theory.



## 4.4 Testable hypotheses in agenda building research

### *Media dependency*

The central working hypothesis of this study is that a systematic inter-agenda relationship exists, namely one of *media dependency*, which also means that the dominant pattern of interaction is unidirectional:

*Hypothesis A: During an election campaign the news media responds systematically to changing issue emphases from political actors. Change in the composition of media agendas is caused by (but itself not causing) change in the composition of party agendas.*

As outlined in the introductory chapter, the purpose of the present study is to assess the capability of political parties to manipulate public issue salience by means of controlling the media agenda. The theory proposed here is that public issue salience is endogenous, i.e. that salience is brought about by the agenda choices of political actors. *Hypothesis A* is an observable implication of that theory. It is a necessary condition for one of Riker's heretical manoeuvres, the manipulation of dimensions, to apply to electoral competition.

It is also a *falsifiable* implication of the theory of endogeneity of salience. As King et al. (1994) have pointed out, "we should design theories so that they can be shown to be wrong as easily and quickly as possible. [...] We should always design theories that are vulnerable to falsification" (1994: 100f.). It is fairly obvious that if the analysis of a particular election campaign resulted in the finding of either *media dominance* (parties following the lead of the media) or of *reciprocity* (both sides influencing each other), it could safely be concluded that parties in that instance did not manage to control the media agenda. From that it

would follow that in the instance parties remained unable to manipulate public salience, unless they found a way to do so that circumvented the agenda-setting function of the mass media.

Such a finding would not necessarily mean that agenda manipulation is impossible. We might be able to find reasons why this particular instance may count as an exception from the rule, or instead we may have to revise our theory in parts. King et al. (1994: 102-4) have argued that a finding that is inconsistent with a theory does not necessarily imply falsification as understood by Popper (1968), which would demand outright rejection of the entire theory. And even Popper admitted that, ultimately, falsification of theories is just as impossible as verification, notwithstanding the asymmetry between the two (Popper 1968: 42).

However, “both consistency and inconsistency provide information about the truth of the theory and should affect the certainty of our beliefs” (King et al. 1994: 102). The test of *Hypothesis A* in the following empirical part of this study will indeed be critical to our understanding of whether manipulation of the choice context is possible in large-scale electoral competition - critical because prior evidence about agenda building is scarce and far from conclusive.

Agenda building during an electoral campaign is a dynamic process that involves two groups of actors: *political parties* and *media outlets*. As outlined above, the core research question of this study is how changing issue emphasis by parties relates to the media treatment of different issues or policy dimensions over the course of a campaign. That means that the ultimate objective of this study is to investigate the direction of causality in an agenda building process during a campaign. However, while empirical testing of *Hypothe-*

*sis A* should allow one to make general statements about which set of actors dominates the process, it appears necessary to generate an additional set of hypotheses. These hypotheses specify the condition under which agenda building will occur.

### ***Party effects***

In total, three hypotheses can be formulated that specify the role of different political actors in the agenda building process.

*Hypothesis P1: The relative agenda building power of campaigning parties depends on their position in the party system.*

Different political actors can be expected to have unequal agenda-building power. Theories of party competition treat party size (in terms of vote percentages received at the last election), pivotal position in a party system (the ability to make or break a government) and incumbency as main criteria that determine political influence. It can be tested empirically to what extent agenda-building power depends on these aspects of political influence.

*Hypothesis P2: Issue ownership moderates the ability of parties to raise particular issues onto the media agenda.*

In their book on saliency theory, Budge and Farlie (1983) have argued that campaigning parties should only ever try to raise issues that they 'own'. A related and indeed testable question is whether to own an issue affects the likelihood that the media will follow a party's lead.

*Hypothesis P3: The rate at which an issue climbs onto the media agenda is a function of the number of parties raising it.*

Budge and Farlie (1983), Riker (1993) and Hammond and Humes (1996) have all argued that campaign agendas of different parties will not converge, that instead campaigners tend to talk past one another, and that individual issues which are raised by one side are likely to be ignored by the other. On the other hand, media interest in campaign proceedings may be more likely to develop in the presence of conflictual political debates. That would mean that the larger the number of parties that are voicing stands on an issue, the stronger the media response. This is a testable proposition that, if supported by empirical evidence, would pose serious problems for political actors that are trying to raise competing issues.

### ***Media effects***

In addition, we can formulate two hypotheses specifying the role of variation in media receptiveness to agenda building efforts by parties:

*Hypothesis M1: Regulation of campaign coverage (the stop-watch approach) facilitates agenda building.*

With regard to Television networks and their approach to campaign coverage, it has repeatedly been argued that they operate in a “sacerdotal-pragmatic continuum” (Semetko and Canel 1997: 476; see also Semetko 1991; Semetko et al. 1991). In Britain, the BBC epitomizes the *sacerdotal* attitude towards political actors in a campaign (Blumler et al. 1992), regarding it “as a duty to report the election campaign and the activities and policies

of parties in full detail, with special place given over in the news to the day's election events throughout the entirety of the campaign" (Semetko and Canel 1997: 460).

While there are no explicit legal requirements in the UK regarding the quantitative balance of coverage, the *BBC Producers' Guidelines* set out that

"[o]ver the period of the campaign, coverage of each of the parties in news and current affairs programmes reflects broadly the allocation of party election broadcast to the major parties. In accordance with this principle the BBC undertakes to maintain balance, over the period of a campaign, in its recorded actuality of political speeches and in film, videotape, and studio contributions from politicians." (BBC 1993: 159)

Hence, the allocation of campaign coverage in the news across the different parties reflects on the allocation of party election broadcasts. The BBC Producers' Guidelines explicate the procedure that is applied in the run-up to a campaign:

"When an election is imminent, the broadcasters make a proposal to the Committee on Party Political Broadcasting on the allocation of party election broadcasts. If the Committee fails to reach an agreement the broadcasters impose the allocation. There is no precise mathematical formula for the allocation of time for party election broadcasts. But the judgement is made on the basis of votes cast at the previous general election, together with votes cast at intervening by-elections, local government elections and European elections. This allows significant political change to be taken into account. There is also a provision that any party contesting 50 seats should be entitled to a five minute broadcast on television and radio." (BBC 1993: 158-9)

The self-regulatory regime that the BBC has established also has a strong guideline function for the regulation of private broadcasting in the country. Since 1955, the BBC had commercial competition in the form of ITV. ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and also cable, satellite and digital commercial television in the UK is regulated by the Independent Television Commission (ITC) which has set out a programme code that its licensees have to comply with. The concept of impartiality in election campaign broadcasting is explicitly referred to as a required standard of broadcasting, but its interpretation and application is left at the discretion of the licensee:

#### **“4.3: Programmes at the time of elections**

The general provisions of Section 3 of this Code - notably Section 3.3 on 'major matters' - apply to all coverage of elections. There is no expectation that the time devoted to all parties and candidates in an election will be equal. Licensees must exercise their judgement, based on factors such as significant levels of previous electoral support, evidence of significant current support, and the number of candidates being fielded by a party. Due weight should be given to coverage of major parties (these are defined in relation to the UK in Section 4.3(i) below). However, smaller parties and independent candidates may also be among those with significant views and perspectives, to which appropriate coverage may need to be given.” (ITC 2002: Section 4)

Licenses for terrestrial broadcasters like ITV differ from those that apply to Sky News, for example, in that they require the terrestrial channels to air free party election broadcasts. Until 1992, ITV followed the example set by the BBC to take the allocation of party election broadcasts as an allocation criteria for the distribution of airtime in news programmes. Officially, the ITV abandoned the stopwatch principle in 1992 and introduced news values as the sole criterion for campaign coverage (Carver 2001).

The question is whether different approaches to campaign coverage, from strict stopwatch coverage in public television to less regulated coverage that aims at the rigorous application of news values moderates the ability of political actors to manipulate the media.

Norris et al (1999) found that although ITV renounced the stop-watch approach in 1992, their allocation of campaign coverage, at least over the course of the entire campaign, still broadly reflects on the allocation of PEBs. While in my analysis I will not review the actual allocation of airtimes to parties, hypothesis M1 will deal explicitly with the question of whether self-imposed or loosely applied impartiality criteria, balanced against news values, have a detectable influence on the agenda-building impact of the main political actors.

*Hypothesis M2: Press partisanship moderates the agenda building power of political actors.*

The media present a continuum of political orientations and these should be mirrored in differences in the agenda-building powers of political actors. The aim of campaign coverage in partisan newspapers is to benefit one party at the expense of another.

An important question is how *saliency aware* media actors can be found to be. Saliency is a purely quantitative concept, implying that the more coverage an issue gets the more important it will be. In combination with issue ownership, it implies that issue-owning parties gain no matter what the tendency or tone of coverage. If a partisan paper wants to bolster the electoral prospects of its preferred party, ideally it should relay without distortion the stated issue priorities of that party to the public, while ignoring the agenda priorities of other political actors. Partisan media actors could of course also be tempted to give a positive account of their preferred party's policy proposals while at the same time denigrating the competitors' proposals. This could result in a perfectly balanced account of the different party agendas, which would, if saliency theory is right, be detrimental to the intended cause.

# **CHAPTER 5: QUANTIFYING CAMPAIGN PROCEEDINGS, PART I: REPLICATION**

## **PARTY AND MEDIA BEHAVIOUR DURING THE 1997 UK GENERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN**

### **5.1 Data requirements**

The preceding chapter outlined the central hypothesis of this study: that mass media coverage of substantive issues is expected to be, to a large extent, a function of the issue emphases given by campaigning parties. A valid empirical test for such a hypothesis requires campaign data of a sort that allows us to establish causality in the formation of party and media agendas. A causal relationship between two agendas exists if one actor's issue priorities are partly dependent on another actor's priorities, which means that the dependent agenda evolves in response to preceding occurrences on the independent agenda. That requires time series data containing repeated observations of campaign behaviour of different actors, so that agenda change can be traced and the extent to which change on the agendas of different actors are systematically interrelated can be estimated. This requirement constitutes a significant constraint on the choice of campaign(s) to study.

Although election campaigns in Western democracies are one of the core research objects of empirical political science and, accordingly, a vast amount of data has been collected in National Election Studies or campaign studies proper, one aspect of campaign proceedings remains neglected in terms of systematic data collection, namely the continuous communication output of political parties. The only political texts emanating from campaigns that



have received ample attention and have been systematically collected and content analysed are election manifestos (Klingemann et al. 1994; Budge 1999). But manifestos are of very limited use when it comes to investigating the development of the electoral agenda.

Of course, given the often-addressed professionalisation of political campaigns, and with it the tendency towards designing increasingly coherent and controlled campaigns, election manifestos should provide a blueprint of the priorities of subsequent communication efforts. Nonetheless, election manifestos are published at one particular point in time at the beginning of a campaign; and although they surely make their impact on media coverage and should set the stage for the entire campaign, and thus be systematically linked to all following campaign communications, the distribution of issue emphases over time remains a question of short-term strategy that will not have been set out in the manifesto. Even if the party behind the manifesto attempts to devise most of its day-to-day strategies well in advance, it will not disclose future tactical moves in the manifesto. In addition, campaigns can develop unforeseeable dynamics that may force parties to alter their plans. Altogether, that means that manifestos are but a summary of the platform that a party carries into the campaign, and a clear indication of which issues the party wants to emphasise and which positions on these issues to take. The day-to-day tactics of the campaign, i.e. at which point in time during the campaign they will emphasise which issues, are a different matter that will not be disclosed in the manifestos, and hence has to be investigated on the basis of different data.

The data required for the purposes outlined in the previous chapter have to consist of observations of party and media behaviour during the campaign. To my knowledge, only a single comprehensive data set of this kind exists to date. It was compiled by Holli Semetko and Margaret Scammell (*1997 Election Party and Media Content Analysis*) as part of a

larger study into the effects of political communication in the 1997 UK General Election campaign by Norris et al. (1999). The rationale behind the collection of party source material was inspired by earlier work from Semetko et al. (1991), which studied the agenda formation process between parties and media in the UK General Election campaign of 1983, and the US Presidential Election campaign of 1984. Semetko et al. (1991) collected material from US candidate speeches and UK press conferences during the campaigns instead of relying on election manifesto data.

For the 1997 campaign, Scammell and Semetko content analysed manifestos, press releases and party election broadcasts (PEB), which amounted to a fairly comprehensive account of the total communication output of the three main parties - Labour, Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats. Press releases in particular are argued to constitute a valid indicator of the parties' "tactical agendas" (Norris et al. 1999: 62). Their content analysis provides us with accounts of strategic or forced moves of political actors during a campaign, of either adaptive or proactive behaviour. The systematic collection and content analysis of press releases is a rare occurrence in campaign studies and is essentially what makes Scammell and Semetko's data set so valuable.<sup>49</sup>

The collection of party source material was accompanied by a content analysis of evening news broadcasts from three TV channels (*BBC*, *ITV* and *Sky News*) and of the front pages of six daily newspapers (*Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*, *Daily Mail*, *Mirror*, and

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<sup>49</sup> Press releases not only provide a daily measure of party output, they furthermore contain explicit attempts to signal strategic priorities to the media. Mass media, and in particular television, use for their campaign coverage their own reports or direct footage from press conferences or speeches, and press releases are in essence condensed statements from these events. In the press releases, parties emphasise the messages from speeches and press conferences that they would like to see prioritised in the media. Hence, evaluating the relationship between the content of press releases and the content of media coverage measures the extent to which the parties' emphasis that they put on some of their public statements of a given day are picked up by the media. Alternatively, the media could select themselves from their footage or first-hand knowledge of the public appearances which aspects to prioritise. An estimation of agenda-building effects hence serves to establish the effectiveness of press releases as means to drive media coverage.

*The Sun*). Hence, the data set contains measures of both daily campaign proceedings and daily media coverage of those proceedings.

It cannot be regarded as purely accidental that the most comprehensive data collection on communication output exists for a British election campaign. British campaigns are highly ritualised with the three main parties holding scheduled press conferences on almost every morning of every campaign day. During these press conferences, on average three or four party spokesmen and –women give statements relating to their particular area of policy expertise. The choice of spokespersons and the content of their statements define the priorities and set the stage for the day’s remaining party activities; and these statements are immediately handed out as press releases (Semetko et al. 1991: 26; Kavanagh and Gosschalk 1995; Rosenbaum 1997: 78-122). This facilitates not only news production from the campaign trail but also data collection for those who want to investigate the campaign proceedings.

## **5.2 Why re-analyse the 1997 UK campaign data?**

In their use of the data from the 1997 UK campaign, Norris et al. (1999) posed some questions that were similar to those that have been outlined in the previous chapters. In the introduction, Pippa Norris points out the two “major concerns of the book”, the first of which was “to establish how far strategic communications are important today for electoral success”, and the second was “to establish how far political coverage on television and in the national press has the capacity to influence the electorate” (Norris et al. 1999: 2f.). Through the additional use of British Election Study (BES) campaign panel surveys and an

experimental study on the effects of television news, Norris et al. aimed at a comprehensive account of communication effects between parties, media and voters. Apart from agenda building and agenda-setting, they were also looking into effects on civic engagement, persuasion effects and feedback loops (1999:12-19).

Revisiting the data they used is not meant as a mere replication. The focus here will be much narrower, while at the same time aiming at a more *efficient* use of the existing data, by “maximizing the information used for descriptive or causal inference” (King et al. 1994: 28). I will solely look at the salience measures from the party and media content analysis, since these are the data that allow for time-series analysis.

Norris et al. (1999) followed Semetko et al. (1991) not only in terms of their data collection method but also in their analysis of agenda interaction. They aggregated agenda data over the entire campaign period. Their units of analysis or cases are campaign issues and policy dimensions, the observed value of each case being the amount of times the issue has been mentioned by a party or media actor over the course of the campaign. They then correlated the aggregated media and party agendas and found overall correlations to be at best modest, which lead them to the conclusion that “the news media is fairly autonomous in its news priorities” (83). And when comparing public agendas with media agendas, they went on to conclude that “the public followed its own agenda” (128).

It is the same pitfall that McCombs and Shaw (1972) encountered in their initial agenda-setting study, namely making inferences about causality in a necessarily temporal process without specifying meaningful time frames that would allow such conclusions to be drawn. The difference is that McCombs and Shaw collected media and public opinion data that could not be disaggregated any further, which meant that they simply could not go beyond

stating the degree of observed simultaneous concern of both media and the public with similar issues. In contrast, the data that Norris et al. (1999) are using can easily be disaggregated to smaller time units that enable causal inferences to be made.

This is precisely the plan of the empirical analysis, which follows, namely to disaggregate to the level of daily party and media agendas and to apply time series analysis in order to determine the extent and direction of causality in the agenda building process. Election campaigns in general, and British campaigns and the 1997 campaign in particular have been exhaustively reported on using descriptive-analytical methods. What I am aiming for is instead a systematic quantification of proceedings.

The empirical analysis will proceed in three steps, each contained in one chapter, which can basically be summarized as: replication → disaggregation → causal analysis. The remainder of this chapter summarizes the data, replicates Norris et al.'s (1999) analysis, and discusses their choices of measuring issue attention.

### **5.3 The data**

The *1997 Election Party and Media Content Analysis*, directed by Scammell and Semetko, contains information about the behaviour, or more precisely the text (and visual) output, of 12 different 'actors': three political parties, three television channels, and six newspapers, over the last month before the UK General Election was held on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1997.

### *Data Sources: political parties, electronic and print media*

The study of agenda building in the UK necessitates a focus on the three main political parties in the country. A particularity of the British system is that quite a number of smaller parties represent regional interests and so only campaign on regional level, like the Scottish *SNP*, *Plaid Cymru*, or the Northern Irish parties. And while the national media do give some marginal coverage to regional campaigns, the national election campaign centres on the three main protagonists: the *Labour Party*, the *Conservatives*, and the *Liberal Democrats*.

The UK can be argued to have a 2 ½ party system, with two parties, Labour and the Conservatives, competing for government, and the Liberal Democrats winning more significant shares of the vote than of the seats, as a result of the first-past-the-post electoral system that tends to over-represent bigger parties. The data set used here, however, derives from the content analysis of political texts from all three parties. It is useful that the Liberal Democrats were included in the content analysis, because, although they do not seriously compete for government, they still constitute a sizeable national party. It will be of particular value to empirically assess the extent to which the Liberal Democrats are, as one might expect, marginalized by the media, and whether this also significantly delimits their agenda building power in comparison with the bigger parties.

The electronic media in the UK are represented by the content analysis of evening newscasts of three TV channels, *BBC 1*, *ITV* and *Sky News*. That means that the only news-producing electronic medium left out is *Channel 4*, which was in all likelihood omitted because of its comparatively small niche audience. The included channels present a cross-

section of some diversity, with the BBC being a highly regulated public television channel, ITV an almost equally regulated, long-established private channel, and both obligated to proportional stop-watch coverage of campaign proceedings, while Sky is representative of modern European private TV stations which do not work on the basis of enforced rules about campaign coverage (for a comparative discussion of the UK television market, see Semetko 1996a and 1996b).

The sampled newspapers can be divided into different, and partly crosscutting groupings. The British national press in 1997 consisted of 10 daily papers, six of which were sampled by Scammell and Semetko. One of the characteristic features of the British press landscape is the division into tabloid and broadsheet newspapers. Connell (1998: 18-9) identifies five papers as broadsheets and five as tabloids. He also adds the division within the group of tabloids into “mid-market dailies” and “popular dailies”, and identifies two as mid-market and the remaining three tabloids as popular dailies.

The newspaper sample that was chosen for the Scammell/Semetko content analysis appears fairly representative of the total press landscape with regard to the broadsheet-tabloid categories. They included three tabloids, two of which count as popular dailies (*The Sun* and *The Mirror*), while the *Daily Mail* is mid-market, which positions it somewhere in the middle in the broadsheet-tabloid continuum. They also included three broadsheets, *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and *The Times*. The omitted papers consist of the two smallest tabloids in terms of circulation - *Daily Express* and *Daily Star* -, and both the largest and the second smallest broadsheet - *Daily Telegraph* and *Financial Times*, respectively (see for a summary of the national press and its circulation figures: Seymour-Ure 1997: 82f.).

As noted repeatedly, 1997 saw a watershed in terms of press partisanship with the majority of daily papers for the first time in British history endorsing the Labour party during a campaign (Seymour-Ure 1997; Norris et al. 1999). The total ratio of Labour vs. Tory press was 6:4 if one counts *The Times* as endorsing the Tories, which was less clear in this instance since they decided late in the campaign to declare their support for any euro sceptic irrespective of party affiliation. The sample reflects this division roughly with four of the included dailies openly endorsing the Labour campaign (*Independent, Guardian, Sun, Mirror*) and the remaining two sticking, more or less, with their traditional affiliation with the Conservatives (*Daily Mail, Times*).

### ***Time frame of data gathering***

The choice of time frame, i.e. “the total period under consideration, from the beginning to the completion of the data gathering process” (Eyal et al. 1981: 212f.) appears somewhat arbitrary. The date of completion of data collection is of course unproblematic: it is set by Election Day. That means that the last newspaper issues to be considered dated from Election Day, the last news broadcasts from the night before Election Day, and the last campaign communication material, i.e. press releases, dated also from the day before election.

It is the date at which to begin data gathering that appears questionable. It is the prime minister who calls elections in the UK. He has to publicly announce the dissolution of parliament and set a date for polling, which is by law determined to occur no less than 23 days after dissolution (Butler 1995: 77). The 1997 elections were announced by the incumbent prime minister, John Major, on 17<sup>th</sup> March to be held on 1<sup>st</sup> May, 45 days later, which has correctly been described as “the longest campaign in recent history” (Norris 1997: 4). It was the longest campaign of the post-World War II period; in fact it was about



was the longest campaign of the post-World War II period; in fact it was about two weeks longer than any campaign since 1955 (Butler 1995: 76, Table 6.1).

The time frame for data gathering, chosen by Scammell and Semetko, however, reduces the observed campaign period back to the standard length of campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s, namely 31 days, by setting 1<sup>st</sup> April as the starting day for content analysis of party and media output. They refrain from explaining their choice of time frame, but the rationale for this may have been the decision of television channels to begin their comprehensive campaign coverage - and foremost the decision of the BBC to start extending the format of its flagship evening news programme, the "9 O' Clock News" on BBC 1 - on 1<sup>st</sup> April (Semetko et al. 1997: 102; Norris et al. 1999: 72). The beginning of this extended media coverage and of the data gathering also coincides roughly with the launch of the election manifestos by the Labour Party, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats in the first week of April.

The data falls short of providing a complete set of party and media output in various ways, one of which is the omission of material from the first two weeks of campaigning. In addition to that, the choice was made to collect and content analyse TV newscasts and newspapers on weekdays only, which creates some problems for time series analysis since it introduces regular missing data points.<sup>50</sup> In comparison, the collection of party output appears to be comprehensive for the chosen period. Although there are days without entries, it appears as though this is because parties did not release material on those days. For both Labour and Conservatives, only two and four days, respectively, are lacking data, and these invariably occurred on weekends. The Liberal Democrats communicated significantly

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<sup>50</sup> Issues in data analysis relating to the omission of weekend news will be discussed in Chapter 7 in which time series analyses are carried out.

less and less often than the bigger parties. Table 5.1 summarizes the data gathering, indicating and summing up the days for which material was collected and content analysed.

**Table 5.1: The timing of data collection during the 1997 UK campaign study**

Date	Party Press Releases			News	
	Labour	Tories	Liberal Democrats	Press	TV
30.03.1997	x				
01.04.1997	x	x		x	x
02.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
03.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
04.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
05.04.1997	x	x			
06.04.1997		x			
07.04.1997	x		x	x	x
08.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
09.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
10.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
11.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
12.04.1997	x				
13.04.1997	x		x		
14.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
15.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
16.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
17.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
18.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
19.04.1997	x				
20.04.1997	x	x	x		
21.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
22.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
23.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
24.04.1997	x	x		x	x
25.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
26.04.1997		x			
27.04.1997	x	x			
28.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
29.04.1997	x	x		x	x
30.04.1997	x	x	x	x	x
01.05.1997				x	
<b>N (coded days)</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>22</b>

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

### *Text units and coding*

Of the political and news texts that were content analysed I will be using all the coded news stories and the press releases from the three parties. Data from the manifestos and party election broadcasts (PEB) can be omitted because they do not constitute output that is necessarily comparable to press releases. Press releases are clearly meant to convey the strategic daily messages that parties hope the media will transmit in their coverage. The manifesto has a broader meaning, a relevance that goes beyond day-to-day strategy. Although the release days of manifestos are known, manifestos cannot be treated as that day's

political communication output. The role and relative importance of the manifesto in relation to a day's press releases cannot be measured. So even if we know the publication date of a manifesto, it appears unwise to include it in the analysis of party and media interaction during the campaign. Also, the parties invariably choose to emphasize particular aspects of the manifesto once it is published, and do so by issuing respective press releases. That means that the press releases capture the particular tactical use of the manifesto by the publishing party at the time of its publication.

Party election broadcasts (PEB) were omitted, mainly because they are directed towards the public rather than the media and have a different format than press releases. Although it might be of interest to study how strongly PEB reflect the particular issue emphases and agenda dynamics at the time of their screening, that research interest differs from the questions raised in this study. And most of all, the press releases constitute a sizeable enough and entirely coherent set of political text that merits its treatment as the sole and comprehensive indicators of strategic party behaviour during the campaign.

The political text in the form of press releases consists of 111 documents from the Conservative Party, 110 Labour Party documents and 45 releases from the Liberal Democrats.

The media data, on the other hand, includes 1,418 TV news stories and 559 newspaper articles. In contrast to the exhaustive quantification of the daily news output from the electronic media, the newspaper content analysis can only be regarded as a news sample. With the coding of front pages, only the most prominent aspect of news production is reported, excluding editorials and in-depth analysis. And especially with regard to the tabloids, we will see in later sections how the selection of front pages distorts or at least exaggerates selectivity in news production and produces high levels of day-to-day variance or white noise. It is likely that the consideration of editorials and the domestic political news section

of the papers would have produced a level of stability over time in coverage comparable to that which transpires from the TV content analysis.<sup>51</sup>

The TV news bulletins and newspaper front pages were broken down for the coding into smaller text units, namely the individual news stories or front-page articles. These can be treated as news texts, comparable to press releases that constitute the units of political text. The left column in Table 5.2 lists how many documents per actor were coded for the 1997 UK campaign study. It is evident that the electronic media provided the most material. From the BBC and Sky News alone ten times as many news stories or more were content analysed than from any of the tabloids. The broadsheets, not surprisingly, provided more material than the tabloids, which is mainly due to the different layouts of tabloid and broadsheet front pages.

