



# Leadership Traits and Media Influence in Britain

Daniel Stevens and Jeffrey A. Karp

*University of Exeter*

Although party leaders are now assumed to play a more important role in parliamentary elections, little is known about how voters form opinions about leaders. In this article, we rely on theories of priming to investigate how media exposure influences leadership evaluations. The analysis is based on a unique examination of the nature and dynamics of leadership evaluations in Britain which combines survey data with media content data to investigate how perceptions of character traits, and media influence on perceptions of character traits, affect leadership evaluations. Our findings show that both the amount and the tone of newspaper media coverage can affect leadership evaluations which could result in a gain or loss in party support.

**Keywords:** leadership traits; media effects; war in Iraq; Tony Blair; 2005 British election

Recent trends suggest that election campaigns matter more in Britain than in the past – because voters' preferences are less deeply rooted – and that media coverage of leaders may play a key role in how much they matter. The aspects of leadership that count most for voters and the extent of media influence are, however, not well understood. We know that the media tend to focus more on process and personality than on issues in elections (Deacon *et al.*, 2001; Wring and Ward, 2010). But how this affects voters is unknown. In this article we examine the structure of leadership evaluations and the influence of media on them.

Party leaders now attract more attention than ever before – it is much easier for the media to focus on a handful of leaders as symbols of their parties (McAllister, 2007, p. 287). A media focus on leaders has also prompted a response from British parties, in which 'leaders are increasingly the personification of their parties' (Heffernan, 2006, p. 583). As Richard Heffernan and Paul Webb (2005, p. 55) put it, 'there is little doubt that the party leaders figure extremely prominently in contemporary election campaigns in the UK, and that this prominence has grown with the advent of televised campaigning ... Thus, the increasingly presidential style of election campaigning in Britain is likely to prove an enduring phenomenon'. In a system that is more leader focused, voters may take cues from a leader's character, just as they do to infer the qualities of people with whom they engage in everyday life (Rahn *et al.*, 1990).

Early research on character in the United States incorporated the notion of 'presidential prototypes' against which presidents are judged (Kinder *et al.*, 1980). Competence and trustworthiness emerged as 'the preeminent traits for presidents and presidential hopefuls' (Kinder, 1983, p. 1). Numerous studies since have both confirmed the influence of character evaluations in American elections and the centrality of competence and integrity in those evaluations (Bishin *et al.*, 2006; Funk, 1996; 1997; 1999; Goren, 2002; 2007). However, the influence of such considerations in Britain is not well understood, let alone the extent to which the media affect these evaluations.<sup>1</sup>

## Media Effects in British Elections

As in the United States, contemporary research into media effects in Britain has challenged the former minimal effects orthodoxy. 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, appears to have had a large impact on vote choice (Ladd and Lenz, 2009; Newton and Brynin, 2001). More typically, in the absence of clear evidence of media persuasion, some studies have maintained that newspaper reading can *reinforce* existing political preferences (Brynin and Newton, 2003; Harrop, 1987).

On the other hand, media effects in British *elections* seem quite limited (Andersen *et al.*, 2005; Norris and Sanders, 2001; Norris *et al.*, 1999). The picture is typically of a disconnect between what the media highlight in elections and what the public considers important (see, for example, Butler and Kavanagh, 2002; Deacon *et al.*, 2001; Kavanagh and Butler, 2005; Miller, 1991, p. 249; Norris, 2006). The result is that research on elections often ignores media impact entirely (see Norris, 2006, p. 195).

Despite such attitudes and the 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 per cent) reported using television as their main source of information on political issues during the 2005 general election campaign and more than half (54 per cent) 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 equivalent sentiment towards New Labour (Bartle, 2005) or latterly towards David Cameron and his coalition government.

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 on associations between audience usage of media, particularly different press sources, and attitudes and behaviour, rather than coverage and content – the kinds of stories that appear in an individual's newspaper. Accounts of the 2005 election refer to the benefits of Labour's positive record on the economy, problems provided by the war in Iraq, and the failure of the Conservative party to capitalise on Labour's vulnerabilities as explanations for the result (e.g. Norris and Wlezien, 2005). Leadership evaluations enter some explanations (Evans and Andersen, 2005), but again what lies behind them and the role of the campaign are largely unknown.

Conceptually, the literature on media effects in Britain often *mentions* potential agenda setting and priming effects but only rarely tests for the former. Priming 'refers to changes in the standards that people use to make political evaluations' (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987, p. 63). Media priming occurs when the news media's increased attention to a subject changes its impact on evaluations of leaders such as the president in the US or the prime minister in Britain – 'voters will use issues that are more salient in the news media than those that are not because salient information should be more available' (Jenkins, 2002, p. 391). Media influence on perceptions of leaders is particularly likely in a system characterised by valence

politics (Clarke *et al.*, 2004), where voters may draw cues about a prospective government's competence from the person at the top.

### Data and Methods

We take a novel approach to the question of priming effects in Britain by combining content analysis of press coverage with daily tracking of public opinion during the 2005 general election. The public opinion data, collected as part of the 2005 British Election Study (BES), are based on a panel design that incorporates a rolling cross-section survey (RCS). The essence of the design is to administer a baseline survey before the campaign and then to re-interview the same respondents on a randomly chosen day during the course of the campaign (and then again after the election). With a different slice of the original sample interviewed on each day of the campaign a picture of the dynamics of the election emerges.

The 2005 BES included a baseline survey ( $n = 7,793$ ) which first went into the field on 7 March, two months before the election, and was completed on 4 April. The sample was drawn from a panel recruited by YouGov, with respondents completing surveys online.<sup>2</sup> Random selection for interview during the election campaign commenced on 6 April. The number of interviews completed on a daily basis varied considerably, ranging from a low of 59 to a high of 279, yielding a total panel of 6,059 respondents.<sup>3</sup>

As measures of character, we rely on a series of items that asked respondents about their perceptions of Tony Blair's competence as a leader, his responsiveness to voters' concerns and his trustworthiness.<sup>4</sup> Responses were collected in the baseline pre-campaign survey and are thus not influenced by events unfolding during the campaign. Of course these perceptions will already be influenced by partisanship and perceptions of Blair. Our interest, however, is not in these associations but in how they interact with the press coverage during the campaign to affect leadership evaluations. Leadership evaluations are based on thermometer ratings ranging from strongly dislike (0) to strongly like (10).<sup>5</sup> We examine Blair's leadership evaluations rather than voting for Labour because they provide a cleaner test of priming effects.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the 2005 BES did not include any items measuring individual exposure to television newscasts and magazines, so we must limit our focus to newspaper coverage. To evaluate the impact of that press coverage, we rely on data collected by a team from Loughborough University, who coded election coverage from a total of 65 national and regional newspapers, television newscasts and magazines. 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. Our interest is in all stories falling under the category of 'character', which we define as articles where the first or second theme was what the Loughborough team called the 'integrity of leaders', 'the presidentialisation of the campaign', 'the sexual exploits of politicians' or about corruption or scandals. Such stories were likely to bring aspects of character to the top of readers' heads, making character considerations more accessible. It should not matter whether or not the coverage was directly about Tony Blair; priming theory says that to the extent that there was more coverage of

character, when people thought of Blair they should have been more likely to evaluate him in terms of their perceptions of his character.

