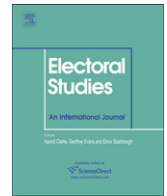




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Priming time for Blair? Media priming, Iraq, and leadership evaluations in Britain

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ABSTRACT

Priming is often mentioned in studies of media effects in Britain, yet empirical tests of its extent and nature are lacking; most evidence of priming effects is from the United States. Moreover, research on British elections concludes that the media have little impact on the public's perceptions of issues, including in the 2005 election. In this paper we argue that priming by the British media has been misconceived and thus not studied adequately. We demonstrate that the issue of the war in Iraq was primed by media coverage in 2005, both as a consequence of the volume of coverage of the issue and its tone. The influence of Iraq was not just long-term, *via* its impact on confidence in the Labour government or Tony Blair's reputation, but was also affected by media coverage *during* the campaign. We also demonstrate that the media's coverage of Iraq in 2005 influenced voters' evaluations of Blair by polarizing consumers of the same news. Finally, we find slightly more of an impact of the *tone* of coverage of Iraq in 2005 but it is moderated by the editorial stance of the newspaper—the editorial stance of British newspapers still seems to matter, suggesting that the dealignment of the British press has not eliminated the influence of reading a newspaper that endorses a party, no matter how qualified that endorsement may be.

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This paper examines media priming of the issue of the war in Iraq during the British general election campaign of 2005. The capacity of the media to influence evaluations of leaders through priming is well established in the United States (Althaus and Kim, 2006; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Krosnick and Brannon, 1993), a candidate-centered system with a non-partisan press and lengthy election campaigns. But is media priming also evident in a system such as Britain's, with parliamentary rather than presidential elections, a partisan press and official election campaigns

that typically last no longer than one month?¹ This is an important question to answer since it tells us about the generalizability of a key media effect at a time when the distinction between media coverage of leaders in presidential and parliamentary systems may be increasingly blurred (Poguntke and Webb, 2005).

While priming is often mentioned in studies of media effects in Britain, empirical tests of its extent and nature are lacking. Studies of British media effects tend to focus

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¹ This is not to deny that 1) there has been some research on priming in other media and political systems such as Canada (Mendelsohn, 1994, 1996) and Sweden (Togeby, 2007), only that there has been far less of it than for the United States, and 2) that in Britain government and opposition wage a “permanent campaign;” however, much of the electorate's interests lie elsewhere before a general election is called.

on associations between audience usage of media, particularly different press sources, and attitudes and behavior; the capacity for media influence through the priming effects of news content has been understudied. In this paper we focus on media priming of the war in Iraq in the British general election of 2005. By priming, we mean “changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations” (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p. 63), as a result of media coverage. Thus media priming occurs when increased attention of the news media to an issue results in an increase in its impact on evaluations of leaders such as the President in the US or the Prime Minister in Britain. As Price and Tewksbury (1997, p. 197) characterize the process:

First, a media message renders one or another construct applicable, and that construct—say unemployment—is activated. By virtue of its activation, and in direct proportion to the recency and frequency of its activation, that construct remains temporarily accessible ... Subsequently, when a person is called on to evaluate the performance of the president, unemployment is likely to be activated.

We demonstrate priming effects of Iraq on perceptions of Tony Blair both as a consequence of the amount of coverage of the issue and also the tone of coverage *during the election campaign*. Thus the influence of Iraq was not just long-term, through its impact on confidence in the Labour government or Tony Blair's reputation over a prolonged period after 2003, but was also affected by media coverage during the election. In addition, we demonstrate that the media's coverage of Iraq in 2005 influenced voters' evaluations of Blair not simply through a conventional reinforcement effect, in which readers of partisan British newspapers have their partisan views confirmed, but by polarizing consumers of the *same* news. Finally, we find an impact of both the number of stories about an issue and the tone of those stories on Iraq in 2005 but they are moderated by whether the newspaper is Labour, Conservative or independent. The editorial stance of British newspapers still seems to matter as much as their tone of coverage, suggesting that the observed dealignment of the British press (Bartle, 2005) has not eliminated the influence of reading a newspaper that endorses a party, no matter how qualified that endorsement may have become.

This paper makes several contributions. The priming effects we uncover are stronger than conventional accounts of the British media's ability to influence public perceptions of issues in elections, thus placing the British media and British campaigns in a new light. This paper is also the first systematic analysis of media priming effects in British elections. It shows a more complex impact of consumption of news than previous accounts of the British media's ability to, at most, reinforce predispositions based on its audiences “reading what they believe.” Finally, this paper provides a test of the influence of the tone of coverage on priming effects outside the United States (Althaus and Kim, 2006). We find equally strong effects of the overall tone of coverage of the war in Iraq during the campaign as the sheer number of stories, suggesting that priming in Britain may be rooted as much in the tone of the discourse about issues as in their accessibility.

1. Priming in British elections

1.1. Minimal media effects and trends in British Politics

As in the United States, contemporary research into media effects in Britain has challenged the former minimal effects orthodoxy. Thus, media coverage in Britain may change economic perceptions (Gavin and Sanders, 1997, 2003; Sanders et al., 1993) and, when the allegiance of some newspapers changed between 1992 and 1997, appeared to have a large impact on vote choice (Ladd and Lenz, 2009; Newton and Brynin, 2001). In the absence of clear evidence of media persuasion, studies have more typically maintained that newspaper reading can reinforce existing political preferences (Harrop, 1987; Brynin and Newton, 2003). Indeed, learning effects in British elections seem quite limited (Andersen et al., 2005; Norris et al., 1999; Norris and Sanders, 2001). The picture is of a disconnect between what the media highlight in elections and the issues the public considers important (see, for example, Butler and Kavanagh, 2002, p. 249; Deacon et al., 2001; Kavanagh and Butler, 2005; Miller, 1991; Norris, 2006). As a result, research on British elections often ignores a media impact entirely: “the most comprehensive analysis of the 2001 UK election, by Clarke et al. (2004), compares rival theories of issue-based voting models ... but the study excludes any explicit analysis of the role of the news media in this process” (Norris, 2006).

Despite such sparse evidence, there is a growing recognition of the *possibility* of media effects in British elections. British consumption of news media is high: about nine in ten people (89%) reported using television as their main source of information on political issues during the 2005 general election campaign and more than half (54%) said they read their local newspaper for the same purpose (Electoral Commission, 2005, p. 31). Most national newspapers in Britain are partisan and take a clear and explicit party line in their editorials and their reporting of daily news (Brynin and Newton, 2003), albeit the strong pro-Conservative bias of many newspapers in the 1980s has dissipated without being replaced by similar sentiment toward New Labour (Bartle, 2005). Current trends in British politics also suggest that the relationship between news media and public perceptions needs to be re-examined. The influence of party identification and social class has diminished: with weaker predispositions citizens may be more susceptible to what they read in the press. The focus of media coverage has also changed. Party leaders now attract more attention—it is much easier for the media to focus on a handful of leaders as symbols of their parties (McAllister, 2007, p. 287)—and leaders now gain more media coverage than issues (Deacon et al., 2001).² Evidence also confirms that party leaders are highly visible figures about whom most voters have opinions (Clarke et al., 2004) and that leadership evaluations exhibit a strong and independent impact on party support (Clarke and Lebo, 2003; Clarke et al., 1998) and vote

² We are agnostic as to the cause: whether leaders and parties first employed strategies that demanded more focus on leaders or that exploited changes in media, or whether media first began to focus more on a few key personalities, with leaders and parties responding.

preference (Clarke et al., 2004; Evans and Andersen, 2005; Lai and Reiter, 2005; Stewart and Clarke, 1992).³ According to Clarke et al. (2004) the maximum effect of evaluations of Blair on the probability of voting Labour in 2001 was about 70 points on a 100-point scale. Evans and Andersen (2005) suggest that because Blair was a more divisive figure in 2005 evaluations of him may have been even more predictive in 2005. However, the extent to which the media influence these evaluations is not well understood.

1.2. The potential for priming in British elections

Our analysis of media effects in British elections is in the context of such trends. We focus on the British press' capacity to influence the issues that matter in evaluations of the incumbent prime minister. The disjuncture between the media and public's perceptions of the issues that matter most has resulted in the conclusion that there is negligible media influence on the role of issues in campaigns. Perhaps British elections are too brief, the variation in attitudes and opinions too small, and the power of academic surveys too weak (Zaller, 2002) for there to be any discernible influence. We suspect, however, that methodological and conceptual shortcomings have also contributed to this conclusion.

