

# Message or Medium? Campaign Learning During the 2001 British General Election

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### References

Chaffee (1986)	Pls. cite in text all references listed in left column
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*A central claim for the value of democratic elections is their potential for civic education. This study is designed to understand how and under what conditions people learn about public affairs from different sources of campaign information. There has long been debate in the literature about whether the medium matters, in particular whether print media are more effective than audiovisual channels for informing the public about policy issues. Questions also surround which information sources are most effective in closing the “knowledge gap” by reaching the “know-nothings.” Does the medium matter and, if so, for whom? To examine these issues, Part 1 of this article briefly reviews the previous literature and outlines the theory framing our expectations. Part 2 explains the experimental research design. Part 3 summarizes the results. We conclude that what matters are not the structural features of textual versus audiovisual modes of transmission, but rather the type of journalism and the contents of the campaign news typically carried by different information sources in each society. The message, not the medium, matters.*

**Keywords** election campaigns, political communication, political knowledge

The first element of good government, therefore, being the virtue and intelligence of the human beings composing the community, the most important point of excellence which any form of government can possess is to promote the virtue and intelligence of the people themselves. (J. S. Mill, *Representative Government*)

Q1

Ever since John Stuart Mill, a long tradition of liberal democratic theory has emphasized the educative benefits of citizen participation. Studies in cognitive psychology, communication studies, public opinion, and political behavior have explored how citizens learn about public affairs from the news media and parties. But how and under what conditions do different sources of campaign information influence political learning? This issue has attracted continued debate in the literature. Some American studies suggest that the structural characteristics of the print media make newspapers more effective

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than audiovisual media for campaign learning, especially for acquiring detailed information about political issues, party policies, and the government's record (cf. Robinson, 1976; Robinson & Levy, 1986). Yet, others have challenged the "print superiority" hypothesis, reporting that people learn as much about politics from television news, or even more, because of its capacity to generate greater psychological involvement through the use of dramatic visuals and attention-grabbing formats (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992; Graber, 2001). There is also continued controversy about how the type of media interacts with the type of voter, and in particular whether textual or audiovisual channels are more effective in narrowing the "knowledge gap" for the chronic "know-nothings" (Bennett, 1988; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000).

Does the medium matter and, if so, for whom? To address these issues, this study adopted an experimental design as the most feasible method of measuring the effects of campaign learning. Replicating the previous study in 1997 (Sanders & Norris, 1998, Norris et al., 1999), this project used a large cross section of the public selected by quota sampling to be broadly representative of the Greater London electorate, involving over 900 participants under different conditions. This article reports the results of the learning experiments conducted with 389 participants and a control group of 91 participants in the midst of the June 2001 British general election campaign. A rolling callback procedure after the election monitored the persistence of any effects. This design allows us to draw causal inferences that have application well beyond the particular population included in our experiments.

Part 1 of this article reviews the debates in the literature and outlines the theoretical premises framing our expectations. Part 2 provides details of the experimental research design. Part 3 summarizes the results. The study concludes that, first, there was significant campaign learning. In the midst of the campaign, prior to the experiments, British voters displayed widespread ignorance about party policies on some of the key issues in the campaign, but after relatively brief exposure to sources of campaign information people became more aware of prospective party policies and, to a lesser extent, the government's retrospective record. Second, people learned at least as much from watching television news, and also surfing party websites, as from reading newspapers, throwing substantial doubt on the "print superiority" hypothesis. Third, the strength of the learning effects differed among voters, with the greatest gains among the "know-nothings" who were least aware of party policies prior to the experiments. The final discussion suggests reasons why British television news proves more effective than broadsheet newspapers for campaign policy learning. If the contrasts between the findings in Britain and the United States are not purely an artifact of differences in research design and measurement, we argue that they can be explained by structural features of the public service broadcasting tradition in Britain compared with the commercial ethos of network TV in the United States. We conclude that what matters is less the *structural* features of textual versus audiovisual technologies per se, but rather the typical contents of campaign coverage provided by alternative information sources, which studies often found with the mode of transmission.

## Theoretical Framework

How do the sources of information influence what the public learns about the campaign? Heated debate about whether the media matters was sparked by Marshall McLuhan (1964). An extensive literature in communication studies, cognitive social psychology, and voting behavior has examined learning effects from different channels of communi-

caution. The largest body of research has compared learning from audiovisual messages (exemplified by television news) and textual media (such as newspapers) within the American context, although studies have also compared the cognitive effects of these media in Britain.

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**Print Superiority?**

American studies examining this topic have often concluded that, due to the structural characteristics of each medium, reading the printed press is generally a better predictor of detailed policy knowledge and awareness of political issues than watching television news (Neuman, 1974; Robinson & Levy, 1986; Culbertson & Stempel, 1986; Chaffee & Frank, 1996; Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997; Guo & Moy, 1998). A series of experimental studies have found that when the content is held constant by transcribing audiovisual information to print, or by having a newspaper story reported on video, print is the superior mechanism for the transmission of knowledge (e.g., Browne, 1978; Furnham & Gunter, 1989; Furnham, Proctor, & Gunter, 1990; Wilson, 1974). More indirect evidence is based on survey analysis where studies have reported that Americans who rely upon newspapers are better informed than those who rely upon television news, even after controlling for the social characteristics of the audience (Robinson, 1976; Patterson, 1980; Robinson & Levy, 1986). Yet, these claims have also been challenged by other studies which reported finding no difference in campaign learning derived from print and audiovisual formats in the United States (Stauffer, Frost, & Rybolt, 1981), or even that American television news is a *more* effective mechanism for issue learning than print formats (Graber, 1988, 2001; Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). The claim of “print superiority” has therefore been questioned by some counterevidence, although newspapers are usually regarded as providing more effective channels of detailed campaign and policy issue information than television news.

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In seeking to explain this phenomenon, some previous studies suggest that audiovisual channels experience certain constraints, exemplified by television’s dependence upon dramatic visual footage and also strict time limits for each item in network news, which means that this format is commonly less effective than text for conveying abstract ideas and complex issues. Newspaper columns may be more efficient for reporting detailed and technical arguments, for example about global warming, welfare reform, or the budget. In contrast, the visual and audio cues derived from television news and current affairs may prove more useful in facilitating direct evaluations of the character, personality, and experience of political leaders (Graber, 2001). Other alternative explanations have stressed systematic patterns and journalistic practices in how news stories are commonly constructed and communicated through different technologies. Popular accounts often charge American network and local television news with trivializing politics and public affairs, turning serious journalism into shallow and superficial “infotainment” (Fallows, 1996; Gabler, 1998; Patterson, 1993). In contrast American newspapers usually cover a broader range of stories, more in-depth background information about political issues, government, and the policy-making process, and editorial commentary about current affairs. These characteristics of the news media are believed to influence campaign learning.