To assess the impact of press coverage, we first identify the respondent's self-reported use of newspapers and then link it with the media content data. If a respondent read *The Guardian*, our measures of exposure are the total number and net tone of stories in *The Guardian* up to the day of the campaign interview. Similarly, if he or she read the *Daily Mail*, our measures of exposure are the number and net tone of stories in the *Daily Mail* up to the day of the campaign interview, and so on. We were forced to drop less than 1 per cent of the sample because they did not read a newspaper for which we had content data.<sup>7</sup> For analytical purposes we distinguish between Labour, Conservative and independent newspapers based on their editorial stance in the election (see Appendix for definitions), as opposed to individual newspapers.<sup>8</sup>

For the measure of tone, we take advantage of the Loughborough team's coding of all stories as 'bad news', 'good news', 'mixed news' or simply descriptive for each of the parties. We coded bad news stories for Labour as -1, good news stories for Labour as +1, mixed or descriptive stories as 0, bad news stories on character 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). The net tone is derived from the total (e.g. two negative stories and one positive story would result in an overall score of -1).

Loughborough's content analysis shows that there were stories about character from the beginning of the campaign but they were limited to no more than two stories a day in Labour, Conservative and independent newspapers until about twelve days before the election, when there was a shift towards a greater focus on character in all newspapers (see Appendix Figure A1a). This was partly linked to more stories on the war in Iraq.<sup>9</sup> There was also clear variation in the amount of attention to character and its tone during the election (see Appendix Figure A1b). The balance of the tone of coverage was not positive for Labour. Conservative newspapers' coverage of character was virtually always negative towards Blair, culminating in the third week of the campaign, while stories in independent newspapers were more mixed but were often negative on balance, and even Labour newspapers were more often neutral or negative in stories on character than positive.

Empirically, we define media priming as a correspondence in (1) the *amount* of coverage of character in the press (i.e. the number of stories) and leadership evaluations or (2) the *tone* of coverage of character in the press and leadership evaluations. We examine the impact of *cumulative* coverage of character up to the day of interview (accounting for the influence of evaluations of Blair from before the campaign), rather than coverage on the day of interview. Exposure to coverage of character may be more likely if it receives sustained attention (Fan, 1991).<sup>10</sup> Media coverage of character in the 2005 general election peaked about seven days before the election, effects that may still have been felt days later when attention to character issues was minimal (see Appendix Figure A1a).

To gauge priming effects our approach is straightforward. We examine the impact of the number of stories, and their net tone of coverage on feelings towards Tony Blair (the dependent variable in all the analysis that follows), *controlling for feelings towards Blair before the official campaign began*. Thus we are capturing change in feelings towards Blair, *during the campaign*. We anticipate that the effects of the coverage will depend on perceptions of Blair's

character traits. Competence, responsiveness and trustworthiness are all desirable traits in a leader; therefore if they have an influence on leadership evaluations it will be positive. However, given the fallout from the war in Iraq, about which Blair was openly accused of having lied, we expect that trust will be the most influential dimension of character on evaluations of Blair (see Heffernan and Webb, 2005; Stevens *et al.*, 2011).

### **Hypotheses about Priming Effects**

There are different possibilities for priming effects, depending on whether the focus is on the number or the tone of stories:

H1: Exposure to more media stories on character will enhance the influence of the most salient character dimension on evaluations of a leader.

H2: As more media coverage of character enhances the influence of the most salient character dimension, it will diminish the influence of less salient character dimensions on evaluations of a leader.

H3: Exposure to more negative coverage of character will moderate the impact of the most salient character dimension such that the gap between respondents who rate the leader most positively on this dimension and those rating him least positively will widen. The corollary is that less salient dimensions of character will not affect respondents as much (i.e. the gap between respondents who rate a party leader most positively and most negatively will diminish).

H1 is a classic priming effect. Given that we expect perceptions of a party leader on the three character dimensions to be positively related to feelings towards him or her (e.g. the more you trust a leader, the more you like him or her), enhanced influence implies a larger positive impact of the most salient character dimension.

The rationale for H2 comes from previous findings of a 'hydraulic' pattern of priming effects for issues (e.g. Miller and Krosnick, 1996): the priming of one issue often means that other issues fade into the background. We expect the same for dimensions of character; with the amplification of the influence of an aspect of character such as trust we expect to see the other dimensions of character, such as competence, mattering less.

The third hypothesis about the effects of the tone of coverage of character (H3) draws on research on the impact of negative information (e.g. Marcus, 2002; Marcus and MacKuen, 1993) and motivated reasoning (Taber and Lodge, 2006). George Marcus has shown that because positive information is non-threatening it prompts a reliance on habit and routine. In contrast, negative information can induce anxiety, which prompts closer scrutiny of information. At the same time, theories of motivated reasoning show that individuals are often motivated to defend their judgements in the face of incongruent information – information that challenges their beliefs. This means that judgements are maintained or even bolstered, despite information that might be expected to undermine them.

### **Approach**

We begin with an initial test of the changing influence of dimensions of character by examining their impact day by day on feelings towards Blair during the campaign.<sup>11</sup> We combine the day's sample and those from the previous two days. Thus estimates of effects

are akin to a three-day moving average, a standard approach to smoothing fluctuation that is often simply due to sample variation (Johnston and Brady, 2002).<sup>12</sup> The rationale is that for there to be media influence on the dimensions of character driving evaluations of Blair we must first examine whether the influence of dimensions of character changes over time. We estimate feelings towards Blair in multivariate models that control for the influence of the other dimensions of character, as follows (where  $i$  represents a respondent interviewed on day  $t$  of the campaign, and  $t-1$  means the pre-campaign survey – see Appendix for coding):

$$\text{Blair feelings}_{it} = f(\text{Perceptions of Blair's competence}_{it-1}, \text{Perceptions of Blair's responsiveness}_{it-1}, \text{Perceptions of Blair's trustworthiness}_{it-1})$$

### *Influence of Cumulative Media Coverage*

For the rest of the analysis we pool the daily rolling cross-sections and concentrate on how the influence of the three dimensions of character on evaluations of Blair changed over the course of the campaign. The generic model is:

$$\text{Blair feelings}_{it} = f(\text{Competence}_{it-1}, \text{Responsiveness}_{it-1}, \text{Trustworthiness}_{it-1}, \text{Cumulative coverage of Character}_{it}, \text{Competence}_{it-1} \times \text{Cumulative coverage of Character}_{it}, \text{Responsiveness}_{it-1} \times \text{Cumulative coverage of Character}_{it}, \text{Trust}_{it-1} \times \text{Cumulative coverage of Character}_{it}, \text{Pre-campaign Blair feelings}_{it-1}, \text{Attention to the campaign}_{it-1}, \text{Age}_{it-1}, \text{Labour party identifier}_{it-1}, \text{Conservative party identifier}_{it-1}, \text{Education}_{it-1}, \text{Class}_{it-1})$$

As indicated above, when we look at the number of stories we distinguish by Labour, Conservative and independent newspapers. Some might question the ‘endorsement approach’ on the basis that it tells us less and less about the tone of coverage. We therefore also specify models incorporating the tone of coverage. We do so in two ways: first, without making any distinction between the newspapers carrying negative, positive or neutral stories; and second, by looking at the tone of Labour, Conservative and independent newspapers separately. Other than feelings towards Blair before the campaign, we control for other variables that the literature tells us matter, such as: party identification, interest in the campaign, age, education and social class.