The methodological point is that research on British media effects tends to focus on usage—the newspaper an individual reads, for example—rather than coverage and content—the kinds of stories that appear in an individual's newspaper.⁴ Conceptually, the literature on media effects in Britain often mentions potential agenda-setting and priming effects but only tests for the former. Priming and agenda-setting effects are similar—both are memory-based—but conceptually and empirically distinct, with agenda-setting relating to the perceived importance of an issue rather than its influence on evaluations. Some research argues that agenda-setting is necessary for priming to occur (Miller and Krosnick, 2000, p. 311), but the two are not the same (and for evidence that priming and agenda-setting are not always coupled, see Togeby (2007)). Nevertheless, they sometimes appear to be treated as interchangeable in the literature on British media. For example, while Norris's (2006) section on "Priming, Persuasion, and Mobilizing Effects" in the 2005 election, has subheadings of "Persuasion" and "Mobilization," the subheading for priming effects is "Agenda-Setting effects." Similarly, Wlezien and Norris (2005) look for priming effects in changes in perceptions of the importance of issues, at most a necessary condition for priming but not a test of priming effects.

That media coverage of issues influences evaluations of leaders is particularly likely in a system characterized by valence politics like Britain's (Clarke et al., 2004), where, "the campaign is not about communicating spatial location, but rather informing voters about the appropriate bases for choice" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 390). A media focus on Iraq in 2005 may not have made it the most important issue in the election for voters but could have affected its influence on evaluations of Tony Blair. Research in the United States, for

example, has demonstrated considerable media priming effects from coverage of conflicts such as the first Gulf War (Althaus and Kim, 2006; Krosnick and Brannon, 1993). In Britain, the war in Iraq had featured in the news consistently for two years before the election. Yet the notion of a large role of Iraq due to media priming is at odds with existing accounts of the 2005 election in two respects: while Iraq is acknowledged to have had a long-term impact on matters such as confidence in the government and trust in Tony Blair (Wring, 2005), it did not rank at the top of public concerns in the election—it was ostensibly less salient than issues like asylum seekers, crime, and the NHS (Norris, 2006; Whiteley et al., 2005). Moreover, as we have seen, the media is not regarded as having had any real impact on the public's perceptions of issues in the 2005 campaign.

1.3. Volume of coverage, tone of coverage, and hypotheses of priming effects in Britain

The effects of the volume of coverage of an issue in a respondent's newspaper are the standard approach to examining priming, and are sometimes referred to as the dosage–response model (e.g., Malhotra and Krosnick, 2007). It draws on the notion that priming is a consequence of the accessibility of a construct, exemplified in the quote from Price and Tewksbury above. However, Althaus and Kim (2006, p. 964) argue that, "the evaluative tone of media content should have a bearing on the ways in which that content primes subjects ... but such relationships never have been tested in news priming research."⁵ The tone of coverage should moderate priming effects according to Althaus and Kim because priming is more likely where the tone of stories and pre-existing evaluations of a target are consistent.

Our analysis takes advantage of these recent theoretical and empirical advances in media priming studies to examine the possibility that the tone of coverage, as well as the sheer volume of coverage of Iraq, may have affected the consideration given to the issue in evaluations of Tony Blair.

2. Data and methodology

Following the conceptual definitions of priming by Iyengar and Kinder and Price and Tewksbury that we have quoted above, we define media priming empirically as a correspondence in (1) the volume of coverage of the issue of Iraq in the press (i.e., the number of stories) and the influence of that issue on evaluations of Tony Blair, or (2) the tone of coverage of the issue of Iraq in the press and the influence of that issue on evaluations of Tony Blair. We examine feelings toward Blair rather than vote choice because they provide a cleaner test of priming effects; by contrast, vote choice is affected by constituency context and

⁵ At first glance, the influence of the tone of media coverage may appear to be the result of framing rather than priming. However, as operationalized here, following Althaus and Kim (2006), we are looking at priming effects. First, we are examining the media's impact on the influence of an issue on evaluations, whereas framing models examine the impact of media frames on perceptions of issues themselves; second, our interest is in the impact of the balance of the number of stories of particular tones—a priming relationship.

³ Although the claim is by no means settled (Bartle and Crewe, 2002).

⁴ Gavin and Sanders (2003) make a similar argument.

tactical voting. Nevertheless, as we have indicated above, vote choice is highly correlated with evaluations of leaders.

We also examine the impact of media coverage of Iraq on the day of interview, an instant effect, and cumulative coverage of the issue up to the day of interview. Althaus and Kim (2006) show that priming effects need not come from daily coverage—some issues may have fallow periods of attention but individuals may still be primed by an earlier focus. Exposure to an issue is also more likely if there is coverage over a sustained period.⁶

We take a unique approach to addressing the question of priming effects in Britain by combining content analysis of press coverage with daily tracking of public opinion in the 2005 general election. The 2005 election was typical in terms of the distinctive public and media concerns and the lack of media influence according to conventional accounts (Bartle, 2005; Kavanagh and Butler, 2005; Norris, 2006). While it was a somewhat more competitive election than the landslides of 1997 and 2001, polls showed a Labour lead throughout, providing circumstances that were likely to inhibit media effects.

We use rolling cross-sectional data for the duration of the campaign, from the official announcement of the election to the day before polling (29 days), gathered as part of the British Election Study (BES). The 2005 BES rolling cross-section sampled daily from a panel recruited by YouGov,⁷ with respondents completing surveys online. Daily samples varied from a low of 59 (one other day had less than 100 completions) to a high of 279, for a total sample of 6059 (the BES 2005 website gives a figure of 6068 but this includes 9 completions from the day of the election).

For 2005 content data, a team from Loughborough University analyzed election coverage from eleven daily national newspapers. The Loughborough team coded all articles about the election in newspapers from the front page, the first two pages of the domestic news section, the first two pages of any specialist section assigned to the coverage of the campaign, and the pages containing and facing a newspaper's leader editorials for the duration of the campaign.

In order to proceed with our tests of media priming effects from the media content, we need to be able to measure the volume of coverage of the issue and its evaluative tone. Using the Loughborough content analysis, we calculate the number of stories each day on the issue, the tone of those stories, and the cumulative number and tone of stories. The number of stories is measured by their frequency of appearing as a main theme in the news story.⁸ With regard to tone, the content

analysis coded all stories as “bad news,” “good news,” “mixed news,” or simply descriptive for each of the parties.⁹ We coded bad news stories for Labour as a -1 , good news stories for Labour with a $+1$, mixed or descriptive stories as 0 , bad news stories for other parties as $+1$ for Labour, good news stories for other parties as -1 for Labour, and mixed or descriptive stories for other parties as 0 (see Appendix). We take these indicators of news coverage and link them to the rolling cross-section survey data by using the respondent's self-reported readership of newspapers. We were forced to drop less than one percent of the sample because they did not read a newspaper for which we had content data.¹⁰ Our data thus have a virtue that is quite rare in studies of media, let alone of British media (see Gavin and Sanders, 2003, pp. 575–576), because they allow us to look at the content and tone of coverage.

Fig. 1 shows the volume and tone of daily coverage of Iraq over the course of the 2005 campaign. Daily coverage of Iraq grows in the two weeks before the election and is at its peak six days out. Fig. 1 also shows that for all but a handful of days in the campaign the net balance of these stories was negative for Labour. While we do not display coverage of other issues, on nine of the last eleven days of the campaign there were more stories about Iraq than any other issue (on those other days it was the second most covered issue by one story); before that point other issues like asylum seekers and taxation frequently received more attention. Similarly, the war in Iraq received more negative coverage for Labour than any other issue in ten of the last eleven days of the campaign, having been covered like other issues before that in that it was rarely a positive for Labour.