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Yet, generalizations about “print superiority” often confound analysis of the *mode* of transmission with analysis of the typical *contents* of newspaper and television journalism within one particular society. We theorize that the structure of the news industry influences patterns of journalism within each country, and therefore what the electorate can be expected to learn during campaigns from alternative information sources.

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The newspaper market varies greatly by country due to such factors as long-standing historical and cultural traditions in each region; levels of social development in terms of education, literacy, and income; the news industry's organization, economics, and production and distribution system; and the overall structure of public subsidies, government regulations, and freedom of the press (Norris, 2000, chap. 4). Hence, in some societies like Germany and Britain, there are mass circulation tabloid daily newspapers, whereas these are not widely available in other nations like Italy and the United States. Broadcasting in each country also varies according to the technological channels of transmission and distribution, patterns of media ownership and finance, the legal regulations governing broadcasting policy, the predominant culture of journalism, and path-dependent historical traditions (Norris, 2000, chap. 5). The media system within each country is also shaped by the broader political system and social environment. To express the key argument in more concrete terms, because of the systemic contrasts between the media systems in the United States and Britain, we expect that what people typically learn about politics from reading a newspaper like the *New York Times* or watching local television, like Boston's Channel 7 News, will not be equivalent to reading a mass market tabloid like *The Sun* or watching the BBC 10 O'clock News.

In particular, the major differences in broadcasting between the countries under comparison include the commercial nature of network television news in America, in contrast to the public service broadcasting ethos that continues to prevail in Britain. The BBC established the tradition of public service broadcasting 80 years ago to ensure a homogeneous source of information about national concerns, carrying an obligation to "educate, entertain, and inform." Commercial television news in Britain, which came later, continues to reflect this general ethos under the regulation and guidelines set by the Independent Television Commission (Seymour-Ure, 1996). The public service role of British broadcasters is regarded as particularly important during election campaigns when the BBC devotes considerable additional resources to informing the public about the position of the parties on the major issues of the day, broadcasting extended news and current affairs programming. There is also some indirect evidence that in general the public service broadcasting ethos influences public awareness of politics and current affairs; in particular, a study comparing countries in Western Europe found that a preference for public broadcasting, especially when combined with regular exposure to television news, was consistently related to higher levels of political knowledge than a preference for watching commercial television stations (Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001). Although the survey analysis could not determine the causal direction that underlay this association, it suggests that there is a systematic linkage between the type of broadcasting system and levels of political knowledge.

Some previous studies lend support to our assumption that, contrary to much of the evidence in the United States, television news in Britain could be as effective for campaign learning as newspapers. The earliest studies of the role of television in British elections (Trenaman & McQuail, 1959, p. 233) emphasized how far this medium enlarged the public's knowledge of party policies (see also Blumler & McQuail, 1968). Miller's (1991, pp. 154–155) analysis of a panel survey during the 1987 British election campaign found that knowledge of party leaders increased throughout the electorate as polling day approached, and the experience of watching television news played a more important role in this process than the effects of reading newspapers. More recent analysis based on the 1997 British Election Study found that both regular newspaper readers and television news viewers had higher than average knowledge of party politics, "civics," and awareness of parliamentary candidates (Norris et al., 1999), although the study could

detect no significant *gains* in knowledge of party policy during the year-long campaign associated with use of different news media (see also Gunter et al., 1994; Newton, 1997). Elsewhere, analysis of the Eurobarometer surveys conducted in the 15 EU member states, most with a strong public service television sector, found that regular viewers of TV news knew as much about politics as regular readers of newspapers (Norris, 2000, p. 224). Despite the weight of the literature established in the United States, therefore, it is not clear that the print media are ipso facto more informative than TV channels in Britain. All these considerations lead us to our first hypothesis; namely, we anticipate that, all other things being equal, *any campaign learning effects will be similar among those exposed to issue content typical of audiovisual and print media in Britain* (Hypothesis 1.1).

***Party Websites vs. Traditional News Media***

In addition, the idea of “print superiority” needs to be reexamined in the light of the “information revolution,” in particular the way that the rise of the Internet has broadened the sources of journalistic and partisan information where people learn about the campaign. Studies conducted during the 1990s gradually expanded the comparison of campaign information sources to monitor and compare the effects of television advertisements, talk radio, weekly magazines, and news and party/candidate websites, as well as TV news and newspapers (Defleur et al., 1992; Martinelli & Chaffee, 1995; Just et al., 1996; Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Newton, 1997; Davis & Owen, 1998; Bimber, 1999; Johnson et al, 1999; Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Norris, 2000, 2001a). The results have tended to cast doubt on the claims of print media as necessarily superior in conveying information over all other sources, although as yet no clear consensus has yet emerged about this issue.

The format of journalistic and partisan sources of information available via the Internet is usually closer to text-based newspapers rather than to visual media like television; however, when visual stimuli (e.g., photographs and images, as well as web-streamed videos) are present, party websites essentially combine features in a mixed format containing elements common to both TV and newspapers (Norris, 2001a). In terms of contents, the typical party website in the 2001 British election was information-rich, providing detailed policy briefings about the major issues of the day, the policy platforms for the parties, and background materials about candidates, party leaders, and the party campaign. All of these considerations lead to our second hypothesis (Hypothesis 1.2); namely, *any campaign learning effects will be similar following exposure to typical issue information conveyed via party websites, television news, and newspapers.*

***The Tabloid vs. Broadsheet Press***

Another important contrast lies within newspaper markets where we need to distinguish between the popular tabloid and the “high-brow” broadsheet sectors. Despite a few exceptions, such as the *New York Post* or *Boston Herald* and the supermarket weeklies, America lacks a large-scale tabloid daily press that reaches most of the public, especially in its more graphical manifestations. In contrast, papers such as *The Sun* or *Daily Mirror* enjoy a massive circulation. The European tabloid press is commonly characterized by a particular *style* of journalism, including an emphasis on simple and concrete language, light, bright, and vivid writing, shorter stories, and extensive use of photographs and graphics. Front-page colorful images are accompanied by dramatic splash

headlines with stories conveyed in a vivid and direct style. The mass-circulation tabloids are also often characterized by a distinctive *subject* matter of news stories, focusing upon the minor scandals of minor celebrities, entertainment news, sexual shenanigans, crime, sports, and lurid “victim” or disaster stories, as their staple fare, accompanied by give-away games. These stories are by no means confined exclusively to the tabloids in the British press, but they are given far greater prominence and weight in this sector.

