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**CENTRE FOR RESEARCH INTO
ELECTIONS AND SOCIAL TRENDS**

Working Paper
Number 75
September 1999

Was it the Sun wot won it again? The influence of newspapers in the 1997 election campaign

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The *Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends* is an ESRC Research Centre based jointly at the *National Centre for Social Research* (formerly SCPR) and the *Department of Sociology, University of Oxford*

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ABSTRACT

One of the distinguishing features of British politics is the presence of a highly partisan press. As a result it is often argued that rather than simply engaging in agenda setting or issue framing, newspapers in Britain can influence both how individuals vote and the aggregate outcome of elections. The 1997 British general election is an ideal occasion on which to examine this claim as a number of traditionally pro-Conservative newspapers switched to backing Labour. If British newspapers do have an influence on voting behaviour it should be most apparent when newspapers change sides. Newspapers do indeed appear to have had some influence on how people voted in 1997, but it is less clear that they had much impact on the overall outcome. Meanwhile, they had little apparent influence on individual voters' views on a key issue in the campaign, Britain's membership of the single European currency.

On 17 March 1997, John Major, the incumbent Conservative Prime Minister, announced that the general election would be held on 1 May. The unusually long notice, six weeks, would he hoped give him time to improve his apparently hopeless position in the opinion polls. Yet within hours his hopes of a morale-boosting lift-off were devastated. For the next morning, *The Sun*, Britain's best selling national daily paper, announced that it was backing Labour.

The Sun's announcement was undoubtedly of symbolic significance. Its sharp, some would say cruel, attacks in the final days of the 1992 campaign on Neil Kinnock, the then Labour leader, were widely regarded as responsible for Labour's unexpected defeat (Linton, 1995; McKee, 1995; MacArthur, 1992). Indeed, although it later tried to retract the headline, the newspaper itself famously proclaimed that it was 'The Sun wot won it'. Certainly Labour's leadership took the supposed power of the newspaper sufficiently seriously to devote considerable effort during the course of the 1992-7 parliament to persuading the paper's staff and above all its proprietor, Rupert Murdoch, that 'New Labour' was a party they could back.

But *The Sun's* change of allegiance was simply the most dramatic of a number of such changes amongst Britain's newspapers in 1997. Although *The Star* had not formally endorsed the Conservatives in 1992, their coverage was strongly pro-Conservative (Harrop and Scammell, 1992); in 1997 the newspaper backed Labour. *The Independent* switched from being neutral in 1992 to backing Labour in 1997, albeit also calling for a tactical vote for the Liberal Democrats where appropriate. Meanwhile, instead of backing the Tories as they had done in 1992, *The Times* encouraged its readers to back Euro-sceptic candidates of whatever partisan persuasion. Overall, during the 1997 campaign more than twice as many people were reading a newspaper that backed Labour as were reading one that supported the Conservatives. The traditional Tory advantage amongst the press was dramatically broken for the first time in post-war British politics.

The change in mood in Britain's newspapers did not come as a surprise. Large sections of the press which had backed John Major in 1992 but which were antagonistic to further European integration, rapidly fell out of love with him in the wake of sterling's forced eviction from the European Monetary Union in September 1992. In January 1994, *The Sun* itself argued 'What fools we all were' for backing Major in 1992. Large sections of the Conservative press called for John Major's defeat when he voluntarily called a leadership election in the summer of 1995 with the aim of ending the unrest within his party. Meanwhile, Tony Blair, who became Labour leader following John Smith's death in May 1994, won widespread admiration amongst Conservative journalists for pushing through the kinds of reform of the Labour party that they had been calling on for years. In truth, what, if anything, was surprising about the behaviour of the British press in 1997 was not how many newspapers defected from the Conservative camp, but that there were not more.

And, of course the unprecedented if not surprising level of support for Labour amongst the national press was followed by the party's most successful election result ever, at least in terms of seats. For those commentators who believed that the Tories traditional advantage in terms of press partisanship provided them with an unfair advantage at election time (see, for example, Linton 1995) the outcome of the 1997 appears to be a clear vindication of their claims. Another simple case, it seems, of 'It was the Sun wot won it'!

What it certainly provides is an important test case. Britain's uniquely highly partisan press (Dalton et al, 1998b), has meant that it has always been worth asking the question, do newspapers influence votes? and not just, do the media help set the agenda or frame issues? (Curtice, 1997) But, even so, addressing this question still leaves us with the problem of disentangling cause and effect that bedevils all research on the impact of the media. For any association between newspaper read and vote choice could reflect the outcome of one or other or both of two very different social processes. One possibility is

indeed that newspapers influence the way that people vote. The other, however, is that people choose to read a newspaper that chimes with their own views.

Unfortunately, much previous writing on the alleged influence of the British press has failed to take sufficient account of this difficulty (see, for example, Dunleavy and Husbands, 1985; Newton, 1991). In contrast, in our previous work (Curtice and Semetko, 1994; Curtice, 1997) we have sought to overcome it by using panel data to examine whether those who consistently read one kind of newspaper switch their vote over a given period of time in a different direction from those who read a different kind of newspaper. Trouble is, if a newspaper has promoted the same message for a long period of time and that message has indeed proved persuasive, the proportion of that paper's readers open to further persuasion over any time period may be quite limited. But if newspapers change their message, as happened in the 1997 British election, then their readers cannot be considered to carry the legacy of past persuasion. In short, if newspapers can influence votes, then the one occasion on which we should be able to see their influence is when a paper changes sides.