For the content analysis, news stories, articles and press releases provided the text units. That means that these documents were not disaggregated to the level of lines or paragraphs, which would of course have provided with a more precise quantification of content. Instead, entire text documents were coded by summarizing their content. A multitude of content variables was considered by the coders, including story length, the political tendency within stories, the use of quotes, explicit references to parties and individual politicians, and so on. For the eventual time series analysis of agenda building, the only content information needed are the date of publication and the issue contents of any news or political text.

Political or campaign stories in the media were coded for up to six different subjects, listed in the order of importance or predominance in the story. In the coding of press releases, all mentioned topics were listed in their order of importance, producing at times lists

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<sup>51</sup> The limitation of newspaper coding to front pages was not a deliberate choice of Scammell and Semetko. The codebook instructions leaves the question as to how many pages and sections of newspapers will be coded open, depending on funds available.

that are longer than six entries per record. The resulting database has therefore multiple entries for each political or news texts.

**Table 5.2: Total amounts of campaign news and political text**

	Total number of documents (n of press releases; n of news stories/articles)	Total number of cases (sum of event counts per actor)	Event counts per document
<i>Conservatives</i>	111	360	3.24
Labour	110	466	4.24
Liberal Democrats	45	154	3.42
<b>Parties Total</b>	<b>266</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>3.68</b>
BBC	485	1396	2.88
ITV	363	925	2.55
Sky News	570	1228	2.15
<b>TV total</b>	<b>1418</b>	<b>3549</b>	<b>2.50</b>
The Times	178	427	2.40
The Guardian	93	297	3.19
The Independent	143	354	2.48
The Sun	49	98	2.00
The Mirror	47	96	2.03
Daily Mail	49	149	3.04
<b>Press total</b>	<b>559</b>	<b>1421</b>	<b>2.54</b>

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

The entries in the database are *event counts*, i.e. occurrences of topics in news or political texts. The middle column of Table 5.2 lists the event count totals per actor, while the right column reports the mean number of counts per document.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> It is apparent that party documents (press releases) have more counts, i.e. contain on average more references to different subjects than do media documents (articles or news stories). This is partly due to the restriction from the codebook that media records should only be coded for up to six different subjects. To a larger extent, however, the discrepancy between the mean number of event counts per political text and the mean per news text results from the fact that a considerable amount of news is non-political. Non-political stories were only roughly coded, the entry consisting almost invariably just of the main subject in the story. Only infrequently was a non-political story coded to contain more than one subject, and also only on rare occasion were there references in political stories to non-political subjects. It follows that the mean frequency of event counts for non-political stories remains fairly constant at just over 1.0. This systematically decreases the mean frequency of event counts per news text and implies that the average frequency of event counts per political or campaign story is substantially higher than the figures in Table 5.2.

The codebook lists a total of 239 different subjects, 225 of which are explicitly campaign- or policy-related. The remaining 14 subjects served to give a raw coding to non-political stories, which were only categorized but not of substantial interest themselves to the enterprise of a campaign study. The 225 different political subjects listed in the codebook are grouped into 15 thematic categories, nine of which are policy dimensions (CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM, DEFENCE, ECONOMY, SOCIAL WELFARE, EDUCATION, INFRASTRUCTURE, ENVIRONMENT/ENERGY, EUROPE/FOREIGN AFFAIRS, and REGIONS) while the 6 other categories concern the campaign proceedings and the behaviour of candidates and parties (CONDUCT OF CAMPAIGN, POLLS/HORSERACE, PARTY LEADERS, MEDIA TREATMENT, PARTIES/MANIFESTOS, and CAMPAIGN STYLE/SLEAZE).

The resulting data set allows us to quantify sufficiently (although not ideally since we have to put up with the well-known misbehaviour of event count data, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter) how often different political and media actors mentioned particular issues and how they varied their priorities over the course of the campaign. Since the data entries for non-political stories do not contain any relevant information with regard to campaign and issue agendas, they have been omitted from the data set. All estimates, for example percentages of daily media content devoted to issues or particular policy dimensions, are hence calculated from the total of campaign output, not the total news output.

## 5.4 The contents of campaigning and campaign coverage

### *Measuring agendas*

Norris et al. provided a rather brief report on the party and media agendas and their interaction in the 1997 campaign (1999: 79-84). The core methodological problem with their approach, as mentioned above, is the lack of disaggregation to the smaller time units, which are needed if we want to make causal inferences.

It is nonetheless useful to start out by looking at the aggregate agendas, for two reasons: first, for agenda building to matter at all, issues and policy questions need to play a major role in campaign communications and mass media coverage of the elections. Otherwise, even if we were to show that political actors are capable of determining which policy areas the media cover, this would only amount to them controlling a marginal aspect of what eventually reaches the public.

Secondly, some degree of convergence between party and media agendas has to transpire at the end (and, as argued before, the eventual degree of convergence is exactly what aggregate agendas can reveal). Again, otherwise our findings could amount to no more than stating that the parties managed to increase convergence somewhat but not to substantially shape media coverage.

A methodological issue that Norris et al. (1999) did not address, but on which they nonetheless made a decision, is how to measure agendas from event count data.

Norris et al. (1999) chose to treat news stories as equal units, which means that each article or story from a news bulletin was counted once. For this purpose, they considered only the dominant or most important subject recorded for each individual story, and then treated

the entire story as an occurrence of that subject. Considering that for a news story up to six different subjects were listed by the coders, the manner in which media agendas were aggregated led to the omission of a substantial part of the data. Since we do not know exactly how dominated an individual story was by its main theme, the omission of the rest is arbitrary, and it does indeed lead to a substantial underestimation of media attention to substantive political issues.

In addition, Norris et al. (1999) compare the media agendas estimated in this manner with party agendas, the aggregation of which was based on an entirely different procedure. With respect to parties, it was not documents but event counts that were summed up, hence treating each press release as if all subjects mentioned in it were equally important. Each procedure has the disadvantage of ignoring some of the information. In the latter case by treating all event counts as equal units of text any information about relative importance of issues in a text is left out, while the procedure used for calculating media agendas ignores a large number of issue occurrences, on the basis that the subjects were not dominating a story. Each approach may have its merits (either using as many cases as possible or instead using as much information we have about different cases as possible), but clearly the treatment of comparable text units should be consistent. There is no reason to assume that while news texts are essentially dominated by single themes, political texts are collections of multiple themes each of which is exactly as important as any other.

Table 5.3 introduces four alternative models that can be used to measure the media agenda (which is here presented as the media total, including all press and TV data), and each of them produces somewhat different distributions of attention between substantive issues and the general campaign proceedings.



The first column reports the frequencies of event counts per policy dimension, i.e. how often each dimension was mentioned in the media during the campaign. The second column reports the 'main story subject frequencies'. This refers to the number of stories that were dominated by issues from one of the policy dimensions. The two extreme models (1 and 4) are estimated from these different frequencies. Agenda 4 summarizes the media agenda in the same manner as Norris et al. (1999: 81, Table 5.5, which gives the agendas separately for press and TV) did. It gives for each subject category the percentage of news stories that were dominated by a subject out of that category. According to that agenda estimate, substantive issues accounted for less than a third of all news stories. If, in sharp contrast, we calculate the agenda as the distribution of all recorded event counts across the 15 dimensions (Agenda 1), we arrive at an estimate of 44% of media coverage devoted to issues.

**Table 5.3: Alternative agenda measures (press and TV combined)**

Subject	Count frequencies	Main story subject frequencies	Average rank in news story	Media Agenda 1: Percentage distribution of count frequencies	Media Agenda 2: Percentage of count frequencies weighted by 1/average rank	Media Agenda 3: Percentage of count frequencies weighted by 1/squared average rank	Media Agenda 4: Percentage distribution of main story subject frequencies
Conduct of campaign	715	253	2.67	18.6	20.9	23.3	28.7
Opinion polls	379	94	2.99	9.8	9.9	9.8	10.6
Party leaders	228	38	3.30	5.9	5.4	4.9	4.3
Media treatment	80	21	2.70	2.1	2.3	2.5	2.4
Parties	517	142	2.88	13.4	14.0	14.4	16.1
Campaign issues	237	45	3.05	6.1	6.0	5.9	5.1
<b><i>SUBTOTAL CAMPAIGN</i></b>	<b><i>2,156</i></b>	<b><i>593</i></b>	<b><i>2.89</i></b>	<b><i>55.9</i></b>	<b><i>58.4</i></b>	<b><i>60.9</i></b>	<b><i>67.2</i></b>
Constitutional reform	70	11	3.09	1.8	1.8	1.7	1.2
Defence	5	1	3.80	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Economy	528	73	3.36	13.7	12.2	10.8	8.3
Social Welfare	290	60	3.18	7.5	7.1	6.7	6.8
Education	197	32	3.17	5.1	4.8	4.5	3.6
Infrastructure	40	3	3.65	1.0	0.9	0.7	0.3
Environment	17	2	2.82	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.2
Europe/Foreign Affairs	340	67	3.10	8.8	8.5	8.2	7.6
Regions/Devolution	211	41	2.90	5.5	5.7	5.8	4.6
<b><i>SUBTOTAL ISSUES</i></b>	<b><i>1,698</i></b>	<b><i>290</i></b>	<b><i>3.19</i></b>	<b><i>44.1</i></b>	<b><i>41.6</i></b>	<b><i>39.1</i></b>	<b><i>32.8</i></b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3,854</b>	<b>883</b>		<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

The reason for this discrepancy is that some of the campaign themes, most importantly CONDUCT OF CAMPAIGN<sup>53</sup> and PARTIES<sup>54</sup>, were more likely to be the main subject of a story than any of the substantive issues. The third column shows that on average campaign themes ranked higher in news stories than did issues. This appears at first sight to suggest that while issues were mentioned in stories, they remained marginalized in most of them. If that were true, Norris et al.'s (1999) campaign measure could be said to do justice to the differential treatment of subjects by the media in their construction of stories.

<sup>53</sup> CONDUCT OF CAMPAIGN is an amorphous category that includes subjects like the strategy of parties, the daily travels of candidates, or campaign spending.

<sup>54</sup> PARTIES refers to manifestos, party records, and internal dissent.

But take for example one of the main subjects within the CONDUCT OF CAMPAIGN category, which was 'politicians' travels'. This subject accounts for over a third of the 239 times that the category dominated a news story. And 'politicians' travels' was, if mentioned, more likely to be the main subject of the story than any other subject from the code-book (65% of its occurrences were as main subject, whereas the average across all subjects was a mere 23%). And this makes of course intuitive sense, since the campaign travels of the candidates are one of the preferred and most frequently used frames for campaign reports in the media. Such frames help provide a plot for campaign coverage. The fact that more time or space in a story is spent on describing the campaign trail movements than on the content of the candidate's messages delivered on his day's travels is due to the nature of story-telling and should not be interpreted as if issues were only hidden in reports and ultimately irrelevant to viewers or readers.

The agenda measures in models 2 and 3 in Table 5.3 take account of the fact that campaign themes on average feature more prominently in campaign stories than issues do. Model 2 divides the number of event counts per subject category by its average rank within stories and calculates percentage distributions from the so weighted frequencies. Model 3 goes a step further and divides the observed count frequencies by the squared ranks. That means that Agenda 2 depicts importance as a linear function of rank, while in Model 3 relative importance of story subjects is interpreted as exponentially declining with lower ranks.

Models 2 and 3 produce strikingly similar distributions. It also emerges that the non-selective pure event counts model (Agenda 1) deviates less from the weighted frequency models than does the highly selective agenda estimation that Norris et al. used (Agenda 4).

This happens because issues are indeed mentioned in the vast majority of campaign stories. Issues were mentioned in 63% of all newspaper articles about the campaign and 72%

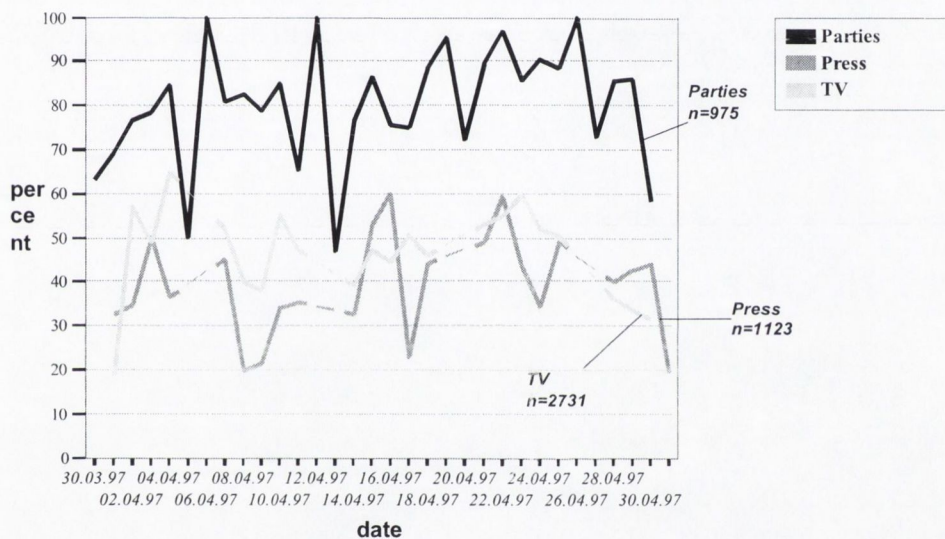
of all TV campaign stories. While only 11% and 15%, respectively, of these stories were coded as pure issue stories, the remaining 52% and 57%, respectively, of press and TV coverage were mixed stories in which issue coverage was embedded in reports of campaign proceedings. The agenda measure used by Norris et al. (1999) picks up only on a small part of all the issue coverage that appeared in campaign stories - since issues only headlined 17% of stories.

As argued before, we should use comparable measures of issue attention on which to base correlations between party and media agendas, and since we do not have clear information on relative importance of event counts within press releases from the parties, it appears most reasonable to use the unselective event counts model (Agenda 1). It deviates less from the weighted frequency models than does Norris et al.'s estimation. It is preferable to the more accurate weighted frequency models because it simplifies the estimation procedure. And it also corresponds to the procedure used by Norris et al. to estimate party agendas. Foremost, since we cannot apply a weighted frequency measure to the party agendas (we do not have information about relative importance of themes, only about the sequence in which they are mentioned in a press release), it is most important to provide a consistent and hence comparable agenda measure both for media and party output.

### *The importance of issues to parties and media*

Using the unqualified event counts measure, we can compare the amount of issue attention as it develops during the campaign. This is done in Graph 5.1 by plotting issue attention<sup>55</sup> of the three actor groups - parties, TV and the press - against time.

**Graph 5.1: Emphasis on the issue context by parties and media**



Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

Clearly, parties are consistently more focused on the issue context than are the media. It is also apparent that issue attention started off on a relatively low level but increased sharply over the first few days and that it dropped again sharply at the very end of the campaign. This holds for parties just as it does for the media. It appears as if both for parties and the media a campaign has some sort of a plot with an introduction and a conclusion to

<sup>55</sup> Issue attention is estimated in percentage of event counts per day that were mentioning issues. N is the total number of event counts per actor group.

proceedings, both of which are largely devoid of policy debates. The substance of policy is dealt with in between, where we find the parties devoting about 80% of their output to issues, dropping only twice during the first half of the campaign down to 50% and rising briefly, also twice during the first half, towards the ceiling of the scale. In the second half of the campaign, variance diminishes with issue attention stabilizing above 80%, before dropping again to 60% just before Election Day.

The television networks focused at the beginning on non-policy topics like general party strategy and, very much so, sleaze, before entering the coverage of policies, and left issue debates behind during the last few days which seem entirely dedicated to horserace coverage with discussion of the size of the expected Labour victory or the remote chance of a repeat of the 1992 poll debacle. But in between they dedicated a fairly stable half of their combined campaign coverage to issues. Just as with the parties, the first half of the campaign is characterised by strong oscillations, reaching after a dramatic early increase a peak of over 60% issue attention, after which the networks' interest drops again sharply. Again similar to the parties, the variance of the issue attention measure appears to decrease during the second half, producing an almost monotonic increase of issue attention that peaks about ten days before election day and monotonically decreases from there onwards.

The press were giving altogether the least and most unstable attention to what many might consider the very substance of politics. No trend in the press variable in either direction appears to hold for more than a couple of days.

The curves displayed in Graph 5.1 are of course only group averages, beneath which we discover differences between parties, networks and newspapers. Table 5.4 reports the daily averages and the standard deviation of issue concerns for individual parties and media actors.

We find there that much of the variance in the aggregated party estimate is produced by Labour and the Liberal Democrats, whereas the Tories not only top the table in terms of how much attention they gave to issues, but also appear to have been the most consistent proponents of policy debates, deviating least from the mean, which amounts in their case to 85% issue attention. The Labour Party proves to be least issue-attentive, although still way ahead of any network or newspaper.

**Table 5.4: Attention to the issue context by parties and media**

ACTOR	Days	Issue-related proportion of campaign communication and coverage	
	coded N	Daily mean	Std. Dev.
Conservatives	27	85.7	12.1
Labour	29	77.2	17.2
Liberal Democrats	21	81.0	17.6
<b>Party total</b>	31	<b>79.9</b>	18.3
BBC	22	51.3	11.8
ITV	22	46.2	12.3
Sky News	22	38.7	14.7
<b>TV total</b>	22	<b>45.5</b>	13.8
Guardian	23	33.2	19.0
Independent	23	40.8	16.8
Times	23	39.6	14.2
<b>Broadsheets total</b>	23	<b>37.9</b>	16.9
Mail	23	54.6	26.4
Mirror	23	31.1	35.6
Sun	23	26.2	25.9
<b>Tabloids total</b>	23	<b>38.5</b>	32.0
<b>Press total</b>	23	<b>38.1</b>	24.6

*Source:* Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

It might still surprise many observers that a very substantial part of campaign coverage deals with issues. Again, as with the general attention to the campaign, networks score higher than most of the newspapers. Amongst the networks, regulation, and the resulting stopwatch approach to campaign coverage that applies to both the BBC and ITV, results in more, and indeed more consistent, consideration of issues than provided by Sky News. This

indicates, as one would expect from stop-watch coverage of British campaigns, that the news reports on BBC and ITV tend to consist to a large degree of meticulous accounts of the day's campaign activities of all three main parties and their personnel, relying heavily on sound bites from rallies and press conferences, hence recycling much of what parties have prepared, and in the process almost unavoidably including a fair and fairly stable amount of issue coverage.

The most surprising finding here is that the tabloids on average devote just as much coverage to issues as do the "quality papers". The Daily Mail, the only 'mid-market' daily amongst the tabloids, and originally a broadsheet itself (Connell 1998: 19), even outscores every other media outlet (including the BBC) in the magnitude of its issue coverage. Even both of the popular dailies, the Mirror and the Sun, are not far behind the much more respectable and supposedly serious, informative Guardian. The substantial difference between broadsheets and tabloids does not lie in how much they write about issues, but how continuously they do so. The standard deviations for all three tabloids are substantially higher than for any other actor, which means that their coverage oscillated heavily between almost complete ignorance for the substance of politics and extreme issue hype. The expectation here is that in subsequent analyses we might find the tabloids focusing on issues almost only where these constituted an integral part of other, genuinely "exciting" and hence newsworthy, campaign proceedings.

The broadsheets are somewhat in the middle of those two extreme approaches, more selective than the networks yet still giving a routine account of the preceding day's events and being somewhat less susceptible or simply less flexible than the tabloids in the magnitude of their reaction to genuinely newsworthy issues.



Issues do not simply enter news reports because of their news values. If this were the case, we would expect high covariance between the different actors' attention to the issue context of the election. However amorphous and subjective the concept of news values is, different media actors would nonetheless be expected to show some agreement in their assessment of newsworthiness. But even the tabloids, notwithstanding their similarly high standard deviations, are not in sync. Although all three of them equally strongly fluctuated between issue attention and disinterest, their interest in issues ebbed and flowed in more or less unrelated cycles.

In contrast, all three networks' varying magnitudes of issue attention expose moderate but statistically significant bivariate correlations with one another.<sup>56</sup> As for the press, the statistically significant correlations that we do find are invariably very modest yet somewhat interesting, since they tend to involve papers that are endorsing the same party.<sup>57</sup> This might indicate that partisan papers tend to jump on the bandwagon and to extend their issue coverage only if their supported party raises an issue with some intrinsic news value. In order to substantiate this speculation, we need to investigate systematically which issues the media focused on, how much commonality and covariance there was in the different media's agendas, and how responsive they were to the policy stimuli from the political parties.

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<sup>56</sup> We find the strongest correlation at .63 ( $p=.001$ ) between the BBC's daily proportion of issue coverage and Sky News' relative attention to issues. The correlation between the BBC and ITV is still sizeable at .51 ( $p=.007$ ), while ITV's issue attention is somewhat more out of sync with Sky News (.32;  $p=.08$ ).

<sup>57</sup> We find correlations around .4 (significant at .05 level) between the Guardian, the Independent, and the Mirror, and also a correlation of .4 between issue attention in the Times and the Daily Mail.

*The specific issue content of campaigns and their coverage*

This short final section of the data summary looks at what is inside the reported total amounts of issue attention, i.e. it presents with the aggregated issue agendas, and reports the correlations between aggregated party and media agendas.

Table 5.5 shows that for all but the Liberal Democrats ECONOMY was the most important policy dimension receiving the plurality of emphasis by the parties and of all issue-related media coverage. Altogether, all agendas consist mainly of four core policy dimensions, ECONOMY, SOCIAL WELFARE, EDUCATION, and EU/FOREIGN AFFAIRS.<sup>58</sup>

**Table 5.5 Aggregated party and media agendas**

Subject	Conser- vatives	Labour	LibDems	TV	Press
Constitutional reform	1.6	0.9	2.6	4.1	4.1
Defence	0.0	0.9	0.9	0.2	0.5
Economy	57.0	40.1	19.0	29.5	35.5
Social Welfare	10.0	25.8	44.8	17.6	15.7
Education	11.0	15.8	22.4	12.2	9.8
Infrastructure	1.6	1.1	0.0	2.6	1.6
Environment	1.0	2.0	3.4	0.8	1.6
Europe/Foreign Affairs	14.2	11.5	6.0	17.3	27.8
Regions/Devolution	3.6	2.0	0.9	15.6	3.4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.1</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>99.9</b>	<b>100.0</b>
N	308	349	116	1,259	439

Note: Not all columns add up to 100 percent because of rounding. The above figures are calculated as a percentage of event counts in all press releases or political stories content analysed between 30<sup>th</sup> March and 1<sup>st</sup> May.

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, *Election Party and Media Content Analysis* (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

Correlations between aggregated agendas are substantial, ranging between .8 and .9 for all possible pairings involving the Conservatives, Labour, TV and Press. Only the Liberal Democrats with their unique focus on Social Welfare are somewhat detached from other

<sup>58</sup> REGIONS/DEVOLUTION is the exception: an issue dimension that largely features on only one agenda, that of the broadcast media. To some extent this maybe so because of the character of television coverage of the campaign. The TV stations' use of regional offices and reporters to cover daily proceedings across the country may lead to a news frame that produces repeated references to REGIONS.

agendas. Theirs is only significantly correlated with one other issue agenda, namely at .74 with Labour's. These correlations are reported in Table 5.6.

**Table 5.6: Inter-agenda correlations**

	Labour	LibDems	Press	TV
Conservatives	.891**	.353	.873**	.839**
Labour		.738*	.850**	.866**
LibDems			.438	.537
Press				.881**

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

Not all of these numbers are higher than the estimates for agenda cross-correlations provided by Norris et al. (1999: 82), which showed at least the same amount of correspondence between party and press agendas, but they are more consistent in that all correlations bar the ones involving the LibDems are in the same range.

Once we disaggregate to the level of particular media actors, we find that the television networks had almost identical issue agendas, correlated with one another at above .95 (see Table 5.7). That also means that all three channels were similar in corresponding closely to the agenda choices of Labour and Conservatives while differing markedly from those of the LibDems.

**Table 5.7: Cross-Correlations between TV agendas**

	ITV	Sky
BBC	.972**	.979**
ITV		.965**

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

The newspapers present a more varied picture, which is not surprising given that the sample of papers includes broadsheets and tabloids, pro-Labour and pro-Tory papers. However, the cross-correlations reported in Table 5.8 show that there is no clear dividing line, neither partisanship nor the broadsheet/tabloid divide. While three of the Labour papers, the Guardian, the Independent and the Mirror, appear to constitute a fairly coherent group, all of them being highly inter-correlated at around .9, no such tendency emerges for the Tory papers. The Times shares more of its agenda with the Guardian than with the Mail.

**Table 5.8: Cross-correlations between press agendas**

	Independent	Mirror	Mail	Sun	Times
Guardian	.916**	.899**	.843**	.874**	.959**
Independent		.902**	.759*	.615	.828**
Mirror			.630	.716*	.834**
Mail				.778*	.919**
Sun					.928**

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, *Election Party and Media Content Analysis* (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

The Sun, as the newspaper with the least campaign and the least issue coverage, both in terms of the amount of coverage and the number of policy dimensions ever mentioned, has an agenda that is moderately correlated with those of all other papers, except the Independent (here only a correlation of .65 is found). The Sun's issue priorities do not correspond more with those of other Labour-endorsing papers. The highest correlation is with the Times.

Table 5.9 reports the correlations between party and individual media agendas. And here, a clear pattern emerges linking press partisanship with agenda correspondence. While the agenda choices of the Sun are not corresponding closely to the issue emphases given by any

of the parties, the remaining Labour papers, Guardian, Independent and Mirror, reflect the Labour agenda consistently more closely than the Conservative agenda (correlations with Labour are between .04 and .17 higher). The other side of the partisan divide seems to hold together in agenda terms equally well with both the Daily Mail and the Times corresponding more closely with the Tory's agenda than with Labour (Tory lead in terms of correlations ranges between .07 and .20).

**Table 5.9: Correlations between aggregated party and press agendas**

	Labour Press			Tory Press		
	Guardian	Independent	Mirror	Sun	Daily Mail	Times
<b>Conservatives</b>	.782*	.829**	.744*	.604	.903**	.844**
<b>Labour</b>	.823**	.939**	.918**	.531	.706*	.773*
<b>Liberal Democrats</b>	.511	.698*	.775*	.164	.099	.320

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Note: Cell values are Pearson correlations between issue agendas (N=9).