Before moving to the analysis, we note the limitations to these tests. Ideally our analysis would not be limited to the 2005 general election, but the combination of a rolling cross-section that gauges respondents’ perceptions of different elements of character and a media content analysis that identifies coverage of character and its tone currently exists for that election only. This may compromise the generalisability of our specific findings to other elections. However, we argue in the conclusion that they point to interplay between dimensions of character and an impact of the media that is likely to be greater in other elections given that we demonstrate them in an election that was unexceptional – it involved an incumbent prime minister and was not close. Our analysis is of newspapers, although there are potential priming effects of both newspapers and television news. Priming effects of television news are more likely if the British public is more trusting of television news than the press (Gavin and Sanders, 2003), although we would also note that television news strives for neutrality and balance, meaning that we should not see priming effects of tone. The limited media usage questions of the BES also mean that we do not know precisely how often a respondent reads a newspaper, whether he or she reads stories



about politics or how much attention he or she pays to those stories. Finally, it would be ideal if the content analysis distinguished between character-based coverage about competence, responsiveness and trust but we only have general measures of such coverage.

Such limitations should not detract, however, from what is substantively and theoretically new in this article. It represents a unique examination of the nature and dynamics of leadership evaluations in Britain and goes well beyond the tendencies to focus, at most, on the newspapers individuals read rather than their content, and beyond the notion that campaign coverage either has little impact on voters or merely reinforces their preferences.

## Results

### *Character Traits*

We begin with some univariate statistics on the dimensions of character. While our focus is on evaluations of Blair, for perspective we also report in Table 1 perceptions of the competence, responsiveness and trustworthiness of the other major national party leader in 2005, the Conservative party's Michael Howard. The results show that perceptions of the two leaders were generally below the midpoint of the scales for character, indicating a lack of enthusiasm towards both of them. Interestingly, Blair was viewed as significantly more competent than Howard but Howard was seen as significantly more responsive to voters than Blair, and the two were considered equally (un)trustworthy. In other words, if trust was the key dimension of character, the Conservative leader held no overall advantage over Blair. Table 1 also presents the perceptions of readers of Labour and Conservative newspapers and Labour and Conservative identifiers. As would be expected, they show that readers of Labour newspapers were more positive about Blair and negative about Howard than the sample as a whole, with the reverse being true of readers of Conservative newspapers. However, the bias among readers of Labour newspapers was not as great as among readers of Conservative newspapers. Table 1 also illustrates that views of the two major party leaders among Labour and Conservative newspaper readers were not nearly as polarised as the views of Labour and Conservative party identifiers. Finally, the results indicate that even among his natural bases of support Blair was thought to lack the virtues of responsiveness and trustworthiness.

Having provided this context, Figure 1 presents evidence of each character dimension's influence on feelings towards Blair over the campaign. We transformed the measures of competence, responsiveness and trustworthiness to range from zero to one. For each day of the campaign, a bivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) model is estimated and the coefficient for each character dimension is plotted over time to illustrate the varying impact.

The figures show considerable variation, both across different dimensions of character and within character dimensions over time. As expected, perceptions of Blair's trustworthiness were far more influential than perceptions of his competence or responsiveness to voters. In addition, competence had less of an impact than trust but is still statistically significant, while perceptions of Blair's responsiveness had no discernible influence for large parts of the campaign. The dynamics of the impact of trust show a trend towards greater influence as the campaign unfolded.<sup>13</sup> At the outset, the coefficient for trust is about 6.5 – an already large effect on a 0–10-point scale – but by the end of the campaign its influence

**Table 1: Mean Perceptions of Party Leaders**

	<i>Competence</i>		<i>Responsiveness</i>		<i>Trustworthiness</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Total sample						
Tony Blair	0.50	(0.30)	0.40	(0.28)	0.36	(0.32)
Michael Howard	0.46	(0.27)	0.49	(0.26)	0.36	(0.30)
Labour newspaper readers						
Tony Blair	0.54	(0.29)	0.44	(0.27)	0.40	(0.32)
Michael Howard	0.42	(0.27)	0.46	(0.25)	0.31	(0.29)
Conservative newspaper readers						
Tony Blair	0.42	(0.30)	0.33	(0.27)	0.27	(0.30)
Michael Howard	0.58	(0.26)	0.60	(0.24)	0.53	(0.30)
Labour identifiers						
Tony Blair	0.70	(0.24)	0.57	(0.24)	0.59	(0.29)
Michael Howard	0.34	(0.24)	0.40	(0.24)	0.22	(0.23)
Conservative identifiers						
Tony Blair	0.33	(0.27)	0.26	(0.23)	0.15	(0.21)
Michael Howard	0.70	(0.19)	0.70	(0.19)	0.69	(0.22)

Notes: *SD* = Standard deviation; *Competence*, *Responsiveness* and *Trustworthiness* are measured on 0–1 scales.

Source: *British Election Study Rolling Cross-Section, 2005*.

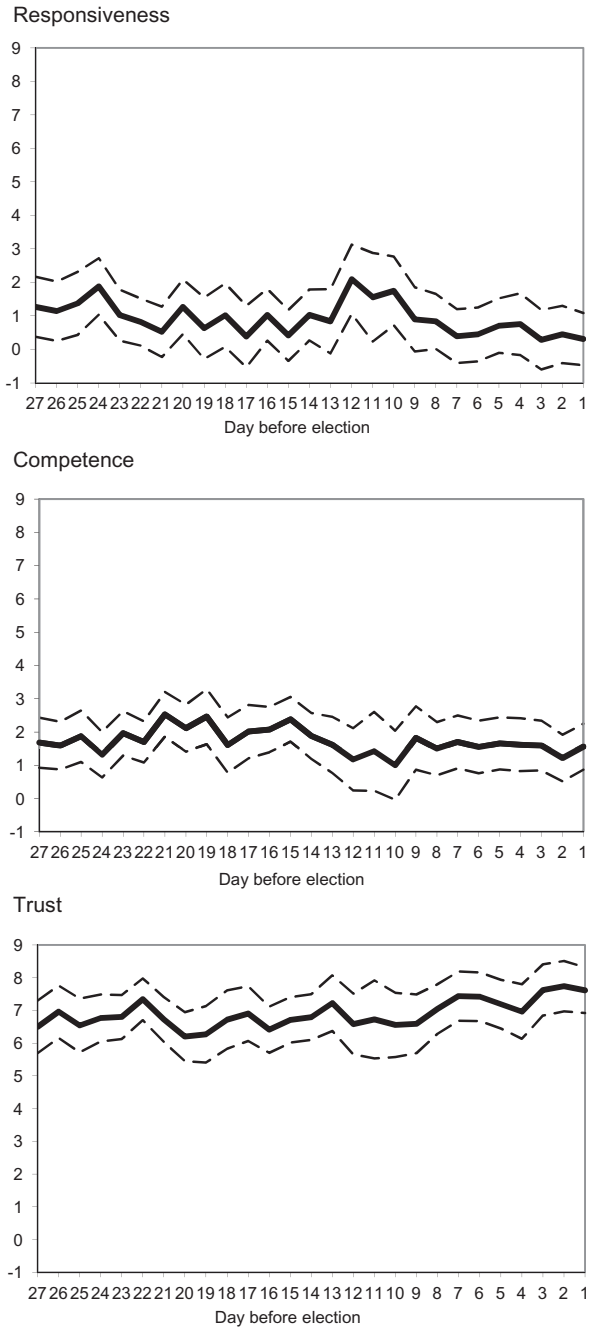
increased by about 25 per cent. The impact of competence and responsiveness, on the other hand, diminished somewhat over the duration of the campaign but with slightly different patterns. The influence of competence did not vary much, declining from about 1.8 at the start of the campaign to about 1.5 at the end; responsiveness had a more limited influence until 10–12 days before election day, when its impact peaked at about 2 points, before declining from there. This analysis supports the initial expectation that trustworthiness was the most important dimension of character in evaluations of Blair in 2005.