The major daily mass-circulation tabloids in Britain also devote many column inches to political news, particularly during campaigns, in sharp contrast to their American supermarket equivalents. But British tabloids typically devote fewer column inches to election news than the broadsheet press; for example, in the 2001 campaign a comparison of front-page leads related to election news was 32% in the three major tabloids (the *Sun*, *Mirror*, and *Star*) compared with 78% in the broadsheets and 87% of lead items in TV news (see Deacon, Golding, & Billig, 2001, p. 104). During the campaign, tabloids also gave more attention to the progress of the campaign and events (like the “Prescott punch”) than to policy issues, and coverage of issues like health and the economy was in far less depth than in the broadsheets. This leads to our third proposition, as we expect that *following exposure to typical issue information, all other things being equal, electors will learn more from broadsheet than from tabloid newspapers in Britain* (Hypothesis 1.3).

### *Levels of Prior Political Knowledge*

Yet another reason to reexamine the “print superiority” hypothesis is that many studies are primarily concerned with the impact of different channels of communication upon the general public. Yet, studies of cognitive social psychology, education, and voting behavior shift the focus and level of the analysis from the type of medium to the type of user, based on the assumption that the social background, prior cognitive skills, and political predispositions of the audience can prove vitally important in the learning process. It is well established that different social groups—young and old, university graduates and high school dropouts, women and men—typically are found to use and to learn from different types of media. Social variables such as education and age are commonly highly correlated with both patterns of media use (especially readership of newspapers) and the acquisition of knowledge. Education provides cognitive skills which facilitate making sense of complex policy issues and alternative proposals.

Yet, it remains unclear who learns most from alternative sources of new campaign information. The original or *traditional* “knowledge gap” hypothesis (Tichenor et al., 1970) claimed that the most highly educated, who possessed the greatest cognitive skills and background knowledge, would learn most as a result of new media information, expanding disparities between the information rich and poor. Yet, in contrast, others have suggested a *revised* knowledge gap hypothesis, namely that some more accessible and less demanding forms of campaign information, typified by television news, are capable of narrowing any prior knowledge gaps (McLeod et al., 1979; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000). We follow this line of reasoning, assuming that the marginal rate of knowledge acquisition should fall in a curvilinear pattern as the level of knowledge increases. This leads us to the hypothesis that, *all other things being equal, exposure to further issue information will generate the greatest knowledge gains among the least informed* (Hypothesis 2.1).

Along similar lines, it follows that we expect that campaign-learning effects will also be the product of an interaction between the type of reader and the type of media.

For example, readers with poor literacy and cognitive skills can be expected to learn more from human interest stories conveyed in the vivid and direct writing style found in the tabloid press, while those with greater educational training may cope better with the greater cognitive demands and more complex and abstract prose style found in typical stories in the broadsheet press. Therefore, we hypothesize that we will find different effects due to the interaction among readers and media, so that in Britain *information from the tabloid press will generate the greatest knowledge gains among less politically aware readers* (Hypothesis 2.2). For the same reasons, *we expect that broadsheet newspapers, which provide more demanding information, will largely benefit more knowledgeable readers* (Hypothesis 2.3).

Therefore, for all of these reasons, this study sought to reexamine the “print superiority” hypothesis of different information sources within the context of the May–June 2001 British general election campaign. The research monitored what people learned about party policies and the government’s record during the campaign, using an 11-point political knowledge scale administered before and after exposure by each group to typical issue information provided from one of four different information sources (TV news, broadsheet newspapers, tabloid newspapers, and party websites). The research allows us to compare learning effects among these different sources and also changes in the size of any knowledge gaps among information “haves” and “have-nots.”

## Research Design

Cross-sectional surveys are the most common way of exploring the influences of the information sources upon electors, but they can say little about the causal effects of exposure to different varieties of message. Panel surveys are more useful but also limited in measuring media exposure. Experiments allow the analyst precisely to control the specific messages that respondents see and hear, for example exposure to a particular news story or party political broadcast, and “pre-post” designs allow us to measure “before” and “after” shifts in attitudes and behavior. This enables the researcher to make relatively strong statements about the causal effects of exposure to messages. Many experiments are limited because they rely upon small groups of student respondents, and it is difficult to generalize from these results to the general population. In contrast this project used a large cross section of the public selected by quota sampling to be broadly representative of the Greater London electorate, involving over 900 participants in total. The campaign learning experiments drew on 480 of these, including a subgroup of 389 participants shown campaign information and a control group of 91 not shown any campaign information. The experiments were conducted in the midst of the May–June 2001 British general election campaign. This combination of an experimental design with a broad cross section of the public in a natural setting allows us to draw causal inferences that have application well beyond the particular population included in our experiments.

To test how far the theoretical expectations were met in practice, different experimental groups were shown broadsheet newspaper stories, tabloid newspaper stories, and television news stories containing equivalent information about the same issues, as well as similar content downloaded from party websites. The experiments administered a pre-questionnaire survey, exposed groups to different media, and then administered the post-questionnaire. The changes between the pre- and post-surveys were monitored to find how the type of media influenced the practical political knowledge that was acquired.

Experiments are becoming increasingly common in political science (Iyengar & Simon, 2000); nevertheless, the way that they are designed is critical to the results. Since the methodology is less familiar than other approaches, we need to outline the specific research design in some detail, including the selection of participants, the experimental procedures, and the measures of political knowledge used as the dependent variables in the analysis. 1  
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### *Selection of Participants*