True, as we have already noted, the partisan shift of the British press in 1997 was presaged in the intervening years since the previous election. So some of the papers' new message may have already rubbed off on some of their readers before the 1997 campaign started. However, as noted further below, analysis of the impact of press partisanship on the voting preferences of their readers between 1992 and 1995 suggests in fact that the initial impact of the changed mood of the British press was a limited one. Moreover, there are good reasons to anticipate that it is only at election times that the influence of a new political message will become readily apparent. After all, it is only during the election campaign itself that a newspaper comes down firmly in favour of one party or another. And it is only when faced with the need to decide how they should vote that readers may be open to guidance and persuasion.

Thus in this paper we examine whether those reading different kinds of newspaper switched their votes in a different direction over the course of the campaign. In so doing we pay particular attention to the behaviour of those who were reading a newspaper that promoted a different political message than it did in 1992. Given, however, that some of the impact of the changed partisanship of the press may have occurred before the formal campaign began, and given Miller et al's claims that the influence of *The Sun* on the 1987 election occurred in the months before the campaign started (Miller et al, 1991), we look not only at what happened over the course of April 1997, but also at the 'long campaign' in the twelve months prior to the election.

As noted, our method builds upon the work of Curtice and Semetko (1994) and Curtice (1997). Two important conclusions have emerged from that work. First, we found that newspapers did apparently have some influence on individual voters. In particular we found that those who consistently read a pro-Labour or pro-Conservative newspaper over a considerable period of time were more likely to remain loyal to that paper than those who did not read a newspaper at all were. Equally, those who stopped reading such a newspaper were more likely to defect. Exposure to the more critical tone of certain sections of the traditionally pro-Conservative press between 1992 and 1995 appeared to have an impact by denying the Conservatives their 'loyalty bonus' rather than in rendering them more likely to defect than those who did not read a newspaper at all.

However, in each case these 'effects' were small - and they did not appear to be apparent at all over the few weeks of the 1992 campaign itself. Moreover, pro-Labour newspapers worked to Labour's advantage just as much as pro-Conservative newspapers appeared to generate a benefit for the Tories. As a result, there was little evidence that newspapers had much impact on the aggregate outcome of elections. Between 1987-92 and 1992-5 the net movement of voting preferences amongst the whole electorate was very similar to what happened amongst those who did not read a newspaper at all. Thus our second

important conclusion from previous work has been that when it comes to the outcome of elections, the disposition of the press does not make much difference at all.

The changed partisan tone of the press was, however, not the only feature of note about the press coverage of the 1997 election. It was also notable for the amount of attention that was devoted to Europe (Norris et al, 1999; Chap.5). Moreover, while some traditionally Conservative newspapers abjured from backing the Conservatives yet others remained faithful, they were all in agreement that both further European integration in general and British membership of a European single currency in particular were undesirable (Seymour-Ure, 1997). Indeed, all of them, apart from *The Sun*, published details of which individual candidates were thought to share such views and thus might be worthy of support. Overall, more than twice as many people were reading a Eurosceptic newspaper during the 1997 election as were reading a pro-European one.

This clearly suggests that we should not only examine whether newspapers influenced votes in the 1997 election, but also whether their coverage of Europe affected opinions. After all, this was a topic on which the clear lead being provided by the press contrasted with the divisions of the Conservative party and the equivocation of Labour. And with all major parties committed to holding a referendum before taking Britain into a single currency, this is an issue where the influence of the press or otherwise may well be put to the test in the ballot box in the not too distant future.

Data

Our evidence comes from the 1997 British Election Campaign Study. This is a four wave panel study undertaken between spring 1996 and the weeks immediately after the election on May 1 1997. The first wave, which was administered face to face, comprised the 1996 British Social Attitudes survey to which questions were added so that it could act as the

first wave of an election panel study (Jowell et al, 1997). The remaining three waves were all conducted by telephone. The first of these was administered in the first two weeks of April 1997 which was when the election campaign first got into full gear. The second telephone wave was undertaken in the last two weeks of April while the final wave took place in the weeks immediately after polling day. 3,662 respondents were interviewed in the 1996 recruitment wave, of whom, 1,800, 1,809 and 2,315 respectively were successfully interviewed in the ensuing waves (for further details see Norris et al, 1999).

Who won the campaign?

If Labour's new found friends amongst the press were responsible for the party's electoral success, then one pattern that we would expect to see is that Labour's overall level of support rose during the election campaign. But this is far from what happened. In Table 1 we show the levels of support registered for each party in each of the waves of the campaign panel. For ease of interpretation, we have excluded from the Table those who in the three pre-polling day waves said they would not vote or did not know for whom they would vote, while in the post-election wave we have excluded those who said they did not vote. Note however that the questions asked to elicit this information varied somewhat during the course of the panel. In the initial spring 1996 wave we asked our respondents which party they were most likely to vote for in a year or so's time. In the two April waves we asked respondents whether they had definitely decided for whom they would vote in the election, and if they had not for whom they were most likely to vote; we have combined the answers to these two questions.

Table 1
Trends in Party Support in the Campaign Panel

| | 1996 | | 1997 | |
|------------------|--------|------------|-----------|--------|
| | Spring | Early Apr. | Late Apr. | May |
| | % | % | % | % |
| Conservative | 28 | 30 | 29 | 29 |
| Labour | 53 | 50 | 49 | 46 |
| Liberal Democrat | 13 | 12 | 16 | 19 |
| Other | 5 | 8 | 7 | 6 |
| | (1124) | (1196) | (1247) | (1151) |

Source: British Election Campaign Study 1997

Labour's share of the vote did not rise during the 1997 election campaign. In fact it dropped. In our panel, support for Labour fell by four months between the first fortnight in April and polling day, after having already fallen by three points over the previous twelve months. This result is not peculiar to this panel. Labour's share of the vote averaged 52% in the first five opinion polls published at the beginning of the campaign, but only 47% in the last five polls to be conducted before polling day (Butler & Kavanagh, 1997). Indeed, Labour's ability to retain its share of the vote during its much vaunted, press backed 1997 campaign was little better than its ability to do so during its much vilified, press decried 1983 campaign during which there was a seven point drop in opinion poll support (Butler and Kavanagh, 1984). The party whose support did rise during the 1997 campaign in our panel was the one party to which no newspaper lent its backing except as a possible tactical vote, that is the Liberal Democrats. This result too is in line with the trends in the opinion polls.