### ***Intensity of Media Coverage on Character***

We now focus on the association between the amount of newspaper coverage of character and its influence on evaluations of Blair during the campaign. Given that evaluations are measured on a 10-point scale, we use OLS to estimate the model. Priming effects imply an increase in the importance of character with increased media attention on character or, to put it another way, interactions between competence, responsiveness and trustworthiness and media coverage. We mean-centre newspaper coverage, so that the main effects (e.g. *Labour papers' cumulative coverage of character*) represent the impact of the average cumulative number of stories on character in a respondent's newspaper at the time of interview and the interactions show the effects of deviations from that average. The interactions also mean that the main effects of each dimension of character represent its influence at average levels of media coverage. All the standard errors in Tables 2–4 account for the possible non-independence of errors in each day's sample, using the *cluster* command in Stata 11.0.



**Figure 1: Effects of Leadership Traits on Feelings towards Blair**



*Note: Solid line is coefficient and broken lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.*

Table 2 shows the impact of the *number* of stories on character in Labour, Conservative and independent newspapers. The estimates indicate, as one would expect, that feelings towards Blair before the campaign were strongly associated with feelings about him one month later, that Labour identifiers felt more positive towards Blair and Conservative identifiers more negative than identifiers with other parties or with no party, and that women and the more highly educated were more positive about Blair while older individuals were more negative.

We also see effects of media coverage. Media attention to character was associated with an enhanced influence of the most salient dimension of character, trust, in Labour and Conservative newspapers while it exerted no impact on the influence of the competence

**Table 2: Effects of Media Intensity on Feelings towards Blair (OLS Model)**

	<i>Coefficient</i>
Labour papers' cumulative coverage of character	0.02 (0.01)
Conservative papers' cumulative coverage of character	0.00 (0.00)
Independent papers' cumulative coverage of character	-0.02 (0.01)
Blair's competence	0.99* (0.42)
Blair's responsiveness	-0.35 (0.34)
Blair's trustworthiness	3.36** (0.39)
Competence × Labour papers' coverage of character	-0.00 (0.06)
Competence × Conservative papers' coverage of character	-0.00 (0.02)
Competence × independent papers' coverage of character	0.02 (0.07)
Responsiveness × Labour papers' coverage of character	-0.11# (0.05)
Responsiveness × Conservative papers' coverage of character	-0.08** (0.02)
Responsiveness × independent papers' coverage of character	-0.03 (0.05)
Trust × Labour papers' coverage of character	0.07# (0.04)
Trust × Conservative papers' coverage of character	0.06** (0.02)
Trust × independent papers' coverage of character	0.03 (0.05)
Control variables	
Feelings towards Blair before the campaign	0.50** (0.02)
Attention to the campaign	-0.05** (0.01)
Age	-0.007** (0.001)
Female	0.11* (0.05)
Education to school level	0.17** (0.04)
Education beyond school level but not to university degree	0.11* (0.05)
Middle class	-0.01 (0.05)
Labour party identifier	0.46** (0.05)
Conservative party identifier	-0.34** (0.06)
Constant	0.81** (0.13)
N	5241
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.83

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; # $p < 0.10$  (two-tailed test).

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses and are adjusted for clustering by day of interview.

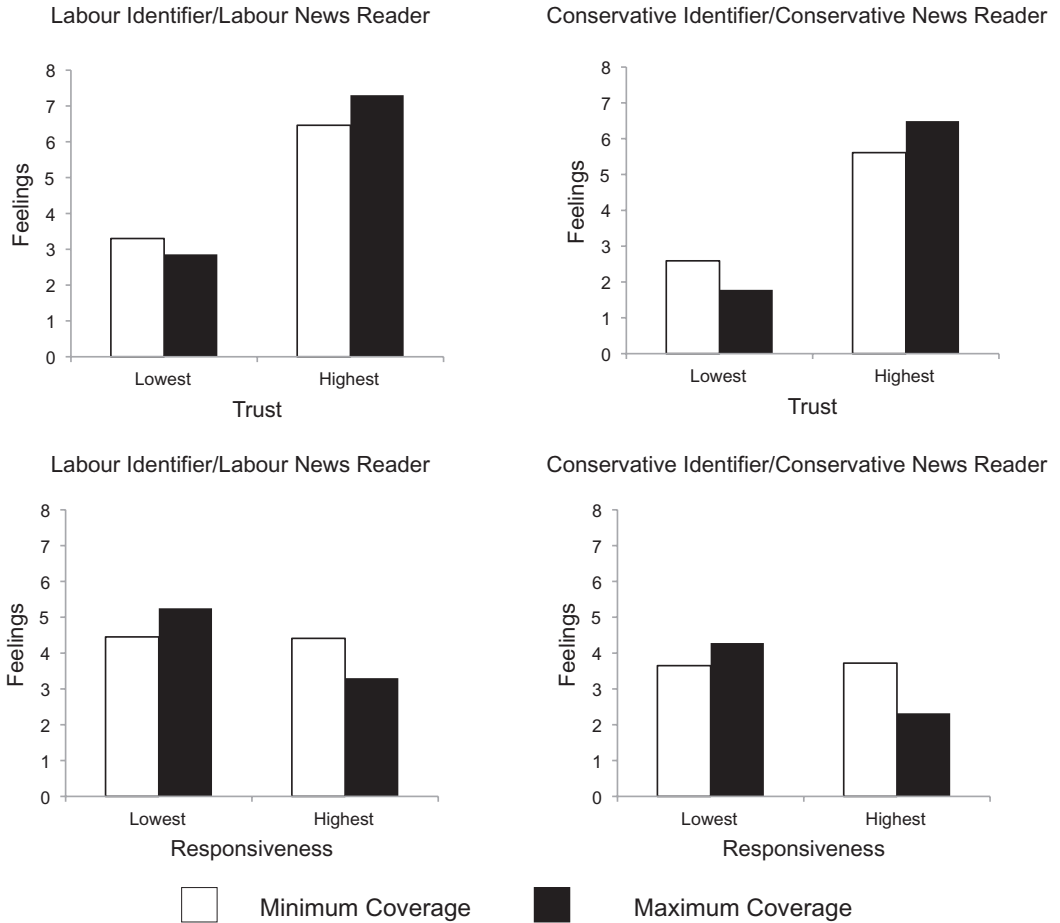
dimension. This is in line with H1. The negative signs on the interactions of perceptions of responsiveness and cumulative coverage of character in Labour and Conservative newspapers indicate that more media attention to character was associated with a negative influence on feelings towards Blair. We interpret this not as evidence that seeing Blair as responsive ultimately became a drag on support for him, but of a hydraulic pattern to priming in line with H2, where the enhanced impact of trust was accompanied by a diminished influence of another character dimension. We also saw this in Figure 1. Thus, perceptions of Blair as responsive became a weaker factor in evaluations of him with more media coverage of character, such that the most positive views of Blair's responsiveness resulted in evaluations of him that were about a point lower by the end of the campaign for readers of newspapers than at the beginning.