In total, 919 participants drawn from the general electorate were included in the total study, more than most experimental designs. Of these, 480 were used in the tests of campaign learning. The remainder were used in separate experiments concerned with the impact of positive and negative news and party election broadcasts on persuasion. The experiments were based in a Greater London location, in central Ilford, with participants drawn primarily from southeast England. The location was selected to provide a diverse group of Londoners, including office-workers and casual shoppers, in a mixed constituency, drawing participants from around the region who were attracted to a popular shopping mall. Most came from the borough of Redbridge, but others were drawn from the surrounding boroughs of Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Newham, Tower Hamlets, and Waltham Forest, as well as elsewhere in Greater London. Respondents from one area should not be understood to represent a random sample of the whole UK electorate, but they were selected by a professional fieldwork agency using quotas for age, gender, class, ethnicity, and past vote to reflect the social and political background of the Greater London population. The accuracy with which the demographic profile of respondents matched that of the Greater London population is shown in Appendix A. 10  
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Moreover, the fact that the media outlets under comparison are nationwide, with the same papers read and TV evening news watched from Cornwall to Cumbria (with the exception of some minor differences in the media systems in Scotland and Wales), means that in principle we would expect to find the same results if the experiments had been conducted anywhere else in England. Nevertheless, the generalizability of the results rests not on the selection of a random sample of participants, as in a survey design, but on the way that subjects were assigned at random to different experimental groups. Any difference in the response of groups should reflect the stimuli treatment rather than their social backgrounds or prior political attitudes. The only exception concerned the group of Internet users, where we only tested those who already had some prior experience of surfing the Internet. This group can therefore be regarded as reflecting the general background of the online community, with higher educational and occupational status, rather than the Greater London electorate as a whole. 30  
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### *Experimental Procedures*

One potential problem of experiments is that participants may alter their own behavior given the artificiality of the research setting and their perceptions of the aims of the study. To help overcome this potential problem, and to avoid the danger of selection bias by discouraging participation by the politically apathetic, the briefing did not mention that the study was about election news. The main experiments employed a single-shot rather than a repeated design, to avoid respondents becoming unduly conditioned by the research process itself, although one call back was used after the election among a subsample to monitor any “decay” effect of the stimuli. To try to reduce the inevitable 40  
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artificiality of experiments, we solicited a large and diverse group of participants, constructed a relaxed setting for the study, and used real-world campaigns, media materials, and issues as the basis for research. Despite these safeguards, there is a strong likelihood that participants read/viewed the news more attentively in the experimental setting than they would do normally in the “real” world. This was unavoidable given the research design, but this tendency may well have exaggerated the strength of any knowledge gains that we recorded. Insofar as the strictest test is how knowledge gains differ among different experimental groups, however, this bias may be less important when interpreting the results, since the bias of the experimental design was uniform across all groups, whether exposed to television, newspapers, or the Internet.

The experiments were conducted during the last part of the election campaign, from mid-May until 6 June, election eve. Participants were asked to complete a short (15-minute) pre-test questionnaire about their media habits, political attitudes, and personal background. They were then assigned at random to watch a 30-minute video compilation of television news, to read selected newspaper stories, to read selected off-line party web pages that had been downloaded and edited into a dedicated site. Respondents subsequently complete a short (15-minute) post-test questionnaire, after which they were paid for their time and given a letter about the purpose of the experiment. A member of the research team interviewed respondents unable to read the questionnaire separately on a face-to-face basis. To reduce the artificiality of the exercise, the atmosphere was designed to be relaxed, with refreshments provided in a comfortable environment. The whole process lasted for about an hour for each participant. The experiments were carried out during the middle weeks of the official general election campaign. The aim of this timing was to examine the attitudes of participants who had been subjected to the intensive barrage of political coverage that characterizes an election period, again to increase the realism of the experimental conditions.

The classification of “type of media” is relatively straightforward in Britain, where national newspapers and evening television news on the five major terrestrial national channels continue to be the main sources of campaign television, despite some fragmentation of channels and outlets from cable, satellite, and broadband services in recent years (Norris et al., 1999). The study compared the effects of exposure to five sources of campaign information: television news, newspapers (distinguishing between the “quality” or heavyweight broadsheets and the popular “red-top” tabloids), the party websites, and election broadcasts by the three major parties. Details of the methods are given in Appendix B. Approximately 70–140 respondents were tested in each experimental group. In addition, a TV news control group was shown a typical 30-minute evening news bulletin with content unaltered by any sort of experimental manipulation, and “sports” coverage instead of election news in the middle. Other experiments (not reported here) replicated tests for the impact of negative and positive news.

The compilation of television news stories was chosen to represent a “typical” evening news program during the campaign. We drew on stories recorded from all of the main news programs on the terrestrial channels in the three months prior to polling day. The videos were edited to follow the same format. This consists of a “sandwich,” with ten minutes of identical, standard footage at the top and bottom of each programme and one of the different experimental video stimuli in the middle “core.” A similar process was followed to select equivalent information on the same issues in newspapers, campaign websites and party political broadcasts (see Appendix B). Respondents were not told which media was being shown to which group, or even that different media were being used by different groups of respondents.

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### *Measures of Campaign Issue Knowledge*

Perennial debates about whether citizens know enough to cast an informed vote, and whether people learn from the news media, remain unresolved in part because theorists remain divided about the most appropriate way of conceptualizing and measuring “political knowledge” (see discussions in Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991, 1993, 1996; Lupia, 1994; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Mondak, 2001). Here we assume that citizens need to acquire sufficient information about the issues to estimate the probable risks and benefits of their electoral decisions. We believe that people need practical knowledge—in domains that matter to them—to connect their issue preferences accurately to the available electoral options. This approach strikes a middle way on the assumption that voters do not need to scan all campaign news comprehensively, as on a civics test. Nor do they need to rely upon ideological shortcuts, which may be misleadingly dated or inaccurate. Instead, the approach in this study implies that to connect issue preferences with voting choices, citizens need two basic types of electoral knowledge: (a) accurate information about the *retrospective policy record* of the government on the important issues of the day and (b) accurate information about the *prospective policy proposals* for the major political parties on important issues.

If issues are trivial to most voters, for example if the closure of the ideological gap among the major parties in Britain means that voters have no party preference about the outcome, then it is rational to pay little attention when there are many other more rewarding uses of limited time and energy rather than scanning the papers or watching the news. Learning more about politics—the name of the Speaker of the House, the role of the Privy Council, the meaning of a “three line whip”—may well be virtuous or beneficial in and of itself, in the best of all possible worlds, but no matter how desirable it is not essential, or even relevant, to citizens’ roles in casting a ballot. And if all parties share a broad consensus about the main policy options on the important issues, then again voters do not need to pay any attention to the campaign news, or even to cast a vote, since doing so will not affect their interests directly. If, however, the major parties differ on the issues that voters do care about, so that putting a cross against the “wrong” party could affect their interests, then citizens need correct practical information about the government’s record and party policies to cast a rational vote. How much knowledge is sufficient for this process remains a matter of controversy, but our approach seeks to strike a middle way between the high benchmarks of the civics test and the minimalist standards of the relativists.