So whatever impact newspapers' backing for Labour during the 1997 campaign had on voters, we can see that it was not sufficient to deliver a swing to Labour. Already it appears that previous work which argues that the partisanship of newspapers has insufficient influence to sway the aggregate outcome of an election is likely to be endorsed. But of course this simple analysis far from settles the matter. Perhaps Labour's fall in support was occasioned by factors that had nothing to do with its press coverage, and when we divide our respondents into those who were and those who were not reading a Labour supporting newspaper we will see an important difference. But even if that does prove to be true, what Table 1 does make clear is that if we are to assess properly the influence of the press on the evolution of voting preferences during the 1997 campaign we cannot afford to ignore the Liberal Democrats, as much previous research in this area has in fact done.

Newspaper readership and vote switching during the 1997 campaign

Labour's vote may not have risen during the 1997 campaign, but it was certainly higher amongst those reading Labour-supporting newspapers than amongst the remainder of the population. In Table 2 we show how those reading different kinds of newspaper actually voted according to the reports obtained in the final wave of the campaign panel. In so doing we identify five different types of newspaper reader: -

The 'Tory faithful' are readers of the three newspapers that continue to back the Conservatives in 1997, *The Mail*, *The Express*, and the *Daily Telegraph*,

The Sun comprises readers of that newspaper alone,
'Other ex-Tory' comprises readers of either the *Daily Star* or *The Times*,
The 'Labour faithful' are readers of *The Mirror* (*Daily Record* in Scotland)
and *The Guardian*,
'Other' comprises readers of *The Independent*, the *Financial Times*
and any regional newspaper.

We have separated *Sun* readers simply because of the particular interest in the persuasive power of this newspaper. Meanwhile, although both *The Independent* and *the Financial Times* both formally backed Labour, their news coverage has a relatively dispassionate style and was less likely to be perceived as favourable to Labour. For example, according to the 1997 British Election Study cross-section survey, no less than three-quarters of *Independent* readers said that their paper did not favour any party. Note also that in Table 2 we divide respondents according to their reports in April 1996 of which newspaper they reported reading regularly, that is three times or more a week, the only occasion when this particular piece of information was obtained from our panel respondents.

Table 2
Newspaper Reading and Vote 1997

| | Vote 1997 | | | | | Not Vote % |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|----------|-----------|------------|----|---------------|
| | Con % | Lab % | LDem % | Other % | | |
| Paper read regularly, 1996 | | | | | | |
| Tory faithful | 42 | 20 | 14 | 7 | 17 | (347) |
| <i>The Sun</i> | 25 | 40 | 10 | 4 | 22 | (309) |
| Other ex-Tory | 26 | 38 | 18 | 2 | 16 | (106) |
| Labour faithful | 7 | 61 | 10 | 5 | 17 | (306) |
| Other | 19 | 30 | 18 | 10 | 22 | (134) |
| None | 22 | 35 | 19 | 4 | 19 | (774) |

Source: British Election Campaign Study 1997

Readers of a 'Labour faithful' paper were no less than three times as likely to vote Labour as those reading a 'Tory faithful' one, and around twice as likely to do so as someone reading a non-partisan newspaper or someone not reading a newspaper regularly at all. But perhaps more strikingly for our purposes is the fact that the proportion backing

Labour is also higher amongst readers of *The Sun* and those reading one of the other ex-Tory newspapers. This of course is precisely what we would expect to find if those newspapers' change of partisanship made a difference to the way that their readers voted.

But of course it may well have been the case that readers of *The Sun* or or of one of the other ex-Tory newspapers were already more inclined to back Labour even before the campaign got under way. Perhaps *The Sun's* change of allegiance was a response to a change of mood that had already occurred amongst its readers, and was designed not in the hope of persuading readers to change their vote but because of a fear that otherwise they might stop reading the newspaper. We should note too that *The Sun's* readers were also more likely than most to abstain, suggesting that politics was not particularly central to their lives anyway. Meanwhile, Liberal Democrat support apparently varied little from one newspaper group to another, though the party appears to have found both readers of *The Sun* and readers of *The Mirror* both particularly difficult to capture.

In order to establish whether the partisanship of the press did make a difference to the way in which people voted we need to look at how votes shifted during the campaign. Were readers of *The Sun* particularly likely to switch towards Labour during the course of the campaign? Did readers of Tory faithful papers in contrast remain faithful to the Conservatives? The ideal survey for answering such questions would of course be one that had interviewed respondents just before the campaign started and *The Sun* made its switch. But in contacting its respondents in the first fortnight of April 1997 the 1997 British Election Campaign Study did so just as the campaign began to get into full swing after the Easter holiday, leaving plenty of opportunity for any press influence to manifest itself by polling day. So, while some of those who might have been influenced by *The Sun's* announcement might have switched their vote before the first interview, our panel does cover the period when voters were most likely to be attuned to their newspaper's election coverage, encompasses the occasion when most newspapers formally declared their position, and includes the time when uncertain voters were making up their minds.