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

To sum up, what we can infer from summarizing the data from the 1997 campaign is both that issues were not marginalized by the press, and that the campaign produced substantial convergence between policy agendas of parties and the media, which holds generally with regard to all major television networks and most strongly for partisan newspapers. The chapter has replicated the approach that Norris et al. (1999) have taken to study the relationship between issue emphasis by parties and issue coverage in the media. In the process of replication, however, their method of measuring issue coverage was challenged. It appears wise to include issue references in the media that were lost in their aggregation. While in the data gathering process news stories were coded as containing references to multiple themes, everything but the dominating theme of the story was omitted for the es-

timation of media agendas. It was shown that, by doing so, Norris et al. underestimated the role of issues in media coverage, and also that this resulted in an unequal treatment of political and news text.

A more urgent problem with their approach is, however, that they did not consider the dynamics of the agenda building process. Replicating Norris et al.'s investigation cannot result in an assessment of the direction of causality. Agenda building research needs to draw from the advances in the field of agenda-setting research, as was argued in Chapters 3 and 4, which calls for disaggregation to smaller time units and time-series analysis. The next chapter will be concerned with the process of disaggregation. Considerable amounts of information are lost by treating a campaign as an event, as Norris et al. have done. A campaign is a dynamic process, and disaggregation allows visualising and analysing the ebb and flow of issues on different agendas.

Ultimately, for the assessment of causality in agenda building, it is more relevant to know *when* during a campaign different actors mentioned particular issues than to know *how often* over the course of the campaign they did so.

## **CHAPTER 6 : QUANTIFYING CAMPAIGN PROCEEDINGS, PART II: DISAGGREGATION**

### **6.1 The rationale behind disaggregating data**

As briefly referred to in the previous chapter, a crucial guideline for data analysis is to make as efficient a use of the data as possible. King et al. (1994) point out that disaggregating data helps to maximise efficiency:

“[A]n efficient use of data involves maximizing the information used for descriptive or causal inference. Maximizing efficiency requires not only using all our data, but also using all the relevant information in the data to improve inferences. For example, if the data are disaggregated into small geographical units, we should use it that way, not just as a national aggregate. The smaller aggregates will have larger degrees of uncertainty associated with them, but if they are, at least in part, observable implications of the theory, they will contain some information which can be brought to bear on the inference problem.” (King et al. 1994: 28)

The data from the 1997 campaign do indeed contain more information that explicitly relates to the research question of agenda building than was used by Norris et al. (1999) in their analysis of agenda interrelationships.

There are two targets for disaggregation, both of which allow retrieving additional information. One is to disaggregate into smaller time units, the other to disaggregate policy dimensions into their constituent parts, which are individual issues. Both procedures will produce smaller aggregates that do indeed contain “observable implications of the theory” (King et al. 1994: 28). The larger aggregates are important in that they indicate the general priorities of different actors in the 1997 campaign and the overall correspondence between

what parties and media tended to talk about. If there were no sizeable correspondence between these general priorities, i.e. correlations between aggregate agendas, we could safely conclude that whatever happened during the campaign, it did not have major consequences. That means that if there were agenda building effects they should show in the aggregates. However, what ultimately shows in the aggregate cannot be taken as evidence in itself for agenda building effects.

This is where disaggregation comes into play. If the aim is to determine causality in agenda building, then it is crucial to know not only *what* different actors said, but also *when* they said it. Disaggregating into smaller time units reveals the distribution of attention across time. And only on the basis of information about over-time distribution of issue attention on party and media agendas can we make causal inferences.

Disaggregating policy dimensions into individual issues is of equal importance but refers to a different problem. It is necessary to establish *what exactly* parties and media were talking about when they referred to policy dimensions like ECONOMY, WELFARE, or FOREIGN AFFAIRS. This form of disaggregation provides a crucial test of the validity of policy dimensions as units of analysis.

### ***Disaggregating time***

The study of agenda building during election campaigns has to go quite some way in order to emulate the methodological advances of agenda-setting research and to provide with equally sound evidence that supports its core hypothesis.

As discussed at length in Chapter 4, there are only few examples of studies of agenda building processes involving politicians and media, which disaggregate data and make use



of sophisticated time series analysis (Bartels 1996; Wood and Peake 1996). But these are longitudinal studies with time frames of between four (Bartels 1996) and seven years (Wood and Peake 1996). They relate output on selected policy areas from branches of government (President, Congress) to weekly numbers of respective articles in the press and employed sophisticated techniques (vector auto-regressions) in order to establish the causal direction of government-press relationships.

The use of such sophisticated time-series analysis for the study of campaign dynamics is made impossible by the short time frames of election campaigns, at least in a European setting that does not experience 'permanent campaigns'. But the short time frame of campaigns and the limits it sets in terms of methodologies that can be employed does not justify the fact that all the campaign studies to date that have looked into the relationship between party and media agendas invariably used a methodology that is reminiscent of the founding days of agenda-setting research (Raymond 1987; Semetko et al. 1991; Alvarez 1996; Walters et al. 1996; Norris et al. 1999; Petrocik et al. 2001). Apart from Alvarez (1996), none of these studies have systematically disaggregated data to a level that would allow for causal analysis, and even Alvarez (1996), although he did disaggregate and looked at issue careers on politicians' and media agendas, fails to provide any systematic analysis beyond the mere eyeballing of trends in the data.

A core purpose for revisiting the data from the UK 1997 campaign is to make up some ground and to move agenda building research closer to the methodological standards set by advances in agenda-setting research.

In their methodological critiques of the agenda-setting tradition, Eyal et al. (1981) and Gonzenbach and McGavin (1997) have pointed out that the subject of study is a temporal process and has to be treated that way. To say that the public agenda is set by the media or

that the media agenda is built by their sources, defines the study of *agenda change* as the subject of analysis. Accordingly, the most important observable implications of such hypotheses are only to be found in the smaller aggregates.

Disaggregation into smaller time units allows observing variation in agendas over time, and is needed in order to relate variation in the dependent variable (in our case media agendas) to variation in the independent variable (party agendas), and ultimately to explain media agenda change as a function of preceding party stimuli.

The steps of disaggregation across time in this chapter serve to illustrate the occurrence of variation in agenda composition over time and to make descriptive inferences about co-variation in party and media agendas. This sets the stage for causal analysis of agenda building in the next chapter.

### ***Disaggregating subject matters***

We are dealing with an additional and conceptually separate problem of aggregation where it is argued that if party X increases its emphasis on policy dimension D at time T, medium Y tends to also increase its coverage of dimension D at time T+1. The aggregation problem arises from the fact that dimension D is a collection of individual issues,  $i_1 \dots i_n \in D$ . Policy-making is highly specialised, and hence issues that are subsumed under the same policy dimension headline are varied and do not have to be closely related to one another in substance. This is for example why Norris et al. (1999) state correctly that “Europe was the single most time-consuming policy issue”, because, “although ‘economy’ represented a higher proportion of stories than ‘foreign affairs’, this general category en-

compasses a wide range of sub-topics including inflation, unemployment, taxes, and budgetary policies” (75).

And as long as we only know that two actors emphasise the same policy dimension, we cannot be certain that their attention was related. It will only have been meaningfully related if they were talking about identical or at least similar or related sub-aspects within that dimension.<sup>59</sup> Some issues within policy dimensions are wide apart in terms of their policy substance. So if, for example, the Labour party were to announce its position on raising or lowering VAT and some newspapers were in their following morning’s issues discussing Labour’s relationship with Trade Unions, we might be misled into believing that Labour talking about the economy has prompted the media to do the same, simply because both Trade Unions and VAT are coded as economic issues. In fact, no agenda building would have occurred. The party and the newspapers would simply have been talking past one another.

Hence, any agenda building effect that materialises on the aggregate level of policy dimensions has the potential to be a spurious one.

It is therefore necessary to not only disaggregate into smaller units of time but also to disaggregate the subject matter into smaller units of substance. This will occupy the final part of this chapter. In Chapter 7, it will however be shown that there are significant limitations to the use of individual issues as units of analysis. The eventual investigation of causality in agenda-setting will have to rely on policy dimensions as units of analysis, mainly because

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<sup>59</sup> It should be pointed out that causality in agenda building does not hinge on perfect identity of issues within a policy dimension being raised by a party and being subsequently covered in the media. A party might well raise a particular aspect of a policy dimension, like for example Foreign Affairs, say the concept and time plan for the European monetary union, and thereby cause the media to speculate about what has been coded in the present data set as a separate issue, namely the EU as a “threat to sovereignty” of member states like the UK. Although, even in such instances it is likely that the originally raised issue, even if it prompted media preoccupation with some other but related issue, will at least be mentioned in the coverage somewhere.

of the greater data density, which is important since event count data can only be put to good use for causal analysis if counts are distributed in a way that at least approximates a normal distribution. This affords simply more counts per case and that can only be accomplished by aggregating to the level of policy dimensions.

Prior disaggregation into individual issues mainly serves to ensure that within policy dimensions parties and media were actually referring to such an extent to similar sub-subjects that the use of aggregate policy dimensions for causal analysis is validated.

## **6.2 Agenda variation across time**

### ***Information regained: the averaging effect of agenda aggregates***

Agendas are not static. For example, from Table 5.4 we learned that about 40% of the total communication output of the Labour Party referred to economic issues. This percentage value, as does any other percentage value in that table, results from the cumulative sums of references that were made to an issue during the campaign. Over the course of the campaign, however, the Labour party may have given at times significantly more attention to economic issues, and at other times significantly less. Issue attention and hence the composition of agendas may vary over time.

And if indeed there were major shifts of attention during the campaign, the correlations between aggregated agendas, which are reported in Tables 5.5 through 5.8, will contain little information about the actual relationship between different actors' behaviour. It is likely that, at different stages of the campaign, correlations between actor agendas deviated significantly from the overall – or average - correlations.

In a first step of disaggregation, we can divide the campaign into weekly periods and compare both to what extent individual actors changed their priorities and to what extent inter-agenda relationships changed over time. The UK 1997 campaign stretched over five weeks, and since no media data was collected for weekends, part of the dataset divides naturally into weekly sub-periods. While each of the weekly media agendas aggregates information from a three to five-day period (data gathering began on a Tuesday, and election day was a Thursday), campaign weeks with respect to the parties run from Monday to Sunday.

Weekly aggregates do not allow for causal analysis. It is not suggested that the party activities in week one build the media agenda of week two. At a later stage, it will be possible to investigate effect spans, but in general there is no reason to expect that effects only materialise with a one-week delay. Weekly agendas are still aggregates, but in contrast to the total campaign aggregates that Norris et al. (1999) worked with, the division into weeks allows to give a first impression of how much variation, how much agenda movement can be detected. Just as with the aggregated campaign agendas reported in Table 5.5, each weekly agenda consists of nine cases, each case being the amount of times a policy dimension was mentioned in political or news text during one of the campaign weeks.

Table 6.1 reports, for each of the three parties, and for television and the press<sup>60</sup>, how strongly the composition of an actors' agenda during a given week was related to his issue priorities from any earlier or later week of the campaign. The consistency of the Conserva-

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<sup>60</sup> The three television channels and the six newspapers are grouped here into one variable per type of medium. This is mainly done for presentation purposes (with a total of 12 actors, correlation matrices would otherwise become confusing) and also because of small number of weekly counts per issue dimension for some of the newspapers.

tives is quite striking. One can almost talk of a static campaign. They did not seem to vary their issue emphasis much throughout the campaign. Each week's agenda of theirs is correlated at .9 or higher with all the other weeks' agendas. The picture for Labour and the Liberal Democrats is somewhat more varied. The Labour party appears to have run a highly consistent campaign during the first two weeks with a correlation of .98. They shifted their issue emphases substantially during the third, while the last two weeks' agendas were again substantially correlated with one another and with the earlier weeks. The LibDems campaign was somewhat more static than that of Labour, with almost each entry in the correlation matrix being above .7 and statistically significant. They did, however, change priorities somewhat during the third week, for which we find rather moderate correspondence with the other four weeks' agendas. While weeks 1, 2, 4, and 5 are correlated with one another at above .9, the coefficients for bivariate relationships between week 3 and any other week range between .65 and .88.

Both press and television expose similar patterns of agenda change to that of the Labour party. Both seem to carry their first week's agenda into the second week while shifting focus during the third. While the press agendas of the last two weeks are again substantially correlated with one another and with earlier agendas, the TV channels alter their priorities again during the last week.

**Table 6.1: Correlations between the agendas of each party or medium from different campaign weeks**

**Table 6.1.1 Conservatives**

	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Week 1	.939**	.931**	.968**	.902**
Week 2		.987**	.953**	.944**
Week 3			.933**	.903**
Week 4				.966**

**Table 6.1.2 Labour**

	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Week 1	.980**	.579	.797*	.819**
Week 2		.648	.859**	.891**
Week 3			.857**	.835**
Week 4				.884**

**Table 6.1.3 Liberal Democrats**

	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Week 1	.975**	.824**	.950**	.948**
Week 2		.883**	.912**	.950**
Week 3			.653	.700*
Week 4				.971**

**Table 6.1.4 Press**

	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Week 1	.822**	.287	.569	.723*
Week 2		.561	.714*	.848**
Week 3			.889**	.702*
Week 4				.933**

**Table 6.1.5 TV**

	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
Week 1	.940**	.516	.676*	.532
Week 2		.567	.595	.339
Week 3			.851**	.502
Week 4				.535

*Source:* Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, *Election Party and Media Content Analysis* (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

Apart from the Conservatives, the involved parties and media appear to have varied their attention to different policy dimensions over the course of the campaign. Correlating party and media agendas can put these weekly agenda estimates to further use for each individual week of the campaign. While we saw in the last chapter that all party and media agendas, bar the Libdems', seemed to be corresponding substantially with each other in the 1997 campaign, the weekly interactions can give some indication as to whether these relationships are subject to shifting dynamics, or whether they may even be spurious ones. It is conceivable that inter-agenda correlations remain insignificant during each single week, yet their accumulation over the entire period produces convergence. That would then either mean that parties and media did not interact or that fairly long effects spans applied.

Table 6.2 reports bivariate correlations between all of the five actors during every single week of the campaign. What emerges is a picture of strong agenda convergence between Labour, the Conservatives, press, and television, during the first two weeks. All the bivariate correlations involving these four actors produce highly significant coefficients of above .85, indeed with only two exceptions (press vs. television during the first week, and Labour vs. press during the second week) the coefficients are above .9. These correlations are higher than the overall correspondence between aggregated campaign agendas, reported in Table 5.6. Much of the overall correspondence between the Labour and Conservative agenda and the media agendas is a result of their almost identical composition during the first two weeks.

We also saw, in Table 6.1, that the Labour party ran a very consistent campaign throughout the first two weeks, that the Conservatives' agenda was static throughout and that both television and press coverage remained almost unchanged during the first couple of weeks. This means that at the beginning of the campaign the two main parties and all the media



agreed on what the important policy dimensions of the campaign were, and that these priorities did not change much until the third week.

Their focus was indeed predominantly on economic issues, which dominated the Tory campaign throughout and featured on the Labour agenda and the media agendas much more prominently during the first two weeks than later on. During the third week, Labour and the media shifted focus away from economics, but apparently the media moved in a different direction than did Labour. Table 6.2.3 shows that while the media agendas continued to correspond with each other as closely during the third week as they had done before, both Labour and the Conservatives went out of step with one another and with the media. While the Conservatives continued their preoccupation with economics, Labour moved away from this issue area just as did the media, but decided on new priorities that the media did not pick up on. During the fourth week, however, party and media agendas moved closer together again, a tendency which became even stronger between Labour, Conservatives and the press during the final week, while the electronic media decided on different priorities than everyone else towards the end of the campaign.

The Liberal Democrats remained detached from proceedings throughout the campaign. Only during the third week the composition of their agenda was almost identical to that of Labour, but typically that was during the short period in which Labour lost touch with the media.

**Table 6.2 Inter-agenda correlations for different weeks of the campaign**

**Table 6.2.1 Week 1**

	Labour	LibDems	Press	TV
Conservatives	.974**	.278	.977**	.901**
Labour		.442	.959**	.927**
LibDems			.342	.452
Press				.839**

**Table 6.2.2 Week 2**

	Labour	LibDems	Press	TV
Conservatives	.926**	.204	.970**	.956**
Labour		.548	.876**	.944**
LibDems			.164	.345
Press				.954**

**Table 6.2.3 Week 3**

	Labour	LibDems	Press	TV
Conservatives	.282	.550	.543	.609
Labour		.948**	.279	.445
LibDems			.402	.563
Press				.932**

**Table 6.2.4 Week 4**

	Labour	LibDems	Press	TV
Conservatives	.859**	.117	.731*	.628
Labour		.451	.868**	.867**
LibDems			.282	.549
Press				.842**

**Table 6.2.5 Week 5**

	Labour	LibDems	Press	TV
Conservatives	.862**	.184	.918**	.111
Labour		.614	.906**	.149
LibDems			.307	.016
Press				.233

*Source:* Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, *Election Party and Media Content Analysis* (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

What can be inferred from these correlation matrices is that agendas are subject to substantial variation, and that overall correlations between aggregated agendas only ever report relationship averages. It is of importance to understand precisely what is behind varying agenda compositions, and what drives agendas closer to one another or makes them drift apart.

The weekly aggregates, their changing compositions, and the changing degrees to which convergence between agendas becomes apparent at different times, indicate that the overall relationships between campaign aggregates (in Table 5.6) are not spurious. At times, parties and media were indeed in almost perfect agreement about issue priorities, while at other times they strongly disagreed. What is important is to find out which side managed to draw the other closer at times.

### ***The content of agenda change: careers of policy dimensions***

In order to unveil the precise dynamics of an electoral campaign, one needs to disaggregate even further, to the level of daily issue priorities. While disaggregation increases uncertainty, as indicated by King et al. (1994: 28), which in our case means that there will be more white noise in daily estimates than in higher aggregates, it serves the purpose of tracing in more detail the trends of changing issue emphasis. This allows us to illustrate what is behind the weekly agenda shifts that were presented in the previous section.

The descriptive statistics in Appendix A report the total number of counts per policy dimension for each of five variables (CONSERVATIVES, LABOUR, LIBDEMS, PRESS, and TV), together with the average number of counts per policy dimension and time unit, and the standard deviation thereof.

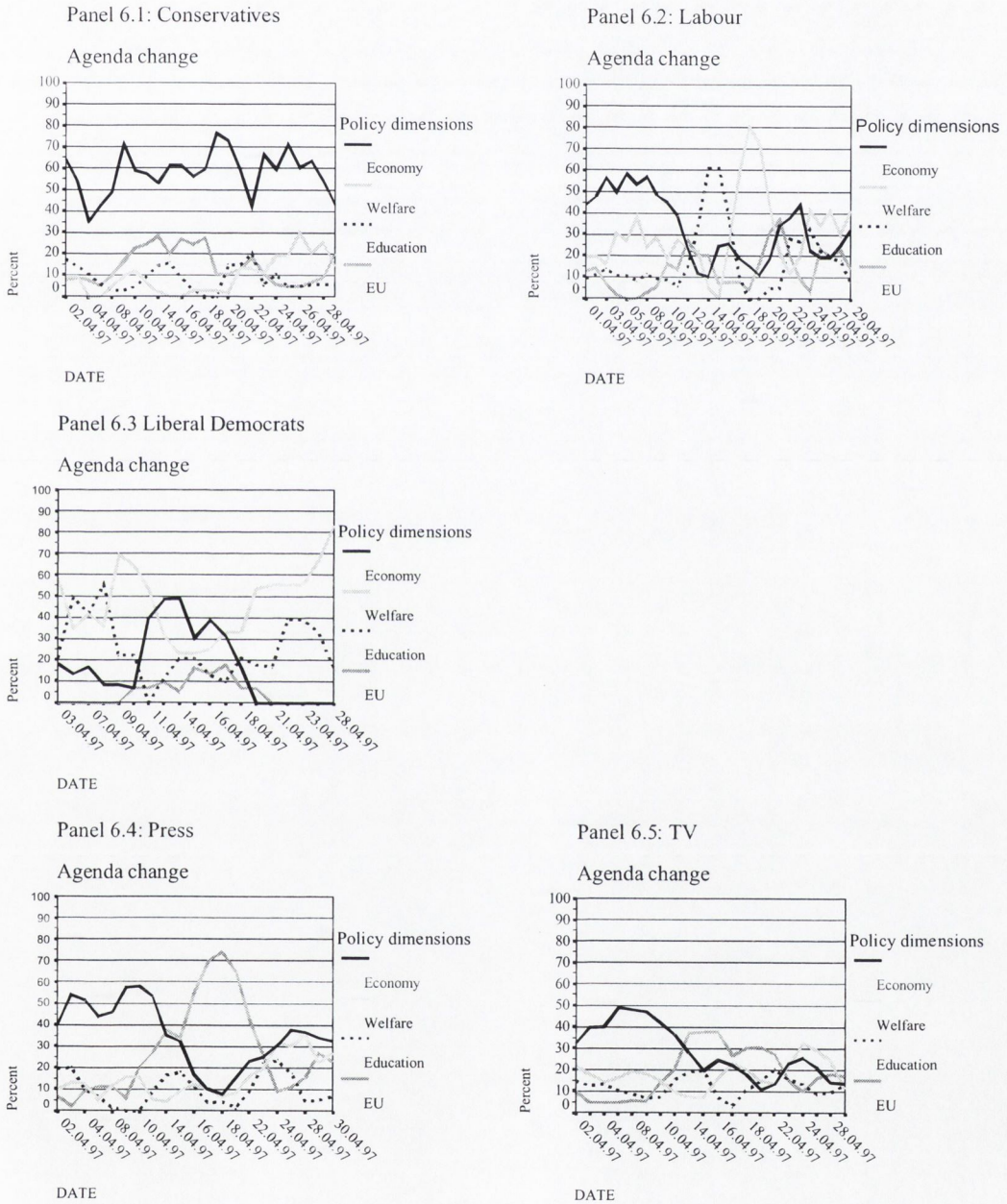
The standard deviations suggest that agendas were subject to continuous change of some substantial magnitude. And it is possible to show that agenda change across the major policy dimensions is more than pure white noise, namely by plotting the movements of the bigger policy dimensions over time for all five variables, as depicted in the five panels of Figure 6A.<sup>61</sup> These graphs show meaningful trends over time. In order to clarify trends in the movement of policy dimensions over time, the daily percentages of event count distributions have been converted into three-day moving averages, which eliminates some of the white noise.

As already indicated by the correlations between weekly agendas, the Conservatives were not only cumulatively but also continuously preoccupied with economic policy. As mentioned by Norris et al. (1999: 74) in their short description of the dynamics of the issue agenda during the 1997 campaign (see also Norris 1997), economic issues dominated the start of the campaign. With the launch of the manifestos in early April, both Labour and Conservatives started off by competing over economic issues, and the media agendas mirror this priority for just as long as both major parties agree on the prevalence of economics. Together with the Labour party shifting focus, at the end of the second week of the campaign, the media's interest in economics subsides and is overhauled by the EU story. With regard to economics in particular, the Liberal Democrats were obviously out of step with proceedings, since they concentrated almost all of their attention to economic issues during the third week of the campaign, just when the media and the Labour party had dropped the issue.

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<sup>61</sup> The focus here is on the four major policy dimensions, basically because within the other five dimensions event counts are very rare and their distribution over time does not yield meaningful trends.

**Figure 6A: Over-time distribution of relative attention to the four main policy dimensions (3-day moving averages)**



Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

This quantification of the patterns of the campaign in 1997 and its issues corresponds strongly with previous descriptive campaign reports (Norris 1997; Seymour-Ure 1997; Kellner 1997; Norris 1999; Norris et al. 1999).

European integration and, in particular, the question of monetary union, became a major story during the latter part of the 1997 campaign because of the large number of euro sceptics in the Conservative party openly voicing their position against the wait-and-see tactics of John Major's government. As Norris et al. point out, "the subject of Europe was important not so much because of the intrinsic news value of the EMU but because of the subject's power to provoke turmoil within the Conservative Party and its significance for their party image and post-election prospects" (1999: 75). In turn, the turmoil within the party that the issue was capable of provoking had intrinsic news value, hence the media interest in the story.

The common interpretation of events during the latter part of the 1997 campaign was, however, that the issue was first picked up by the media who gave a platform to euro sceptics, which then forced Tory campaign headquarters to react. The panels in Figure 6A, in contrast, give some indication that it might actually have been the Conservative campaign that treated the issue in their press releases before the media picked up on it: the EU curve in Panel 6.1 begins to climb from 8<sup>th</sup> April onwards, between one and three days earlier than on any of the other actors' agenda. We will study the career of the EU issue as well as two of the economic issue careers in more detail at the beginning of the next chapter. Eyeballing the panels in Figure 6A does give a first indication of the sequence of events, but time-series analysis will enable to make more sound judgments about direction of causality.

The only major identifiable trend with regard to the remaining two policy dimensions (education and social welfare) is some substantial and simultaneously occurring attention to welfare issues by all actors during the final week of the campaign, just before the media resigned more or less from covering issues and devoted their final couple of days of campaign coverage to the horserace, the reliability of polls, and the likely magnitude of the Labour victory. Altogether, education and welfare, as mentioned by Norris et al. (1999: 74ff.), were consistently mentioned issues, but they did not rise to ever dominate policy debates between parties and media in a way as did both economic and European issues.

By disaggregating data into smaller time units, it can be illustrated that issue evolution is a dynamic process, and that relationships between agendas are, as a result, not stable. Correlations between agenda aggregates, which were presented by Norris et al (1999: 78), are somewhat misleading. In fact, at times the major parties and the media were much more in agreement about priorities than their overall correspondence would suggest, while at other times they considerably moved apart. From the aggregate figures, we can only estimate the average similarity between agendas, without knowing whether intense periods of convergence occurred or not. In addition to that, by tracing the careers of policy dimensions like ECONOMY or EU/FOREIGN AFFAIRS on the different agendas, we can see how attention to these issue complexes ebbed and flow and that the movements on different agendas may be systematically related.

Party and media agendas do not appear to evolve separately. The question then is whether we can establish a systematic pattern of interaction.

But before entering the in-depth analysis of stimulus-response mechanisms and causal direction in agenda building, we first need to make a detour that establishes the meaning, i.e. the content, of policy dimensions and the degree of correspondence in policy dimension content between different actors, since these will ultimately serve as units of analysis. As argued in the introduction to this chapter, policy dimensions are broad and possibly heterogeneous collections of issues. Accordingly, the apparently intense exchange between parties and media about economic questions during the first two weeks of the campaign, for example, may be proven to be a spurious relationship, namely if different actors could be shown to have focussed on unrelated fields of the economy.