### *Measuring Knowledge*

The items measuring knowledge of the government’s retrospective record included a battery of six true/false factual statements. These asked participants whether the rate of unemployment, of crime, of income tax, and the number of asylum seekers had been rising or falling; when the Euro was going to be introduced in most European member states; and whether the government had removed the automatic right of asylum seekers to cash benefits. The accuracy of these factual claims was checked against official sources. Five items were also selected to measure knowledge of prospective campaign policies, including those on taxation, the Euro, asylum seekers, and child care. People were asked to identify which of the main parties was most in favor of each of these proposals. These issues were chosen for two main reasons.

First, we selected issues where one of the major parties had adopted a distinctive position in its official manifesto that differed from the others. In the 2001 British elec-

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tion, the major parties were relatively close together on the issues of education, crime, and health, but they differed sharply toward Europe, with the Conservatives staking much of the election on the claim that only they could “save the pound.” On taxation, as well, there were distinctive platforms, with the Conservatives pledged to cut taxes by 8 billion pounds, while Labour promised no increase in the basic rate of personal taxation and the Liberal Democrats said they would raise income tax by one penny in the pound to pay for public services. Asylum was another issue that featured in the campaign, with the Conservatives promising to create new secure reception centers for asylum seekers. Lastly, Labour, in the run up to the official campaign, also launched a distinctive initiative to introduce “baby bonds” for every child at birth, a savings fund with a contribution from the public purse, although this pledge was not widely featured in the campaign proper. In contrast, it proved difficult to identify any clear-cut distinctive party policies on other important valance issues. 1  
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Second, we selected issues that were central to the campaign, as shown by the attention devoted to them in the news media and in public perceptions of the most important problem facing the country (Norris, 2001b). The pros and cons of the issues of Europe, taxation, and asylum seekers were widely debated on television news and current affairs programs, as well as covered in the special supplementary election pages in the broadsheets (Deacon, Golding, & Billig, 2001). Content analysis by Echo Research found that Europe was the first issue in newspaper coverage of the Conservative party and the second issue for coverage of the Labour party, while coverage of taxation ranked respectively second for the Tories and fourth for Labour. The issues were also important to voters, although not critical: MORI polls found that taxation was the fifth most important issue to voters, while Europe ranked tenth in the most important problem facing the country (Norris, 2001a, Table 4). 15  
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In addition, the surveys included a short battery of five statements about “civic” knowledge and also other items on party policy, where no information was provided in the media stimuli, as controls to see whether there was any change in these measures from pre- to post-test caused by the experimental conditions, such as heightened attention to politics. The inclusion of these items interspersed with the others also helped disguise the true purpose of the study. The civic items were replicated from the British Election Study. 30

For comparability of content, the campaign coverage in the different media was selected to include functionally equivalent although not identical stories covering the same issues across all media under comparison. The study selected typical stories or web content published in the period leading up to and during the official campaign, rather than manipulated contents. The reason for this decision was to facilitate generalizability from the results and to increase the realism of the experiments, given our initial assumptions that the typical contents, rather than the mode of transmission, are what drives any learning effects in each society, although admittedly this strategy comes at the loss of some control over the information presented to participants. We considered striving to eliminate all differences between conditions except for the medium of presentation, as Clark suggested (1983), for example by transcribing the TV news stories and turning them into mocked-up print format or web pages. This strategy would have maximized control for theoretical reasons so that we could have been sure that it was only the medium of presentation and not the typical content or formal features of each medium. On further consideration, however, we decided that the result, while technically clean, would have been relatively meaningless since we are interested in the way that formal features (e.g., length, structure, or language) covary with the medium. Removing these 35  
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features, by transcribing audiovisual information into print, would have made it impossible to generalize about learning effects in the real world (for a discussion, see Eveland & Dunwoody, 2001). To check the comparability across media, the information presented to respondents on the websites is available for scrutiny ([www.pippanorris.com](http://www.pippanorris.com)), along with transcripts of the TV news broadcasts, the full text of the broadsheet papers, links to the video party election broadcasts, and the full pre- and post questionnaires.

### *Types of Voters*

We anticipated that there would be important differences in who learns from different media, especially differential gains made by the information “haves” and “have-nots.” The most straightforward way to operationalize this was to include the pre-test levels of political knowledge as part of the analytical models. If our hypothesis is correct, we should expect to find a general closure in the pre-test and post-test knowledge gaps, with the least informed learning most as a result of exposure to the information sources, especially the less knowledgeable who read tabloid newspapers.

### *Post-Election Call Back Survey*

Our previous experiments have been single-shot, to avoid conditioning. One important question that arises from such an approach, however, is the persistence of any effects. This is theoretically interesting given the online model of learning (Lodge et al., 1995) which suggests that when people are presented with additional information they commonly incorporate new facts in an accumulating tally to help them form a judgment, as they evaluate previously unknown presidential nominees, unfamiliar policy proposals, or new issues like global warming. Once people make an evaluation, however, the online processing model suggests that they commonly forget the more detailed information that they initially used to make their evaluation and only recall their final judgment. To test for any decay effects, in these experiments we employed a rolling call back among a subgroup of participants who indicated that they would be willing to be telephoned to answer a few more questions in a short survey. We contacted 201 successfully within three weeks of their initial experiment on a rolling daily basis, allowing us to monitor any decay function in knowledge of party policies, vote intention, and liking of the major parties.

### **Analysis of the Results**

Turning to the first results, in the midst of the British general election campaign, prior to the experimental stimuli, what did most British voters know about some of the major issues that distinguished the parties? Studies in America have reported the existence of a chronic core of “know-nothings,” roughly one fifth to one third of the public steeped in ignorance that were beyond the reach of information campaigns (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947; Neuman, 1996; Bennett, 1988, 1989; Bennett et al., 1996). Are similar problems evident in Britain?