To gauge priming effects our approach is straightforward: we examine the impact on feelings towards Tony Blair of the volume and tone of stories on Iraq in the daily newspaper a respondent claimed to read (we also include non-readers in our analysis). The focus on priming means that our interest is not in changes in respondents' views on Iraq but in changes in the *influence* of their views on evaluations of Tony Blair. We analyze the strength of the association between respondents' approval of the ongoing war in Iraq and their feelings toward Tony Blair (the dependent variable in all the analysis that follows). Of course these perceptions will already be influenced by partisanship; our interest, however, is not in this association but in the effect of press coverage of Iraq on its impact when evaluating Blair.

⁶ There may also be a measurement dimension to cumulative coverage in that estimates of variation in exposure on any given day are more hit-and-miss than estimates of relative exposure over a longer period of time.

⁷ The entire YouGov panel was 89,000 in May 2005. A sample of 7793 completed a pre-campaign survey. Random samples of these 7793 were then contacted each day of the campaign (this information comes from the BES 2005 website at www.essex.ac.uk/bes/2005).

⁸ Where stories only concerned one theme coding was straightforward. Where an article contained more than one theme, the main theme was the most dominant one in the article, defined by: 1) the amount of space discussion of the theme occupied in the article, 2) the prominence given to a theme in the article, and 3) the headlines. A theme had to occupy at least two full sentences in an article (2005 Media Coding Election Schedule, Loughborough University).

⁹ The elements of stories used to determine tone were: 1) whether there was a “clear directional steer” in the headline, subheadline, or introduction to the article (e.g., “Disastrous poll ratings derail Labour campaign”), 2) whether there were clear examples of political judgments from the author(s) of the article, 3) the political dispositions of quoted sources, (i.e., whether they were one-sided, balanced, or neutral). A story was coded as “Bad News” if “more than 50% of the article material that relates to the coded theme is focused explicitly on the negative implications of the topic for that political party”, “good news” if the opposite was the case, mixed news if there was roughly equal bad news and good news, and descriptive if the article had no evaluative content (from 2005 Media Coding Election Schedule, Loughborough University). Unfortunately we were unable to obtain intercoder reliability for these data but were assured that high levels of intercoder agreement were a fundamental element of coder training (personal communication).

¹⁰ An additional seven percent did not identify a single newspaper—probably a combination of people who mistakenly said they read a newspaper and people who read more than one.

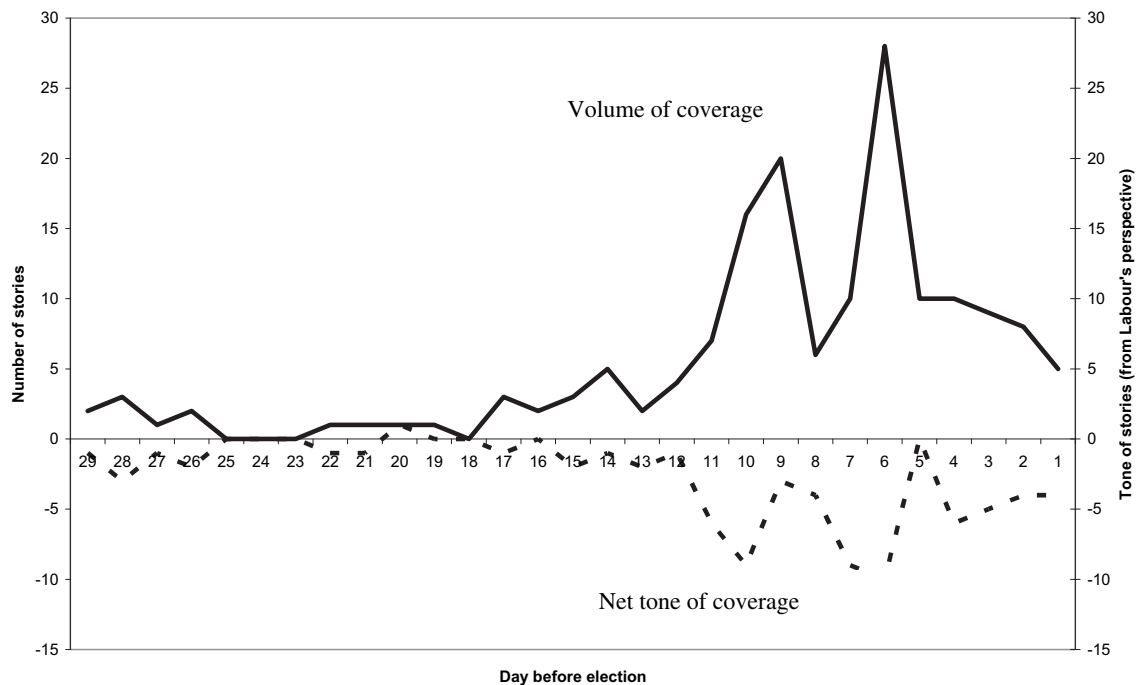


Fig. 1. Volume and tone of media coverage of Iraq in 2005.

We pool the daily rolling cross-sections from the 2005 BES.¹¹ We model feelings toward Blair as a function of approval of the war in Iraq, coverage of the war in Iraq in a respondent's newspaper, and a number of control variables (where i represents a respondent interviewed on day t of the campaign—see Appendix for coding):

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Blair feelings}_{it} = & f(\text{Approval of war in Iraq}_{it} \times \text{Day's coverage of war in Iraq in respondent's newspaper}_{it}, \\
 & \text{Cumulative coverage of war in Iraq in respondent's newspaper}_{it}, \text{Approval of war in Iraq}_{it} \\
 & \times \text{Day's coverage of war in Iraq in respondent's newspaper}_{it}, \text{Approval of war in Iraq}_{it} \\
 & \times \text{Cumulative coverage of war in Iraq in respondent's newspaper}_{it}, [\text{Pre-campaign Blair feelings}_{it} - 1]) \\
 & + \text{control variables}(\text{Attention to the campaign}_i, \text{Age}_i, \text{Labour Party identifier}_i, \\
 & \text{Conservative Party identifier}_i, \text{Education}_i, \text{Class}_i)
 \end{aligned}$$

The day's coverage of Iraq is simply coverage on the day of interview in the newspaper a respondent claims to read most often. Cumulative coverage captures total coverage of stories on Iraq up to the day of interview in the newspaper a respondent claims to read most often (see Appendix II).

There are two important features of this analysis. First, as the equation above signifies, we estimate models with and without a control for pre-campaign evaluations of Tony Blair. We do this because we seek to understand the extent to which media priming of the war in Iraq on evaluations of Blair in 2005 were already bound up in evaluations of Blair before the campaign began; if that was the case we would

expect the inclusion of pre-campaign evaluations of Tony Blair to eliminate evidence of media priming. Second, we distinguish between Labour, Conservative, and independent newspapers based on their editorial stance in the election (see Appendix II for coding). Some might question the “endorsement approach” on the basis that it tells us less

and less about the tone of day-to-day coverage. It is therefore noteworthy that, despite press dealignment, when we regressed the tone of stories on Iraq on whether a newspaper was a “Labour paper” or a “Conservative paper” it showed a statistically significant difference in the expected direction for Iraq—a more negative tone in the Conservative press.¹² We also control for other variables that the literature tells us matter and that were asked about in the surveys: party identification, interest in the campaign, age, education, and social class.

While there are some limitations, this analysis amounts to a conservative test of media effects, meaning that our analysis will be biased toward null results. More specifically,

¹¹ We examined alternatives to the number of stories on the day of interview, such as also including a weighted average of stories on the previous two days and taking the natural log of stories. None made a difference to the pattern of results we report here.

¹² And indeed for coverage of other issues such as asylum seekers, crime, the economy, the NHS, taxation and terrorism.

we limit the analysis to how priming influenced the role of an issue in leader evaluations rather than the characteristics of the leaders (Mendelsohn, 1994, 1996). This is because it is issues that have been the focus of claims of no media influence in British elections. We must also restrict our analysis of news media coverage to newspapers, although there are potential priming effects of both newspapers and television news in the “post-modern” (Norris, 1997) campaign era in Britain.¹³ Priming effects of television news are also more likely if the British public is more trusting of television news than the press (Miller and Krosnick, 2000), although because British television news endeavours to be balanced we would not expect to see any effects of tone. In addition, the limited media usage questions of the BES mean we do not know how often a respondent reads a newspaper, whether she reads stories about politics, or how much attention she claims to pay to those stories (although we are able to control for attention to the election campaign in general).¹⁴ Finally, we are unable to gain purchase on the question of whether priming necessarily follows changes in the perceived salience of an issue because the BES surveys asked only about the most important issue for respondents. This captures change in the single most important issue but misses movement in the salience of other issues. Where authors such as Miller and Krosnick (2000) have used “most important issue” questions to examine priming they relied on data on the *three* most important issues to respondents, a measure that is more likely to capture temporal variation in the salience of several issues.