As we have already seen in Table 2, the spring 1996 wave of the panel asked which newspaper, if any, our respondents read regularly. During the election campaign itself, however, it asked a somewhat different question about newspaper readership, that is which newspaper, if any, respondents had read yesterday. This might be felt to be a less reliable and valid indicator of regular exposure to a particular newspaper than a question which asks about regular readership. Clearly in any particular wave such a question may well have identify as a non-reader someone who did in fact see one or more newspapers on a fairly regular basis during the campaign, but happened not to do so the day before they were interviewed. Others might be 'misclassified' in that the newspaper they read the day before they were interviewed was not typical of their reading during the campaign. However, despite these concerns no less than four in five respondents gave the same answer to this question in the second campaign wave as they gave in the first campaign wave a fortnight earlier. What is true is that the proportion that did not read a newspaper yesterday is, at just over a half in both campaign waves, considerably higher than the two in five who said they did not read a newspaper regularly in spring 1996. Thus it appears that those classified as readers of a particular newspaper on the basis of their answers to this question are, if anything, less likely to be irregular readers than if they had been categorised on the basis of a question about regular readership.

In any event in Table 3 we show the pattern of vote switching during the campaign, using the same categories of newspaper readers as in Table 2, but classifying respondents according to their answers in early April to the question about which newspaper they had read yesterday. For each group of newspaper readers, we show the change in the level of Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat support between early April and polling day. Two features of this comparison should be noted. First we include in our denominator both those who said they did not vote on polling day and those who said they had not decided how they had voted. Second, although many of those who said in early April that they had not decided how they would vote were, after further questioning, able to indicate

the party for which they thought they were most likely to vote, no account has been taken of their answers. Our rationale for both decisions is that the impact of newspapers may lie in mobilising voters to turn out and support a party which they are already mildly inclined to support rather than in persuading them to vote for a different party entirely.¹ One consequence is that all of the parties appear to have gained votes during the course of the campaign because only one in six of our panel said they did not vote on polling day whereas in early April as many as two in five had not definitely made up their minds what they would do.

But what differences between our various newspaper groups do we find on our measure in Table 3? In fact there are some quite striking ones. Most notably, Conservative support rose by 12 points amongst readers of the ‘Tory faithful’ press but not at all amongst readers of the equivalent Labour press. And while Labour was not particularly successful at winning over votes amongst *Sun* readers, such readers together with readers of other ex-Tory newspapers were not particularly likely to return to the Tory fold either.

Table 3
Newspaper Reading and Change in Party Support during Campaign

| Paper read yesterday, early Apr. | % voted - % saying had decided to vote early Apr. | | | |
|----------------------------------|---|-----|------|--------|
| | Con | Lab | LDem | |
| Tory faithful | +12 | +7 | +12 | (219) |
| <i>The Sun</i> | +2 | +2 | +4 | (139) |
| Other ex-Tory | +3 | +5 | +12 | (68) |
| Labour faithful | +0 | +8 | +6 | (164) |
| Other | +5 | +4 | +8 | (68) |
| None | +5 | +7 | +11 | (718) |
| All Respondents | +5 | +6 | +10 | (1371) |

Ns represent whichever is the smaller number of persons in that group in the early April and post-election waves.

Source: British Election Campaign Study 1997

In short, we do appear to have here some evidence that which newspaper people read did make some difference to the likelihood that they would decide during the course of the campaign to opt for one party rather than another. But there are, of course, some important limitations to this analysis. Not only have we not examined whether any of our differences are statistically significant, but we also have to bear in mind the possibility of ‘floor’ and ‘ceiling’ effects in our measures of changes in party support. For example, with no less than 58% of readers of ‘Labour faithful’ papers having already decided to back Labour by early April, and with just 23% unsure about what they would do, the scope for further increases in Labour support in this group was less than it was, for example, amongst those who were not reading a newspaper, only 30% of whom backed Labour and 43% of whom were undecided. To overcome these limitations we can

undertake a logistic regression of how party support developed in 1997. The results are shown in Table 4.

Using logistic regression in fact also enables us to deploy a more refined measure of change in party support than utilised in Table 3. Apart from being asked whether they had decided how they would vote, and if so for whom, respondents were also asked in early April to give each party a mark out of ten to indicate the chances that they would vote for that party in the election. Instead of assuming that at the beginning of April all voters either definitely had or had not decided to vote for a particular party, this measure assumes voters are somewhere along a continuum from having definitely decided to vote for a particular party to having definitely decided not to vote for that party at all. So, instead of constructing a model of change in our logistic regression by introducing into it as our first independent variable the party for which the respondent had decided to vote, we introduce instead the mark out of ten given to the party whose support we are analysing.² We undertake separately analyses of voting Conservative in the election versus not voting Conservative (including abstention), of voting Labour versus not voting Labour, and of voting Liberal Democrat versus not voting Liberal Democrat.

Our substantive interest, however, is in our second variable, that is the newspaper group to which our respondent belonged. Here, we need to give some consideration as to what are the appropriate comparisons that we might make. What we report in Table 4 is a coefficient that shows the estimated difference between the behaviour of the newspaper group in question and the behaviour of those who said they did not read a newspaper yesterday. Our assumption in constructing this measure is that the latter group was not influenced by the partisanship of any particular newspaper and thus the difference between their behaviour and that of any other newspaper group gives us an indication of the persuasive power or otherwise of that kind of newspaper.

This, however, only tells us part of the story that we wish to tell. If, for example, *The Sun's* shift of allegiance made a difference to the way their readers voted, we should not only find a difference between the way that they shifted their votes and what happened amongst readers who did not read a newspaper at all, but also a difference between those reading *The Sun* and those not reading one of the Tory faithful newspapers. The latter group can be regarded as an indicator of what might have happened amongst *Sun* readers if the newspaper had not switched allegiance. By making this and similar comparisons, we might, for example, establish that while those newspapers who switched their allegiance to Labour in 1997 did not prove to be a particularly effective recruiting sergeant for Labour, they no longer helped the Conservative cause in the way that the Tory faithful press continued to do.