### *Learning About Party Policies and the Government’s Record*

Despite the barrage of media headlines on some of the key issues in the campaign, prior to the experiments the British public displayed widespread ignorance about party policies

on Europe, asylum seekers, and taxation (see Table 1). About half the public could identify the Conservatives as the party proposing to keep the pound for the duration of the next parliament, to house new asylum seekers in reception centers, and to introduce the 8 billion pound tax cut. Even fewer (41%) knew that the Liberal Democrats proposed raising income tax, their most distinctive pledge in the election. More of the public (67%) were aware of Labour’s baby bond pledge, with two thirds identifying this correctly as Labour policy, a surprising result in the sense that of all the issues under comparison, this had been given by far the least coverage in the mass media during the election and had received almost no attention in Labour speeches or campaign literature. Knowledge of the government’s record showed greater variation across the items in the scale. There was widespread awareness that the unemployment rate had fallen (73%), that a record number of asylum seekers had entered Britain in the previous year (78%),

**Table 1**  
11-point political knowledge scores before and after exposure to information sources

	Pre-test correct (%)	Post-test correct (%)	Change (%)	
House new asylum seekers in secure reception centers (Con)	49	76	+27***	
Raise income tax (Lib Dem)	41	59	+18***	25
Create a baby bond saving fund for every child at birth (Lab)	67	83	+16***	
Cut taxes by £8 billion (Con)	49	49	+10***	
Keep the pound for the duration of the next parliament (Con)	52	61	+9***	
Euro notes and coins are due to be introduced in most EU member states next year (T)	61	68	+7***	30
The government has removed the automatic right of asylum seekers to get cash benefits (T)	36	41	+5**	
A record number of asylum seekers came to Britain last year (T)	78	84	+6***	35
The overall rate of crime has gone down since 1997 (T)	29	29	0 (ns)	
The rate of unemployment in Britain has fallen during the last 12 months (T)	73	72	-0.5 (ns)	
The basic rate of income tax has risen under Labour (F)	46	45	-0.6 (ns)	40

*Note.* The pre-test survey was prior to any experimental stimuli. The post-test was administered after the stimuli. Only respondents ( $N = 389$ ) exposed to campaign learning experiments from any source are included, excluding the control group ( $N = 91$ ). The significance of the difference between the pre-test and post-test groups was measured by paired-sample  $t$  tests. *True/false:* The percentage of respondents exposed to campaign information from any news source who could correctly identify whether the statement about the government’s record was true or false. T = true, F = false. *Con/Lab/Lib Dem:* The percentage of respondents exposed to campaign information from any news source who could correctly identify the correct party advocating each policy. \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .000$ .

*Source.* Campaign Learning Study.

and that Euro notes and coins were going to be introduced in most EU states the following year (61%). But less than a third were aware that the rate of crime had declined under the Blair administration, and about a third knew that the government had removed the automatic right of asylum seekers to cash benefits. The separate items formed a consistent, non-skewed, and reliable political knowledge scale (Cronbach's alpha = .65) with a mean of 5.8 on the 11-point scale and a standard deviation of 2.49. 1  
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But is there a group of irredeemable know-nothings in the British public, consigned forever to political ignorance about party policies? The answer is clearly negative. After relatively brief exposure to information in the media experiments, for example 1–2-minute items in the TV news, interspersed with many other election and non-election news items, there were significant gains registered in eight out of eleven knowledge items, as measured by the mean change in correct answers from the pre-test to post-test among the pooled group of all those exposed to the learning experiments. The significance of the difference between the pre-test and post-test results was measured by paired-sample *t* tests. For example, those who could identify the Conservatives as the party proposing housing new asylum seekers in secure reception centers jumped dramatically from half to three quarters of the public. Knowledge that Labour proposed baby bonds rose from 67% to 83%. Awareness that the Liberal Democrats proposed tax increases increased from 41% to 59%. There were also smaller but still significant improvements in awareness of Conservative policies toward the Euro and tax cuts. People generally learned more about prospective party policies than about the government's performance and record in office, although there were some gains here too. When knowledge increased, this was partly because wrong answers were converted to right answers, and partly because some of those who were undecided ("don't know") in the first round converted to correct answers in the second. 10  
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The reason why people learned slightly less about the government's record remains unclear, but we can speculate that this could be due to the way that claims about party policies often involved "one-sided messages": Irrespective of the merits of the proposals, few doubted that the Liberal Democrats promised to raise taxes or that the Conservatives wanted to cut taxes. In contrast, many of the aspects of government performance were heavily contested, representing "two-sided" messages in the heat of party campaign debate, so people had good reasons to doubt these facts, for example whether the rate of crime or income tax had actually gone up or down under the Blair administration. Any assessment of the accuracy of these statements also depends upon the fine print of the particular facts that are being discussed by government and shadow spokespersons, such as whether the rate of "crime" refers to household burglaries, car thefts, or violent offenses or whether the changes in "taxation" refer to VAT, personal tax, or capital taxation. We are unable to test these propositions with the available data, but whatever the reason, it appears that the British public learned slightly more about party policies than about the government's record. 30  
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### *Control Items With No Stimuli*

One reason for any change in knowledge, however, could be the experience of participating in the experiment if this process generated any unintentional effects. As a check on our results, we included nine control items to monitor changes in knowledge without providing any information about these items in the media stimuli. Four items on party policy concerned matters like student fees, paternity leave, and the minimum wage, while five items on civic knowledge asked about the truth or falsity of statements regarding, for 45  
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example, the correct number of members of parliament, the longest time between general elections, and whether there were separate elections for the European parliament. The significance of the difference between the pre-test and post-test results was measured by paired-sample *t* tests. The results in Table 2 show that there were significant gains on three control items, but not on the others. It is not particularly surprising that the experience of watching political news prompted some people to recall, in the midst of the campaign, that there were indeed separate elections for Westminster and the European parliament. The effects of the increase in correct answers on the issue of student fees and paternity leave are more difficult to understand, and this could have been due to the experimental conditions slightly heightening political awareness in general. In the midst of the general election, people might have been aware of party policies on these issues, or at least the ideological position of the major parties toward education and child care in general, but unsure about the correct answer in the first questionnaire. The conditioning of participating in the experiment, following exposure to general political stimulæ, might have heightened attention and cued people toward making correct “educated guesses” about more detailed party policies in the second questionnaire, using party ideology as a cognitive shortcut.

**Table 2**  
Change in political knowledge where no information was given

	Pre-test correct (%)	Post-test correct (%)	Change (%)
Abolish student fees throughout the UK (Lib Dem)	33	41	+9***
Introduce paid paternity leave (Lab)	46	54	+8**
Britain has separate elections for the European Parliament and the British parliament (T)	67	73	+7**
No one may stand for parliament unless they pay a deposit (T)	54	56	+2 ( <i>ns</i> )
Abolish car tax on low polluting vehicles (Lib Dem)	13	13	0 ( <i>ns</i> )
Raise the minimum wage to £4.20 (Lab)	58	58	0 ( <i>ns</i> )
Voting in British General Elections is based on proportional representation (F)	47	47	0 ( <i>ns</i> )
The number of members of parliament is about 100 (F)	53	53	0 ( <i>ns</i> )
The longest time allowed between general elections is four years (F)	33	30	-3 ( <i>ns</i> )

*Note.* The pre-test survey was prior to any experimental stimuli. The post-test was administered after the stimuli. No information was given in the information sources about these issues. Respondents exposed to campaign learning experiments and the control are included. The significance of the difference between the pre-test and post-test groups was measured by paired-sample *t* tests. *True/False:* The percentage of respondents exposed to campaign information from any news source who could correctly identify whether the statement about the government’s record was true or false. T = true, F = false. *Con/Lab/Lib Dem:* The percentage of respondents exposed to campaign information from any news source that could correctly identify the correct party advocating each policy.