3. Hypotheses

We consider three competing hypotheses of priming effects in the 2005 election.

3.1. Hypothesis 1: no media effects

In keeping with much of the literature, the theory underlying this possibility is that the disjuncture between the press’ concerns and the public’s means there are no priming effects. If media priming is to occur the public must view the issue-focus of the media as relevant (Althaus and Kim, 2006); most accounts of British elections suggest they do not. The public may also be resistant to media coverage and be more affected by other forms of communication such as interpersonal discussion. This is similar to Malholtra and Krosnick’s (2007, p. 274) description of a process in the US by which, “people may make weighting decisions based upon their own principles about national importance and/or presidential responsibility rather than based simply upon the volume of attention to a domain in the media or any other stream of public communication.”

¹³ Norris (2006, pp. 217–218) notes, “a systematic bias by the BES team of Principal Investigators; in the 2005 pre-post campaign British Election Survey by NatCen and the BES Internet rolling campaign survey by YouGov, out of over 800 items in each study, not one in either survey monitored attention or exposure to television news.”

¹⁴ The 2005 survey did ask whether a respondent read a newspaper every day or “sometimes.” We use this question to provide some leverage over the issue of priming versus learning effects below.

3.2. Hypothesis 2: classic reinforcement effects

Another strand of the literature on the effects of British media coverage of elections, based on the editorial stance of the newspapers individuals read rather than their content *per se*, says that where there are media effects they serve simply to reinforce partisan preferences. This is captured by the notion that people read what they believe: “readers select a paper to fit their politics, and newspapers select particular types of readers” (Newton and Brynyn, 2001, p. 265).

In terms of priming, this suggests that the amount of media coverage of an issue and its tone may affect leadership evaluations. Readers of Labour and Conservative newspapers will read stories with different tones and, as mentioned above, there was a more negative tone in Conservative newspapers than Labour newspapers in 2005. Because individuals should give more weight to issues when coverage is consistent with their predispositions and less weight to issues when they are not, we should see diminished evaluations of Tony Blair among Conservative newspaper readers compared to Labour newspaper readers when there are more stories, and more negative stories, about Iraq. For “cross-pressured” readers, that is, Labour readers of a Conservative newspaper such as the Daily Mail or Conservative readers of a Labour newspaper such as the Daily Mirror, the Iraq issue should thus be given less weight because their preferences are not reinforced.

3.3. Hypothesis 3: reinforcement of issue predispositions

Even accounting for self-selection, readers of Labour, Conservative, and independent newspapers differ among themselves in how they view the incumbent government’s record on issues. Thus a third possibility is that individuals’ pre-existing views on issues moderate the effects of coverage of them. This may systematically affect responses to the same coverage among Labour or Conservative newspaper readers. For example, readers of Labour newspapers could be polarized by coverage of issues like Iraq, with those already disapproving of the war viewing Blair more dimly than before and those approving of the war viewing him more brightly. In addition, motivated reasoning suggests that there may be differences in how readers respond to stories on Iraq on any given day and the *cumulative* effects of these stories. While a single day’s stories may lead to polarization, as readers defend their predispositions, it becomes increasingly difficult to defend one’s positions in the face of large amounts of contrary information (Redlawsk et al., 2010). This has two implications. First, the priming effects of a day’s coverage and cumulative coverage may differ in sign. While stories on a given day may polarize their cumulative impact could break through motivated reasoning and bring readers with different views of the war in Iraq closer together. Second, this is particularly likely for Conservative newspaper readers who supported the war in Iraq because the Conservative press was especially negative in its coverage.

Such an account is consistent with psychological theories of “hot cognition” and motivated reasoning (e.g., Taber and Lodge, 2006), in which individuals tend to ignore, discount, or counterargue with information that is inconsistent or

incongruent with their predispositions, either maintaining or bolstering their original viewpoints unless large amounts of contrary information start to penetrate. Thus motivated reasoning allows for the possibility that the *same* information has different directional effects due to where individuals stand on an issue. It is also consistent with changes in the understanding of priming effects, in which they are increasingly “viewed as less automatic and much more conscious” than before (Togeby, 2007, p. 347).

Such patterns of effects would be at odds with the reinforcement account described above. Classic reinforcement assumes that readers select newspapers or stories within newspapers that they agree with, whereas the motivated reasoning perspective says that individuals may be exposed to the same information but interpret it very differently based on prior views. The result is that the same information may lead to evaluations moving in different directions.^{15,16}

4. Results

We turn first to the association between the *amount* of newspaper coverage of the war in Iraq and the issue's influence on evaluations of Tony Blair. Priming effects imply an increase in the weight given to an issue as a result of media attention: an interaction. With daily and cumulative coverage split by partisanship for the analysis of the volume of stories, this necessitates six interactions. The interactions mean that the main effects of approval of the war in Iraq represent its influence when exposure to newspaper coverage of the issue is zero: for the coefficients under the heading *Coverage on the day of interview*, the main effect is the relationship with feelings towards Blair when either (1) the respondent's newspaper did not mention Iraq that day, or (2) the respondent did not read a daily newspaper; the coefficients under the heading *Cumulative coverage to day of interview* represent the relationship when either (1) the respondent's newspaper did not mention Iraq up to the day of interview, or (2) the respondent did not read a daily newspaper. The main effect of newspaper coverage of Iraq represents its influence when approval of the war in Iraq was zero, meaning the respondent disapproved of the war. All the standard errors in the analysis account for the possible non-independence of errors for a day's sample, using the *cluster* command in Stata 11.0.

Model 1 of Table 1 displays the estimates without controlling for feelings toward Blair before the campaign. As explained above, this is in order to know more about the

dynamics of priming effects in the election and the extent to which media influence was associated with longer term feelings about Blair as opposed to influence during the campaign. Model 1 of Table 1 shows clear evidence of priming effects for coverage on the day of interview in Labour, Conservative and independent newspapers and for cumulative coverage of the war in Conservative newspapers and, weakly, in Labour newspapers ($p = 0.13$).

The signs on the interactions are positive for three of the four statistically significant interactions and show interesting variation in effects across Labour, Conservative, and independent newspapers. The positive interactions between approval of the war in Iraq and media coverage imply that media focus on the issue polarized feelings toward Blair: those who approved of the war responded to media coverage of Iraq with more positive evaluations of Blair, while those who disapproved of the war responded to the greater volume

Table 1

Daily and cumulative press coverage of Iraq and priming in 2005: number of stories.

	Model (1)	Model (2)
Pre-campaign feelings toward Blair		0.78 (0.01)**
Approval of Britain's involvement in Iraq	3.74 (0.13)**	0.85 (0.10)**
<i>Coverage on day of interview</i>		
Labour papers' coverage of Iraq	-0.01 (0.05)	0.01 (0.03)
Conservative papers' coverage of Iraq	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.10 (0.04)*
Independent papers' coverage of Iraq	-0.39 (0.14)**	-0.26 (0.07)**
Approval × Labour papers' coverage of Iraq	0.29 (0.12)*	0.07 (0.08)
Approval × Conservative papers' coverage of Iraq	0.40 (0.13)**	0.30 (0.08)**
Approval × independent papers' coverage of Iraq	1.04 (0.32)**	0.43 (0.39)
<i>Cumulative coverage to day of interview</i>		
Labour papers' cumulative coverage of Iraq	-0.03 (0.01)**	-0.00 (0.01)
Conservative papers' cumulative coverage of Iraq	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
Independent papers' cumulative coverage of Iraq	-0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)
Approval × Labour papers' cumulative coverage of Iraq	0.04 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)
Approval × Conservative papers' cumulative coverage of Iraq	-0.07 (0.02)**	-0.03 (0.02)#
Approval × independent papers' cumulative coverage of Iraq	0.05 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.07)
<i>Control variables</i>		
Attention to the campaign	-0.05 (0.01)**	-0.04 (0.01)**
Age	-0.013 (0.003)**	-0.006 (0.002)**
Female	0.34 (0.10)**	0.17 (0.05)**
Education to school level	-0.14 (0.08)	0.09 (0.05)
Education beyond school level but not to university degree	-0.25 (0.11)*	0.05 (0.04)
Middle class	0.02 (0.10)	-0.01 (0.06)
Labour Party identifier	2.58 (0.09)**	0.69 (0.06)**
Conservative Party identifier	-1.67 (0.10)**	-0.48 (0.07)**
Constant	3.06 (0.19)**	0.93 (0.11)**
N	4936	4936
Adjusted R ²	0.48	0.81

** $p < 0.01$ * $p < 0.05$ # $p < 0.10$ (two-tailed test). Standard errors are adjusted for clustering by day of interview.