### 6.3 Dissecting policy dimensions

Aggregates invariably hide some information. We saw in the preceding section on temporal disaggregation that agendas vary over time and that they appear to do so in gradual fashion, with systematic trends. The meaningfulness of correlations between aggregate agendas depends on how these temporal patterns of issue evolution are interrelated.

But they also depend on how valid an aggregation a policy dimension is. We need to know whether two actors more often than not refer to the same thing when they are coded to have talked about a policy dimension like ECONOMY or SOCIAL WELFARE.

#### *The number and nature of issues*

The nine policy dimensions that were identified and applied to the coding of political and news text by Scammell and Semetko contain a total of 141 separate issues (see Appendix C for a full listing of issues grouped into policy dimensions). Of these, 14 issues had no entries in the 1997 data set, which means that they were never mentioned in a press release or news text (or at least no text was coded for containing any passages about these issues).<sup>62</sup> That leaves us with a total of 125 issues, any one of which was mentioned at least once by a party, newspaper, or in a news bulletin.

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<sup>62</sup> Since most of the coding scheme was taken from earlier campaign studies by Semetko et al. (1991) in the 1980s, some of the then coded issues did no longer apply to the political debates of the late 1990 (like, for example, the Falklands) or were apparently of no particular interest to any of the involved parties and media actors during the 1997 campaign (like, apparently, the entire theme complex of nuclear energy). Seven of the nine policy dimensions contained non-applicable issues:

CONSTITUTION/ POL. S.: 330 Bill of Rights; 333 MI5/ MI6

DEFENCE: 349 Policy: LibDem

ECONOMY: 364 Nationalisation; 372 Savings Schemes; 373 Money Supply

SOCIAL WELFARE: 398 Jobseekers' Allowance; 399 Child Benefit; 414 Welfare Cuts

ENVIRONMENT/ENERGY: 452 Nuclear Power; 455 Energy Conservation; 456 Power Generation/ Supply

EU/FOREIGN AFFAIRS: 478 Anglo-Irish relations; 479 Falklands; 481 Overseas Development

REGIONS: 493 Scots Law/ Legal System

Policy dimensions differ widely with regard to how many individual issues they contain. This ranges between only three subdivisions within the category DEFENCE to a total of 28 individual issues subsumed under ECONOMY (see Table 6.3). Apart from EDUCATION, which contains only 10 different issues, the dominant dimensions of the campaign are also the ones containing the largest sets of different issues. This makes it particularly important to disentangle what is underneath the larger concept of policy dimensions.

As we can see from Table 6.3, there is substantial variation in the total number of issues ever mentioned by different actors. This ranges from the highly diversified BBC agenda that contains references to no less than 103 different issues to the sparse issue agenda of the Sun with only 12 different issues ever mentioned. Television news in general proved most comprehensive in referring to the vast majority of issues that are listed in the codebook. Political parties covered almost as much issue ground as did the 'serious' newspapers, the broadsheets, which each mentioned between 30 and 46% of the listed issues. As was to be expected with their rather fragmentary coverage at least on front pages, the tabloids appear most selective, only ever mentioning between under 10% (Sun) and just over 23% of the issues (Mail).

However selective parties and media were, most of them tended to refer to an approximately representative sample of the distribution of issues across policy dimensions. The Liberal Democrats and the Sun are again (as with their output in general) the major exceptions, the Liberal Democrats referring to more Social Welfare issues than economic issues and the Sun choosing for their limited front-page coverage just as many EU themes as economic ones.

**Table 6.3: Number of issues mentioned by parties and media, per policy dimension**

	Total	Tories	Labour	Lib Dem	TV	BBC	ITV	Sky	Press	Guardian	Independent	Mirror	Mail	Sun	Times
Policy Dimension	Number of issues per policy dimension														
Constitution/ Pol. S.	12	2	3	3	10	10	8	4	4	3	3	0	2	0	2
Defence	3	0	3	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0
Economy	28	21	17	9	26	24	20	20	20	12	16	6	13	4	16
Education/Tech/Arts	10	7	6	4	9	9	7	8	8	4	4	3	0	2	7
Environment/Energy	8	3	2	3	7	4	5	0	5	0	4	0	1	0	2
EU/Foreign Affairs	12	5	6	3	9	8	8	7	10	6	7	3	6	4	8
Infrastructure	9	3	2	0	9	9	3	4	3	0	3	0	2	0	2
Regions	21	5	4	1	21	20	13	15	4	2	2	0	3	1	3
Social Welfare	22	8	14	13	21	18	17	15	15	9	13	5	2	1	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>47</b>

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

To supplement the rather abstract numbers of how many issues the different policy dimensions contain and to provide some more tangible information, Appendix C contains the listing of all 141 different substantive issues that the codebook mentions, i.e. including the ones that did not occur in the 1997 campaign. In addition to that, Table 6.4 provides a list of the 16 most prominent individual issues of the campaign. Sixteen is not a magic number; the cut-off point was simply set at a total of 50 event counts. That means that parties and media mentioned each of these 16 issues at least 50 times during the campaign.

As one can see from Table 6.4, the top three in the list is made up of one economic and two EU issues, and these three issues were in fact the only ones that were mentioned by every single one of the twelve involved actors. All the parties, all the newspapers and all the networks had something to say about these issues. The top two, *Personal Taxation* and *EU(general)*, were mentioned more than ten times on average by each of the actors, *EU: Monetary Union* a little less often than that. One has to take into account, however, that

these counts are almost never evenly spread across the different actors. The lion's share of references invariably occurred on the TV agendas, while appearances of individual issues on newspaper agendas were consistently sparse.

Table 6.4: The "biggest" issues in the 1997 UK campaign

Issue	Policy Dimension	Counts total	Referred to by n		
			Parties	Newspapers	TV
<b>Personal Taxation</b>	ECONOMY	133	3	6	3
<b>EU (general)</b>	FOREIGN AFFAIRS	133	3	6	3
<b>EU: Monetary Union</b>	FOREIGN AFFAIRS	102	3	6	3
<b>Jobs/ Unemployment</b>	ECONOMY	97	3	4	3
<b>Schools</b>	EDUCATION	93	3	5	3
<b>NHS</b>	SOCIAL WELFARE	91	3	4	3
<b>Policy: Labour</b>	ECONOMY	88	2	6	3
<b>Industry/ Business/ Manufacturing</b>	ECONOMY	70	3	4	3
<b>Law &amp; Order: Crime</b>	SOCIAL WELFARE	65	3	5	3
<b>Policy: Labour</b>	EDUCATION	64	3	5	3
<b>ECONOMY: general</b>	ECONOMY	63	2	5	3
<b>EDUC., TECHNOL., ARTS: Education general</b>	EDUCATION	60	3	2	3
<b>Policy: Conservative</b>	FOREIGN AFFAIRS	56	0	6	3
<b>Health (general)</b>	SOCIAL WELFARE	53	3	3	3
<b>Soc. Sec.: Elderly/ Pensions</b>	SOCIAL WELFARE	53	3	3	3
<b>Trade Unions</b>	ECONOMY	50	2	5	3

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

What we find for the 16 most frequent issues of the campaign is that almost all of them received attention from the majority of actors within each group. The three networks gave some coverage to every single one of them. Apart from on two instances, all three parties considered these issues in their press releases; and with only one exception, at least half of the newspapers also covered each of these issues.

On top of that, it can be stated that all these issues were drawn from the repeatedly mentioned four major policy dimensions, six ECONOMY issues, four SOCIAL WELFARE issues, and three issues a piece from EDUCATION and EU/FOREIGN AFFAIRS.

### *Issue correspondence across agendas*

We can go a step further towards establishing the strength of the relationship between the parties' and the media's assessment of what the important issues were. Table 6.5 was constructed by categorizing issues into those that were mentioned by none, one, two or all three of the parties and cross-tabulating these against issues that occurred on the agendas of few, some, or most of the media actors.<sup>63</sup> This cross-tabulation shows how the average number of media outlets that are referring to an issue increases with the number of referring parties.

From comparing the distribution of cell values with the marginal distributions, one can see at once that some relationship exists: the higher the number of parties that jointly discussed issues, the higher also the average number of media outlets covering these issues. Issues that were not mentioned by any party are unlikely to be covered by many media outlets. The likelihood of media coverage only slightly increases for issues mentioned by one party but ignored by the others. Once a pair of parties is engaging in debate of the same issue, this issue is likely to be featured in a substantial number of media. And with all three parties mentioning the same issue, it becomes more likely than not that the vast majority of media outlets will give coverage. And this goes both ways: an issue that is referred to by the majority of papers and television channels is almost certain to occur on the agenda of at least two parties. The Pearson correlation coefficient measuring the bivariate relationship is substantial at .47 and statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ), so we can safely conclude that the choices of issues to talk about made by the parties and the media as groups were related.

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<sup>63</sup> Instead of creating ten different categories, i.e. 0 to 9 media outlets mentioning an issue, they were grouped into 0-3, 4-6, and 7-9 media actors. With ten different categories on one variable, we would arrive at a cross-tabulation with 40 cells instead of twelve, which might rather confuse and make it more difficult to gather information from the table.

**Table 6.5: Issue correspondence between parties and media**

		Number of mentioning media outlets			Total number of issues
		0-3	4-6	7-9	
Number of mentioning parties	0	39	7	1	(47)
	1	19	8	2	(29)
	2	11	10	7	(28)
	3	4	7	10	(21)
Total number of issues		(73)	(32)	(20)	(125)

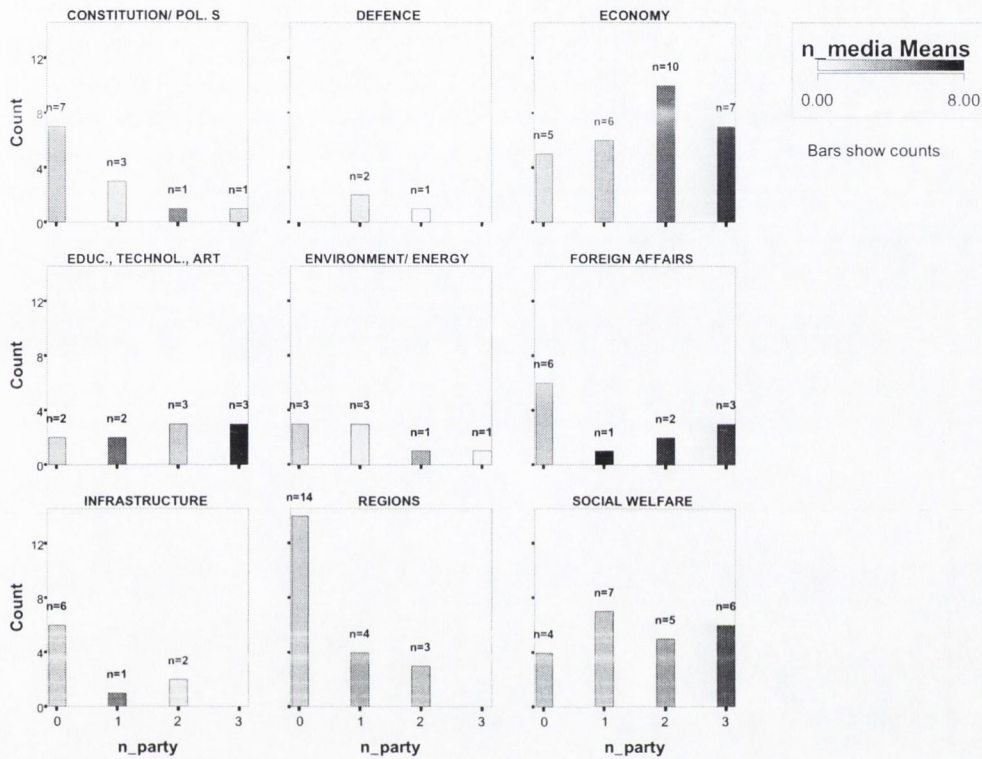
*Source:* Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

We can further look into whether this relationship varies between policy dimensions. With rather neglected policy dimensions one would expect that the few occasions on which different actors did actually talk about them would not have necessarily created much response from the other side, so that the particular issues that different actors chose out of the complete set of issues within the policy dimension might not be related to the sample chosen by someone else.

On the other hand, it is of particular importance to know whether the bivariate relationship reported in Table 6.5 holds for the bigger policy dimensions. Figure 6B gives a graphic display of the strength of this bivariate relationship within each policy dimension. The policy dimensions are presented as separate panels of bar charts. Bars from left to right within each chart report how many issues per policy dimension were mentioned by how many parties; from zero (left bar) to all three parties (right bar). The height of the bars indicates the number of issues in each category. The white-to-black shading of the bars indicates the average number of media outlets that were covering the issues in the respective category. A perfect linear relationship between the two variables (number of parties mentioning an issue and number of media outlets mentioning an issue) would be indicated by bars becoming darker the further to the right they are placed in a panel.

Such a linear relationship only exists for the economic policy dimension. The five issues that were mentioned by no party only received attention from a small number of media outlets, while the six issues that appeared on only one media agenda received slightly more media attention. The light grey shading indicates that an issue in one of these two categories was mentioned by, on average, three or four media outlets. The ten economic issues that were referred to by two parties and, even more so, the 7 issues referred to by all three parties, appeared also on the agendas of the vast majority of media outlets. The dark grey of the third bar and the almost black colour of the right bar indicate that issues in these categories were mentioned by between 6 and 8 newspapers or television channels.

**Figure 6B: Correspondence of party and media issue concerns by policy dimension**



*Note:* Policy dimensions define panels. The X-axis is defined by N\_PARTY, which is an ordinal measure of the number of parties referring to an issue, ranging from 0 to 3. Bar colours indicate the mean value of N\_MEDIA, an ordinal measure of the number of media actors referring to an issue, ranging from 0 to 9. Bar heights are measures of the number of issues within each category of N\_PARTY per policy dimension.

*Source:* Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

Relationships for other policy dimensions are less linear. In the Social Welfare category, issues become even slightly less likely to be mentioned in the media if one party mentions them than if no party does. The involvement of a second and third party, however, has again a strong effect on the number of media outlets covering.

The foreign affairs category, which mostly contains EU issues, appears to produce a rather non-linear relationship. This is, however, to a large extent a result of the small number of issues per category. For example, of the three issues that were mentioned by all three



parties, one issue was only mentioned by a single media player, while 9 media outlets mentioned the other two. With only up to three issues in each of the last three categories, a single deviation can make a strong impact on the overall pattern.

In contrast, the fourth major policy dimension, EDUCATION, TECHNOLOGY, ARTS, does produce a genuinely non-linear relationship. Most media interest develops whenever all three parties make references to an issue, but an issue mentioned only by one party and ignored by the others is consistently present on more media agenda than an issue that referred to by two parties. Although the number of cases per category is as small as with the Foreign Affairs dimension, in this case the non-linearity of the relationship is not produced by a single deviating case. It holds for all issues in the one- and two-party categories.

In the cases of marginalized policy dimensions like CONSTITUTION, ENVIRONMENT, or REGIONS the average number of reporting media either does not change much at all or at least does not co-vary systematically with the number of parties considering the involved issues.

That means that, with only few deviations, the more dominant a policy dimension was during the campaign, the higher the degree of issue correspondence between parties and media. The correlation between the number of parties mentioning an issue and between the number of media outlets doing so was, as reported earlier, .47 and statistically significant. That estimate was based on 125 cases, which is the total number of mentioned issues in the campaign. Once we select only the four core policy dimensions ( $n=72$ ), the coefficient increases to .53 (remaining significant at  $p < .001$ ). And for the economic policy dimension alone ( $n=28$ ), the coefficient is .68 ( $p < .001$ ). This is an important finding, since it indicates that the more space parties and media gave to a policy dimension during the cam-

paigned, the stronger was their agreement about which issues were the most important ones within the dimension.

### *Correlations between issue agendas*

So far, by disaggregating to the level of individual issues, we have shown that the more parties that are concerned with an issue, so will the number of media outlets covering the issue increase. This is a first indication that parties and media agree to some extent about the particular content of different policy dimensions. But it leaves the possibility that there might be an asymmetry in the amount of attention parties and media gave to different issues within dimensions. We know that parties and media were for long periods of the campaign preoccupied with economic issues, and that within that dimension they tended to mention the same issues. It could, however, be the case that much of their attention to economics was distributed unevenly across the mentioned issues.

In order to investigate whether agenda convergence, which was investigated earlier at the level of policy dimensions, holds once we disaggregate the data, we can correlate the actor agendas that contain information about their attention given to the 125 different individual issues of the campaign. The correlations between actor agendas reported in Tables 5.6 through 5.9 and Tables 6.1 and 6.2 were based on a small  $N$  (with just the nine policy dimensions as cases). Of course, once we start correlating agendas that are no longer made up of nine cases (policy dimensions) but of 125 (issues), not all of which are mentioned by each actor, coefficients and their significance will reduce substantially. There is not only variation as to which issues within policy dimensions featured on different agendas, but

also with regard to how the total amount of attention to any policy dimension was distributed across the involved issues.

Table 6.6 repeats the analysis from Table 5.6 in the previous chapter, only that this time the units of analysis are issues instead of policy dimensions. On average, correlation coefficients are halved compared with those calculated from aggregate agendas.<sup>64</sup>

**Table 6.6: Correlations between issue agendas**

	BBC	ITV	Sky	Guardian	Independent	Mirror	Mail	Sun	Times
Conservatives	.475**	.459**	.465**	.377**	.377**	.354**	.391**	.298**	.497**
Labour	.390**	.462**	.377**	.504**	.382**	.461**	.353**	.350**	.487**
LibDems	.251**	.324**	.260**	.307**	.313**	.287**	.152	.124	.239**

\*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Note: Cell values are Spearman Rho rank order correlations between issue agendas (N=125).

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

We do find less of a pattern that we did in the correlation matrix in Table 5.6, which was based on agendas estimated from policy dimension aggregates. In particular, effects of press partisanship are much weaker, i.e. the coefficients show little variation – at least between Labour and the Conservatives. The issue agenda of the Conservatives is only marginally stronger correlated with that of the Mail and the Times than is the Labour agenda. However, the Guardian and the Mirror are substantially closer to the agenda of their supported party than to the agendas of the other parties. The general pattern is still present, i.e. the endorsed party's agenda is more reflected in the newspaper than the agenda of its opponent, with the exception of the Sun whose agenda corresponds more with that of the Conservatives than of Labour. But the differences between coefficients are mostly small. The Liberal Democrats again are detached from proceedings. All the coefficients between the

<sup>64</sup> Here, rank order correlations (Spearman's Rho) are used because of the generally low number of counts per issue and hence the skewed distribution.

LibDem agenda and the media agendas range from very modest to very low, and a couple of them are even insignificant.

The fact that quite a number of correlations are close to or above .5 for the two bigger parties, however, indicates some substantial correspondence between the major parties' issue emphases and news reporting. Unequivocally, even at the lower level of aggregation we do find a substantial relationship: a related set of issues dominated the major parties' communication output and campaign news. There is of course more white noise in this data matrix. Many individual issues are infrequently mentioned by some actors and not mentioned at all by others. This reduces the coefficients, but all the correlations between the two major parties and media actors remain highly significant.

## **6.4 Disaggregation as a means for time-series analysis**

The descriptive analysis in this chapter has revealed some more information about the evolution and content of campaign agendas. Tracing the careers of major policy dimensions on the different agendas (Figure 6A) suggested that, for prolonged periods, the campaign was dominated by particular policy dimensions (first ECONOMY than EU/FOREIGN AFFAIRS). It appears as though the two major parties and all the media were involved in intense debates of economic issues at the start of the campaign, which explains very high levels of correlations between all agendas, bar that of the LibDems, over the first two weeks (Tables 6.2.1 and 6.2.2). Curiously, the LibDems emphasised economic questions only during the third week, just when Labour and the media had dropped the theme. The Conservatives' agenda remained static throughout, never relaxing their preoccupation with economic issues. That explains why their first two weeks' agendas were highly correlated

with those of Labour and the media while losing touch during the third week. In the middle of the campaign, Labour as well as the media looked for new issues to focus on, but Labour did not manage to (re)set the media agenda during that period. Instead the media discovered the EU question, but also from the fourth week onwards, everyone apart from the LibDems re-emphasised to some extent economics, which brought Conservatives, Labour and the media again closer together.

We see that agenda evolution is a dynamic process that produces varying degrees of convergence between actors. The media are clearly not simply transmitting party messages. They do not follow the parties wherever these would like to go with their choices of issues. And their attention to particular issue areas, which might well be prompted by party efforts (a question that will be answered in the following chapter), is not inexhaustible. The Conservatives could not keep the media interested in economic questions throughout the campaign. But while the media seemed to lose interest in economics, they did not simply let the Labour party - who were also keen to shift focus during the third week - decide where to go from there.

This gives us some idea of what the dynamics of the campaign were. Time-series analysis in the next chapter is, however, needed in order to establish who was the driving force behind the occurring patterns of convergence between party and media agendas.

The second step of disaggregation served to unveil what the issues within dimension were and to what extent different actors emphasised identical issues when they talked economics or EU. With individual issues as units of analysis, we see that agendas overlap, that there are some issues, which are only mentioned by a subset of actors, but that also particular issues within dimensions became the primary focus of debate for all the involved players.

This level of disaggregation can put to further use in the next chapter. This will result in an exploratory analysis of how strongly changing emphasis on individual issues by parties and media influenced one another.

The analysis will proceed in two steps. First, we will look at three core issues (*EU*, *Jobs/Unemployment*, and *Taxation*) and provide case studies of who brought these issues onto the agenda. The second step will more systematically combine disaggregation in terms of substance with temporal disaggregation. So far we know that parties and media tended to emphasise to some degree identical issues within dimensions. In the next chapter, it will be investigated whether different actors' emphasis on individual issues stood also in a temporal relation. That means to study the timing of emphasis on individual issues and of whether emphasis given by one actor to an issue at time  $t$  increases the likelihood that some other actor will emphasise it at time  $t+1$ .

After those two steps which are still exploratory in nature, we will return to the level of policy dimensions at which a systematic time-series analysis can be carried out in order to establish the direction of causality in inter-agenda relationships.

## **CHAPTER 7: WHO FOLLOWS WHOM? ASSESSING CAUSALITY IN AGENDA BUILDING**

The preceding two chapters gave a descriptive account of campaign proceedings. The quantification gives a more conclusive summary of the discourse between party and media actors and the dynamics of a campaign than the anecdotal accounts typical of campaign studies can provide.

Clearly, parties are more concerned with substantive issues in their communication than the mass media are in their account of campaign activities. But issues do play a non-trivial, non-marginal role in campaign news. And party emphasis on issues and policy dimensions generally corresponds with the priorities of media coverage. This raises the expectation that we might also find measurable and statistically significant interaction between parties and media in how they develop their agendas over the course of the campaign. The analytical steps that were presented in the previous two chapters suggested that the issue content of party and media agendas corresponded to some degree and that correspondence between agendas varied over time. Time-series analysis, which will be carried out in this final chapter, assesses how short-term change in the composition of one actor's agenda relates to change in the composition of other actors' agendas.

The core question in this final part of the empirical analysis is whether this relationship can be characterised as a reciprocal one or rather as a unidirectional causal process, and if so, what is the direction of causality: Who follows whom?

The entire final chapter will work towards testing Hypothesis A, which was formulated in Chapter 4:

*Hypothesis A: During an election campaign the news media responds systematically to changing issue emphases from political actors. Change in the composition of media agendas is caused by (but itself not causing) change in the composition of party agendas.*

This is the central hypothesis of the study, and it will be tested in detail in the fourth and last section of this chapter. In addition to that, specific analyses in Sections 2 through 4 will serve to test each of the additional hypotheses that were formulated in Chapter 4. These hypotheses relate to (a) the unequal agenda building power of different political actors (Hypotheses P1 through P3) and (b) the unequal responsiveness of different media actors to agenda building efforts (Hypotheses M1 and M2).

The unit of analysis in this chapter will be either attention to an individual issue or to a policy dimension on a particular day of the campaign. Since the time units for analysis are campaign days, and since the aim is to pinpoint cause and effect (stimulus and response) in the agenda building process, it is necessary to discuss the daily sequence of events. The first section of this chapter serves to explain that party and media output from identical campaign days is in fact not simultaneous output. This has important consequences for the treatment of party and media variables in time-series analysis.



## 7.1 The daily sequence of events

The smallest time units to which we can disaggregate our data are campaign days. In the time-series analysis of agenda building processes we want to estimate the effects of daily communication output from the parties on subsequent media coverage, or vice versa. The concept of effect spans, as outlined by Eyal et al (1980) and discussed in detail in Chapter 3, suggests that effects may be lagged by any possible number of time units. It is possible that effects are immediate, which would mean that the media pick up on party stimuli as soon as the next newspaper is published or the next news bulletin is broadcast (or, in turn, that a party reacts to news content as soon as its next press releases are issued).

This does not mean, however, that the shortest possible effect span is a day. Parties as well as the electronic media can react to stimuli from other actors on the same day. This is so because, for example, party press releases are invariably issued after the publication of daily newspapers. All of the British dailies included in the sample are morning papers, and with the earliest party press conferences scheduled for after 7am,<sup>65</sup> politicians and campaign professionals have the opportunity to take the content of the daily papers into account before they issue the day's press releases. Also, the BBC, ITV, and Sky news bulletins that were recorded and content analysed for the 1997 dataset are broadcast in the late evening, invariably after 9pm. By then, all the days' campaign activities (press conferences, rallies, speeches), and especially the issuing of news releases by the parties, have concluded. That means that the entire set of a day's communication output from all three parties (plus of course the content of the morning newspapers) can be considered in television coverage.

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<sup>65</sup> For a discussion of election press conference routines in the UK, see Kavanagh and Gottschalk (1995).

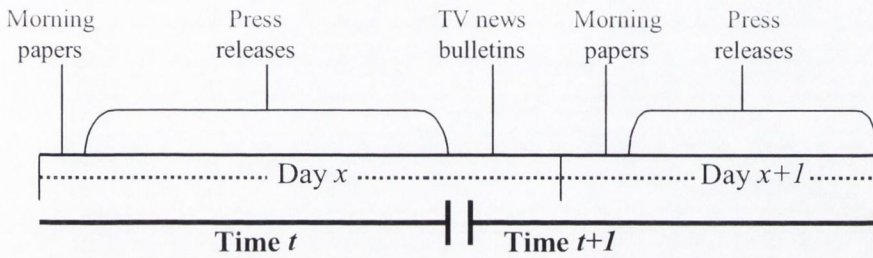
News stories and press releases, however, are only coded with regard to the date of publication. Given our knowledge about the sequence of events, we have to specify minimal effects spans for different bivariate relationships involving party and media actors. For example, if we were to find a significant relationship between press and parties, press and television, or parties and television at lag zero,<sup>66</sup> this would not imply simultaneous behaviour. Instead, it would mean that parties or television followed the press, or that the parties had influenced television. The minimal effect span for these three relationships (press→party, press→television, and party→television) is zero days, which means that the dependent variable is able to respond to the independent variable on the same day. In contrast, the minimal effect span for the remaining two possible types of a causal relationship (party→press and television→press) is one day. Since newspapers are published first thing in the morning, they can only cover the events from preceding days.