These results are best illustrated by simulating feelings towards Blair at different levels of responsiveness and trust for a Labour identifier reading a Labour newspaper and a Conservative identifier reading a Conservative newspaper. 'Minimum coverage' could be seen as representing coverage at the beginning of the campaign or for non-readers and 'Maximum coverage' as representing readers at the end of the campaign. We display the results of these simulations in Figure 2.

We clearly see the contrast between trustworthiness and responsiveness in two respects. First, for trust, more coverage of character lowers feelings about Blair for those with below-average trust in Blair but renders feelings more positive for those with above-average trust in Blair, whereas we see higher levels of responsiveness associated with lower evaluations of Blair among readers of Labour and Conservative newspapers at the end of the campaign. Second, Figure 2 reinforces the message of Table 2 that trust had a much stronger influence on feelings towards Blair than responsiveness and that the influence also grew with cumulated media coverage of character, so that a gap of about 3 points between those at the lowest and highest levels of trust towards Blair became a gap of about 4.5 points, or almost half the scale.

What do the results imply for the *net* impact of the amount of coverage of character on feelings towards Blair if perceptions of trust and responsiveness were driving evaluations of Blair in different directions? To get some idea of this we examined feelings towards Blair under the same assumptions as in Figure 2, but setting both trust and responsiveness to their minimum values and then to their maximum values. This allows us to see whether the movement in the influence of trust and responsiveness cancelled each other out or whether one dominated the other. Under these scenarios evaluations of Blair grew somewhat more positive for Labour newspaper readers with the lowest levels of trust and responsiveness but there was an almost equal decline in evaluations of Blair for Labour newspaper readers with the highest levels of trust and responsiveness. Thus the decline in evaluations of Blair was almost perfectly balanced by movement in the other direction; indeed the mean evaluations of Blair under this scenario barely changed. We see a similar pattern for Conservative newspaper readers but with a marginally greater decrease in evaluations of Blair of about 0.3. The shifts in the impact of trust and responsiveness as a result of media coverage of character appear ultimately to have cost Blair only a little support because the losses among those who saw him as untrustworthy, and the diminished salience of responsiveness as a factor in support, were offset by gains among those who saw Blair as trustworthy.

**Figure 2: Predicted Feelings towards Blair from Number of Stories in Newspapers**



Notes: Estimates are derived from Table 2 and are based on a middle-class female, educated to school level. Attention to the campaign, age, pre-campaign feelings towards Blair and perceptions of competence are set at their means. Responsiveness is set at its mean for the trust simulations and trust is set at its mean for the responsiveness simulations.

**Net Tone of Stories on Character**

In Table 3 we switch our focus to the *tone* of press coverage of issues. In our initial analysis we examine the tone of coverage for newspapers as a whole rather than separating tone of coverage by the editorial stance of a newspaper; thus we assume that the impact of tone has the same effect on evaluations of Blair whether it is in the *Daily Mirror* or the *Daily Mail*.

Table 3 echoes the analysis of the number of stories about character in showing an impact of the cumulative tone of newspaper coverage on the influence of perceptions of Blair’s responsiveness and trustworthiness in opposite directions: a positive interaction between tone and responsiveness and a negative interaction between tone and trustworthiness. As

**Table 3: Effects of Media Tone on Feelings towards Blair (OLS model)**

	<i>Coefficient</i>
Tone of papers' cumulative coverage of character	0.00 (0.00)
Blair's competence	0.93** (0.14)
Blair's responsiveness	0.24 (0.15)
Blair's trustworthiness	2.91** (0.25)
Competence × tone of papers' coverage of character	0.00 (0.02)
Responsiveness × tone of papers' coverage of character	0.06** (0.02)
Trust × tone of papers' coverage of character	−0.05 <sup>†</sup> (0.03)
Control variables	
Feelings towards Blair before the campaign	0.50** (0.02)
Attention to the campaign	−0.05** (0.01)
Age	−0.007** (0.001)
Female	0.11* (0.05)
Education to school level	0.17** (0.05)
Education beyond school level but not to university degree	0.11* (0.05)
Middle class	−0.00 (0.05)
Labour party identifier	0.46** (0.05)
Conservative party identifier	−0.34** (0.06)
Constant	0.86** (0.09)
N	5241
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.83

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; <sup>†</sup> $p < 0.10$  (two-tailed test).

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses and are adjusted for clustering by day of interview.

with the number of stories the negative interaction implies that more negative stories about character for Blair and Labour increased the differences between those least trusting of Blair and those most trusting of Blair, evidence that supports H3, while the positive interaction for responsiveness implies that more negative stories on character diminished its boost on feelings towards Blair.<sup>14</sup>

Table 4 reports the results of a model that examines the impact of the tone of coverage across different newspaper outlets. The estimates indicate that significant effects in how the tone of coverage of character affected the influence of perceptions of Blair's trustworthiness and responsiveness were confined to Conservative newspapers; it does matter whether a positive or negative story is in the *Daily Mirror* or the *Daily Mail*. Moreover, while the insignificant results for Labour newspapers suggest that their influence stemmed from the number of stories on character, more than its tone, the source of Conservative newspapers' influence appears to have come both from the number of stories *and* their tone.