¹⁵ For an issue like the war in Iraq it is also inconsistent with arguments that priming of issues is really about learning, followed by adoption of the preferred candidate's or party's position (Lenz, 2009), because the effects are on readers of the same newspaper (i.e., learning comes from exposure to the same information) and the two major parties in Britain differed little in their support for the war.

¹⁶ Iyengar and Kinder (1987) describe a process by which new information is interpreted in a way that is consistent with predispositions as “projection” rather than “priming.” However, later studies, such as Krosnick and Kinder (1990, p. 506) refer to the “consequences of priming” as “contingent on the citizen's prior views.” In addition, the process we are describing does not simply result in the maintenance of existing predispositions but *bolsters* them as a result of media attention and coverage of an issue. We therefore refer to this process as priming.

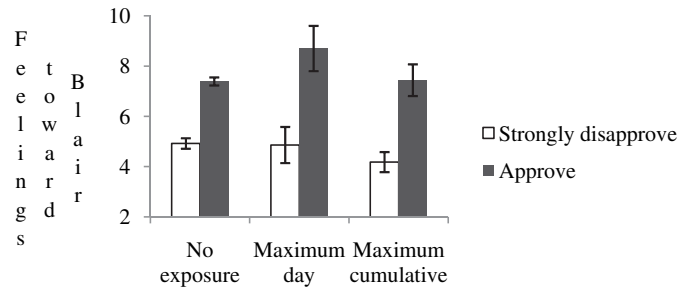
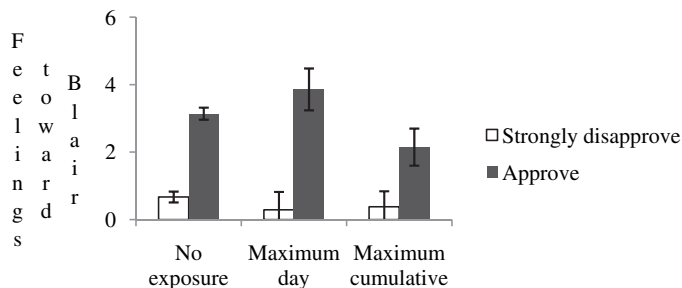
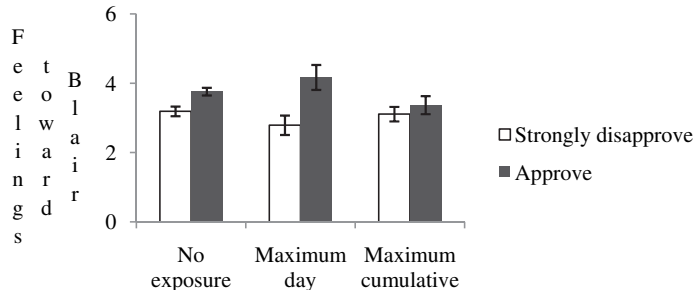
a Labour Identifiers Reading Labour Newspapers (from Model 1)**b** Conservative Identifiers Reading Conservative Newspapers (from Model 1)**c** Conservative Identifiers Reading Conservative Newspapers (from Model 2)

Fig. 2. Predicted effects (with error bounds) of volume of press coverage of Iraq on feelings toward Tony Blair.²⁴ (a) Labour identifiers reading labour newspapers (from Model 1). (b) Conservative identifiers reading conservative newspapers (from Model 1). (c) Conservative identifiers reading conservative newspapers (from Model 2).

of stories with lower evaluations of Blair. Graphs a and b of Fig. 2 illustrate the substantive meaning of these results by simulating feelings toward Blair for Labour identifiers who were readers of Labour newspapers and Conservative identifiers who were readers of Conservative newspapers (versus identifiers not exposed to stories on Iraq).¹⁷ Focusing first on the coverage on the day of interview in Conservative and independent newspapers and cumulative coverage up to the day of interview in Labour newspapers, the predicted values in graphs a and b of Fig. 2 clearly show the polarizing effect of

media coverage of Iraq (see Appendix 1 for the estimates shown in Figs. 2 and 3).¹⁸

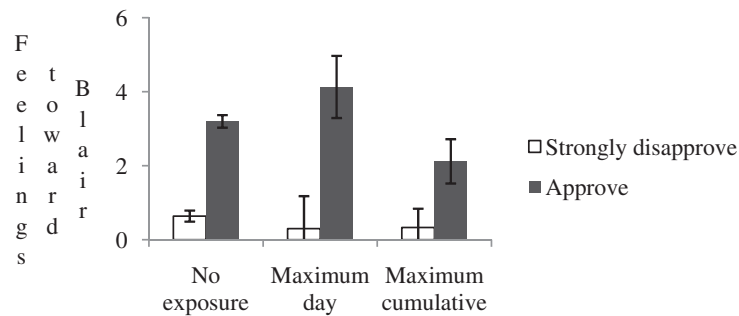
Compared to the baseline differences of about 2.5 points between Labour and Conservative identifiers who approve or disapprove of the war in Iraq, the maximum effect of

¹⁷ When we look at cumulative effects we set daily coverage at zero and when we examine daily coverage effects we set cumulative coverage at zero in Figs. 2 and 3.

¹⁸ On the 4-point scale of approval of the war in Iraq the mean level of approval was “disapprove”, with one standard deviation from the mean being “strongly disapprove” and “approve” (the scale had no midpoint). In these simulations, we are thus examining evaluations of Blair when approval is ± 1 SD (standard deviation) from the mean.

²⁴ Estimates use PR value in Stata 11.0 and are for a middle-class woman educated to school level of average age in the sample (46.9 years), paying the average level of attention to politics in the sample (6.4 on a 10-point scale). For part b, estimates are based on the same values with the addition of average pre-campaign evaluations of Tony Blair (3.93 on a 0–10 scale).

a Conservative Identifiers Reading Conservative Newspapers (from Model 3)



b Conservative Identifiers Reading Conservative Newspapers (from Model 4)

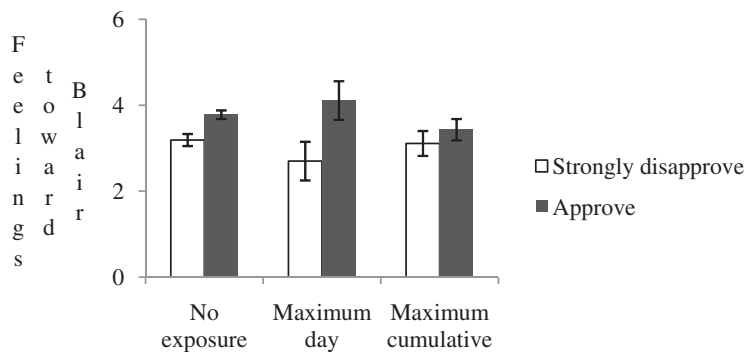


Fig. 3. Predicted effects (with error bounds) of tone of press coverage of Iraq on feelings toward Tony Blair.²⁵ (a) Conservative identifiers reading conservative newspapers (from Model 3). (b) Conservative identifiers reading conservative newspapers (from Model 4). Notes: We use the term “no exposure” for consistency with Fig. 2 but with this analysis the category also covers neutral or balanced coverage of Iraq (i.e., when net tone is equal to zero).

volume of coverage of Iraq in Labour and Conservative newspapers on the day of interview is to widen the gap in feelings toward Blair by about 1 whole point, to 3.5 points. Cumulative coverage of the issue in Labour newspapers has a similar impact. This polarization in feelings toward Blair is both the result of lower evaluations among those who disapprove and of higher evaluations among those who approve of the war. Conventional accounts of media effects in Britain do not anticipate readers’ opinions moving in different directions from exposure to the same media. Indeed, our findings here imply a very different psychological process¹⁹; if consumers of newspapers “read what they believe,” as conventional wisdom suggests, it appears that it is a very partial reading. Moreover, while some accounts of the 2005 election acknowledge that Iraq cost Labour votes (e.g., Evans and Andersen, 2005) the notion that this was the result of media coverage and of losses and gains in support, albeit greater losses than gains, has not been considered.