Figure 7.1 gives a graphic display of daily proceedings during the campaign. The preceding discussion of the regular sequence in which press, parties and television publish their material suggests that calendar days are inappropriate units of analysis for the study of agenda building. Instead, we can introduce the notion of a *partly lagged agenda building cycle*.

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<sup>66</sup> Lag zero means that the behaviour of actor A on day X is set in relation with the behaviour of actor B on day X. In contrast, lag one means to relate behaviour of actor A on day X with behaviour of actor B on day X+1.

**Figure 7.1: The daily sequence of campaign proceedings and the partly lagged agenda building cycle**



The agenda building hypothesis, as discussed in Chapter 4 and as formulated in *Hypothesis A*, suggests that sources like political parties exert a systematic influence on the composition of subsequent media agendas. Although we will control for the possibility of a reciprocal relationship or a reversed causal order, the hypothesis as such stipulates that the independent variables are agenda choices of parties at time  $t$ , while the dependent variable is media agenda composition at time  $t+n$ . (If effects are immediate, the dependent variable will be media agenda composition at  $t+1$ .) The *partly lagged agenda cycle* defines time periods  $t$  and  $t+1$  for this causal relationship. Time unit  $t$  ends with the completion of the issuing of press releases on a given day, while time unit  $t+1$  begins with the evening newscasts on television and comprises the publication of the following morning's newspapers as well as the following day's period during which press releases are issued. A time-series analysis of agenda building estimates the effects of party behaviour during time unit  $t$  on media behaviour during time unit  $t+1$ . Similarly, the extent to which parties set their own agenda for subsequent days can be measured by correlating issue emphasis at  $t$  with issue emphasis at  $t+1$  - which is defined as the *autocorrelation* of a variable, and can of course be measured at any lag  $t+n$ .

In the remainder of this chapter, temporal relationships between variables will always be noted by reference to the so defined time units  $t$  and  $t+1$  (or  $t+n$ ).<sup>67</sup>

The partly lagged agenda building cycle with the definition of time units  $t$  and  $t+1$  also explains how to proceed if one wants to aggregate all the media actors - newspapers and television channels - into one combined variable. This will be applied in some of the analyses in this chapter, since especially with regard to individual issue careers the total number of event counts becomes fairly small, so that party-media interaction can only be investigated by looking at the two combined groups instead of treating different parties or media separately.

The combined treatment of television and the press can be accomplished by adding the television variables lagged by one day to the (unlagged) press variables. As we can see from Figure 7.1, the earliest possible television and newspaper reactions to party press releases issued during time period  $t$  are those that occur during time period  $t+1$ . Hence, if we want to assess the impact that the behaviour of parties has on the combined media output, we have to relate party behaviour in period  $t$  to combined media behaviour in period  $t+1$ . Figure 7.1 shows that in order to do so the agenda choices of the electronic media on day  $x$  have to be combined with press agenda choices on day  $x+1$ , which is exactly the same as to say that we combine the press variables with the TV variables after the latter have been lagged by one day.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Of course, once we intend to estimate the impact that media agenda change has on party agendas (or on other media agendas), a different cycle applies. With regard to television coverage, time unit  $t$  ends after the evening broadcasts and time unit  $t+1$  begins with the publication of the morning newspapers and includes all the press, party, and television output of the following day. In contrast, with regard to the press, time unit  $t$  ends after the publication of newspapers in the morning, and  $t+1$  stretches from the beginning of press release publication to the next morning's papers.

<sup>68</sup> Practically, if we have time-series data with equal units of one day, every row in the data matrix is a calendar day. To combine press and TV variables, the values on the TV variable have to be moved down by one row. This is the process of lagging.

## 7.2 Visualising agenda building: three case studies

A limitation of the 1997 campaign data set is that count distributions across individual issues are uneven with only very few event counts being recorded for the large majority of issues, and with only very few issues for which sizeable numbers of event counts were recorded. Table 6.4 shows that there are only 16 individual issues (out of 125) which contain 50 or more event counts. And even the number of 50 event counts in one issue is fairly modest if we consider that these 50 counts are drawn from up to 12 individual actors. That amounts to a mean of just over four counts per actor agenda, distributed across more than 20 time units. For a vast majority of issues, the density of counts per actor is even much less than that. No sophisticated time-series analysis can be based on such sparse count distributions. For our eventual time-series analysis, this will require that we aggregate back to the level of policy dimensions. But ahead of that, we can use the information that we have on count distributions over time and across actors for individual issues to make some descriptive inferences about the pattern of party-media interaction.

While a comparative analysis of issue treatment by parties and media is beyond this study, given the data quality at this level of disaggregation, we can provide two types of analysis that make use of all the information contained in these smallest aggregates. The first type of analysis, to which the remainder of this section of the chapter is devoted, consists of case studies into the 'careers' of three major individual issues of the campaign, while the second type of analysis (carried out in Section 7.3) uses simple cross tabulations in order to assess how the probability of an actor to talk about an individual issue at time  $t+1$  is affected by some other actor having talked about it at time  $t$ . This type of analysis

provides means to test some of the additional hypotheses set out in Chapter 4, while the core hypothesis about the direction of causality will be dealt with in the final section (7.4).

Three individual issues or issue complexes stand out from the rest and allow us to introduce to the time-series analysis of agenda building by carrying out in-depth case studies. Within the economic policy dimension, most of the discourse was about the issues of *Jobs/Unemployment* and *Personal Taxation*, which is not untypical for any modern day election campaign in Western capitalist societies. These issues epitomise the conflict between right- and left-wing economic policies. Each of the issues appears to be traditionally 'owned' by one of the major parties in the British political system. *Jobs/Unemployment* is a traditional Labour issue, while *Personal Taxation* is traditional Tory campaign ground. Both issues can be understood as valence issues, which means that no one wants (or wants to publicly advocate) higher unemployment figures or to increase taxation (Stokes 1963). Each issue defines a social or economic problem, but issue ownership theory (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996) posits that only one of the actors has developed the reputation of being able to implement adequate policies.

The case studies of how these two issues were treated by parties and the media should provide a means to empirically test *Hypothesis P2*, which proposes that issue ownership has an independent effect on who the media will listen to.

The third major theme of the campaign, and by all accounts the theme that received most media exposure, was that of EU politics, which in the aftermath of the Maastricht Treaty, and in anticipation of the event of Monetary Union and of the prospective strategies of any future UK government (Join or not? And, if joining, what will be the time frame?), stirred

up internal conflict within the Conservative party, between pragmatists around the incumbent PM John Major and the euro sceptics. That undoubtedly gave it news value and raises the question of whether intentional agenda building could have played any role in its rising up the media agenda. This third case study does not test any of the specific hypotheses that were laid out in Chapter 4, it rather works towards the testing of the core *Hypothesis A* about the causal direction of agenda building. While the case study will fall short of giving a conclusive answer to that question, it is included in this chapter because previous studies into the 1997 campaign (foremost Norris et al. 1999) have contended that the career of the EU issue in 1997 shows the limits to the agenda building power of political actors. Norris et al. have argued that the Conservatives were more or less forced to respond to media interest in the issue.

### ***New Labour or not? Left-right placements and issue ownership in economic debates***

The first two weeks of the recorded campaign proceedings were dominated, as shown in Table 6.2 and figure 6A, by economic debates between Labour and Conservatives, and this preoccupation of the two major parties with economics appeared to be consistently reflected in the media priorities during that period. The listing of the most important individual issues in Table 6.4 clarified that much of this debate centred around two classic economic themes, *Jobs/Unemployment* and *Personal Taxation*. Of the combined total of 866 event counts for the economic policy dimensions in the entire data set, 230 (over a quarter) were accounted for by these two individual issues. They are clearly not as dominant within their policy dimension as the EU issue complex was within the Foreign Affairs dimension.

Economic debates were in general more varied, but these two issues at the top of the economic agenda make ideal cases for in-depth studies because of the implied notions of right- and left-wing economic policy and differential expected issue ownership.

Also, as Table 7.1 shows, both issues were of similar importance to parties as well as media. *Personal Taxation* recurred somewhat more often in the media than in party press releases, while the opposite is true (by a smaller margin) for *Jobs/Unemployment*. The standard deviation of event counts per day on party and media agendas is fairly high for both, which indicates that counts were unevenly spread over time, some of which might be regarded as white noise, while, given the general career of the economic policy dimension, we would expect to see clearly identifiable trends also. Hence, we can investigate how these trends are interrelated and whether agenda building occurred.

**Table 7.1(a) Descriptive Statistics: PERSONAL TAXATION**

	Time units	Event Counts				
	N	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>PARTIES</b>	31	0	11	57	1.84	2.38
<b>MEDIA</b>	27	0	18	76	2.92	4.06

**Table 7.1(b) Descriptive Statistics: JOBS/UNEMPLOYMENT**

	Time units	Event Counts				
	N	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>PARTIES</b>	31	0	10	52	1.68	2.17
<b>MEDIA</b>	27	0	11	45	1.67	2.25

*Source:* Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, *Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)*

Plotting the distribution of counts over time for both groups of actors can compare the treatment of these two issues by parties and media. For illustration purposes and also because we are more interested in the general direction of causality rather than the particular



relationships between individual actors, parties and media are treated, to begin with, as coherent groups.

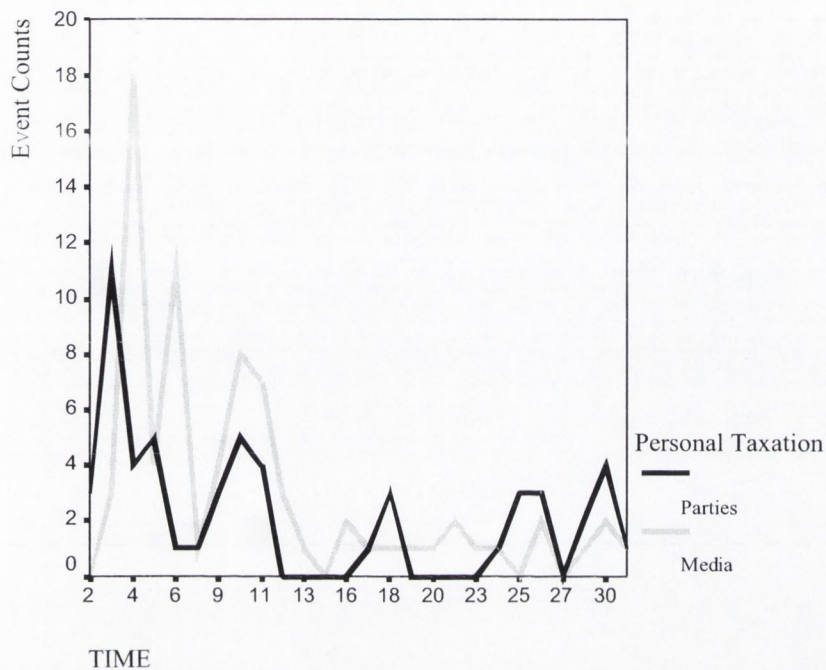
Figures 7.2 and 7.3 show the careers of the two issues on the two combined agendas. As explained in Section 7.1, time units are no longer calendar days, but artificial time periods, which begin with the transmission of television newscasts in the evening of a day and finish with the completion of the press release output on the following day.<sup>69</sup> That implies that simultaneity in party and media movement would in fact indicate party responses to immediately preceding media coverage. Instead, from eyeballing the trends in Figures 7.2 and 7.3, we can infer that more often than not changes on the party agenda preceded changes on the media agenda.

We can also see that most of the references by parties and media to both issues occurred during the early part of the campaign, that the two issues' careers were not single-peaked, and that to some extent the issues competed with one another, which means that they were not peaking simultaneously but in repeated succession.

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<sup>69</sup> Of course, in some sense, calendar days themselves are artificial time units.

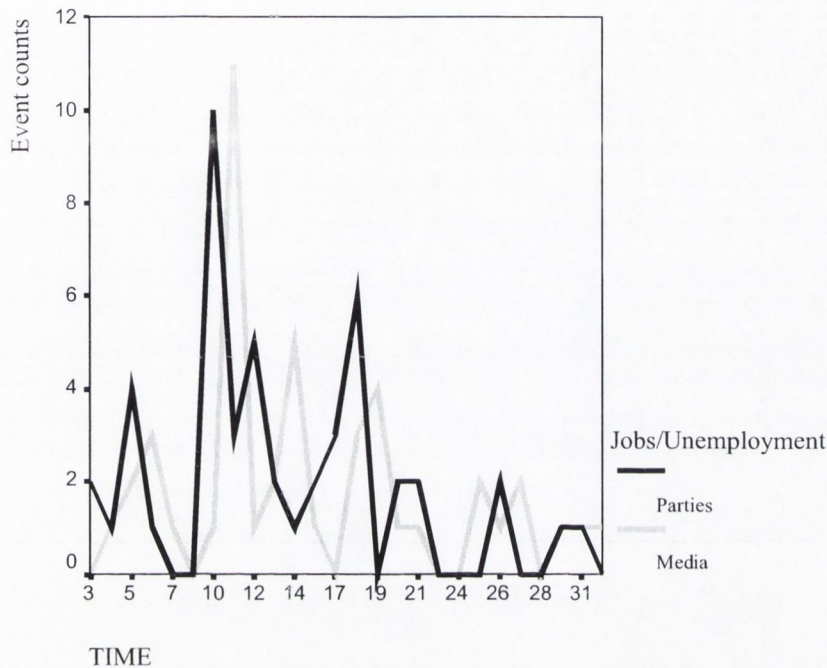
Figure 7.2: Party and media references to tax policy



Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

For the early part of the campaign, media attention to tax policy appeared to be triggered by party emphasis, with media responses multiplying the given party stimuli. Later in the campaign, however, we find equally modest amounts of party and media attention but less systematic co-variation. The graphic display already hints at a systematic relationship with media being prompted by party emphasis to report on tax policy.

Figure 7.3: Party and media references to jobs and unemployment policy



Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

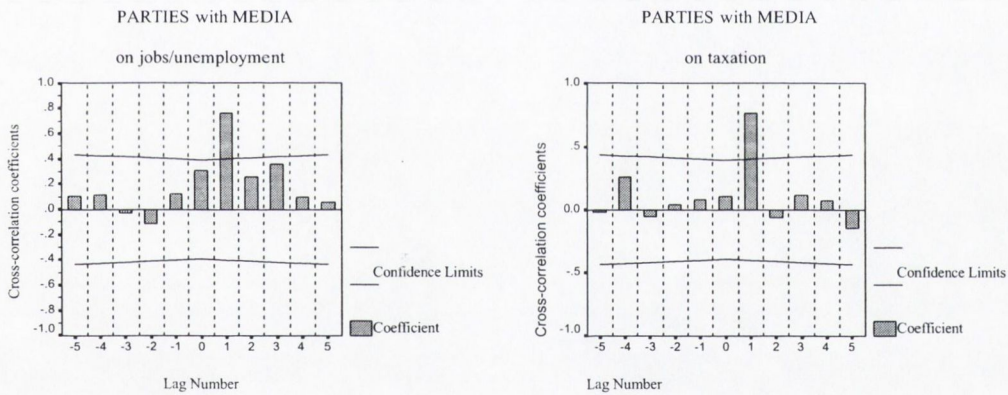
Jobs and unemployment policy features somewhat more strongly on party than on media agendas, but again we find that substantial peaks on the media variable immediately succeed the majority of distinctive peaks on the party variable. Considerable attention to the issue is more spread over the first three weeks or so of the observed period. And again, towards the end, visible party-media interaction tends to decrease.

Estimating cross-lagged correlations between the two variables can provide a more rigorous test of the direction of causality. We know from the discussion in Section 7.1 that party effects on media agendas should materialise at lag 1 or higher (party agendas at time  $t$  in-

fluencing media agendas at  $t+n$ ). In turn, immediate party responses to media content should materialise at lag 0 and non-immediate effects at negative lags.<sup>70</sup>

Figure 7.4 reports cross-lagged correlations between the party and media variable for both issues. For both issues, statistically significant correlations only appear at lag 1 and they are very substantial (coefficients are around .8), which clearly confirms the impression from eyeballing the graphs in Figures 7.2 and 7.3, namely that the media were consistently and immediately responding to party stimuli.

**Figure 7.4: Cross-lagged correlations between party and media treatment of economic issues**



Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

The correlation coefficients in Figure 7.4 in fact slightly underestimate the true strength of the relationship. Since coefficients are calculated across various lags in both directions, the number of cases on which estimates can be based is reduced. The actual coefficients when correlating the party variable at  $t$  with the media variable at  $t+1$  are .84 for both is-

<sup>70</sup> Parties can react immediately to media output from the same time unit, since unit  $t$  start with TV broadcasts and ends with press release output. A relationship at lag  $-1$  would indicate that parties react at time  $t$  to media stimuli from time  $t-1$ .

sues. And once we control for autocorrelation in the media variable, which measures the extent to which current media attention is a function of previous attention (from immediately preceding days), we find partial correlation coefficients between party emphasis and media references to even slightly increase to .87 for *Personal Taxation* and .88 for *Jobs/Unemployment*.

Clearly, both the major economic issues of the campaign were successfully placed by the parties on the media agenda. Finally in relation to these case studies, we can test for the role of issue ownership. Tax policy is a typical Conservative issue. Nobody wants to advocate publicly the raising of taxes, and tax cuts are a characteristic right-wing economic policy initiative. By the same token, unemployment policy partly defines the realm of Social Democratic economic policy making. It is traditional area for left-wing parties to advocate measures that will decrease unemployment and produce jobs. With both issues, we can test whether the issue owning party is successful in raising the issue.

To test this, we can separate the party variable again and focus on Labour and Conservatives individually. The test consists of measuring partial correlations between attention distribution on the combined media variable and either of the two party variables. In each case we control both for autocorrelation on the media agenda and for the other party variable. That way we can measure the independent effect of each party's issue emphasis on media treatment of the issue.

The findings support clearly the hypothesis that issue ownership increases the likelihood that a party will get its issue onto the media agenda. With regard to *Personal Taxation* the partial coefficient for Conservatives is .83 (significant at  $p < .001$ ), that for Labour .74 ( $p < .001$ ). With regard to *Jobs/Unemployment*, the independent Labour effect has a coefficient of .90 ( $p < .001$ ), while the partial coefficient for the Conservatives reduces to .06 and be-

comes insignificant. We did find a statistically significant bivariate relationship with a coefficient of .45 ( $p < .05$ ), but this disappears once we control for the Labour effect.

What we find here is mixed evidence with regard to the issue ownership hypothesis. Clearly, Labour placed the *Jobs/Unemployment* on the media agenda, and the Conservatives did not make an independent impact on media behaviour in this regard.

However, when it comes to traditional Conservative ground, i.e. with respect to the *Personal Taxation* issue, both parties jointly built the media agenda. Labour successfully challenged the Tories in this regard and the media listened to the Labour party on tax questions nearly as much as they followed the Tories. This may count as evidence that Labour's attempt to reinvent themselves as New Labour, economy friendly and independent from trade union interests, started to take effect, at least with the media. Labour made ample reference to tax policy, which they probably would not have done in earlier campaigns, and they managed to establish themselves as an alternative authoritative voice on this issue.

### ***Agenda building as a snowball effect: the European issue***

European integration has been a contentious issue in British politics for a long time, and in the aftermath of the Maastricht treaty its relevance, at least for the media, seemed to have increased again. As mentioned before, towards the end of the campaign the Times, a traditional Tory paper, announced that it would support any euro sceptic candidate irrespective of party affiliation. And the prevalent interpretation of proceedings during the 1997 campaign is that the media picked up the issue not only of Europe but of dissent about Europe within the Conservative party and that the Conservatives were forced to respond (Norris et

al. 1999: Ch. 2). A case of reverse agenda building, it seems, where a party cannot avoid talking about an issue it would like to keep quiet about.

Generally, attention to Europe was much more intense in the media than in party press releases.<sup>71</sup> It surfaced more than three times as often in news stories than it did in press releases (see Table 7.2). Its maximum peak in the media was three times as strong as on the party agenda, the standard deviation 3.5 times as large. The question here is whether amidst the uneven density of references by both actor groups and the respectively uneven distribution of counts we can still find some relationships, and especially whether this relationship does actually prove to be one of a party being dragged into some unintended issue emphasis instead of influencing the media.

**Table 7.2 Descriptive Statistics: EU issues**

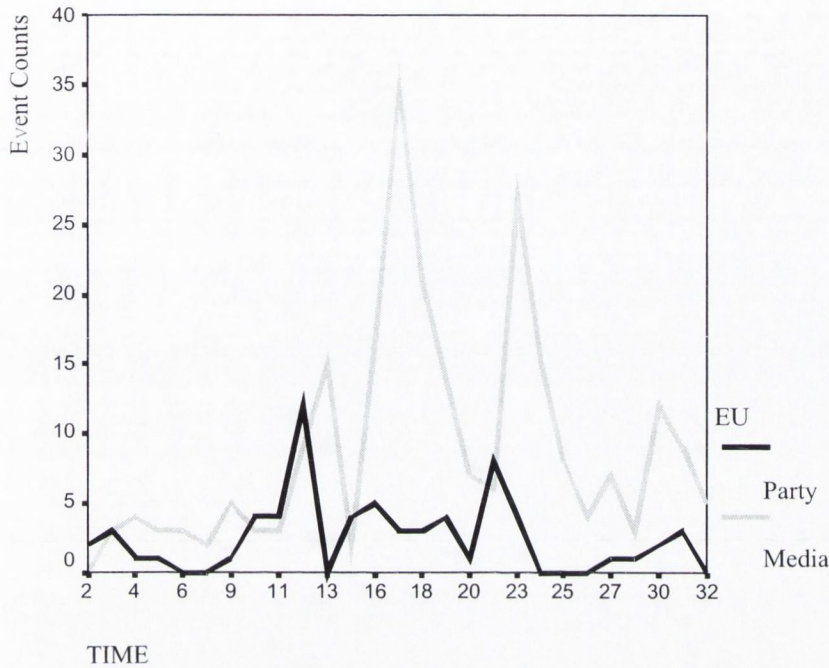
	Time units N	Event Counts				
		Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>PARTIES</b>	31	0	12	74	2.39	2.62
<b>MEDIA</b>	27	0	35	242	8.96	8.34

*Source:* Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

Again, we can start by plotting the distribution of counts on either agenda over time. Figure 7.5 shows that media attention was concentrated in the third quarter of the campaign, with two major and an earlier minor peak. That early minor peak, however, was preceded by the major peak on the party agenda, which suggests that the initial media interest was prompted by party emphasis.

<sup>71</sup> Event counts for all four European issues that are named in the codebook (see Appendix B) were combined into one variable (EU).

Figure 7.5: Party and media references to the EU issue complex



Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

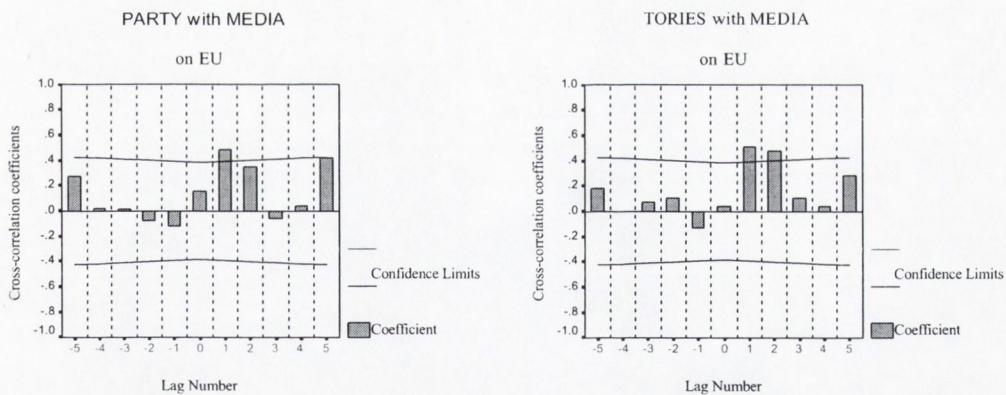
The general picture is that initial party emphasis had a snowball effect in terms of the media interest it generated. But there is more to it. Parties, and in particular the Conservatives, came back to the issue, but by no means did the campaign management of the Conservatives react systematically to the ebb and flow of media coverage. Instead, it was the media who repeatedly again raised their interest to new peaks whenever the Conservatives gave modest attention to the issue in their press releases.

Again, as with the economic issues, we can estimate cross-lagged correlations in order to assess more systematically the temporal order in which parties and media influenced one another. The data from all parties have so far again been combined, and indeed Labour mentioned EU questions nearly as often as the Tories did (30 and 38 event counts, respec-



tively). Once we start to analyse statistically the party-media relationship, however, it makes sense to compare the general party effect with the individual effect the Conservatives exerted. The two panels of Figure 7.6 show that the parties combined, as well as the Conservatives on their own, influenced the media rather than following any media hype about the EU question. The coefficients at lag 1 are smaller than in the case of the economic issues (around .5), but they are statistically significant. What emerges from comparing the individual Tory effect with the combined party effect is that the Tories exerted significant influences over a span of two lags, and that the initial impact is slightly stronger for the Tories alone.

**Figure 7.6: Cross-lagged correlations between party/Conservative and media treatment of the EU issues**



Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, *Election Party and Media Content Analysis* (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

This scale of effects can better be compared by looking at the raw numbers instead of comparing the height of bars (and again correlation coefficients in the panels underestimate the true relationship because of the omission of some cases). The bivariate correlation between party emphasis on EU at  $t$  and media emphasis at  $t+1$  is .56 ( $p < .01$ ), while bivariate

relationship between Conservative emphasis at  $t$  and media emphasis at  $t+1$  is stronger, with a coefficient of .64 ( $p < .001$ ). There are no significant bivariate relationships between Labour or Liberal Democrats and the media, so it appears wise to focus on the Conservative-media relationship with regard to this issue complex.