Table 4
Logistic Model of Vote Switching in 1997 Campaign

| | Dependent Variable | | |
|--|--------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| | Con v non-Com | Vote 1997 Lab v non-Lab | LDem v non-LDem |
| <u>Probability of voting - early April</u> | | | |
| Con | + .63 (.04) | - | - |
| Lab | - | + .51 (.03) | - |
| LDem | - | - | + .45 (.03) |
| <u>Newspaper read yesterday,</u> | | | |
| Tory faithful | + .80 (.27)* | - .39 (.25) | + .42 (.25) |
| <i>The Sun</i> | - .12 (.37) | - .04 (.28) | - .60 (.37) |
| Other ex-Tory | + .09 (.48) | - .08 (.05) | + .11 (.39) |
| Labour faithful | - 1.24 (.59)* | + .86 (.25)* | - .14 (.30) |
| Other | + .93 (.58) | - .45 (.36) | + .12 (.46) |

Main entries are logistic parameter coefficients. In the case of newspaper read they are contrast coefficients which show the difference between the behaviour of the relevant group and those who reported not reading a newspaper. Entries in brackets are standard errors.

** coefficient is significant at the 5% level or less.*

Source: British Election Campaign Study 1997

Our results are relatively straightforward. As we might have expected from Table 3, we find that readers of a 'Tory faithful' paper were significantly more likely to decide during the campaign to opt for the Conservatives while readers of a 'Labour faithful' paper were less likely to do so. Meanwhile, as we suspected might be the case, once we take into account 'floor' and 'ceiling' effects the rise in Labour support amongst readers of the 'Labour faithful' papers was rather greater than we might have anticipated given the behaviour of those who do not read a newspaper at all. In short our evidence here confirms previous work that indicates that, at the margins at least, newspapers can help shore up the loyalty of their readers to the party the newspaper favours. Indeed, the evidence for this being so over the period of an election campaign is in fact rather stronger on this occasion than it was in 1992 (Curtice and Semetko, 1994).

But what does our analysis tell us about the impact of the defection from the Tory camp of some newspapers, most notably *The Sun*? It certainly suggests that readers of these newspapers were not encouraged to vote Conservative in the way that readers of the Tory faithful press were. If they were they too should have had significantly positive coefficients in our Conservative model. Instead their coefficients are close to zero in both the Conservative and Labour models. In short, the pattern of vote switching during the campaign amongst readers of *The Sun* or any other ex-Tory newspaper proved to be much like that of those who did not read a newspaper at all. The defection of some newspapers from the Conservative camp thus failed to make any apparent positive contribution to Labour's attempts to garner the vote, not least because of the relatively high level of abstention amongst *Sun* readers. But at the same time their change of allegiance may well have served to remove what would otherwise have been a source of reinforcement in the Conservative position.

The Sun's defection at the beginning of the campaign may have been of symbolic significance, but whether it won Labour many votes during the campaign seems open to doubt. Over the relatively short period of a campaign at least, it seems that newspapers trumpeting a relatively new tune are unlikely to receive a discernible echo from their readers. Little wonder then that Labour's new friends were insufficient to deter a noticeable worsening of the party's relative position during the course of the campaign.

Meanwhile, what can our analysis tell us about the rise in support for the Liberal Democrats? Precious little it seems. As no newspaper was backing the party there is no reason why people who read one kind of newspaper rather than another should have been more likely to switch to the Liberal Democrats. But what we might have anticipated is that readers of newspapers in general were more likely to have switched to the Liberal Democrats than those who did not. For it is often argued that one of the reasons why Liberal Democrat support appears more often than not to rise during election campaigns is because of the greater publicity the party receives during election campaigns (Trenaman and McQuail, 1961). If this is so, then we might anticipate that readers of newspapers would be more likely to be exposed to that greater publicity. Yet the coefficients in our model for the various categories of newspaper readers are not only all insignificant, but are differently signed. If the partisanship of the press does the Liberal Democrats little discernible harm, the press publicity it secures in election campaigns does little apparent good either.

One other important feature of our analysis so far should also be noted. The last two rows of Table 3 above enable us to compare the pattern of vote switching amongst our panel as a whole with that amongst those who did not read a newspaper. If indeed newspapers had an important influence on the aggregate outcome of the election, these two sets of figures should diverge. They fail to do so to any significant degree at all. For while both pro-Labour and pro-Conservative newspapers may have their effects on individual readers, once again we find that the net effect of their activities is largely self-cancelling.³

The Long Campaign

But perhaps the limitations of our approach in the previous section are too serious. Perhaps in the end it is simply too unrealistic to expect to be able to discern substantial press influence in what is no more than a four week period, no matter how partisan the press becomes during an election campaign. Perhaps our reliance on a measure which simply asks which newspaper someone read yesterday means that we are not adequately identifying those who are exposed to the same partisan measure over a consistent period of time. Maybe if we if look at a longer time period using a different measure of readership, the influence of the press will become apparent.

To address this possibility, Table 5 undertakes the same analysis as Table 3, but looks instead at the pattern of vote switching between the first and the last waves of the panel, that is over the twelve months between spring 1996 and the May 1 1997 polling day. It also classifies respondents according to the newspaper they reported reading regularly in spring 1996.⁴ And indeed we do appear to acquire a somewhat different picture. Above all we find that over this period Labour does better and the Conservatives worse amongst readers of *The Sun* and other ex-Tory newspapers than they do amongst any other group of readers. Even Liberal Democrats do not appear to be immune from the power of *The Sun*. Here surely we have clear evidence that the changed partisanship of the press made a difference to voting behaviour in the 1997 general election.