¹⁹ We looked to see whether the direction of movement was contingent on a reader being “cross-pressured” by estimating the models for Labour identifiers who read Labour newspapers. The results held up, indicating that the polarization is based on issue predispositions rather than partisanship.

²⁵ Estimates use PR value in Stata 11.0 and are for a middle-class woman educated to school level of average age in the sample (46.9 years), paying the average level of attention to politics in the sample (6.4 on a 10-point scale). For part b, estimates are based on the same values with the addition of average pre-campaign evaluations of Tony Blair (3.93 on a 0–10 scale).

On the other hand, *cumulative* coverage of the war in Iraq in Conservative newspapers has a negative interaction with approval. This implies that as the campaign unfolded and Iraq got more attention in Conservative newspapers, those who approved of the war began to think less highly of Blair (those who disapproved were less affected according to the results in graph b of Fig. 2). Thus graph b of Fig. 2 shows readers of Conservative newspapers who approved of the war evaluating Blair less positively with more cumulative coverage and the gap in evaluations closing between approvers and disapprovers. In combination with the results for the impact of coverage of the war on the day of interview this shows the dynamic we suggested, in which attention to the issue of Iraq on a single day is polarizing, as Conservative newspaper readers defend their positions on the war and evaluate Blair accordingly, but over time those who *approve* of the war begin to feel less positive toward Blair.

Model 2 of Table 1 presents estimates from the same specification as Model 1 but with a control for pre-campaign feelings toward Blair. Unsurprisingly, how a respondent felt about Blair in March 2005 was strongly related to how they felt about Blair in April and early May of 2005, i.e., during the campaign. This also results in a large reduction in the strength of the relationships between feelings towards Blair and the control variables. Similarly, we see a reduction in the size and statistical significance of media influence. The interactions between approval of the war in Iraq and the day’s coverage of the issue in Labour and independent newspapers, and

approval and cumulative coverage in Labour newspapers, become statistically insignificant, although the signs do not change. For example, the results still show that cumulative coverage of Iraq in Labour newspapers diminished evaluations of Blair for those who disapproved of the war while having little or no impact on the evaluations of those who approved of the war, but we can no longer say that this difference is statistically significant. Thus, much of the power of the war in Iraq to affect evaluations of Blair and the media's capacity to drive that influence was encapsulated in feelings towards Blair before the campaign began.

However, Model 2 shows that this was not true of Conservative newspaper readers. The impact of coverage on the day of interview and of cumulative coverage of Iraq remains robust to controlling for pre-campaign feelings toward Blair and the implications of the signs on the coefficients are the same as in Model 1—more coverage of Iraq on the day of interview drove readers of Conservative newspapers further apart, contingent on their approval of the war, but the cumulative effect of coverage was to make readers who approved of the war less positive toward Blair. Graph c illustrates by displaying predicted feelings toward Blair based on the same assumptions as before, with the addition of assuming average pre-campaign evaluations of Blair. The differences between approvers and disapprovers are dampened by controlling for pre-campaign evaluations but the patterns are the same: “shocks” of more coverage of Iraq on the day of interview more than double the gap in feelings toward Blair between approvers and disapprovers of the war. At the same time, however, cumulative coverage ultimately leaves Conservative readers who disapproved of the war feeling about the same about Blair as respondents who were exposed to no coverage, while it lowers the evaluations of respondents who approved of the war.²⁰

This begs the question of the net impact of attention to Iraq on the day of interview versus cumulative coverage of the issue. When Iraq was covered in Conservative newspapers there were generally one or two stories per day. For disapprovers the results indicate a stronger influence of coverage on the day than of cumulative coverage—cumulative coverage barely resonated with them—and that impact was negative on perceptions of Tony Blair.²¹ As strong disapproval goes to disapproval, approval, and then strong approval, both daily and cumulative coverage have effects but they are crosscutting. For approvers, the analysis indicates that such coverage had a positive influence on their feelings toward Blair. However, by the end of the campaign the positive influence of one or two stories was almost completely offset by the negative effect of cumulative coverage of Iraq. In sum, coverage of Iraq was a net negative on Conservative readers, as it was for readers of Labour and independent newspapers, but for readers of Conservative newspapers it was a net negative *even accounting for their feelings toward Blair before the campaign was officially launched*. Media coverage of Iraq in

Conservative newspapers during the campaign did *not* leave its readers unaffected.

We now turn from the impact of the volume of coverage of Iraq to the effect of the *tone* of press coverage of issues. The tone of coverage of Iraq varied systematically with the editorial stance of newspapers. Labour newspapers were less negative in their coverage than Conservative newspapers: for Labour and independent newspapers more stories did not necessarily mean more negative stories. Our focus in this analysis is on whether relatively more negative or positive stories on Iraq affected feelings toward Blair, and, if so, whether those effects were moderated by attitudes toward the war.

Table 2 displays estimates of the impact of the tone of coverage based on the same model specifications as in Table 1, with the influence of the net tone of coverage of Iraq examined on the day of interview and cumulatively, first excluding pre-campaign feelings toward Blair and then accounting for them. Thus, as with volume effects we estimate the influence of the tone of Labour, Conservative, and independent newspapers separately. It is possible that the impact of the tone of a story does not vary across newspapers—a negative story may have the same effect regardless of the newspaper in which it appears—but we choose to test that possibility rather than assume it.

Model 3 of Table 2 shows similar results to Table 1 estimates of volume effects but with somewhat *more* evidence of cumulative media priming. Model 3 shows an influence of the tone of coverage of the war in Iraq both on the day of interview and cumulatively for Conservative newspapers, and of cumulative coverage only for Labour and independent newspapers—in total, four of the six interactions are statistically significant. The directions of these effects are similar in implications to those for volume, indicating that more negative stories on Iraq drove Labour newspaper readers who approved or disapproved of the war further apart in their views of Blair, as a result of cumulative coverage, and that the balance of the tone of cumulative coverage in independent newspapers had a similar effect on their readers. Readers of Conservative newspapers, however, show the same interesting contrast between the effect of the tone of coverage on the day of interview—negative coverage polarized readers based on their attitudes toward the war—and the tone of cumulative negative coverage, which lessened differences by diminishing evaluations of Blair among those who approved of the war.²² Graph a of Fig. 3 illustrates with simulations for Conservative identifiers who read Conservative newspapers.

It shows large effects of the tone of daily and cumulative coverage of Iraq. Negative coverage on the day of interview in Conservative newspapers widened the gaps in evaluations of Blair between approvers and disapprovers of the war in Iraq from about 2.5 points for respondents not exposed to stories, where stories were neutral in tone, or where there was a balance of positive and negative stories, into one of 3.8 points, an of more than 50%. Given that

²⁰ Readers should note that the estimates in Figs. 2 and 3 include confidence intervals and that some of these confidence intervals overlap.

²¹ Simulations of feelings toward Blair at different levels of coverage of Iraq on the day of interview and cumulatively up to the day of interview are available from the authors on request.

²² Wald tests of the differences in coefficients confirm that the differences in the interactions between approval and coverage on the day of interview in Labour and Conservative newspapers are not statistically significant but that the differences in the interactions between approval and cumulative coverage are statistically significant between Labour and Conservative newspapers and Conservative and independent newspapers.

Table 2Daily and cumulative press coverage of Iraq and Priming in 2005: *Tone* of stories.