\*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .000.

*Source.* Campaign Learning Study.

**Learning Effects by Type of Media**

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So the British public did learn about the policies and government's record as a result of the experiments, and we believe that this was not simply an unintended effect of the experimental process. This brings us to the issue at the heart of this study: Does the medium matter? The first set of hypotheses (1.1–1.3) predicts that people will learn about the same from exposure to typical issue information carried by television, newspapers, and party websites. Table 3 describes the size of the mean changes in the 11-point knowledge scale among each group exposed to the different sources, compared with the control group who saw no campaign information. This pattern largely confirms our expectations. Tables 4 and 5 examine the effects in regression models including the standard battery of social controls for age, gender, education, and class, plus attitudinal measures of political interest, caring about who wins, and trust in politicians, all of which can be expected to influence how much people learn about politics. Table 4 shows the full regression model for exposure to any news sources versus the control. Table 5 simply reports the series of six regression coefficients for each of the separate information groups.

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The results show that in Britain, contrary to claims of “print superiority,” people did not learn more about party policies from newspapers than television news. The knowledge gains were similar for those watching television news and surfing party websites, as these groups gained on average about 10% on the knowledge scale, while the gains were marginally smaller for groups reading newspapers. The learning effects proved significant for all groups when compared with the control group, even after applying the standard battery of social and attitudinal controls, with the single exception of the group exposed to tabloid papers. The impact of exposure to typical campaign issue information on television news, broadsheet newspapers, and party websites produced significant effects on what the public learned about party policies.

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**Table 3**

Mean change in the 11-point political knowledge scale

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	Pre-test knowledge (mean)	Post-test knowledge (mean)	Knowledge gains	Eta	<i>N</i>
Control (no stimuli)	5.61	5.91	.297		91
Any information source	5.79	6.76	.969	.16***	389
Television news	5.50	6.74	1.240	.29***	100
Any newspaper	5.95	6.76	.811	.16***	212
Broadsheet	6.34	7.18	.835	.19***	139
Tabloid	5.19	5.96	.767	.16*	73
Party websites	5.75	6.80	1.05	.25***	77

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*Note.* The strength (eta) and the significance of the difference between the knowledge gains among the control group and each of the groups exposed to information sources were measured by ANOVA.

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\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .000$ .

Source: Campaign Learning Study.

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**Table 4**  
Full regression model of campaign learning

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	
<b>Control</b>				
Age (years)	.005	.004	.05 ( <i>ns</i> )	
Gender (male)	-.151	.138	-.05 ( <i>ns</i> )	
Education (graduate)	.596	.172	.16***	
Class (ABC1)	.131	.152	.04 ( <i>ns</i> )	<b>10</b>
Ethnicity (White)	.335	.172	.09*	
Pre-test political interest (4-point scale)	.014	.082	.01 ( <i>ns</i> )	
Pre-test care who wins (10-point scale)	.004	.032	.01 ( <i>ns</i> )	
Pre-test trust in politicians (10-point scale)	.086	.030	.13**	
Pre-test knowledge scale (11-point scale)	-.316	.032	-.49***	<b>15</b>
<b>Media stimuli</b>				
Exposure to any information source	.653	.173	.16***	
Constant	1.262			
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.233			

*Note.* OLS regression models were used, with the pre- to post-test change in the 11-point knowledge scale as the dependent variable. For the items in the knowledge scale, see Table 1. The figures represent the unstandardized coefficients (*B*), standard errors, and standardized coefficients ( $\beta$ ). The exposure to any information source variable is coded as a dummy (exposure = 1/control = 0).

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .000.

*Source:* Campaign Learning Study.

**Table 5**  
Six regression models predicting campaign learning

Type of information source	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>N</i> of group control	
Any information source <i>vs.</i> control	.653	.173	.16***	.233	389 + 91	<b>35</b>
TV news <i>vs.</i> control	.790	.220	.25***	.221	100 + 91	
Any newspaper <i>vs.</i> control	.517	.178	.161**	.176	212 + 91	
Broadsheet paper <i>vs.</i> control	.601	.185	.205***	.200	139 + 91	
Tabloid paper <i>vs.</i> control	.327	.231	.114 ( <i>ns</i> )	.119	73 + 91	
Party website <i>vs.</i> control	.792	.247	.256***	.200	77 + 91	<b>40</b>

*Note.* OLS regression models were used, with the pre-post mean change in the 11-point knowledge scale as the dependent variable. For the items in the knowledge scale, see Table 1. The figures represent the unstandardized coefficients (*B*), standard errors, and standardized coefficients ( $\beta$ ). The media stimuli are all coded as a dummy (exposure = 1/control = 0). The models include the controls shown in Table 4 for age (years), gender (male), education (graduate), ethnicity (White), class (ABC1), and pre-test political interest, care who wins, trust in politicians, and political knowledge.

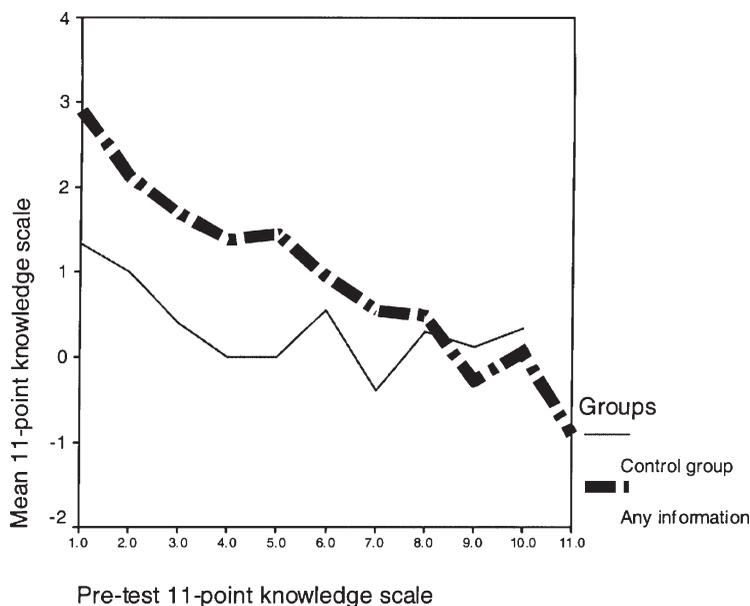
\*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .000.