Controlling for autocorrelation in the dependent variable, the partial correlation between Conservative emphasis and immediate media responses remains strong and statistically significant, with a coefficient of .61 ( $p < .01$ ). Time-series analysis does not support the notion that the Tories were forced by the media into taking stands on Europe. Instead, the timing of their press releases set the stage for media coverage. An explanation for this could be that internal debates within the party preceded public debates, and that Tory campaign headquarters felt obliged to publicly declare their stance on Europe before it hit the front pages. But whatever initially triggered media interest, it appears as though the unfolding issue attention cycle was driven by the Tories, not by the media. Neither initially nor later on did the Tories systematically respond to the ebb and flow in media issue attention, rather they reinforced media interest with subsequent releases.

### **7.3 Raising issues**

The story of the three main issues, told in the previous section, hints at the possibility of a general systematic relationship, with increased party emphasis on an issue prompting an immediate media response. This can be investigated more systematically by looking at the distribution of party and media attention across all 125 issues over time.

### *Marginal distributions and conditional probabilities*

The average rate at which individual issues occur on party or media agendas during a campaign is relatively small. We have seen the maximum total of occurrences in the careers of the three major issues, but for a systematic analysis we have to take into account also the scarcely scattered occurrences of minor issues. A general relationship between party emphasis and media reporting should be detectable across the whole range of issues. Some outstanding effects, as with the major economic issues, may be balanced against the almost random distribution of singular attention to marginal themes, so that we should end up with possibly modest but systematic effects across the entire range of campaign themes.

It should be remembered that we are dealing with a total of 125 issues and a campaign duration of a month. Taking into account embedded missing values on media agendas (weekend issues of papers and newscasts that were not content analysed); the total number of possible issue occurrences in the press was 2,875 (23 days\*125 issues), the respective total for Television being 2,750 (one possible occurrence less per issue since election day was only included for the press). These numbers are hypothetical slots on media agendas. In order to fill all these slots, Press and Television would have had to report on each of the 125 individual issues on every single day of the 1997 campaign.

The hypothetical totals for parties are even larger, given that we assume that any party had the opportunity to issue press releases on every single day, which is why 'empty days' are not treated as missing values but as zeros indicating lack of attention to any issue on days without press releases. The totals for each of the three parties are hence 3,875 slots (125 issues times 31 days, again excluding election day).

The observed frequencies for each actor (the number of slots filled with values above zero) are not identical to the total number of event counts. This is so because individual issues could be mentioned more than once a day. For most of the following analysis the distribution of event counts per individual issue were transformed into simple dummy variables, a value of 1 indicating that an issue was mentioned on a particular day and a value of 0 indicating that it was not. Only where it comes to the grouped treatment of actors (the groups being PARTIES, MEDIA, PRESS and TV), do we find some substantial accumulation of event counts for single issues that enables to take into account not only the occurrence of attention but also the amount of daily attention to a single issue as an additional parameter.<sup>72</sup>

The proportion of cases where the dummy variable takes on a value of one can be understood as the unconditional probability for any issue to occur on any given day on a particular agenda. These probabilities are given in Table 7.3. Ignoring for the moment any differences between issues in terms of how prominently they featured during the campaign, the chance of any issue to be mentioned in at least one television news broadcast on any given day was one in four, its chance to feature on at least one front page on any morning of the campaign was one in ten, and its chance to be commented on in some press release by a party was about once every eight days.

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<sup>72</sup> In most cases, the amount of issue attention is identical with issue occurrence, which means that for most variables, the sum of event counts per individual issue per day tended to be 1. This is particularly prevalent for all the newspapers: Tabloids did not ever mentioned an issue more than once a day, while less than 5% of issue occurrences in Broadsheets are double or triple references. Parties and media, in contrast, tend to give multiple references more often; still around 80% of issue occurrences are singular references. The vast majority of the rest consists of occasions where a party or network mentioned the same issue twice a day. For all individual actor variables, the distribution of values is skewed, strongly clustered around values of 0 and 1, which means that they do not contain enough information about the magnitude of issue attention.

These unconditional probabilities are significantly lower for particular parties - especially for issue to be mentioned by the Liberal Democrats, given the comparatively small amount of press releases they issued - and as well for particular media outlets – mostly so with regard to Tabloids. Here, the probabilities of any issue being mentioned on a front page ranged between 1/45 (Daily Mail) and 1/160 (Sun).

**Table 7.3: Unconditional probabilities of issue occurrences**

	N of issues * time units	Observed fre- quencies of issue occurrences	Mean frequency of issue occur- rence per day
<b>Any Party</b>	3875	476	.1228
Conservatives	3875	244	.0630
Labour	3875	234	.0604
Liberal Democrats	3875	96	.0248
<b>Any TV</b>	2750	683	.2484
BBC	2750	446	.1622
ITV	2750	285	.1036
Sky	2750	245	.0891
<b>Any Press</b>	2875	297	.1033
Guardian	2875	83	.0289
Independent	2875	110	.0383
Mirror	2875	23	.0080
Mail	2875	64	.0223
Sun	2875	18	.0063
Times	2875	114	.0397

*Source:* Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

The data matrix that contains detailed information about the points in time at which individual issues were raised by parties and/or included in the campaign coverage provided by the news media allows us to estimate how the probability of any issue being mentioned by one side (media or parties) at a particular point in time  $t+1$  changes, depending on whether actors from the other side gave attention to the same issue at an immediately preceding point in time  $t$ .

At the most general level, we can aggregate all the information from different newspapers and TV networks into one variable (MEDIA) and cross-tabulate the distribution of issue

occurrences in the news at time  $t+1$  against the distribution of occurrences in press releases from any party at  $t$ . (Or, of course, the other way around, testing for party responses to media output.)

A first, very general test of short-term correspondence between agendas indicates a reciprocal relationship between parties and media. Table 7.4 shows that the conditional probability of an issue being considered by at least some media outlet on any day in the presence of party attention to the issue reaches  $p(1|1) = .56$ , compared with the unconditional probability that was reported in Table 7.3 of  $p(1) = .25$ . That means that an issue becomes more than twice as likely to catch the attention of the media when it is currently mentioned by a party than when it is not.<sup>73</sup> Table 7.5 shows that party attention to issues also becomes substantially more likely in the presence of preceding media coverage. The rate at which the probability of issue appearances on the party agenda is raised by preceding media coverage almost equals that for the opposite case: issues are nearly twice as likely to be mentioned by parties immediately after being reported on in the news (the probability rises from an average value of .13, as reported in Table 7.3, to .26 for cases with preceding media coverage). Chi-square tests give further indication that the cross-tabulated variables are not unrelated.<sup>74</sup> Hence, we can state that observed party and media attention to identical issues in close temporal sequence is not coincidental.

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<sup>73</sup> The marginal distributions for the party variable in Table 7.5 differ from the numbers in Table 7.3, mainly so because here they are put in relation with the media variable, which has embedded missing values.

<sup>74</sup> For Table 7.5,  $X^2 = 151.184$ , d. f. = 1,  $p < .001$ ; for Table 7.6,  $X^2 = 265.065$ , d. f. = 1,  $p < .001$ .

**Table 7.4: PARTY → MEDIA cross-tabulation**

		MEDIA <sub>(t+1)</sub>		Total
		0	1	
PARTY <sub>(t)</sub>	Observed Count			
	(Expected Count)	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	
	% within Party <sub>(t)</sub>	79.7%	20.3%	100.0%
	Observed Count			
	(Expected Count)	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	
	% within Party <sub>(t)</sub>	43.8%	56.2%	100.0%
Total	Observed Count	<b>2,529</b>	<b>846</b>	<b>3,375</b>
	% within Party <sub>(t)</sub>	74.9%	25.1%	100.0%

**Table 7.5: MEDIA → PARTY cross-tabulation**

		PARTY <sub>(t+1)</sub>		Total
		0	1	
MEDIA <sub>(t)</sub>	Observed Count			
	(Expected Count)	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	
	% within Media <sub>(t)</sub>	90.8%	9.2%	100.0%
	Observed Count			
	(Expected Count)	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	
	% within Media <sub>(t)</sub>	73.8%	26.2%	100.0%
Total	Observed Count	<b>2,813</b>	<b>437</b>	<b>3,250</b>
	% within Media <sub>(t)</sub>	86.6%	13.4%	100.0%

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

We have to take into account, however, that the uneven distribution of counts across issues may be responsible for part of the observed relationship. As we have seen from Table 6.4 and from the case studies in the preceding section, some issues are almost always present on both the media and party agenda. Figures 7.2 and 7.3 show that *Jobs/Unemployment* and *Taxation* were more often than not present on both agendas, which means that the chance of both sides mentioned the issue in question on the same day is

fairly high. Even more so, Figure 7.5 shows that *EU* was continuously - to some small degree at least - present on the media agenda. So, whenever the parties raised it, this had to be both preceded and followed by media coverage. That implies that some of the covariation in party and media agendas may not be indicative of a temporal relationship but of a structural factor, the general preoccupation of both sides with similar issues from the major policy dimensions.

***Beyond dichotomies: how much stimulus is required to produce a response?***

Looking beyond the mere dummy variables that indicate the occurrence of issues on days can solve part of the problem. We can also investigate the relationship between the amount of attention given by different actor groups to issue *i* at *t* and *t+1*. With the observed range of event counts per case spreading to a maximum of 18 for the media variable and 11 for the combined party variable, it is more convenient to collapse some of the categories in the cross-tabulation. Instead of presenting with a rather confusing 11x18 cross-tabulation, Tables 7.6 and 7.7 present a 4x4 cross-tabulation. The first category on either variable contains zeros, i.e. cases in which the actor did not mention issue *i* at time *t* or *t+1*. For the second category, cases with one and two counts were collapsed, for the third, cases with three and four counts, and for the final category, cases with 5 and more counts were collapsed.



**Table 7.6: The effect of increasing amounts of media coverage on subsequent issue consideration by parties**

		Amount party emphasis $t+1$ (n of counts)				Total N
<b>Amount media coverage <math>t</math> (n of counts)</b>	0	2217	201	19	5	2442
	(%within party $t$ )	(90.8%)	(8.2%)	(0.8%)	(0.2%)	
	1-2	495	116	19	8	638
	(%within party $t$ )	(77.6%)	(18.2%)	(3.0%)	(1.3%)	
	3-4	68	27	5	4	104
(%within party $t$ )	(65.4%)	(26.0%)	(4.8%)	(3.8%)		
5-18	33	23	7	3	66	
(%within party $t$ )	(50.0%)	(34.8%)	(10.6%)	(4.5%)		
<b>Total</b>		2813	367	50	20	3250
<b>(%within party <math>t</math>)</b>		(86.6%)	(11.3%)	(1.5%)	(0.6%)	

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

**Table 7.7: The effect of increasing amounts of party emphasis on subsequent issue coverage in the media**

		Amount of media coverage $t+1$ (n of counts)				Total N
<b>Amount of party emphasis <math>t</math> (n of counts)</b>	0	2333	515	59	21	2928
	(%within party $t$ )	(79.7%)	(17.6%)	(2.0%)	(0.7%)	
	1-2	187	129	32	29	377
	(%within party $t$ )	(49.6%)	(34.2%)	(8.5%)	(7.7%)	
	3-4	8	18	15	9	50
(%within party $t$ )	(16.0%)	(36.0%)	(30.0%)	(18.0%)		
5-11	1	8	4	7	20	
(%within party $t$ )	(5.0%)	(40.0%)	(20.0%)	(35.0%)		
<b>Total</b>		2529	670	110	66	3375
<b>(%within party <math>t</math>)</b>		(75.0%)	(19.9%)	(3.3%)	(2.0%)	

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

Again, as with the dummy variable cross-tabulations, we find a substantial relationship in both directions. The 0x0 cells are identical with those in Tables 7.4 and 7.5, and we know from those tables that any consideration of an issue by one group of actors increases the

likelihood of subsequent consideration by the other. Here, however, we see that this effect increases substantially with a larger number of counts on the independent variable. For example, if an issue has been mentioned five times or more by the media (which can of course also mean by five or more media), the chance that parties will pick up on it is 50/50 (compared with a 25/75 chance if the issue only occurred once or twice, or a 35/65 chance if it occurred three or four times). The effects of media coverage on party behaviour do not show, however, much variation in terms of how strong a reaction they provoke. It always remains most likely that an issue will be put on one or at two party agendas with 1 or 2 counts.

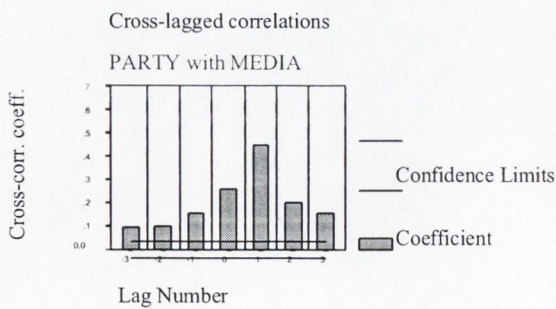
The relationship appears more linear and much stronger in the case where party emphasis precedes media coverage. The chance that an issue will be picked up by the media already becomes 50/50 with only one or two counts on party agendas. It is 84/16 after three or more counts, and reaches a massive 95/5, which means an almost certain media response wherever parties mentioned an issue five times or more on a day. And once an issue has been mentioned three times or more, it is almost equally likely to trigger small or large-scale responses by the media.

Chi-Squares in this case also give a clear indication that the relationship is somewhat reciprocal but clearly asymmetrical. Parties influence the media and media influence the parties, but the media are far more responsive than the parties. The Chi-Square for the Party→Media tabulation is 5447.8 (which, given 144 degrees of freedom, is significant at  $p < .001$ ) compared with a value of 1384.1 (d. f. = 144;  $p < .001$ ) for the opposite relationship. That means that, in addition to the fact that the presence of an issue on one agenda increases the likelihood of it occurring on the other, the more attention parties give to particular issues on a campaign day, the more coverage these issues will receive in the next set

of news bulletins and newspapers. The relationship between the amount of party emphasis and following media coverage is substantially stronger than the relationship in the opposite direction; and it results in an almost monotonic increase in the scale of response, which is not the case for party reactions to media coverage.

The relationship between subsequent party and media emphasis on individual issues can also be expressed in terms of cross-lagged correlations. The cross-tabulations give an idea that there is more of a linear relationship to be read from Table 7.7, with media as dependent variable, than from Table 7.6. Chi-Squares only indicate the existence of a systematic relationship, but do not say much about its character. Correlations are more appropriate means to test for linearity. Figure 7.7 confirms that the strongest linear relationship is to be found at lag 1. The lag 1-coefficient measures the bivariate relationship from Table 7.7, while the lag 0-coefficient measure the bivariate relationship that was tabulated in 7.6. Given the large  $N$  (more than 3,000 cases), all of the coefficients, from lag -3 to lag 3, are statistically significant but coefficients become very small the further we move from lag 1.

**Figure 7.7: The bivariate relationship between over-time distribution of issue emphasis by parties and media**



Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

The lag 1-coefficient is .45, and even after we control for autocorrelation in the dependent variable, the partial coefficient remains at .39 ( $p < .001$ ), which means that .15 of the variance in daily media attention to individual issues is explained by the over-time distribution of party emphasis on individual issues. That may appear to be a fairly modest figure, but it is quite impressive given that we are looking at a total 125 issues over a period of more than 20 time units. Media attention to an issue that follows party emphasis is far from coincidental.

The occurrence of effects in either direction holds indeed for each pair of party and media actors, with both Labour and Conservatives exerting stronger effects on the media than vice versa. The Liberal Democrats exert weaker effects and their relationship with the media is reciprocal with neither side dominating. We find no differences between the electronic media in the strength of their responses to parties, while the Labour press appears slightly more responsive to the Labour party than to the Tories and the Tory press slightly more responsive to the Conservatives than to Labour. I do not present with cross-tabulations reporting these findings because we can indeed investigate all these aspects of party-media interaction and hence test hypotheses *P1*, *M1* and *M2* (see Chapter 4) more rigorously with the time-series research design that will be introduced in the final section.

But before entering time-series analysis, *Hypothesis P3* needs to be dealt with, since it cannot be investigated once we revert to aggregation to the level of policy dimensions, just as was the case with the issue ownership hypothesis that we tested in the case studies in Section 7.2 (*Hypothesis P2*) but. *Hypothesis P3* states that the likelihood of media responses to party stimuli may depend on the number of parties simultaneously giving attention to an issue.

### *How many stimulators are needed to produce a response?*

Campaigns are interactive processes involving a number of party and media players, and it is likely that once an issue enters the debate and rises towards the top of the agenda, the policy discourse will involve an increasing number of players from both sides. From what we know about media behaviour (and have discussed in Chapter 4), media interest should be greatest when controversial policy debates between parties unfold, since this increases the news values of the debate and its subjects. Also, once the news media allow an issue onto their agenda after a party raised it, they are likely to force the other parties to respond to the policy proposals of the initiating party. That means that we would expect to find a strong correspondence between the number of party and media players involved in day-to-day policy discourse. Table 6.5 already showed that, on the aggregate level, the number of media players mentioning an issue is systematically related to the number of parties doing so. In this subsection, we want to investigate whether this relationship holds once we disaggregate into smaller time units, i.e. whether incidents of many players on side emphasising an issue are indeed more often followed by a multiple response from the other side than incidents of players raising an issue in isolation.

This is, however, an expectation that seems to run counter to a hypothesis brought forward by Budge and Farlie (1983) in their saliency theory. Budge and Farlie argued that there are no incentives for parties to compete directly over policy proposals within issue areas that parties should and, more often than not, will avoid confrontational debates about competing policy proposals within an issue area. From the logic of saliency and issue ownership theory (see discussion in Chapter 2), it follows that it is in the interest of parties to pro-

promote exclusively their owned issues and hence to run campaigns which are essentially detached from one another. We have already found some counterintuitive evidence, namely that agendas of the two major parties, no matter at which level of aggregation we estimate them, are highly correlated, that they are also moving somewhat simultaneously during much of the campaign (see Table 6.2 and Figure 6A). We also found in one of the case studies - the one concerning the issue career of *Personal Taxation* - that Labour and Tories were joint agenda builders for the media (Section 7.2).

While the ownership criterion may pose a disincentive to do so, parties nonetheless appear to have joined in policy debates during the 1997 campaign and indeed once they did so, agenda convergence between the major parties and the media appeared to increase markedly (Agenda convergence was never stronger than during the first two weeks when Labour and Tories debated economic issues). This raises the expectation that we may find empirical evidence in support of *Hypothesis P3*, which states that the more jointly parties act during a campaign, the larger the overall agenda building effect on the media.

Table 7.8 shows that the data from the 1997 campaign indeed warrant the notion that the larger the number of parties discussing an issue at any given point in time, the more likely that the media will cover the issue in question. While already the occurrence of an issue on only one party agenda prompts increased media interest, this effect is significantly enhanced the more parties join in.<sup>75</sup> The number of cases where all three parties emphasised the same issue on the same day are very rare, but at the same time they prove to be highly unlikely to fail in prompting at least some media response. The TV networks start out from a basis of substantial issue coverage anyway, which explains that the absolute effects that

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<sup>75</sup> This relationship also proves to be a reciprocal one, with parties becoming increasingly likely to include issues in their daily press releases the higher the number of news broadcasts and papers in which the issues were featured. But again, party responsiveness remains more moderate than media responsiveness.

can be reached by joint party action are more substantial than for the Press – a 75% response rate to issue debates involving two parties; a 93% response rate to occasions with all three parties referring to identical issues.

**Table 7.8 Joint effects: parties interacting in order to build the media agenda**

		Press <sub>(t)</sub>		Total
		0	1	
Number of mentioning parties <sub>(t-1)</sub>	0	2318 92.5%	187 7.5%	2,505
	1	225 73.8%	80 26.2%	305
	2	31 57.4%	23 42.6%	54
	3	4 36.4%	7 63.6%	11
	Total	2578	297	2,875
		TV <sub>(t)</sub>		Total
		0	1	
Number of mentioning parties <sub>(t-1)</sub>	0	1,878 80.2%	464 19.8%	2,342
	1	171 52.8%	153 47.2%	324
	2	17 24.3%	53 75.7%	70
	3	1 7.1%	13 92.9%	14
	Total	2,067	683	2,750

*Source:* Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

While Tables 7.4 through 7.7 showed that parties manage to consistently raise media awareness by mentioning issues, the additional analysis here indicates that they manage to establish individual issues firmly on the wider media agenda only after engaging their fellow political competitors first. This creates a serious strategic problem for political parties. On the one hand, parties will only ever want to talk about issues the salience of which can

be beneficial to them. But on the other hand, if the issue owning party is set to benefit from media interest in an issue, it has a strong incentive to involve other parties in the debate, parties who have nothing to gain from emphasising an issue they do not own.

While we are not testing Budge and Farlie's claim that parties are unlikely to engage one another in debates, because this is not part of the agenda building problem, we do see from the marginal distributions in Table 7.8 that incidents with more than one party mentioning the same issue are fairly rare (4 times less likely than an issue to be raised by a party in isolation). This points to the fact that parties do not have identical priorities in a campaign. However, we do see that agenda building effects become significantly more likely once the parties do engage one another.<sup>76</sup>

## 7.4 Time-series analysis

### *The limits to disaggregation*

Disaggregating data to the smallest possible units (individual issue attention per day) has the advantage that it leaves no ambiguity about the nature of observations. Any form of aggregation will come at the loss of some information. However, there are limits as to what we can accomplish with disaggregated data. In general, the pay-off for disaggregating is increased uncertainty. In our particular study, the precise pay-off is a limitation on the type of analytical methods that the data quality of disaggregated unit allows to employ.

In order to establish the direction of causality with rigour, we need to employ time-series analysis. Disaggregating data to the unit of the individual issue, however, only allows for

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<sup>76</sup> For the first relationship reported in Table 7.8,  $n(\text{parties})_t \rightarrow \text{Press}_{t+1}$ :  $\chi^2 = 199.85$  (d. f. = 3;  $p < .001$ ), for the second relationship,  $n(\text{parties})_t \rightarrow \text{TV}_{t+1}$ :  $\chi^2 = 134.44$  (d. f. = 3;  $p < .001$ ).



simple analytical methods such as cross-tabulations. These can be used for descriptive inference only, and can produce some informed guesses about the direction of causality. This level of disaggregation does not give a data matrix that can be used for time-series analysis. As long as the individual case is issue  $i$  at time  $t$ , the data matrix will contain too few entries with a value higher than 0 to conduct any meaningful regressions with. For those reasons, we need to aggregate back to the level where the individual case is policy dimension  $D$  at time  $t$ .

The analysis at issue-level that we have conducted in the previous and this chapter, nonetheless, gives us some confidence in the validity of policy dimensions as meaningful aggregates of thematic priorities. The issue-level analysis shows that whenever actors “talk economy” or “talk EU” they are not talking past one another but are most of the time in agreement about what precisely they are referring to. Aggregating back to the level of policy dimensions has the advantage of dealing with larger individual values (sums of event counts per theme and day), which increases the reliability and validity of results from time-series analysis.

### ***Testing causality***

In order to establish a causal relationship in a dynamic process involving a multitude of variables (actors and policy dimensions), it is necessary to devise a regression model that allows us to estimate the effect of some actor’s treatment of policy dimensions over the course of the campaign on the treatment of policy dimensions by another actor. That requires a regression model, which incorporates information about different actors and policy dimensions as well as the temporal order of agenda changes.

The central task of this study is to assess the *direction of causality*. In order to do this, it is necessary to run a number of regressions, each time with a different dependent variable. The concept of Granger-causality (which was discussed in Chapter 3 and formulated by Granger 1969) posits that the direction of causality in a dynamic process can be assessed only by comparing the effect of variable A (measured at time  $t$ ) on variable B (measured at time  $t+1$ ) with the effect of B (at  $t$ ) on A (at  $t+1$ ), while controlling for autocorrelation (which is the influence of A or B at  $t$  on itself at  $t+1$ ). If more of the variance in A is explained from earlier values of A and B than of A alone, and if more of the variance in A is explained from A and B than of the variance in B from B and A, then, and only then, can we say that B caused A.

Hypothesis A in Chapter 4 posits that party emphasis on issues Granger-causes media coverage of issues. An empirical test of this hypothesis requires a set of time-series regressions - at least two, namely one in which parties are the dependent variable and one with media as dependent variable. Both regressions need to include a lagged dependent variable, as a control for autocorrelation. Evidence in support of Hypothesis A would consist of the finding that, during the 1997 campaign, party agendas exerted a significant and independent influence on subsequent states of the media agenda, while the media agenda did not exert a significant and independent influence on subsequent states of the party agenda (or, at least, a considerably lesser influence).

There are good reasons for not treating the multitude of involved actors as two coherent blocs with all the parties on one side and all the media on the other. The fact that the data set includes information on the behaviour of three political parties and of nine media actors allows for a comparative research design. We can test whether the hypothesised direction of causality holds no matter which party or media we are talking about. Also some of the addi-

tional specific hypothesis about interfering factors in the agenda building process that were outlined in Chapter 4 (Hypotheses *PI*, *M1* and *M2*) imply that some parties will be more successful agenda setters than other, and that some media actors will be more amenable to agenda manipulation by parties than others. Apart from running more than two regressions, we will, in each regression, also include more than one independent variable. Hypothesis *PI* states that the agenda building power of political parties depends on their status and position in the political system, which can be tested by including the three party agendas as individual independent variables in each of the regressions that have a media actor as dependent variable. The relationships between each of the three actors and the media will be assessed separately for each group of media actors, i.e. television and the press. This allows us to test whether one medium is more accessible to parties than others or whether the agenda building hypothesis holds equally strong for both types of mass medium.

In addition to this, hypotheses *M1* and *M2* require additional regressions with specific subgroups of press as well as of television as dependent variables. Hypothesis *M1* states that public broadcasters are more amenable to manipulation by parties than private ones, because of regulation of their campaign coverage. In the British case, we would not necessarily expect differences between BBC and ITV, since the stopwatch approach to campaign coverage applies for both. Instead, in the UK, Sky represents the modern type of private broadcaster that is unregulated and takes American networks as a model for broadcasting (in the case of Sky News, CNN stood as model). Hence we would expect more freedom of choice in selecting priorities in the case of Sky and possibly less reliance on prefabricated party material.