The signs on the interactions for the tone of cumulative coverage of character in Conservative newspapers are negative for trustworthiness and positive for responsiveness. Both interactions are statistically significant. As for the number of stories about character, we illustrate the implications in Figure 3 by estimating feelings towards Blair among

**Table 4: Effects of Media Tone and Source on Feelings towards Blair (OLS model)**

	<i>Coefficient</i>
Tone of Labour papers' cumulative coverage of character	0.01 (0.02)
Tone of Conservative papers' cumulative coverage of character	-0.00 (0.00)
Tone of independent papers' cumulative coverage of character	0.05* (0.02)
Blair's competence	1.03* (0.38)
Blair's responsiveness	0.03 (0.29)
Blair's trustworthiness	3.09** (0.34)
Competence × tone of Labour papers' coverage of character	0.06 (0.09)
Competence × tone of Conservative papers' coverage of character	-0.01 (0.02)
Competence × tone of independent papers' coverage of character	-0.03 (0.15)
Responsiveness × tone of Labour papers' coverage of character	-0.00 (0.07)
Responsiveness × tone of Conservative papers' coverage of character	0.07** (0.02)
Responsiveness × tone of independent papers' coverage of character	-0.01 (0.10)
Trust × tone of Labour papers' coverage of character	-0.03 (0.07)
Trust × tone of Conservative papers' coverage of character	-0.05* (0.02)
Trust × tone of independent papers' coverage of character	-0.01 (0.11)
Control variables	
Feelings towards Blair before the campaign	0.49** (0.02)
Attention to the campaign	-0.05** (0.01)
Age	-0.007** (0.001)
Female	0.11* (0.05)
Education to school level	0.16** (0.05)
Education beyond school level but not to university degree	0.10* (0.05)
Middle class	-0.00 (0.05)
Labour party identifier	0.46** (0.05)
Conservative party identifier	-0.35** (0.06)
Constant	0.78** (0.11)
N	5241
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.83

\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

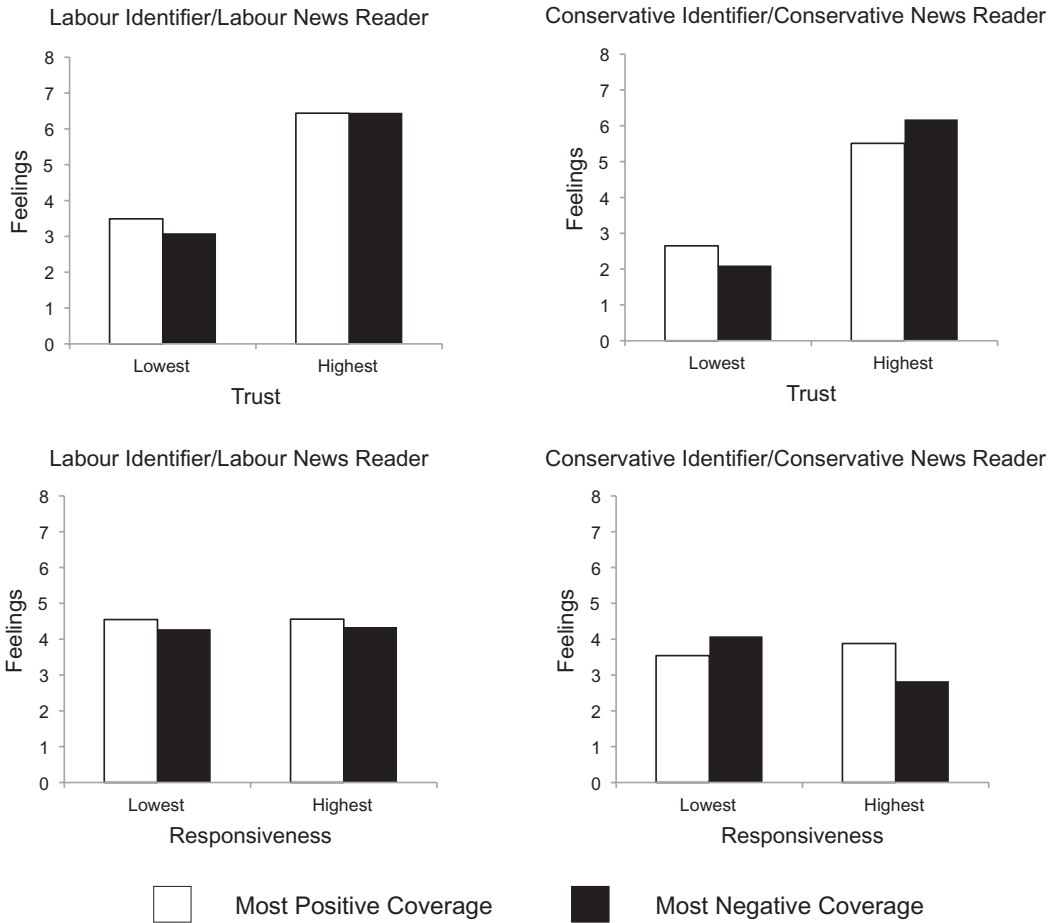
Note: Standard errors are in parentheses and are adjusted for clustering by day of interview.

Conservative readers of Conservative newspapers given no media coverage of character, average levels of media coverage and the maximum levels of coverage at the time of interview. Although the interactions are not statistically significant, we also provide estimates for Labour newspaper readers for comparison with Conservative newspaper readers and with Figure 2.

The results in Figure 3 show similar contrasts in the effects of the tone of media coverage of character on the influence of perceptions of Blair's trustworthiness and responsiveness to voters as the number of stories. More negative coverage of character issues pushed the evaluations of Conservative readers inclined to trust or distrust Blair further apart, whereas for responsiveness we see a positive influence diminish with more negative coverage. Again,



**Figure 3: Predicted Feelings towards Blair from Tone of Stories in Newspapers**



*Notes: Estimates are derived from Table 4 and are based on a middle-class female, educated to school level. Attention to the campaign, age, pre-campaign feelings towards Blair and perceptions of competence are set at their means. Responsiveness is set at its mean for the trust simulations and trust is set at its mean for the responsiveness simulations.*

this is consistent with a hydraulic pattern of priming, in which as trust became a more salient and polarising influence on evaluations the boost that perceptions of Blair’s responsiveness once provided was diminished. While the pattern of effects among Labour newspaper readers is similar for trustworthiness they are much more modest than for Conservative readers, reflecting their statistical insignificance.

As with the number of stories, we seek to gain further understanding of the nature of the cross-cutting impact of the tone of media coverage of character on evaluations of Blair by repeating the simulations of Figure 3 for Conservative newspaper readers while letting perceptions of Blair’s responsiveness and trustworthiness assume first their minimum values and then their maximum values. This analysis shows that the maximum negative coverage

of character in Conservative newspapers resulted in an overall decrease in support for Blair of about 0.2 points. While this is the net effect, negative coverage has little effect on feelings towards Blair among Conservative newspaper readers with already low perceptions of his responsiveness and trustworthiness; the decrease in feelings comes largely from those seeing him as most trustworthy and responsive.

Before concluding, we address one additional issue. Some analysts of media effects have begun to question whether what looks like media priming may in fact be an artefact of more straightforward learning (e.g. Jenkins, 2002; Lenz, 2009). When lacking direct evidence, as we do, the standard approach is to look at priming among individuals with different levels of knowledge; if priming effects are limited 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 re-estimated Tables 2, 3 and 4 with the sample split by two indicators of political sophistication: attention to politics and interest in the election, both from the pre-campaign survey. The results largely hold up across these indicators of political sophistication. There is thus no *prima facie* reason to believe that what we observe here are learning effects.