Table 5
Newspaper Reading and Change in Party Support over the Long Campaign

| Paper read regularly, 1996. | % voted - % saying in 1996 would vote that way. | | | |
|-----------------------------|--|-----|------|--------|
| | Con | Lab | LDem | |
| Tory faithful | +1 | -4 | +5 | (347) |
| <i>The Sun</i> | -6 | +1 | +0 | (309) |
| Other ex-Tory | -7 | +1 | +7 | (106) |
| Labour faithful | +1 | -11 | +3 | (306) |
| Other | -1 | -12 | +5 | (134) |
| None | +4 | -5 | +6 | (774) |
| All Respondents | +1 | -5 | +5 | (1976) |

Ns represent whichever is the smaller number of persons in that group in the 1996 and post-election waves.

Source: British Election Campaign Study 1997

We have however to remember the limitations of this form of analysis that were pointed out when we looked at Table 3. We also need to bear in mind the possibility that different groups of newspaper readers varied in the degree of their commitment to the party they thought in 1996 they would vote for the following year. *Sun* readers who in 1996 said they backed the Conservatives may in fact have been less committed to their choice than were those who were reading one of the Tory faithful papers; after all they were choosing to read a newspaper which had already exhibited a substantial degree of detachment from the Conservative cause. However we do not have available to us the more subtle ten point measure of voting intention that we had in Table 5 which might overcome this potential problem. What we do have is a five point measure obtained in the spring 1996 wave which indicates how much the respondent is in favour of or against each of the parties,

with a score of one indicating that the respondent is 'strongly in favour', and a score of five, 'strongly against'. So, in constructing a logistic model of vote switching in the long campaign we not only include how respondents said in 1996 they would vote the following year, but also the five point in favour/against measure for the party in question. As in Table 4, separate analyses are shown for each of the three main parties.

Table 6
Logistic Model of Vote Switching over the Long Campaign

| | Dependent Variable | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| | Vote 1997 | | |
| | Con v Non-Con | Lab v non-Lab | LDem v non-LDem |
| Vote intention, 1996 | | | |
| None/Don't Know | + 15 (.14) | -.11 (.14) | -.20 (.15) |
| Conservative | +1.61 (.16)* | -.74 (.18)* | -.71 (.18)* |
| Labour | -1.22 (.21)* | +1.31 (.13)* | -.59 (.13)* |
| Liberal Democrat | -.30 (.21) | -.50 (.19) | +1.35 (.16)* |
| Feeling towards party, 1996 | | | |
| | + .88 (.11)* | + .85 (.10)* | +1.02 (.13)* |
| Newspaper read regularly, 1996 | | | |
| Tory faithful | + .38 (.19)* | -.29 (.19) | -.08 (.20) |
| <i>The Sun</i> | -.33 (.21) | + .61 (.18)* | -.79 (.24)* |
| Other ex-Tory | -.34 (.32) | + .43 (.28) | -.01 (.31) |
| Labour faithful | -.41 (.30) | + .37 (.17)* | -.72 (.24)* |
| Other | + .02 (.31) | -.58 (.25)* | -.25 (.28) |

Main entries are logistic parameter coefficients. In the case of newspaper read they are contrast coefficients which show the difference between the behaviour of the relevant group and those who reported not reading a newspaper. In the case of vote intention they are deviation coefficients from the overall mean, with the coefficients for those intending to vote for Other parties not shown. Entries in brackets are standard errors.

** coefficient is significant at the 5% level or less.*

Source: British Election Campaign Study 1997

Our suspicion that the changed partisanship of some newspapers made a discernible difference over the long campaign is confirmed. In particular we find that *Sun* readers were not only significantly more likely to switch to Labour than were those who read a Tory faithful newspaper, but they were also more likely to do so than those who did not read a newspaper regularly at all. In short, by any test reading *The Sun* appears to have made a difference to voting preferences in the twelve months of the 1997 election. Meanwhile, although not quite significantly different from those who do not read a newspaper at all, readers of Other ex-Tory newspapers were clearly more likely to switch to Labour than were readers of Tory faithful newspapers. Equally, there are clear differences in the Tory equation between readers of Tory faithful newspapers on the one hand, and readers of *The Sun* and other ex-Tory newspapers on the other. However, it is the Liberal Democrats, not the Conservatives, who appear to be the bigger losers from the persuasions of *The Sun*.

So, over the longer term, newspapers that change their partisanship can, it appears, persuade some of their readers to vote for their party's new allegiance. Indeed, once we take into account the prior partisanship of their readers, the pattern of vote switching amongst those reading one of the papers that defected from the Conservative cause in 1997 appears to be not dissimilar to that amongst those reading a paper that traditionally supported Labour.⁵ Having *The Sun* on side was as beneficial to Labour as keeping *The Mirror* on side.

But that benefit was a small one. Only just over one in five of our sample read either *The Sun* or one of the other ex-Tory newspapers regularly, only a little higher than the proportion who were reading of the Tory faithful papers. As we can see from the last two rows of Table 5 not only was it insufficient to avoid an absolute decline in Labour's share of the vote, but it was also insufficient to stop Labour's share of the vote falling amongst the electorate as whole just as much as it did amongst those who did not regularly read a newspaper. What however it does appear to have done is to help stem the tide of

Conservative recovery in the twelve months before the election. Whereas Conservative support rose by four points amongst those who were not reading a newspaper regularly, it rose by only one point amongst the electorate as whole.