	Model (3)	Model (4)
Pre-campaign feelings toward Blair		0.78 (0.01)**
Approval of Britain's involvement in Iraq	3.82 (0.12)**	0.88 (0.09)**
<i>Coverage on day of interview</i>		
Tone of Labour papers' coverage of Iraq	0.18 (0.12)	0.14 (0.15)
Tone of Conservative papers' coverage of Iraq	0.09 (0.11)	0.12 (0.06)*
Tone of independent papers' coverage of Iraq	0.36 (0.16)*	0.15 (0.09)#
Approval × Tone of Labour papers' coverage of Iraq	−0.51 (0.42)	−0.55 (0.30)#
Approval × Tone of Conservative papers' coverage of Iraq	−0.55 (0.18)**	−0.35 (0.11)**
Approval × Tone of independent papers' coverage of Iraq	−0.24 (0.73)	0.46 (0.44)
<i>Cumulative coverage to day of interview</i>		
Labour papers' cumulative tone of coverage of Iraq	0.06 (0.02)**	−0.02 (0.01)
Conservative papers' cumulative tone of coverage of Iraq	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.01)
Independent papers' cumulative tone of coverage of Iraq	0.04 (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)
Approval × Labour papers' cumulative tone of coverage of Iraq	−0.16 (0.07)*	0.03 (0.05)
Approval × Conservative papers' cumulative tone of coverage of Iraq	0.09 (0.03)*	0.033 (0.019)
Approval × independent papers' cumulative tone of coverage of Iraq	−0.18 (0.04)**	−0.07 (0.06)
<i>Control variables</i>		
Attention to the campaign	−0.05 (0.01)**	−0.04 (0.01)**
Age	−0.013 (0.003)**	−0.006 (0.002)**
Female	0.34 (0.10)**	0.17 (0.05)**
Education to school level	−0.14 (0.08)#	0.09 (0.05)
Education beyond school level but not to university degree	−0.26 (0.11)*	0.10 (0.05)#
Middle class	0.00 (0.09)	0.04 (0.04)
Labour Party identifier	2.59 (0.09)**	0.69 (0.06)**
Conservative Party identifier	−1.66 (0.10)**	−0.47 (0.06)**
Constant	3.05 (0.18)**	0.93 (0.10)**
N	4936	4936
Adjusted R ²	0.48	0.81

** $p < 0.01$ * $p < 0.05$ # $p < 0.10$ (two-tailed test). Standard errors are adjusted for clustering by day of interview.

average ratings of Blair in the pre-campaign survey were 3.9, this is a sizeable impact of media coverage. But it was coverage whose tone was incongruent with predispositions on Iraq that was associated with this movement. Again, such polarization is contrary to the notion of a press focus on Iraq that did not affect the public and of the classic reinforcement model of media influence. The patterns of the effects of tone in Conservative newspapers are also similar to those for volume in that *cumulative* negative coverage lowers the evaluations of those who approved of the war, such that by the end of the campaign the gap between approvers and disapprovers is about 0.8 of a point *less* than for respondents exposed to no coverage or to neutral or balanced coverage.

Model 4 of Table 2 shows estimates of the effects of the tone of coverage when we control for pre-campaign

feelings toward Tony Blair. As in Table 1 this has a dramatic effect on the size of the coefficients for the control variables. For tone, however, the impact of coverage on the day of interview in Labour newspapers hardly changes, while the coefficient for daily coverage in Conservative newspapers decreases but its standard error is also smaller. The interactions for cumulative coverage become statistically insignificant, although even controlling for pre-campaign feelings toward Blair the cumulative tone of coverage in Conservative newspapers is close to statistical significance ($p = 0.11$). In short, some of the influence of media tone is already captured by respondents' feelings toward Blair prior to the beginning of the campaign but much is not.

Model 4 of Table 2 shows that readers of Labour newspapers were polarized *during the campaign* by negative stories about Iraq. Overall, the tone of coverage of Iraq appears to have affected Labour newspaper readers more than its sheer volume, and day-to-day variation in tone had more influence than a build up of negative stories over time. There is a clear impact of coverage on the day of interview, while cumulative coverage had little impact in either direction, neither exacerbating nor undoing these effects. Gaps in evaluations of Blair among Labour newspaper readers increased by about one-third from such coverage. For readers of Conservative newspapers, on the other hand, we see the contrast between daily and cumulative coverage that was also evident for volume of coverage. The implications for the net impact of the tone of Conservative coverage of Iraq are also similar. Graph b of Fig. 3 illustrates with additional simulations for Conservative identifiers who read Conservative newspapers. Attention to Iraq in Conservative newspapers occurred mostly in the last week of the campaign when there were often one or two negative stories. The estimates indicate that while disapprovers became somewhat more negative in their evaluations of Blair from daily coverage, for readers who approved of the war the positive impact of one or two negative stories on a given day was offset by the negative impact of cumulative coverage. Thus, like the volume of stories the tone of stories on Iraq was a slight drag on evaluations of Blair among readers of Conservative newspapers during the campaign.²³

²³ The results of all our analysis are substantively the same if we control for additional issues that may have influenced evaluations of Tony Blair, such as the government's handling of the NHS and asylum seekers. This is especially true of the models that control for pre-campaign feelings toward Blair, which likely capture much of the influence of views on these issues. While our models are dynamic in the sense that we control for pre-campaign feelings toward Blair and are thus examining changes in feelings toward Blair in Models 2 and 4 we also reestimated our models, splitting the sample by the week of the campaign, in order to be sure that we were not confounding media effects with other factors such as the proximity of the election or intensifying partisanship. In this analysis, we see the issue of Iraq becoming more salient for non-readers of newspapers, particularly in the last week of the campaign. We also see media effects among Conservative newspaper readers—for the number of stories and their tone—in the final week of the campaign and some effects of Labour newspapers too. In sum, there are general effects of the war in Iraq that intensify as election day nears, but they are moderated by the amount and tone of media coverage. Moreover, the effects of time are not consistent—we do not see media effects becoming monotonically stronger or weaker as the election approaches. The results are available on request.

Before concluding, we address one final issue. Some analysts of media effects question whether what looks like media priming is an artifact of straightforward learning (e.g., Jenkins, 2002; Lenz, 2009). Ideally we would have conventional panel data to test this possibility. When lacking such data, however, the standard approach is to look at priming among individuals with different levels of knowledge; if the putative priming effects are confined to those with low levels of knowledge of the issue or of politics, the process looks more like learning than priming. The 2005 BES rolling cross-section lacks factual questions on political knowledge but we reestimated Tables 1 and 2 with the sample split by two indicators of political sophistication: how often a respondent claimed to read a newspaper (everyday vs. sometimes or never) and two levels of expressed interest in the election, both from the pre-campaign survey. The results hold up across these indicators of political sophistication, indeed they sometimes appear slightly stronger for sophisticates. While the tests are not as strong as we would like they provide no *prima facie* reason to believe that what we observe here are simply learning effects.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper has presented a comprehensive examination of media priming of Iraq as a consideration in evaluations of the incumbent British prime minister in an election. We have argued that priming has been misunderstood and misrepresented in the literature on British political communication. We have provided a rare kind of analysis of the content of British media; it is rarer still to look at the dynamics of issue effects during British campaigns, to our knowledge it has not been done. This kind of analysis is also necessary in order to understand the generalizability of findings from the American context—not only its political system but also its media system.

We find evidence of priming effects for an issue that conventional accounts of the 2005 election suggest the media covered without affecting public perceptions. This is true whether we examine the impact of the volume of stories about Iraq or their tone. The findings contradict notions of distinct media and public issue agendas and that media coverage in British campaigns is merely part of the ritual. We also examined the validity of conventional accounts of the reinforcement effects of the British press. Overall, the effects were more complex than conventional wisdom implies. We found evidence of significant media influence. As conventional wisdom about British campaigns would suggest, some of that influence was already contained in pre-campaign evaluations of Tony Blair. Thus when we control for pre-campaign evaluations some, but not all, of the evidence of media effects during the short British campaign disappears. For example, day-to-day changes in the tone of media coverage of Iraq in Labour newspapers polarized readers according to their views of the war, with disapprovers growing more negative about Blair and approvers growing more positive. Conservative newspaper readers were influenced during the campaign both by the volume and the tone of coverage of Iraq, day-to-day and cumulatively, such that those who approved of the war had lower evaluations of Blair by the end of the campaign. These results are consistent with the motivated processing of information that can occur when views are firm but can also be

undone in the face of large amounts of contrary information—Conservatives who approved of the war faced the largest amount of coverage that was incongruent with their views.