## Discussion and Conclusion

While there has been increasing recognition of the importance of leaders in British politics, understanding of what aspects of leadership matter and how they are influenced by media coverage is lacking. In this article we have tested three hypotheses about character in the 2005 British election. While all three dimensions of character have an influence on leadership evaluations, trust is far more important than competence and responsiveness to voters' concerns. That perceptions of these three dimensions of character are correlated (Clarke *et al.*, 2009) does not mean they are all equally influential. The importance of trust makes sense given the damage done to perceptions of Blair's character by the circumstances leading to Britain's involvement in the war in Iraq. Furthermore, trust became *more* central to evaluations of Tony Blair as the campaign unfolded, while perceptions of his competence and responsiveness became somewhat more peripheral concerns.

We also examined the extent to which media priming was behind these changes. We found that media attention to character in Labour and Conservative newspapers was associated both with the growing influence of trust and also with the diminished influence of responsiveness. As more and more stories about character were given space in these newspapers, perceptions of Blair's trustworthiness became an increasingly important factor in feelings towards him. We also saw evidence of a hydraulic effect of priming (e.g. Figure 1), in which the greater salience of trust as a result of media attention to character was accompanied by declining importance of responsiveness. We then examined whether the tone of media coverage of character primed certain aspects of Blair's character. We found similar effects to the sheer number of stories – an impact of the cumulative tone of coverage of character in Conservative newspapers on the weight given to perceptions of Blair's trustworthiness and responsiveness, with the tone of coverage appearing to enhance the importance of trustworthiness and to diminish that of responsiveness. More than that, however, we showed that *negative* coverage of character issues enhanced the influence of perceptions of Blair's trustworthiness. For respondents who trusted Blair, negative coverage

of character rendered their feelings towards Blair more positive than positive coverage of character or an absence of coverage of character.

Thus, this examination of the importance of different character considerations in a British election shows that in 2005 trust mattered more than anything else. There is a parallel here to the integrity dimension that has been found to be so important in US presidential elections, but whereas competence has been the other key quality required in presidents it did not seem to matter as much to the British electorate in 2005. There has been little room for character considerations, let alone media influence, in conventional accounts of the 2005 election (e.g. Kavanagh and Butler, 2005; Norris and Wlezien, 2005). Our analysis shows that under different scenarios character could have gained or lost Blair tranches of support. Had the priming of character not reduced evaluations of Blair for those less inclined to trust him, offsetting gains among those who trusted him, the result would have been a real boost in support. The reverse is also true. Overall, the shifts in the impact of trustworthiness and responsiveness appear ultimately to have cost Blair a little support among readers of Conservative newspapers through the amount and tone of coverage while marginally reinforcing his support among readers of Labour newspapers.

The media priming effects we have demonstrated in a British election echo those found in other countries. These priming effects are a consequence of the number as well as the tone of stories, though this varied in 2005 by Labour and Conservative newspapers. Priming effects of Labour newspapers were through the number of stories about character whereas Conservative newspaper readers were affected by both the tone *and* number of stories about character. Ultimately in 2005 the overall effect of media coverage of character on feelings towards Blair was small, but like John Zaller (1996) who referred to the revival of the notion of 'massive media impact' that often goes unobserved because it is cross-cutting, we find large effects of media coverage in one direction cancelled out by almost equally large media effects in the other direction. It is easy to see why previous research that does not distinguish between these cross-cutting effects could conclude that the British media's influence in elections is minimal. We would argue, however, that the evidence points to a different conclusion. Even if the net impact of media priming of character considerations on support for Blair was small in 2005, the corollary is that in another election, if shifts in the impact of character attributes such as trustworthiness and responsiveness were less symmetric, there is clear potential for the amount of coverage of a candidate to have a large impact on net support for a leader and thus for his or her party. This could be the case in a closer, less run-of-the-mill election where the leader's traits were not as well known as Blair's were in 2005, or in the modern British campaign where there are leaders' debates.

These claims need further testing – this article represents an initial look to see whether considerations of character and media priming matter in British elections. Our data are limited to a single election and the measures of media exposure are blunt. Future research needs to explore how exposure to other media, particularly television, primes leadership evaluations. In addition, while our analysis is limited to examining how press coverage affects leadership evaluations, future research should explore how priming ultimately affects vote choice. This research suggests both that British studies of elections should take another look at the impact of leaders and that analysis of media effects should move beyond media use and agenda-setting effects to consider priming more adequately.

## Appendix

### *Coding of Newspaper Articles about Character (Deacon et al.'s Content Analysis)*

From the variables theme 1 and theme 2:

Integrity of leaders: codes 37–41

Sexual exploits of politicians: code 49

Presidentialisation of the campaign: code 145

Other issues concerning standards, corruption, scandals or sleaze: code 52 in the following newspapers:

Labour paper = Financial Times (37), Guardian (18, 19), Mirror (32, 33), Sun (30, 31), Times (20, 21); Conservative paper = The Daily Mail (26, 27), Daily Telegraph (24, 25), Express (28, 29); Independent paper = Daily Star (35, 36), Independent (22, 23), Scotsman (41)

### *Coding of Variables from BES Rolling Cross-Section (Variable Numbers in Brackets)*

Respondent's newspaper (pre\_q146, pre\_q147)

Do not read a newspaper: pre\_q146 = 3

From pre\_q147: Labour paper = Financial Times (= 6), Guardian (= 7), Mirror (= 9), Sun (= 12), Times (= 13); Conservative paper = The Daily Mail (= 2), Daily Telegraph (= 4), Express (= 5); Independent paper = Daily Star (= 3), Independent (= 8), Scotsman (= 11)

Labour/Conservative/independent papers' coverage of character: total number of stories with character as the main or secondary theme up to the day of interview in a respondent's newspaper.

Labour/Conservative/independent papers' tone of coverage of character: total tone of stories with character as the main or secondary theme up to 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.

Feelings towards Blair before the campaign (pre\_q68): 0–10 scale where 0 = strongly dislike, 10 = strongly like)