With regard to the press, Hypothesis *M2* states that if newspapers are responsive to party stimuli, partisanship should moderate this effect. That means that a partisan press outlet,

which the British papers invariably are, should transmit the agenda of the party it supports, while ignoring the opponents issue emphases. Dividing the press variable into Labour press and Tory press can test this. Relationships between parties and newspapers cannot be assessed for individual newspapers, because of the poor data quality (only front pages were coded, as described in Chapter 5, and hence event counts are rare). Also, while grouping into partisan press is possible and allows to test the partisanship hypothesis, a grouping according to the other, cross-cutting property of British newspapers – the tabloid-broadsheet – divide, is made impossible by the exceptionally infrequent occurrence of event counts on tabloid agendas. Hence, we could not include a testable hypothesis that concerns the likelihood of agenda building to occur in broadsheets rather than tabloids.

In the following subsection, the specific time-series regression model that is used here will be outlined, after which the findings from the various regressions will be presented.

### ***Model specifications***

As explained in Chapter 5, party and media agendas contain information about nine different dimensions. But instead of estimating agenda building effects for individual policy dimensions separately, we want to assess overall dynamics of agenda evolution. Policy dimensions are cross-sections in the data set. That means that we have information about daily party and media behaviour concerning different policy areas but taking place simultaneously.

Bartels (1996) and Wood and Peake (1996) in their longitudinal studies of agenda building in the U.S. could use vector auto regressions in which the treatment of each issue by one actor was treated as one variable. They could then run regressions in which the inter-

play of the various variables was assessed. That is only possible with a time frame of some length – it requires more than the between 22 and 31 time units for which we have information concerning the issue emphasis given by media and parties.

A method that can be applied to datasets with a substantial number of cross-sections and a limited number of time units is a time-series cross-section design. Time-series cross-section (TSCS) data are mostly used as a comparative research design for the study of longitudinal processes in different (e.g. national) settings. The research design used here is essentially not different. It can be understood as a comparative study in how strongly issue attention by one actor responds to preceding attention to the same issue by one or more other actors. It is comparative in that it aims at general statements about a relationship between variables, which holds across different issue areas and over time. This is accomplished by using a TSCS model insofar as the critical assumption of such models is “that of ‘pooling’; that is, all units are characterized by the same regression equation at all points in time” (Beck and Katz 1995: 636). The generic TSCS model writes as

$$y_{i,t} = \beta x_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t}; i = 1, \dots, N; t = 1, \dots, T \quad (1)$$

where  $y_{i,t}$  denotes observations on the dependent variable that are indexed by unit ( $i$ ) and time ( $t$ ),  $x_{i,t}$  is a vector of independent variables, and  $\varepsilon_{i,t}$  is the term for the standard errors.

The plan for the data analysis is to carry out five separate regressions. Each regression will have a different dependent variable - CONSERVATIVES, LABOUR, LIBDEMS, PRESS, and TV.<sup>77</sup> The vector of independent variables includes all three parties where the dependent variable is PRESS or TV, and the vector will include both media variables whenever the dependent variable is a party. This way we can estimate the effects of party

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<sup>77</sup> Additional regressions with Labour press and Tory press, and each of the three television channels as dependent variables will be presented and discussed after the findings from the five initial regressions.

behaviour on media behaviour and vice versa.<sup>78</sup> But first, this generic model needs to be adapted to account for some of the specifics in the agenda building process under investigation here.

This time series analysis differs from other comparative longitudinal studies in that we are investigating *lagged* effects, i.e. we want to estimate the impact of observations on the independent variables on *subsequent* observations on the dependent variable. For the TSCS equation, this is basically accomplished by indexing the vector of independent variables by unit (*i*) and time (*t-1*). Earlier in this chapter, in Section 7.1, we have explained how the lagging of variables is to be accomplished for this data set, taking into account the daily sequence of events. The procedure has been explained for both cases, with either media or parties as dependent variables.

Apart from the adjustments that have to be made to the initial TSCS model because of particularities of the present data set, there are more serious statistical problems associated with the application of regression techniques to TSCS that need to be briefly discussed and taken account of before outlining the eventual model and estimating it. The central statistical problem with applying ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to TSCS data is that for OLS to be optimal all the error terms in the regression are expected to have the same variance and to be independent of each other (Beck and Katz 1995: 636). This is unlikely for

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<sup>78</sup> The model does not include measures of inter-media or inter-party agenda building. This means that in the analysis presented here we do not control for effects of television content on subsequent press content and vice versa, or for effects of Conservative press releases on Labour or LibDem agendas or vice versa. Such additional independent variables were omitted mainly because their inclusion could produce a causal model with too many temporal layers (press effects on TV would temporally overlay measured effects of party output on TV and so on. Hence if, for example, press influences parties and TV and parties influence TV, how much of these effects is confounded within different terms in the model?) Since our research questions do not include inter-party or inter-media agenda-building, we can omit the terms from the model. All models have, however, been run with the included terms and found strong inter-media and inter-party agenda building effects without diminishing the party-media effects which are reported in the findings below. The results reported below remain robust under inclusion of the additional terms, but since inclusion would complicate the interpretation of the exact path of causality, and since we are not particularly interested in inter-media and inter-party agenda-building, omission of those terms appears an adequate solution.

any TSCS design, and is indeed very unlikely in our case. As can be seen from the descriptive statistics in Appendix A, the distribution of event counts across the nine policy dimensions is highly uneven, and at the same time consistently correlated for most of the five variables. While the four biggest policy dimensions (Economy, Education, Europe, and Social Welfare) score consistently high on each variable, the remaining dimensions are almost uniformly sparsely filled with counts. This leads to the expectation that in a regression the error processes for different units (policy dimensions) will have systematically different variances. Also, for the observed daily campaign agendas an almost fixed-sum condition applies. That means that the total sum of counts per variable for each day of the campaign does not vary much. As a result of the biased scales for different policy dimensions together with a fairly stable sum of counts per day, *contemporaneous correlation* is very likely to occur. As Beck and Katz have shown with Monte Carlo simulations, OLS as well as the often-used remedy of feasible generalized least squares (FGLS) will both consistently produce overconfidence in their estimates in the presence of contemporaneous correlation (1995: 638-42). Beck and Katz (1995: 638) recommend instead the use of OLS regressions with *panel-corrected standard errors* (PCSE). This is a remedy that takes into account the correlation of error variance at identical time points but between units. In addition, cross-section dummies for each policy dimension are included in the model. While contemporaneous correlation is accounted for by estimating panel-corrected standard errors, *heteroscedasticity* as a result of biased scales per unit remains problematic. By estimating dimension-specific regression intercepts (fixed-effects coefficients) and thus technically allowing the constant for the equation to vary between policy dimensions, we control for the bias resulting from different scales of variables across units.

A further statistical problem with TSCS arises from *serial correlation* in the dependent variable. This refers to correlated error variance within cross-sectional units, but between time periods. As Beck and Katz point out, any serial correlation “must be eliminated before the panel-corrected standard errors are calculated” (*ibid.*). This can be achieved by including a lagged dependent variable, which has the additional benefit of controlling for patterns of continuing issue attention in a dependent variable. With regard to agenda dynamics, it is reasonable to assume that both parties and media expose some level of continuity in their issue attention over time. And indeed, partial autocorrelations estimated for all five variables (Appendix B) show conclusively that issue attention on subsequent days is strongly correlated. Any partial higher-order autocorrelation (from two-day lags upwards) is almost negligible. Agenda stability and continuity appears to be a short-term process during campaigns. Including a lagged dependent variable (with a one-day lag) would therefore appear not only to account for the statistical problem of serial correlation but also to control for continuing levels of attention to a policy dimension which otherwise could have been attributed to the exogenous variables. From these different considerations, a changed TSCS design emerges which is formally presented in equation 2:

$$y_{i,t} = ky_{i,t-1} + \beta x_{i,t-1} + \phi d_i + \varepsilon_{i,t} \quad (2)$$

where  $y_{i,t}$  is the amount of attention given by the dependent variable (party or media actor) to issue  $i$  at time  $t$ ;  $y_{i,t-1}$  is the amount of attention given by the same actor to the same issue on the previous day;  $x_{i,t-1}$  refers to the amount of attention given by the independent variables (if  $y$  is PRESS or TV, this includes all three parties, and if  $y$  is a party, then  $x$  in-



cludes both sets of media) at an immediately preceding point in time;  $d_i$  is the unit-specific dummy variable; and  $\varepsilon_{i,t}$  denotes the panel-corrected standard error.

### ***Findings***

Table 7.9 reports the findings from five separate regressions that are based on the model specifications in equation 2, with policy dimension dummies, a lagged dependent variable and panel-corrected standard errors.

At the bottom of the table, the Durbin-Watson statistic for serial correlation and the Breusch-Pagan test for contemporaneous correlation are given. Only the first of the five regression models (with CONSERVATIVES as the dependent variable) appears problematic. This might be due to the overwhelming predominance of the economic issue in daily Tory agendas. Cross-sectional bias in the scale of values (and the resulting error variance of the estimates) is more problematic in this case than with all the other agendas, which are more evenly balanced, with three to four dominating issue areas. For the remaining four regression models, neither is the null hypothesis of no contemporaneous correlations rejected, nor do the Durbin-Watson statistics reach critical levels that would indicate serial correlation.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the inclusion of the lagged dependent variable proves to correct for serial correlation. Regressions without lagged variables (which are carried out in the stepwise estimation that SHAZAM, the software used here, applies) yield Durbin-Watson statistics ranging between 1.0 and 1.3.

**Table 7.9: Dynamics of party and media issue attention during the 1997 UK General**

**Election campaign**

	<b>Conser- vatives (t)</b>	<b>Labour (t)</b>	<b>LibDems (t)</b>	<b>TV (t)</b>	<b>Press (t)</b>
<b>Variables</b>	<b>B (panel-corr. SE)</b>	<b>B (panel-corr. SE)</b>	<b>B (panel-corr. SE)</b>	<b>B (panel-corr. SE)</b>	<b>B (panel-corr. SE)</b>
<b>Conservatives (t-1)</b>	-.195 (.159)			.917** (.031)	.482** (.134)
<b>Labour (t-1)</b>		.271 (.162)		.977** (.026)	-.014 (.120)
<b>LibDems (t-1)</b>			.024 (.152)	.833 (.456)	-.001 (.197)
<b>TV (t-1)</b>	.013 (.048)	.080 (.057)	.008 (.022)	.120 (.092)	
<b>Press (t-1)</b>	.142 (.093)	.038 (.111)	.065 (.046)		.362** (.102)
<i>Policy Dimension Intercepts:</i>					
<b>Constitution/Political System</b>	.176 (.152)	-.076 (.183)	-.006 (.073)	1.602** (.495)	.344 (.200)
<b>Defense</b>	-.019 (.015)	-.050 (.029)	.048 (.055)	-.010 (.136)	.059 (.069)
<b>Economy</b>	7.422** (1.481)	3.227* (1.459)	.444 (.503)	2.245 (3.094)	1.591 (1.307)
<b>Education, Technology, Arts</b>	.830 (.425)	.907 (.628)	.794* (.314)	1.623 (1.119)	.590 (.569)
<b>Environment, Energy</b>	.069 (.063)	.249 (.194)	.160 (.095)	-.166 (.202)	.051 (.148)
<b>Europe/ Foreign Affairs</b>	1.337* (.569)	.027 (.718)	-.091 (.262)	5.252** (1.753)	2.764** (1.063)
<b>Infrastructure</b>	.268 (.193)	-.050 (.155)	-.026 (.037)	1.040* (.465)	-.022 (.116)
<b>Regions</b>	.287 (.437)	-.422 (.421)	-.097 (.156)	7.581** (1.55)	.437 (.253)
<b>Social Welfare</b>	1.088 (.618)	2.138* (.940)	2.294** (.639)	2.022 (1.909)	1.561* (.751)
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.639	.569	.436	.668	.607
<b>N</b>	153	153	153	189	198
<b>Durbin-Watson</b>	1.68	2.16	1.79	1.85	2.06
<b>Breusch-Pagan (with 36 d.f.)</b>	70.87**	35.47	50.15	50.39	40.02

\*p < .05, \*\* p < .01

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool) aggregated into a cross-sectional time-series matrix by the author.

Note: Least-squares dummy variable regressions with panel-corrected standard errors were estimated with SHAZAM, using the online version of the software (<http://shazam.econ.ubc.ca>).

The estimates for the independent variables in the upper part of the table provide strong confirmation of *Hypothesis A*, although not without exceptions. While in most instances issue emphasis from parties exerts strong and significant influences on subsequent media coverage, no statistically significant coefficients can be found for the opposite temporal and hence causal order. Parties prompt media coverage of issues they emphasise while themselves not responding to the content of coverage.

Parties appear to be more successful agenda builders with regard to television coverage than with regard to the press. But this may be an artefact of the data gathering process, which only focussed on front-page coverage. Newspapers do contain the bulk of their campaign coverage in the domestic politics section, which was not coded. Newspapers have to be more selective with regard to their front page content, and that seems to set limits on the agenda building power of political parties. Without information about the content of all the campaign coverage in newspapers, we cannot make conclusive statements about the strength of the party-press relationship. But we do find, even at the level of front-page coverage, that the press did respond, not to all of the parties, but only to one of them. The Conservatives, albeit less so than with regard to television, were successful in systematically placing some of their campaign themes on the press agenda. It is difficult to find an explanation for why Labour did not manage to influence press agendas. The advantage for the Tories might have to do with the EU issue which featured strongly on the press agenda and for which we found an agenda building effect exerted by the Tories (in the case study in Section 7.2).

With regard to *Hypothesis A*, it can be stated that all the media responded to party stimuli (though not to the stimuli from all of the parties) and that none of the parties responded systematically to any of the media coverage.

Surprisingly, almost all of the coefficients for lagged dependent variables are statistically insignificant, the exception being the press who clearly built every day's agenda strongly on previous priorities of coverage. Indeed most of the continuity in coverage or communication appears to be a structural factor: each actor has some policy dimension(s) he gave exceptional attention to and this may account for some of the autocorrelation effects we saw in Appendix B. Policy dimension intercepts can be interpreted as indicative of overproportional attention by an actor to a particular policy dimension. For the Conservatives, this is ECONOMY; for the press EU; for television EU and REGIONS (the latter possibly being an artefact of the framing of news stories, as discussed in Chapter 5); for Labour ECONOMY and SOCIAL WELFARE; and for the LibDems EDUCATION and SOCIAL WELFARE. While the press and television also concentrated much on ECONOMY, they did less so than the major parties, hence the coefficient in their cases remains insignificant.

The policy dimension intercepts show that the overall composition of agendas varied somewhat between actors, but the significant coefficients for party effects show that some parties managed to systematically alter the day-to-day composition of media agendas in the direction they wanted. Agenda building does not consist of the media transmitting without filter what parties articulate. It rather means that parties repeatedly manage to place issues on the media agenda, which, over the course of the campaign, increases convergence between party and media agendas.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> The statistically significant intercept terms indicate that party communications impact on the variation in issue coverage rather than on the mean of such coverage. This indicates a limitation of the agenda building

The agenda building hypothesis does not state that all of the political actors will have an equal impact on all of the media. Our set of additional hypotheses in Chapter 4 specifies conditions under which agenda building becomes more or less likely to occur. *Hypothesis P2*, in particular, finds strong support in the results from time-series regressions. It states that agenda building power is the function of a party's position in the political system, from which follows that a party which is marginalized - the third party in a two-party system - and hence not pivotal for government formation, is less likely to manipulate the media into covering its preferred issues.

We can see from Table 7.9 that (a) the LibDems did not influence the press agenda at all, and that (b) while all three coefficients for party effects on issue attention by the electronic media are sizeable, only effects from Labour and Conservatives are statistically significant. This might of course be due to the fact that the LibDem variable is more problematic than the other two, in that it has far less counts, which are therefore most clearly Poisson-distributed (see discussion of this problem in King 1988). On the other hand, this finding makes intuitive sense and appears to validate *Hypothesis P2* about variations in party influence. Although the Liberal Democrats are capable of competing for seats in quite a number of constituencies, the national campaign, and hence the media coverage of it, focuses predominantly on the two major parties. The sizeable but insignificant LibDem coefficient in the television regression may indicate that the LibDems' campaign did feature somewhat, as a result of the stop-watch approach, but that they did not manage to drive the content of

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power, in so far as alteration of media coverage as a function of party input is a gradual process: parties do not define the priorities of media coverage but can significantly enhance media attention to such an extent that an otherwise marginal concern can become one of the priorities. In turn, an issue that the media prioritise irrespective of party inputs can be diminished in scale when it is challenged by party-raised issues.

the coverage of their campaign to the same extent and with the same regularity as did Labour and the Conservatives.

The two major parties emerge as almost equally strong agenda builders for the electronic media, with only a slight edge for Labour. The fact that we find the electronic media to be highly responsive to party agendas – and indeed more responsive than the newspapers are – confirms the conventional wisdom about the nature of television campaign coverage and provides some evidence in support of *Hypothesis M1*. Previous arguments about the manipulability of the electronic media are drawn from *newsroom observation studies*, which consist of in-depth studies of the news-production process and have been carried out over the past two decades in various countries.<sup>81</sup> Especially for the British case, it has been argued that the electronic media qualify as *agenda senders* rather than as agenda setters (Semetko and Canel 1997: 459). The BBC, in particular, epitomizes a *sacerdotal* attitude towards the political actors in a campaign (Blumler et al. 1992), regarding it “as a duty to report the election campaign and the activities and policies of parties in full detail, with special place given over in the news to the day’s election events throughout the entirety of the campaign” (Semetko and Canel 1997: 460). A more pragmatic approach to campaign coverage, which is said to drive private broadcasters as well as most newspapers, puts “greater emphasis on weighing the importance of election news against other non-political stories of the day, with news values as the primary basis for story selection” (*ibid.*).

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<sup>81</sup> Newsroom observation studies have been conducted in different countries, predominantly in the United States and Britain (Blumler and McQuail 1968; Blumler et al. 1978; Blumler 1986; Semetko et al. 1991; Blumler et al. 1995; Nossiter et al. 1995; Semetko 1996a), but more recently also in Germany (Semetko and Schoenbach 1994; 1995) and in Spain (Semetko and Canel 1997).

**Table 7.10: Building the agenda for public and private television**

Variables	BBC		ITV		Sky News	
	B	Panel-corr. SE	B	Panel-corr. SE	B	Panel-corr. SE
<b>Conservatives</b> <sub>(t-1)</sub>	.229	.114	.339**	.100	.347*	.163
<b>Labour</b> <sub>(t-1)</sub>	.420**	.123	.225**	.083	.395**	.132
<b>LibDems</b> <sub>(t-1)</sub>	.391	.236	.086	.159	.383	.227
<b>BBC</b> <sub>(t-1)</sub>	.094	.097				
<b>ITV</b> <sub>(t-1)</sub>			.200*	.088		
<b>Sky News</b> <sub>(t-1)</sub>					-.012	.112
<i>Policy Dimension</i>						
<i>Intercepts:</i>						
Constitution/Political System	.760**	.260	.569*	.279	.323*	.152
Defense	-.015	.060	.051	.071	-.056	.034
Economy	2.875*	1.372	-.310	.920	.337	1.595
Education, Technology, Arts	.619	.576	.863	.466	.229	.483
Environment, Energy	-.012	.128	.055	.181	-.236**	.090
Europe/ Foreign Affairs	3.335**	.957	1.313*	.597	.924	.628
Infrastructure	.855*	.388	.127	.137	.121	.146
Regions	3.938**	.959	1.877**	.507	2.152**	.567
Social Welfare	1.769	1.019	.817	.702	-.428	.867
$R^2$	.570		.513		.495	
$N$	189		189		189	
Durbin-Watson	1.83		1.96		1.99	
Breusch-Pagan (with 36 d.f.)	41.20		36.01		31.06	

\*p < .05, \*\* p < .01

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool), aggregated into a cross-sectional time-series matrix by the author.

Note: Least-squares dummy variable regressions with panel-corrected standard errors were estimated with SHAZAM, using the online version of the software (<http://shazam.econ.ubc.ca>).

The estimates in Table 7.9 show that television as such was highly responsive to party activities during the 1997 campaign. They clearly were more responsive than the press was. We can investigate in more detail whether this only applies to the BBC and ITV with their stop-watch approach to campaign coverage or whether instead all the electronic media were

equally responsive, irrespective of the extent to which their approach to campaign coverage is regulated. The additional regressions reported in Table 7.10 serve to test what has been formulated in *Hypothesis M1*, namely that in particular the BBC and ITV are expected to be more amenable to agenda building efforts than private broadcasters or the press.

The results in Table 7.10 clearly reject the hypothesis that Sky was more selective and hence less easily instrumentalised by the parties than BBC and ITV were. The stopwatch approach does not appear to make a difference with regard to agenda building. Sky was equally responsive to party emphasis as were the other channels. The most surprising finding here is that the Conservatives did not manage to drive the BBC agenda. The coefficient for Tory effects is just below statistical significance, and the coefficient is also clearly smaller than for both Labour and LibDems. With regard to LibDems, we find some coefficients (with regard to BBC and Sky) that are of the same scale as those for Labour (and in both cases even bigger than the coefficients for Tory effects), but standard errors are too high for coefficients to become statistically significant.

It is unclear what made the Conservatives the prime agenda builders for ITV, Labour the dominant influence on the BBC. Only on Sky's issue agenda did both parties impact equally strongly. The difference may be just down to white, since the dependent variables in those three regressions have fewer event counts per policy dimension and time unit. The regressions are however, not subject to contemporaneous or serial correlation, as the Durbin-Watson statistic and the Breusch-Pagan test show. While we do find some variation in party effects across the range of electronic media, these variations are not in line with our hypothesis that was derived from conventional wisdom about the stopwatch approach to campaign coverage and resulting manipulability of some media.



As mentioned before, the press agenda has to be treated with caution as a meaningful dependent variable, given the diversity of individual papers subsumed under that category and the relatively small sample of news coverage actually coded in the process of data collection. This means that, in contrast to the electronic media, we cannot investigate relationships between individual newspapers and the parties. It is possible, however, to test *Hypothesis M2*, which states that partisanship of the press determines how strong and dispersed across the press landscape a party's agenda building influence will be.

Table 7.11 presents two additional regressions for the estimation of which the total press output has been split up into two variables: Labour press (containing event counts from the Guardian, Independent, Mirror and Sun, who all supported the Labour party during the 1997 campaign) and Tory press (including the Times and Mail). These regressions were carried out in order to investigate whether the general pattern of press responsiveness to the three parties differs as a function of press partisanship. Surprisingly, this expectation finds no support in the results reported in Table 7.11. If there are differences at all, it is the Labour press that responds even a little bit more to Conservative issue emphasis than does the press from the Tory's own camp.

This might indicate that newspapers with a partisan interest are not sufficiently aware of the possible consequences of issue salience on voting. If they were, one would expect them to try and transmit their favoured party's agenda at the expense of the other parties. Instead, it might well be that partisan papers attempt to present positive coverage of the endorsed party's campaign together with equally extensive negative presentations of the opponent's activities. As a side effect of that, the papers may transport in their coverage just as much of the issue priorities of the opponent than they do of the party they support – or even more, in

case of the Labour press. Again, the press data that were gathered are too selective and of too unreliable quality to make any conclusive claims about this relationship. We have to contend ourselves with educated guesses at this stage.

**Table 7.11: Testing for the Effect of Partisanship of the Press on Agenda Building**

Variables	Tory-Press (Mail + Times) <sub>(t)</sub>		Labour-Press (Guardian + Independent + Mirror + Sun) <sub>(t)</sub>	
	B	(panel-corr. SE)	B	(panel-corr. SE)
<b>Conservatives</b> <sub>(t-1)</sub>	.198*	.077	.279**	.089
<b>Labour</b> <sub>(t-1)</sub>	.038	.065	-.039	.083
<b>LibDems</b> <sub>(t-1)</sub>	-.007	.098	.027	.145
<b>Tory-Press</b> <sub>(t-1)</sub>	.294**	.112		
<b>Labour-Press</b> <sub>(t-1)</sub>			.254*	.111
<i>Policy Dimension Intercepts:</i>				
Constitution/Political System	.079	.122	.338*	.155
Defense	-.003	.007	.070	.066
Economy	1.155	.769	.997	.822
Education, Technology, Arts	.188	.287	.535	.394
Environment, Energy	.013	.081	.060	.111
Europe/ Foreign Affairs	1.574**	.589	1.658*	.649
Infrastructure	.018	.077	-.013	.057
Regions	.254	.154	.240	.145
Social Welfare	.158	.306	1.627**	.598
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	.555		.479	
<b>N</b>	198		198	
Durbin-Watson	2.09		1.99	
Breusch-Pagan (with 36 d.f.)	45.13		51.48*	

\*p < .05, \*\* p < .01

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool), aggregated into a cross-sectional time-series matrix by the author.

Note: Least-squares dummy variable regressions with panel-corrected standard errors were estimated with SHAZAM, using the online version of the software (<http://shazam.econ.ubc.ca>).

Altogether, it seems as though media dependency, i.e. the tendency of mass media to act on issue emphasis provided by the political parties, is a unidirectional causal relationship that varies between electronic media and press, but does not vary either with press partisan-

ship, or with particular attitudes or regulations about the content of coverage. Neither of the media effects hypotheses could be validated. Even *Hypothesis M1*, which seems somewhat supported by the finding that television is more susceptible to agenda building than the press, cannot be validated since television manipulability is not a function of the stop-watch approach – otherwise agenda building effects on BBC and ITV should have been stronger than for Sky.

Party variables, on the other hand, behave very much according to expectations. Incumbency does not play a role; instead the two main contenders in a two-party system, Labour and the Conservatives, emerge as equally strong agenda builders (Labour somewhat more effective with regard to television, while the Tories drove the press agenda). The Liberal Democrats, the third party in a two-party system, may receive their fair share of stopwatch coverage, but apart from some minor influence on television coverage, they do not play a pivotal role in the process, because they are not a pivotal party in the political system.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

### 8.1 Scientific contributions and practical limitations of this study

A number of scholars in the fields of political communication and public relations have argued that the mass media are not independent of the sources that they draw information from for news production – that while the media *set* the public agenda, their own agenda is *built*, at least partly, by their sources (Bartels 1996; Blumler et al. 1992; Cameron et al. 1997; Curtin 1999; Curtin and Rhodenbaugh 2001; Davis 2000; Gandy 1982, Gans 1979, Lang and Lang 1981; 1983; Semetko and Canel 1997; Shoemaker and Reese 1991; Turow 1989; Walters et al. 1996; Weaver and Elliott 1985; Wood and Peake 1996).