In terms of its impact on the vote for Labour, the results indicate movement in both directions. This means that our findings echo the general notion that Iraq cost Labour votes in 2005 (Evans and Andersen, 2005). However, they provide a much more complex picture of the processes by which it occurred and suggest novel media influences in British elections. Overall, the notion of a disjuncture between media and public issue agendas or of, at most, classic reinforcement effects appears false.

Our findings extend priming effects during an election to a parliamentary system with a partisan press. They also replicate Althaus and Kim's (2006) claim that the evaluative tone of media coverage can prime considerations as well as the sheer volume of coverage. The findings also echo a point made by Zaller (1996) about "massive media impact" in the United States; we see some large media effects but they are crosscutting. That means that a focus on net changes in public attitudes may miss a great deal more that is going on beneath the surface, with different groups of the public moving in different directions.

Clearly, our claims need further testing—this paper represents an initial look at an issue that received much discussion in the 2005 British election. Our data are limited to a single election and the measures of media exposure are blunt. We need to explore further the reasons for the variation we see here between Labour, Conservative, and independent newspaper readers; some of our findings are likely influenced by incumbency, for example—we need to be able to examine more elections in different contexts. We would also like to be able to explore in future research the role of television. This research both suggests that British studies of media effects should move the focus beyond simple media use and agenda-setting effects and also that British election surveys need better measures of media exposure in newspapers and on television. But these caveats should not detract from our finding that there was a greater media impact on the role of Iraq in the 2005 British election than previously thought, an election that was unexceptional in that it did not bring about a change of government, was not especially competitive and, unlike 1997, was not preceded by dramatic shifts in newspapers' allegiances. In a more competitive election we may see even larger media effects.

For British campaigns, this analysis shows that the parties are not wasting their time in trying to control the media agenda—we disagree with Norris' (2006) claim that the media did not affect what the public thought about in 2005. However, the impact of media coverage of issues such as Iraq is not straightforward. Inferring from small net changes that there is little media influence and that that influence occurs only through classic reinforcement is a mistake.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to David Deacon, Dominic Wring, Michael Billig, Peter Golding, and John Downey for sharing their data on media coverage of the 2005 general election, and to Richard Flickinger and Joanne Miller for helpful comments and suggestions.

Appendix I. Estimates used in Figs. 2 and 3**a. From Model 1 of Table 1**

Maximum day's coverage			
	No exposure	Labour papers	Conservative papers
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Labour identifier	4.92 (4.71, 5.12)	4.86 (4.14, 5.57)	
Approve of war in Iraq, Labour identifier	7.39 (7.23, 7.54)	8.70 (7.79, 9.60)	
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier	0.67 (0.51, 0.83)		0.29 (–0.25, 0.82)
Approve of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier	3.14 (2.96, 3.31)		3.86 (3.24, 4.48)
Maximum cumulative coverage		Labour papers	Conservative papers
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Labour identifier		4.18 (3.79, 4.58)	
Approve of war in Iraq, Labour identifier		7.44 (6.81, 8.07)	
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier			0.38 (–0.08, 0.83)
Approve of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier			2.15 (1.60, 2.70)

b. From Model 2 of Table 1

		Max. Day's Coverage in con. papers	Max. cumulative coverage in con. papers
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Labour identifier	4.36 (4.25, 4.48)		
Approve of war in Iraq, Labour identifier	4.93 (4.80, 5.05)		
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier	3.19 (3.05, 3.34)	2.79 (2.51, 3.07)	3.11 (2.90, 3.33)
Approve of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier	3.76 (3.65, 3.87)	4.17 (3.81, 4.52)	3.37 (3.11, 3.64)

Fig. 3

a. From Model 3 of Table 2

Maximum negative coverage			
	No exposure	Labour papers	Conservative papers
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Labour identifier	4.89 (4.69, 5.09)	4.53 (4.06, 5.00)	
Approve of war in Iraq, Labour identifier	7.45 (7.31, 7.59)	7.77 (6.90, 8.64)	
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier	0.64 (0.49, 0.80)		0.30 (–0.58, 1.17)
Approve of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier	3.20 (3.03, 3.38)		4.13 (3.29, 4.97)
Maximum cumulative negative coverage		Labour papers	Conservative papers
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Labour identifier		4.22 (3.70, 4.73)	
Approve of war in Iraq, Labour identifier		8.04 (7.36, 8.72)	
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier			0.33 (–0.19, 0.84)
Approve of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier			2.12 (1.52, 2.72)

b. From Model 4 of Table 2

Maximum day's negative coverage			
	No exposure	Labour papers	Conservative papers
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Labour identifier	4.35 (4.24, 4.47)	4.07 (3.50, 4.64)	3.86 (3.42, 4.30)
Approve of war in Iraq, Labour identifier	4.94 (4.83, 5.06)	5.39 (4.96, 5.81)	5.27 (4.83, 5.71)
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier	3.19 (3.05, 3.33)	2.90 (2.31, 3.49)	2.70 (2.25, 3.15)
Approve of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier	3.78 (3.68, 3.78)	4.22 (3.80, 4.64)	4.11 (3.66, 4.56)
Maximum cumulative negative coverage		Labour papers	Conservative papers
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Labour identifier		4.55 (4.20, 4.89)	4.27 (3.99, 4.56)
Approve of war in Iraq, Labour identifier		4.86 (4.40, 5.31)	4.59 (4.28, 4.90)
Strongly disapprove of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier		3.38 (3.00, 3.77)	3.11 (2.82, 3.40)
Approve of war in Iraq, Conservative identifier		3.69 (3.27, 4.12)	3.43 (3.18, 3.67)

Appendix II. Coding of variables

Coding of Newspaper Articles (Deacon et al.'s analysis)

From Deacon et al.'s variable *theme 1*, the main theme of an article (see footnotes ⁷ and ⁸ for descriptions of the coding of the main theme and tone of an article): Iraq = 71–75, covering the codes “Iraq – Conduct of the War – success failure”, “Iraq – Morality or legality of the War”, “Iraq – Weapons of Mass Destruction”, “Iraq – Intelligence”, “Iraq – Other”

Labour paper = Financial Times, Guardian, Mirror, Sun, Times; Conservative paper = The Mail, Daily Telegraph, Express; Independent paper = Daily Star, Independent, Scotsman

Coding of Variables from BES Rolling Crosssection (question numbers in brackets)

Approve of Britain's involvement in Iraq (cam_q62): 4-point scale from strongly approve to strongly disapprove, rescaled to 0–1 where 0 = strongly disapprove, 0.33 = disapprove, 0.66 = approve, 1 = strongly approve

Labour/Conservative/Independent papers coverage of the issue: number of stories with Iraq as the main theme on the day of interview in a respondent's newspaper, where respondent's newspaper comes from pre_q146 and pre_q147.

Labour/Conservative/Independent papers cumulative coverage of the issue: total number of stories with Iraq as the main theme from the beginning of the campaign to the day of interview in a respondent's newspaper, where respondent's newspaper comes from pre_q146 and pre_q147.

Labour/Conservative/Independent papers' tone of coverage of the issue: stories with Iraq as the main theme on the day of interview in a respondent's newspaper: each story coded as +1 if good for Labour or bad for Conservatives/Liberal Democrats, –1 if bad for Labour or good for Conservatives/Liberal Democrats, 0 if mixed news or descriptive.

Labour/Conservative/Independent papers cumulative tone of coverage of the issue: total tone of stories with Iraq as the main theme from the beginning of the campaign to the day of interview in a respondent's newspaper: each story coded as above.

Attention to politics (pre_q141): 0–10 scale where 0 = pay no attention, 10 = most attention
Age (pre_q148): in years
Female (pre_q180): 1 = female, 0 = male
Education (pre_q154–pre_q157): School level = education at 16 years or less, Beyond school but not university = education at 17–18 years
Middle class (pre_q168): 1 = Middle class (“professional or higher technical work,” “manager or senior administrator,” “clerical,” “sales or services,” “small business owner”), 0 = other occupations, unemployed, or never worked

Labour/Conservative party identifier (cam_q18): 1 = identify with Labour Party, 0 = do not identify with Labour Party; 1 = identify with Conservative Party, 0 = do not identify with Conservative Party.

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