But our analysis does little to help us understand the rise of the Liberal Democrats. Our earlier suspicions that the party found it difficult to make much progress amongst both *Sun* and *Mirror* readers is confirmed. But nowhere is there evidence of a group of newspaper readers that was particularly likely to swing to the Liberal Democrat cause.

Press Persuasion and Euroscepticism

We now turn to our second area of potential press influence in the 1997 election campaign, that is on attitudes towards Europe. Of all the issues surrounding Britain's future relations with the European Union, the one that is of greatest salience for both politicians and Eurosceptic newspapers at least is whether or not Britain should join the European single currency. This, above all, was the issue on which the Conservative party was divided in the 1992-7 parliament. But did the sceptical stance taken by the majority of newspapers towards Europe change their readers' minds about what they thought about the single currency?

Fortunately the 1997 British Election Campaign Panel asked its respondents three times about their views about whether Britain should join a single currency, in spring 1996, in early April 1997 and finally after the election. However, it should be noted that the question was only asked of one-third of respondents to the initial spring 1996 wave; as a result we can only look at the relationship between attitude switching and newspaper readership over the course of the official campaign. We asked: -

Here are three statements about the future of the pound in the European Union. Which one comes closest to your view?

Replace the pound by a single currency

Use both the pound and a new European currency in Britain

Keep the pound as the only currency for Britain

The majority of Britain's press may have taken a Eurosceptic stance prior to the election. But in fact opinion in the panel, though still hostile towards joining the Euro, drifted in a more pro-single currency direction during the course of the long campaign. In fact, other evidence from the British Social Attitudes series indicates that hostility towards the single currency (known as the 'Euro') and indeed towards Europe in general was at its height in the spring of 1996, thanks it appears to the controversy surrounding the European Union's decision in March of that year to ban the sales of British beef in the wake of a major health scare (Curtice and Jowell, 1998; Evans, 1998). But even so, there is no sign in our panel of any overall movement in a Eurosceptic direction during the election campaign itself when many newspapers were reminding their readers of their opposition to joining the Euro.

Table 7
Trends in Attitudes towards the Single Currency in the Campaign Panel

| | 1996 | | 1997 | |
|---------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------|--|
| | Spring | Early Apr. | May | |
| | % | % | % | |
| Replace the pound with the Euro | 13 | 13 | 12 | |
| Use both the pound and the Euro | 16 | 24 | 26 | |
| Keep pound as only money in GB | 68 | 61 | 59 | |
| Don't Know | 3 | 3 | 3 | |
| | (1196) | (1415) | (1420) | |

Source: British Election Campaign Study 1997. Only one-third of the sample was asked the question in 1996. The figures for that year are based on all respondents who were

asked the question in 1996, irrespective of whether they were successfully interviewed in later waves.

But of course we have already seen in the case of voting intention that once we subdivide our sample we might see divergent trends in accordance with the opinion of the newspaper voters read. So in Table 8 we show the trend in attitudes towards the Euro over the course of the campaign, displaying the percentage opposed towards its introduction in any form. For ease of reference we have retained the categorisation of newspapers that we have used in this paper so far. It should however be borne in mind that all of the papers included in one of the first three categories in the Table expressed opposition to further European integration during the campaign, while all those in the other two categories of newspaper readers expressed at least measured support (Seymour-Ure, 1997). If the opinions expressed by newspapers mattered, then we should find all those in the first three groups moving in a more anti-single currency direction while those in the two remaining groups of newspaper readers should be moving in a more pro-European direction.

Table 8
Newspaper Reading and Attitudes towards the Euro in the 1997 Campaign
% saying keep pound as only currency

| | Early April | May | Change |
|--|-------------|-----|-----------|
| Paper read yesterday, early April | | | |
| Anti-European | | | |
| Tory faithful | 65 | 63 | - 2 (232) |
| <i>The Sun</i> | 82 | 79 | - 3 (143) |
| Other ex-Tory | 43 | 44 | + 1 (70) |
| Pro-European | | | |
| Labour faithful | 52 | 52 | n/c (169) |
| Other | 39 | 40 | + (64) |
| None | 61 | 58 | -3 (738) |
| All Respondents | 61 | 59 | -2 (1415) |

Ns represent whichever is the smaller number of persons in that group in the early April and post-election waves.

Source: British Election Campaign Study 1997

In truth, we find few differences in the trend of party support over the campaign in the various newspaper groups. And such differences as there are are inconsistent with our expectations; readers of pro-European 'Labour faithful' and 'Other newspapers' did not share in the general trend towards slightly more muted opposition to the Euro. Indeed, even if we just look at the association between newspaper readership and opinions on a single currency at a single point in time, readers' attitudes towards a single currency only weakly align themselves with the position of their newspaper. Only readers of *The Sun* clearly share their newspaper's views. Readers of Labour faithful papers are barely less opposed to joining a single currency than those who do not read a newspaper at all, while readers of Tory faithful papers are only slightly more opposed. There is little apparent sign here that the messages of newspapers on Europe over previous years had had much cumulated impact on their readers before the 1997 election campaign had started.⁶

Our suspicions are confirmed if we model the data in Table 8 using logistic regression, as is shown in Table 9. None of the coefficients for our categories of newspaper readers come anywhere close to being statistically significant. Perhaps even more remarkably this stands in contrast to what we find if we include an indication of which party our respondents supported. Those who in early April said that they had definitely decided to vote Labour or were most likely to give Labour their support were more likely to move towards a more favourable attitude towards the Euro over the course of the campaign than were voters in general. This is even more true of Liberal Democrat supporters while, in contrast, Conservative supporters shifted in a less pro-Euro direction. In short, despite the Conservatives' divisions and Labour's ambiguities, over the course of the campaign voters still tended to take their cue on Europe from the party they supported in a way that they

failed to do so from their newspaper, even though the latter was often more explicit in its message.