What has been missing, however, is sound empirical evidence in support of the agenda building hypothesis. In particular, previous research has applied inadequate methodologies to the study of campaign dynamics (see discussion in Chapter 4). The theoretical part of this study (Chapters 2 through 4) outlined how important the study of agenda building is in the context of election campaigns. Schattschneider (1960: 73) argued that, “[s]ince the development of cleavages is a prime instrument of power, the party which is able to make its definition of the issues prevail is likely to take over the government.”

From the start, the available data imposed certain limitations on what this study could possibly contribute to our understanding of agenda building during campaigns. This study did not, and could not, result in a conclusive assessment of who amongst the UK parties in 1997 “was able to make its definition of the issues prevail” and of how significantly the battle for agenda domination between parties impacted on the electoral outcome.

The aim of this study was more modest, but quite essential for our understanding of agenda building: it aimed at establishing the direction of causality in the evolution of party and media agendas during the campaign. In Chapter 3, the methodological advances in agenda-setting research over the past three decades were presented, with particular emphasis on treating agenda evolution as a temporal phenomenon, which cannot be studied adequately with cross-sectional data. In Chapter 4, the state of the art of agenda building research was evaluated against these insights from advanced agenda-setting studies. Only the studies of Bartels (1996) and Wood and Peake (1996) achieved to establish *Granger-causality*, i.e. they employed techniques that enable to estimate temporally ordered, independent effects between different variables, which is needed in order to establish the direction of causality. But these two studies operated with a time frame of four to ten years, which produces considerably more time points than the study of an election campaign. In contrast, campaign studies (Semetko et al. 1991; Norris et al. 1999; Walters et al. 1996) have continued to rely on cross-sectional data, which can only ever result in an estimate of convergence between party and media agendas, falling short of establishing causality.

Hence, the unique contribution of this study is to apply a time-series design to the study of campaign dynamics and to establish Granger-causality. The major findings in Chapter 7 (Table 7.9) confirm that, during the 1997 campaign, party emphasis on issues prompted media coverage, while on the other hand parties did not respond systematically to news content. This confirms the often repeated hypothesis in agenda building studies, namely that to provide the media proactively (i.e. unasked) with information material is

“to influence the news [...] by providing the context within which all other information is evaluated, by providing usable information that is easier and cheaper to use than that from other sources, and by monopolizing the journalists’ time so that they don’t have an opportunity to seek out sources with alternative views” (Shoemaker and Reese 1991: 150).

This study not only confirms the general (but to date unproven) agenda building hypothesis which states that the media can be influenced in their agenda choices by their sources, but it also provides insight into the mechanism that allows sources to accomplish this strategic goal. The media have been argued to rely heavily and increasingly on information subsidies (Gandy 1980; Davis 2000). Reliance on sources and use of information subsidies allows “passive discovery”, which is “the most efficient means of learning what is news” (Curtin 1999: 57). Public relations and agenda building theory states that because of this practice of passive discovery,

“side sources such as public relations practitioners are able to gain power over the news production process and manipulate the public agenda by formulating the media agenda”  
(Curtin 1999: 57)

It follows that the means to control and manipulate the media is the strategic use of press releases in order “to amplify themes and images stressed by the campaign. Some advocates believe that they can help stimulate media coverage to further advance those themes and images” (Walters et al. 1996: 9). This study has investigated media responses to press release output by political parties and found a solid statistical relationship which suggests that themes do indeed get amplified through the media’s (and especially television’s) reliance and use of press release material.

It is fair to state that this is the only sound empirical evidence to date in support of the hypothesis that the mass media are not the originators of electoral agendas, but instead that they re-emphasise issue priorities which are provided by political actors.

A further limitation that applies to research into campaign dynamics is the current impossibility to trace change on public agendas. This means that we cannot assess how the manipulation of news content by political parties ultimately pays off in terms of changing issue salience and hence altered dimension of social choice. There are no frequently repeated

opinion polls during a campaign, which ask MIP questions.<sup>82</sup> That means we cannot extrapolate day-to-day changes in public salience of issues. At best, we could work with pre- and-post campaign estimates of public agenda composition. But our agenda building research design does not allow assessing conclusively which issues were brought to the fore to what extent by the campaigning parties. What we could assess here is how strong the immediate effects of changing issue emphasis by parties were. That cannot be related in a meaningful way to assessments of public salience, which are only measured at two points in time.

However, as argued in the introduction, agenda building, agenda-setting, and salience effects are independent causal links. Only if all three causal connections are simultaneously (or subsequently) prevalent will political communications provide a means to gain votes. Political actors cannot create conditions under which the public is guaranteed to respond systematically to news exposure, and neither can they ensure that salience matters. This study was meant to investigate the capacity of parties to instrumentalise the media; and empirical analysis did provide with supportive evidence for this hypothesis. By doing so it establishes that one of the necessary conditions for the endogeneity of salience applies. And this is an important finding, since it concerns the missing link in the project of endogenizing salience. The other two necessary conditions, the role of salience for vote choice and the agenda-setting function of the mass media, have received ample theorization and empirical investigation. One might conclude from the collected empirical evidence amassed by the two independent fields of research (see Chapter 2 and 3) that more often than not both

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<sup>82</sup> The exception to this is, as mentioned earlier, the study by Miller (1991). But sadly, his daily estimates of public agenda change cannot be related to daily estimates of media and party agenda change because he did not sample the press release output during the 1987 campaign in the UK.

conditions apply. This defines the odds for salience manipulation by political actors to be beneficial to them.

This study provides first clear evidence that political actors do have the potential to fulfil their part in the process.

## **8.2 Tentative generalizations**

To apply the label of case study to an empirical analysis like this is generally somewhat misleading. It understates the extent to which evidence can be drawn from a variety of simultaneous processes during a campaign. In the first section of Chapter 7, it is shown, in the form of three case studies of individual issue careers, how agenda building varied in form and result from one instance to the next. In addition to that, the time-series cross-section design with a number of individual party and media variables amounts to a comparative study of agenda building during the 1997 campaign. On the basis of this, the regressions reported in Table 7.9 and in Appendices C1 and C2 give evidence of more than just occasional instances of successful agenda building. The direction of causality is unambiguous throughout.

And most of all the particularities of the British media and political system under investigation cannot be taken to explain why agenda building occurred, but rather as influences on how the party-media relationship took shape in the 1997 campaign. That means that from an understanding of these particularities we can derive some generalisations about agenda building under altered conditions.



The investigation of the direction of causality was accompanied by the testing of specific hypotheses concerning the conditions under which agenda building is likely to occur. The conclusion from those tests is that a party is as successful an agenda builder as it is (a) a pivotal party, (b) an issue owner,<sup>83</sup> and (c) capable to engage its opponents in controversial policy debates. The latter two points create a dilemma for political parties, since, as Budge and Farlie (1983) have argued, in order to benefit from issue ownership, they should avoid confrontational policy debates. Time-series analysis shows, however, that ideally you want to be an issue owner who manages to engage the opponent in a debate, which the opponent will not be adamant to comply with. In that sense, agenda building can be interpreted as a non-cooperative game between political actors. The more one of the actors manages to force his agenda onto his opponent, the stronger the media response will be.

Given that we did not find strong evidence for variation in responsiveness across different media (in particular the finding that partisanship of the press did not matter), it is likely that media dependency on issue emphasis provided by pivotal political actors is a general phenomenon.<sup>84</sup>

### ***Inferences from the British case: I. the party system***

The observed British party system is in effect a 2 party system with a third party, the Liberal Democrats, playing a non-pivotal role. This shows in their lack of agenda building power. Some evidence might hint at the possibility that, in contrast to evaluations from Norris et al. (1999: 65), the Liberal Democrats did actually not run “the most internally

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<sup>83</sup> Or, alternatively, a party’s agenda building success increases if it capable to challenge the issue owner. With regard to TAXATION, it appears that the Conservatives were challenged by the Labour party. It appears as though the media ceased to regard the Conservatives as the sole issue owner in this instance.

<sup>84</sup> This is clearly the case with regard to the electronic media, while on the basis of the poor press data we have it is not possible to make conclusive statements about differences between television and press.

coherent campaign”, but instead an ineffective campaign. They shifted their issue focus too often or at inconvenient times - emphasizing economics just when everyone else but the Conservatives had buried the theme. Even the stop-watch approach taken by BBC and ITV, which guarantees a certain amount of consideration of the LibDems’ campaign, did not prevent their issues from being neglected. This seems to indicate that the media during campaigns are reinforcing the inconsequential role of the LibDems by marginalizing their priorities.

Small parties are not generally non-pivotal. The underrated role of the LibDems in the UK stems from the first-past-the-post system and the general political culture in the UK that emphasises the importance of majority decision-making and is suspicious of proportional representation and coalition governments. The expectation beyond the case at hand then is that not party size alone determines agenda building power but that pivotality of parties can make up for disadvantages in terms of mere size. Size should make a difference, irrespective of whether stop-watch approaches are applied by the media or not. The bigger parties will be the dominant members of coalition governments and hold the more and the more important portfolios. But the closer an election, or the tighter the situation for a pivotal small party, the more the media might focus on the fate and the electoral appeal of these smaller parties.

Whether incumbency plays a role or not remains uncertain. While the Conservatives were more influential agenda builders for the press, most of this might be due to the newsworthiness of internal rifts around the issue of European integration. In general, we would expect that campaigns are about the struggle between incumbents and challengers for government control and, unless there is intentional bias, both sides should be equally influential because their efforts are equally newsworthy for the media.

In particular, the repeated finding that the more parties mention an issue the more attention the issue will receive from the media suggests that between-party conflict over issues is newsworthy and, in turn, helps to place issues more readily on the media agenda. Such conflict is most likely to occur between the main contenders.

### ***Inferences from the British case: II. The media landscape***

The stopwatch approach in British Television coverage of campaign, or even the notion of a *sacerdotal* approach to coverage (Blumler et al. 1992), has proved to be less influential than anticipated. It appears to be rather the structure of the party system that explains the relative amount of influence each party has on the electronic media than the proportional amount of airtime they are given. The sheer amount of campaign coverage on the other hand, and the meticulous attempt to broadcast the issue context can account for the magnitude of effects. And ITV, the main commercial channel differs from non-British counterparts in that it is long established and works under strict rulings for campaign coverage. The discrepancy between coverage on public and private television may be expected to be more apparent in continental European systems with their relatively new and generally uncontrolled private channels. However, Sky News is a prime example of a relatively recently established and unregulated private channel. And, surprisingly, they could not be shown to differ in their campaign coverage and manipulability from the older, more established, and strongly regulated broadcasters (see Appendix C1).

Also, the British press landscape differs from other countries. Britain is dominated by national newspapers, which is similar to conditions in other countries that have a highly cen-

tralised structure, like France, but differs from more federal, regionalised contexts like in Germany, Spain, or the U.S. One can imagine variation in the sets of issues coming to the fore in different regions under more federal political and decentralised media systems. Also, where the patterns of political competition or hegemony differ on a regional basis, parties may exert varying control over the agendas of individual media outlets.

The most important particularity of the British media landscape is surely the number and role of tabloids. The patterns of how the British press varies in its responsiveness to issue stimuli from parties may have more in common with continental TV landscapes, with their divide into public and private broadcasting, than with the more homogeneous press in continental Europe – which refers to them being homogeneous in style, not necessarily in political affiliation.

Data quality did not allow the study of tabloids in comparison with broadsheets. What we have learned about the nature of coverage in the tabloids (Chapter 5) is that they tend to be more selective, give generally less attention to campaign coverage, and were over-proportionally focused on the EU question, which appeared to be the only political issue with genuine newsworthiness.

Press partisanship is an important feature of societies with historical class cleavages, especially in those societies that have a history of newspapers which are not only affiliated to a party but were indeed initially official party publications. However, additional regressions, reported in Appendix C2, did not show a moderating effect of press partisanship on the agenda building equation. As argued in Chapter 7, the reason for this might be that the endorsed party receives just as much positive coverage as its opponent receives negative coverage in a partisan paper, which can result in an equal transmission of both sides' agen-

das. Since the notion of salience implies that the amount of issue consideration, not the tendency of coverage, matters, partisan papers may just prove to be insufficiently aware of the role of salience and of the appropriate strategy in partisan coverage, which would be to ignore the opponent's agenda.

In general, it transpires from our analysis that party characteristics have more of a moderating effect on the agenda building equation than do media characteristics. Pivotality, issue ownership, and an increasing number of simultaneously debating parties, are all factors that appear to facilitate agenda building. In contrast, the only characteristic that seems to render a media actor more amenable to agenda building efforts is if "he" is a television channel instead of a newspaper. And here, the factor could equally well be that the agenda building effects we detect will grow stronger the more comprehensive we have sampled the news. Since most of the campaign coverage is inside a newspaper, not on its front page, and since readers may well tend to read more than the front page, just as television viewers are likely to watch entire news bulletins, not just the opening minute, a conclusive comparative study of media behaviour requires more comprehensive content analysis of newspaper content.

### **8.3 Future research: going comparative**

By proposing a systematic and dynamic approach to the study of agenda building, this study was not least meant to inspire future research, in particular comparative research which is needed in order to further substantiate the general hypotheses about the conditions under which parties are capable to determine themselves the criteria that voters will apply in order to evaluate different policy platforms.

As can be seen from the theoretical considerations in Chapter 4 and the tentative conclusions in the previous section, the underlying hypothesis of this entire study is that parties have a general propensity to influence the media. The more ritualised and nationally centralised the campaign - as in the UK - the easier it is of course to study proceedings. This should not deter from attempting replications of the approach presented here for different national context, which are needed as much as revisiting the UK campaign arena. Problems may arise from differences with regard to campaign scheduling, with regard to how identifiable in different contexts the official campaign. In this regard as well, Britain provides with the model subject for study.

The most important aspect with regard to future research is probably the requirement to collect better data, more precise quantifications of campaign proceedings. The event count data that had to be used for analysis here leave not only uncertainty about results and create statistical problems (especially with regard to the press variables), they also limit the possibilities for in-depth study of particular aspects of the process. For example, it was impossible to run time-series analysis with different individual media outlets as independent variables, which means that some important information about variation across actors is lost.

What is needed is a content analysis of political and news text that quantifies individual articles, news stories, and press releases more accurately. And, of course, more extensive content analysis of newspapers would have rendered results from time-series analysis with the press as dependent variable much more reliable. The newspaper material that is included in this data set is but a sample of daily news, and indeed not a random sample, which makes it an unreliable indicator, or at least overstates the selectiveness of news production in the press.

If possible, it would of course be ideal to combine agenda building with agenda-setting research. For this purpose, frequent if not daily observations of public issue salience would be needed, which is quite a hurdle. If it can be provided, it would allow to model in detail how effects are relayed from the parties via the media to the public. The 1997 campaign study did not allow for that, since a panel study, which would be the only available source of information about changes in public salience, has too few observations over time.

The results from the present analysis, however, should indeed encourage future research on a comparative basis, simply because consistent and strong evidence in support of a compelling hypothesis was found.

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## APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

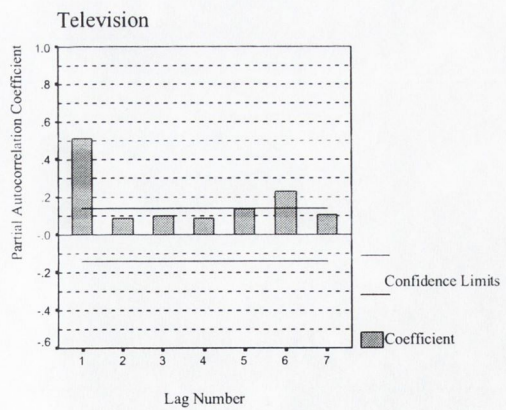
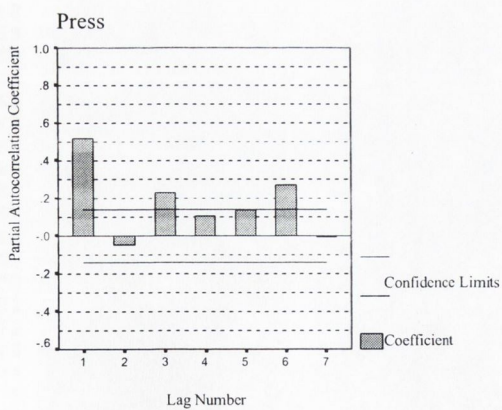
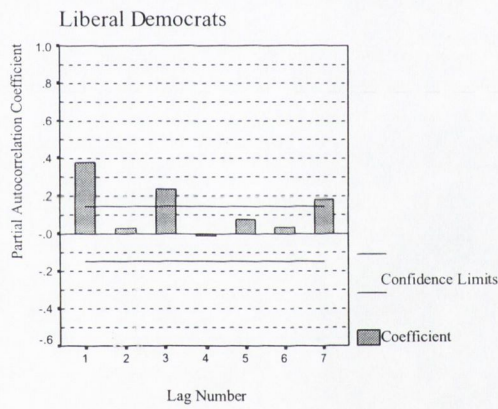
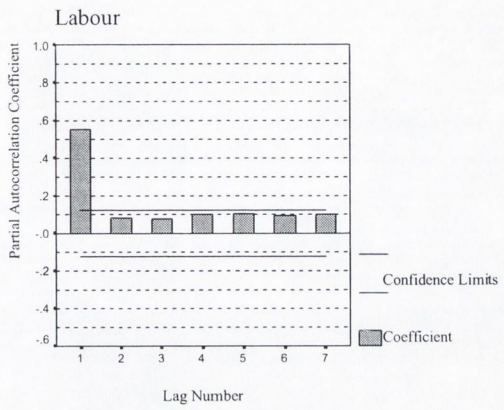
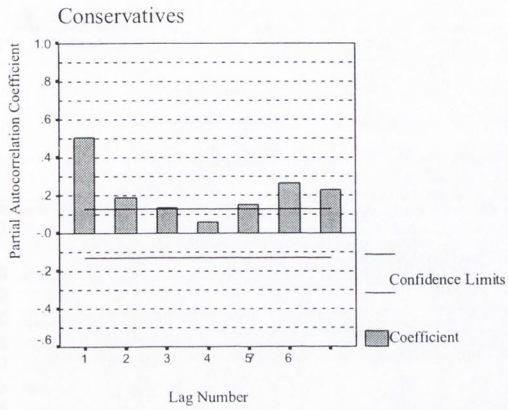
POLICY DIMENSION		CONSERVATIVES	LABOUR	LIBDEMS	PRESS	TV
<b>Constitution/ Political System</b>	N	31	31	31	23	22
	Sum	5	3	3	18	52
	Minimum	0	0	0	0	0
	Maximum	2	2	2	3	7
	Mean	.161	.097	.097	.783	2.364
	Std. Deviation	.454	.396	.396	.902	2.060
	% of Total Sum	1.6%	.9%	2.6%	4.1%	4.1%
<b>Defense</b>	N	31	31	31	23	22
	Sum	0	3	1	2	3
	Minimum	0	0	0	0	0
	Maximum	0	1	1	1	2
	Mean	.000	.097	.032	.087	.136
	Std. Deviation	.0000	.301	.180	.288	.468
	% of Total Sum	.0%	.9%	.9%	.5%	.2%
<b>Economy</b>	N	31	31	31	23	22
	Sum	176	140	22	156	372
	Minimum	0	0	0	0	3
	Maximum	16	20	5	18	39
	Mean	5.677	4.516	.710	6.783	16.909
	Std. Deviation	4.377	4.857	1.322	4.242	11.555
	% of Total Sum	57.1%	40.1%	19.0%	35.5%	29.5%
<b>Education/ Technology/ Arts</b>	N	31	31	31	23	22
	Sum	34	55	26	43	154
	Minimum	0	0	0	0	0
	Maximum	8	7	4	7	19
	Mean	1.097	1.774	.839	1.870	7.000
	Std. Deviation	1.868	1.875	1.241	2.096	5.099
	% of Total Sum	11.0%	15.8%	22.4%	9.8%	12.2%
<b>Environment/ Energy</b>	N	31	31	31	23	22
	Sum	3	7	4	7	10
	Minimum	0	0	0	0	0
	Maximum	2	2	1	2	4
	Mean	.097	.226	.129	.304	.455
	Std. Deviation	.396	.560	.341	.635	.963
	% of Total Sum	1.0%	2.0%	3.4%	1.6%	.8%
<b>Europe/ For- eign Affairs</b>	N	31	31	31	23	22
	Sum	44	40	7	122	218
	Minimum	0	0	0	0	3
	Maximum	4	7	3	16	31
	Mean	1.419	1.290	.226	5.304	9.909
	Std. Deviation	1.455	1.736	.617	5.261	8.147
	% of Total Sum	14.3%	11.5%	6.0%	27.8%	17.3%

<b>Infrastructure</b>	N	31	31	31	23	22
	Sum	5	4	0	7	33
	Minimum	0	0	0	0	0
	Maximum	3	2	0	4	6
	Mean	.161	.129	.000	.304	1.500
	Std. Deviation	.583	.428	.000	.876	1.683
	% of Total Sum	1.6%	1.1%	.0%	1.6%	2.6%
<b>Regions</b>	N	31	31	31	23	22
	Sum	10	7	1	15	196
	Minimum	0	0	0	0	0
	Maximum	4	3	1	5	21
	Mean	.323	.226	.032	.652	8.909
	Std. Deviation	.945	.669	.180	1.229	6.690
	% of Total Sum	3.2%	2.0%	.9%	3.4%	15.6%
<b>Social Welfare</b>	N	31	31	31	23	22
	Sum	31	90	52	69	221
	Minimum	0	0	0	0	1
	Maximum	8	12	7	11	30
	Mean	1.000	2.903	1.677	3.000	10.046
	Std. Deviation	1.880	2.891	2.056	2.747	6.622
	% of Total Sum	10.1%	25.8%	44.8%	15.7%	17.6%
<b>Total</b>	N	279	279	279	207	198
	Sum	308	349	116	439	1259
	Minimum	0	0	0	0	0
	Maximum	16	20	7	18	39
	Mean	1.104	1.251	.416	2.121	6.359
	Std. Deviation	2.467	2.545	1.083	3.439	7.948
	% of Total Sum	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)



# APPENDIX B: PARTIAL AUTOCORRELATIONS



Source: Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999; Party press release content analysis made available by Paul Goddard, University of Liverpool)

# APPENDIX C: THE CODEBOOK LIST OF ISSUES

## FOR THE 1997 CAMPAIGN STUDY

326 CONSTITUTION/ POL. SYST.: general	394 Pte. Medicine/ Hospitals/ Insurance
327 Pol. Institutions: Parl./ Lords/ Judiciary	397 Soc. Sec.: Elderly/ Pensions
328 Political Role of Monarchy	398 Jobseekers' Allowance
329 Electoral Reform	399 Child Benefit
330 Bill of Rights	400 Other Benefits
331 Freedom of Information	401 Welfare State
332 Secrecy	402 Law & Order: Crime
333 MI5/ MI6	403 Law & Order: Penal System
334 Local Govt.	405 UK Ethnic Minorities
335 Political Participation	406 Immigrants
336 Policy: Conservative (not devolution)	407 Racism
337 Policy: Labour (not devolution)	408 Refugees
338 Policy: LibDem (not devolution)	409 Poverty
339 Devolution (constitutional)	410 Homelessness
	411 Women
346 DEFENCE: general	412 Youth
347 Policy: Conservative	413 The Family
348 Policy: Labour	414 Welfare Cuts
349 Policy: LibDem	415 Policy: Conservative
	416 Policy: Labour
351 ECONOMY: general	417 Policy: LibDem
352 Jobs/ Unemployment	418 Gun Control
353 Inflation	421 EDUC., TECHNOL., ARTS: Education general
354 Wages/ Earnings	422 Schools
355 Executive Pay ("Fat Cats")	423 Universities/ Colleges
356 Personal Taxation	424 Science & Technology
357 Council Tax/ Business Rates	425 Arts/ Arts Funding
358 VAT	426 National Lottery
359 Corporate Taxation	427 Other issues
360 Agriculture	428 Policy: Conservative
361 Industry/ Business/ Manufacturing	429 Policy: Labour
362 Trade Unions	430 Policy: LibDem
363 Industrial Action	
364 Nationalisation	441 INFRASTRUCTURE: general
365 Privatisation	442 Housing/ Urban Devpt.
366 Privatised Utilities	443 Public Transport
367 Balance of Trade	444 Roads
368 Public Spending	445 Railways
369 Public Borrowing	446 Other issues
370 Economic Recovery	447 Policy: Conservative
371 Interest Rates	448 Policy: Labour
372 Savings Schemes	449 Policy: LibDem
373 Money Supply	
374 Markets/ City	451 ENVIRONMENT/ ENERGY: general
375 "Stakeholding"	452 Nuclear Power
376 Policy: Conservative	453 North Sea Oil
377 Policy: Labour	454 Environmental Conservation
378 Policy: LibDem	455 Energy Conservation
379 Budget: Conservative	456 Power Generation/ Supply
380 Budget: Labour	457 Water Supply
381 Budget: LibDem	458 Other issues
	459 Policy: Conservative
391 SOCIAL WELFARE: general	460 Policy: Labour
392 NHS	461 Policy: LibDem
393 Health (general)	

- 471 FOREIGN AFFAIRS: general
- 472 Relations with Non-European Nations
- 473 Relations with European Nations
- 474 EU (general)
- 475 EU: Monetary Union
- 476 EU: Social Chapter
- 477 EU as Threat to Sovereignty
- 478 Anglo-Irish relations
- 479 Falklands
- 480 Third World
- 481 Overseas Development
- 482 Policy: Conservative
- 483 Policy: Labour
- 484 Policy: LibDem
- 485 Policy: REF/ UKInd
  
- 491 REGIONS: Scotland: general
- 492 Scotland: devolution
- 493 Scots Law/ Legal System
- 494 Scotland: voting/ electoral politics
- 495 Wales: general
- 496 Wales: devolution
- 497 English Regions
- 498 London
- 499 N.I.: general
- 500 N.I.: voting/ electoral politics
- 501 N.I.: peace process
- 502 Policy: Conservative
- 503 Policy: Labour
- 504 Policy: LibDem
- 505 Policy: SNP
- 506 Policy: Plaid Cymru
- 507 Policy: Ulster Unionist Party
- 508 Policy: Democratic Unionist Party
- 509 Policy: SDLP
- 510 Policy: Sinn Fein
- 511 Policy: Other Northern Ireland party
- 512 N.I.: Terrorism (not "peace process")

*Source:* Margaret Scammell and Holli A. Semetko, Election Party and Media Content Analysis (U.K. Data Archive [SN 3932], 1<sup>st</sup> ed. May 27, 1999)

