

Book Review: Political Communication in Britain: The Leader Debates, the Campaign and the Media in the 2010 General Election

Blog Admin

Matthew Partridge finds a compelling collection of articles which should be essential reading for any serious student of the electoral process.

Political Communication in Britain: The Leader Debates, the Campaign and the Media in the 2010 General Election. Edited by Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore and Simon Atkinson. [Palgrave MacMillan](#). April 2011.

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Harold Wilson famously stated that “a week is a long time in politics”. If so, the year that has passed since the [General Election of 2010](#) seems like an eternity. With the [Liberal Democrats decimated in the recent local elections](#), and Nick Clegg’s hopes of changing the electoral system going down to a decisive defeat, things look very different from a year ago. Therefore, *Political Communication in Britain: The Leader Debates, the Campaign and the Media in the 2010 General Election*, edited by [Dominic Wring](#), Roger Mortimore and Simon Atkinson is a reminder of the time when “I’m with Nick” briefly became a national catchphrase.

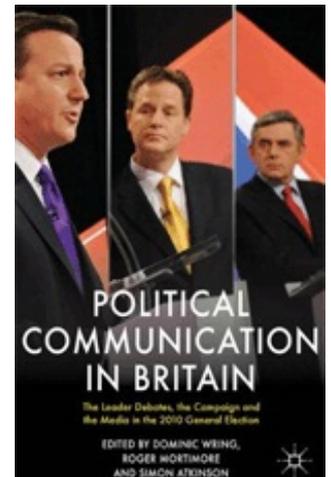
The book consists of twenty articles looking at all aspects of the last election, though with a particular focus on the historic leadership debates and the role of the media, which jointly account for half of the contribution. Other topics covered include; the polls, which overestimated the extent of “[Cleggmania](#)”, the overall campaign (on both macro and micro levels), and the experiences of the voters. Although two of the three editors are affiliated with the polling company [Ipsos MORI](#), the authors of the individual chapters are a mix of academics and practitioners, with the latter group including the journalist [Adam Boulton](#), the Liberal Democrat campaign manager [Lord Rennard](#) and the YouGov pollster [Peter Kellner](#).

Chapters 2 and 3, which both cover the TV Debates, are the most interesting – especially since they provide very different accounts of the negotiations which resulted in the historic three way contests. [Ric Bailey](#), the BBC’s negotiator, sees the agreement between the broadcasters and parties as the culmination of a long process, with broadcaster solidarity the key to avoiding a repetition of past near-misses. In contrast, Adam Boulton believes that it was the decision by his employer Sky News, supported by other parts of News International, to threaten to conduct the debates without the presence of Gordon Brown if necessary, that galvanised the negotiations, and prevented any time-wasting tactics.

Simon Atkinson and Roger Mortimer’s investigation of competing explanations for the overstating of Liberal Democrat support is also fascinating. Their conclusion that it was a combination of the polls exaggerating the post-debate swing towards Nick Clegg and then underestimating the decay in Liberal support, rather than a consistent overestimation of the Lib Dems or a sudden late swing, is debatable. However, their willingness to consider all possible scenarios, and their honesty about the limitations of opinion polls, are commendable.

Roger Mortimer also makes a very useful contribution in the chapter, co-authored with Helen Cleary and Tomasz Mludzinski, on the campaign in “[battleground](#)” seats. Indeed, their conclusion that “this once again failed to be Britain’s first internet election” cannot be emphasised enough. Jennifer van Heerde-Hudson’s article on the expenses scandal, which failed to have the dramatic impact on the election’s outcome that many expected to have, was also very strong.

Of course, there are some articles whose conclusions are more contentious. Ivor Garber is correct that the rise of online campaigning, including Twitter, has encouraged a more decentralised and indirect campaigning style, where press conferences, photo opportunities and “battle busses” play a much reduced role. However, it is less clear whether this decision to eschew traditional campaigning methods is a smart



move on the part of the part of strategists, especially since barely more than 10% of Britons over the age of 15 actually use Twitter.

There are also some topics that were worthy of more coverage, or could have been addressed more directly. The fact that the Conservatives substantially outperformed the [Uniform National Swing model](#) should have been addressed separately, especially given the complaints in previous election that the electoral system was “biased” against them. The failure of the assistance given to the financial sector to generate outrage comparable to that in the United States, is an even more intriguing example of a “dog that didn’t bark” than the expenses scandal.

Overall, *Political Communication in Britain* is a compelling collection of articles, which should be required reading for any serious student of the electoral process, or British Politics in general. There is also plenty of interest for the non-academic reader.

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