Attention to politics (pre\_q141): 0–10 scale where 10 = most attention

Age (pre\_q148): in years

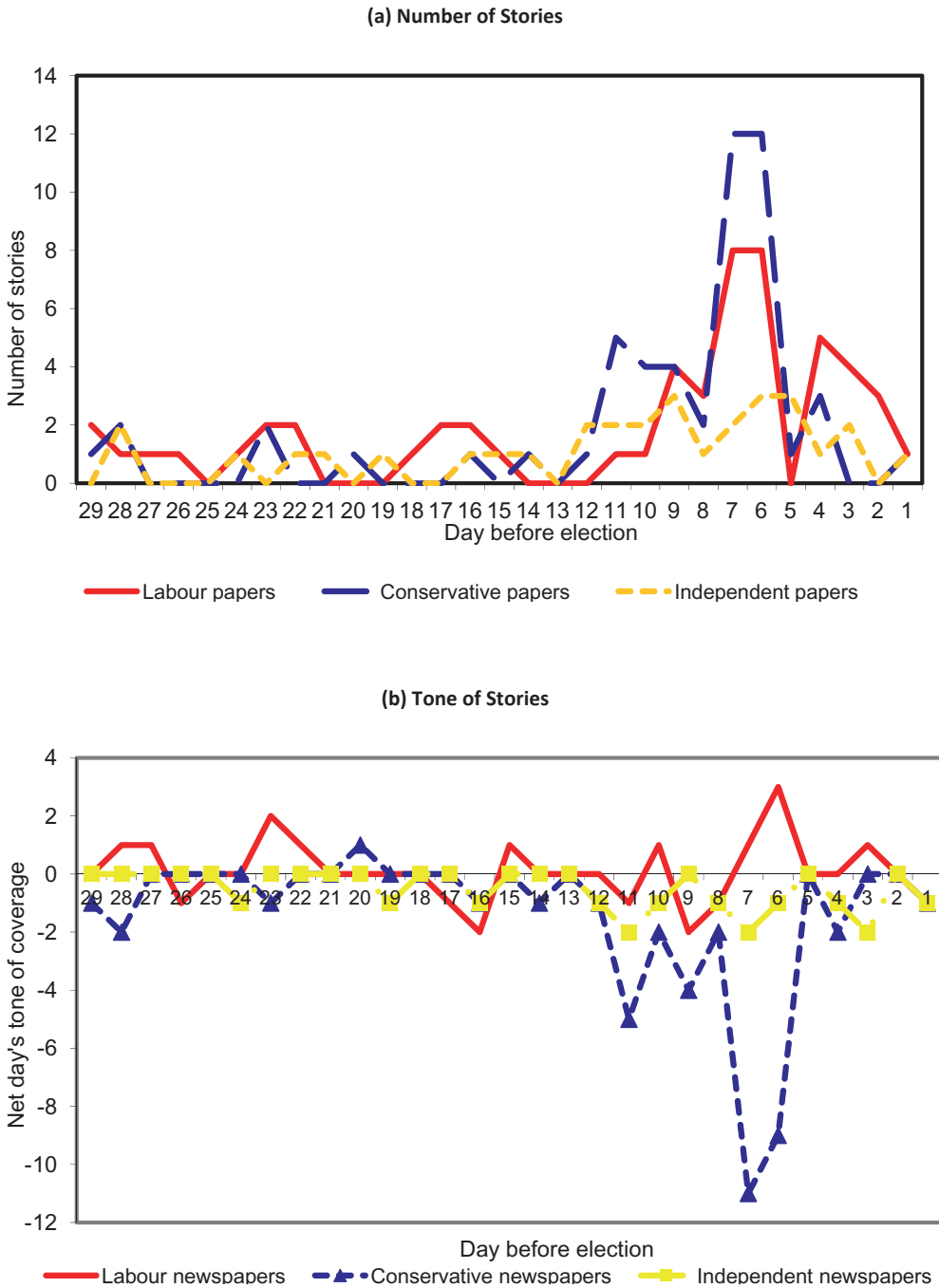
Female (pre\_q180): 1 = female, 0 = male

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.

**Figure A1: Media Coverage of Character in 2005**



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## About the Authors

**Daniel Stevens** is an Associate Professor of Politics at the University of Exeter. He is interested in political communication and political psychology, especially as they relate to political advertising and the media in the United States and Britain. He has published articles on these themes in journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics* and the *British Journal of Political Science*. Daniel Stevens, Department of Politics, University of Exeter, Treliiever Road, Penryn, Cornwall TR10 9EZ; email: [d.p.stevens@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:d.p.stevens@exeter.ac.uk)

**Jeffrey A. Karp** is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Centre for Elections, Media & Parties at the University of Exeter. He specialises in research on public opinion and elections, and comparative political behaviour. Recent publications have appeared in the *British Journal of Political Science*, *Electoral Studies* and *Political Psychology*. He is also a contributor to a number of edited volumes, most recently *Citizens, Context, and Choice: How Context Shapes Citizens' Electoral Choices* (Oxford University Press, 2011). Jeffrey Karp, Department of Politics, University of Exeter, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, Devon EX4 4RJ; email: [j.karp@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:j.karp@exeter.ac.uk)

## Notes

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- 1 For one exception – a comparison of the influence of leaders' perceived attributes in Britain and Australia – see Bean and Mughan (1989).
- 2 At the time, the entire YouGov panel was 89,000. See the BES 2005 website at <http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/> for details.
- 3 The BES 2005 website gives a figure of 6,068 but this includes nine completions from the day of the election.
- 4 The analysis focuses on the incumbent party leader, which provides a conservative test of media effects as voters are likely to have more firmly held opinions about the leadership traits of the incumbent prime minister than of opposition leaders.
- 5 'Now, thinking about party leaders for a moment. Using a scale that runs from 0 to 10, where 0 means strongly dislike and 10 means strongly like, how do you feel about Tony Blair?'
- 6 Vote choice is affected by constituency context and tactical voting – roughly 20 per cent of voters in the BES rolling cross-section said that they voted for a party that was not their first choice – although it is still highly correlated with feelings about leaders in Britain. A simple logit model of vote choice with feelings towards Blair as the predictor shows a 0.03 probability that a respondent rating Blair at zero would vote Labour and a 0.92 probability a respondent feeling most positive towards Blair would vote Labour, a difference in probability of 0.89, almost the entire range.
- 7 The analysis includes respondents who did not read a newspaper (i.e. who were exposed to no newspaper stories about character). An additional 7 per cent of the sample did not identify a single newspaper and were also dropped from analysis.
- 8 There were not sufficient numbers of respondents for individual newspapers to allow for robust analysis and the models would become unnecessarily complicated.
- 9 Indeed, this could have been a conscious strategy on the part of Conservative newspapers in particular, as they sought to undermine support for Blair and Labour.
- 10 We conducted likelihood ratio tests to examine the impact of newspaper coverage on the day of interview. These tests showed that coverage on the day, in terms of the number of stories on character and their tone, did not have statistically significant effects. We also estimated a model in which we assumed the impact of the number of stories decayed gradually to zero over five days. This provided the same pattern of results as Table 2 for trust and responsiveness. The results are available from the authors on request.
- 11 In 2005, feelings toward Blair started lower than in 2001 and did not change. This pattern does not preclude a changing influence of dimensions of character.
- 12 We also estimated models using the daily samples, regardless of size, and then took three-day moving averages of the coefficients for each dimension of character. The patterns of effects were similar to those we present here.
- 13 We examined the statistical significance of the differences of each dimension's influence by day in bivariate models, using Stata 11.0's *suest* command. For all three dimensions there was at least one pair of days on which there was a statistically significant difference in influence. Another measure of the growing influence of trust over the course of the campaign is that the R<sup>2</sup> from a linear regression of the coefficients on time is 0.38.
- 14 We estimated similar models to those shown here for television coverage of character. Not knowing which TV news a respondent watched, our estimates just looked at television coverage in general. Interestingly, the pattern of results – available from the authors on request – is similar to those for newspapers: a negative interaction for the cumulative tone of stories.

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