Table 9
Logistic Model of Newspaper reading and Euro-switching
in 1997 Campaign

| | View in post-election wave |
|------------------------------------|--|
| | Keep pound as only currency v not |
| Favoured keeping pound, early Apr. | +.35 (.17)* |
| Vote intention, early Apr. | |
| None/DK | +.37 (.28) |
| Conservative | +.36 (.17)* |
| Labour | -.35 (.15)* |
| Liberal Democrat | -.63 (.22)* |
| Paper read yesterday, early Apr. | |
| Tory faithful | - .08 (.24) |
| <i>The Sun</i> | +.23 (.30) |
| Other ex-Tory | - .38 (.37) |
| Labour faithful | +.20 (.27) |
| Other | -.27 (.41) |

Main entries are logistic parameter coefficients. In the case of newspaper read they are contrast coefficients which show the difference between the behaviour of the relevant group and those who reported not reading a newspaper. In the case of vote intention they are deviation coefficients from the overall mean, with the coefficient for those proposing to vote for Other parties not shown. Entries in brackets are standard errors.

** coefficient is significant at the 5% level or less.*

This apparent alignment of voters' views on Europe with that of the party they had decided to vote for is of course precisely what we would anticipate from party identification theory (Butler and Stokes, 1974). It suggests indeed that the power of party identification may well be one of the reasons why the influence of individual newspapers

on public opinion is apparently limited. More immediately, it also suggests that come a referendum on a single currency the positions adopted by the parties together with their level of popularity may well be more important than the position adopted by any particular newspaper. A recommendation to vote in favour by, for example, a popular Labour government seems more likely to make an impact on the British public's attitude towards the Euro than, for example, a change of mind on the issue by *The Sun*.

Conclusion

Britain's highly partisan press does have some influence on the way in which their readers vote. Contrary to the claims commonly made by American analysts of political communication (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; McLeod et al, 1994), the media can do more than set the agenda or frame issues. If the media is indeed partisan, then it can persuade as well (see also Dalton et al, 1998a). And if a newspaper switches sides as *The Sun* did in 1997, that change may well be accompanied by a commensurate change in the direction of its influence.

Yet British commentators are mistaken to assume that because the country's press has a measurable impact on individuals it therefore can determine aggregate outcomes. Indeed, relative to the often highly evocative and strident manner in which the British press often conducts itself, its partisan impact is a small one. Some papers may, at the margin, be persuading their readers to vote Labour. But their impact is counteracted by a similar process operating in the opposite direction amongst readers of Conservative supporting newspapers. Even if there is an imbalance in the proportion of persons reading pro-Labour or pro-Conservative newspapers, the net effect on the balance of party popularity over any period of time tends to be small if evident at all. Above all, we have seen that a pro-Labour imbalance in the press in the 1997 election was insufficient to avoid a decline in Labour's overall level of electoral support. And it is wholly unable to explain why there was a rise in the Liberal Democrats support at all.

Securing the support of *The Sun* may well have been a psychological boost for Mr. Blair. Our analysis suggests it may even have secured him a few votes. But it was not *The Sun* that won it in 1997. And it seems unlikely to be capable of delivering either him or anyone else a 'Yes' vote in any future referendum on the Euro either.

Acknowledgements

The 1997 British Election Campaign Study was financed by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Gatsby Foundation as part of their funding of the 1997 British Election Study. It was directed by Anthony Heath, Roger Jowell, John Curtice and Pippa Norris of the Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends.

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¹ In fact, modelling we undertook in which account was taken of 'likely' as well as 'definite' vote intentions produced largely similar results to those reported here.

² In fact we obtain very similar results to those reported in Table 4 if we use which party the respondent had definitely decided to vote for in early April. The pattern of significant and insignificant results for the newspaper groups is the same except that the coefficient for *Sun* readers in the Liberal Democrat equation proves to be significantly negative.

³ Note indeed that Table 4 suggests the influence of the Labour faithful press was rather greater than that of the Tory faithful press, thereby counteracting the fact that it has a smaller readership. A similar result was obtained by Curtice and Semetko (1994).

⁴ One limitation of this analysis however is that we do not take into account the fact that some people may have changed the kind of newspaper that they read between spring 1996 and May 1997. In previous work which looks at an even longer time span (Curtice and Semetko, 1994; Curtice, 1997) those who change their newspaper have been shown to vote differently from those who do not. Such analysis is not however possible with this panel because different methods of ascertaining newspaper readership were used in different waves. So even in this analysis the discriminatory power of our newspaper readership categorisation will be somewhat attenuated. However, one advantage that we have in this section compared with the previous one is a relatively larger sample size, thanks to the high recontact rate secured in the final wave of interviewing.

⁵ Note that the difference in the behaviour of *Sun* and other ex-Tory newspaper readers on the one hand and that of readers of Labour faithful papers on the other is not statistically significant.

⁶ In fact much of the pattern in Table 8 can be accounted for by differences in the educational attainment of newspaper readers. As Evans (1995) has shown, those with high education qualifications are more likely to adopt a pro-European view than are those with lower qualifications. *Sun* readers tend to have relatively low education qualifications, while readers of the *Financial Times* and *The Independent* which are included in our Other newspaper category tend to have high qualifications. If we look at just those without any educational qualifications, opposition to a single currency amongst *Sun* readers is only slightly higher than it is amongst other categories of readers. Moreover, readers of anti-European tabloids in general are only slightly more opposed to a single currency than are readers of the one pro-European tabloid, *The Mirror*, while less than half of readers of an anti-European quality paper are opposed to the introduction of a single currency.