*Source:* Campaign Learning Study.

### Learning Among Types of Voters

Did different types of voters respond differently to these experiments? We had anticipated that this would be the case if prior levels of knowledge influenced further learning. The classification of voters did confirm that there were large knowledge gaps in the pre-test measure, prior to exposure to the information stimuli. The results in Table 4 show that the strongest learning effects were among those who started off least knowledgeable about party politics, reducing but not wholly closing the size of the knowledge gap in the post-test survey. Similar patterns were replicated across the model estimates in Table 5, confirming Hypothesis 2.1. Figure 1 shows this result most dramatically, comparing mean gains in knowledge across the pre-test knowledge scale, without any prior social controls. The pattern shows a strong slope among those given information stimuli in the experiments, with gains of between two and three points on the knowledge scale for those who started off least informed, while in contrast the most knowledgeable made no gains and even fell modestly (due perhaps to boredom induced by overexposure to familiar campaign news?).

We had also hypothesized that the type of media might interact with the type of voters, with the tabloid issue coverage proving most accessible among those with low cognitive skills and prior knowledge, generating larger learning effects for this group than reading broadsheets. In fact, although the size of the groups is small, the learning effects among the “know-nothings” were slightly larger following reading broadsheet than tabloid papers (see Table 6). The net effect of exposure to campaign information was therefore strongest on the “know-nothings” who, by the end, eventually turned into at least “know-somethings,” although as the result of a single experiment not surprisingly



**Figure 1.** Who learns? Data reflect learning on the 11-point knowledge scale by level of original (pre-test) knowledge. The knowledge scales were constructed from the items in Table 1. The control group ( $N = 91$ ) was shown no campaign news. The other group ( $N = 389$ ) was shown campaign information on TV news, broadsheet or tabloid newspapers, or party websites. (Source: Campaign Learning Study.)

**Table 6**  
Learning effects from newspapers among the “know-nothings”

	Pre-test knowledge (mean)	Post-test knowledge (mean)	Knowledge gains	Eta	N
Control (no stimuli)					
Low prior knowledge	2.67	3.25	.593		27
Higher prior knowledge	6.86	7.03	.172		64
Broadsheet newspapers					
Low prior knowledge	2.97	4.66	1.686		30
Higher prior knowledge	7.48	8.02	.548	.19*	43
Tabloid newspapers					
Low prior knowledge	2.80	4.10	1.300		30
Higher prior knowledge	6.86	7.25	.395	.16*	43

*Note.* “Know-nothings” had low prior political knowledge, defined here as groups that had 3 or fewer correct answers on the pre-test 11-point knowledge scale.

\**p* < .05.

*Source.* Campaign Learning Study.

they failed to catch up to those with greater reservoirs of political awareness. The results fail to confirm our prior expectations in Hypotheses 2.2 and 2.3 that different types of newspapers would best serve different types of voters.

Were these transient gains in awareness, or did the effects persist? To check this, we used the daily rolling call back surveys among the subgroup willing to participate in a short telephone interview between 2 and 18 days after the original experiment. Rather than administering the whole 11-point knowledge scale, we restricted the call back to testing just the five items on party policies. The results in Table 7 show the call back knowledge of the mean scale of party policy and the decay in knowledge since the post-test. The results suggest that once learned, there was little decay in awareness. The

**Table 7**  
Decay in 5-point policy knowledge scale

Days after experiments	Call back knowledge of party policies	Change post-test to call back	N
1–3	3.61	0.01	65
4–6	3.28	–0.17	46
7–9	3.12	–0.16	31
10–12	3.22	–0.04	27
13–18	3.56	0.01	20

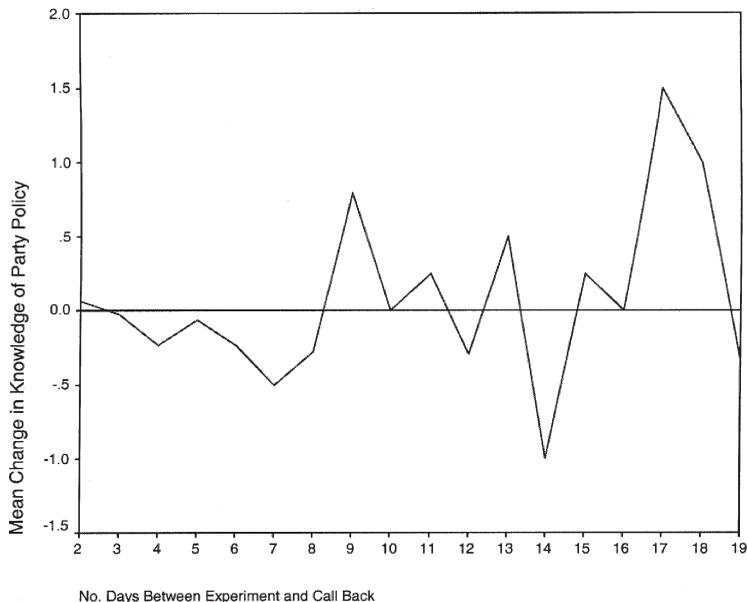
*Note.* Rolling call back surveys were conducted daily among a subgroup of 201 participants. Knowledge of party policies was gauged on a 5-point scale. See Table 1 for details of the items.

*Source.* Campaign Learning Study.

changes are illustrated in Figure 2, showing a pattern of trendless fluctuations in the daily call back, rather than a secular slide. Of course, because the experiments were conducted in the midst of a real general election campaign, with issues being discussed in all of the news media coverage, it is entirely possible that participants subsequently were exposed to information that reinforced at least some of what they had learned in the experiments. Certainly the election coverage continued to debate the issues of fiscal policy, the Euro, and asylum seekers, even if there was little, if any, coverage of some other issues such as baby bonds during the remainder of the campaign. The experiments could also have “primed” participants to be more aware of the election. Whatever the reason, far from any progressive weakening, it appears that the effects of our modest experimental stimuli continued for some days after the event.

## Conclusions and Discussion

The question of the educational functions of election campaigns has been subject to extensive scrutiny. The bulk of the research in recent decades has been American, and this has usually, although not always, pointed toward the superior role of the print media as channels of information rather than television news. Different reasons have been offered to explain the impact of print and television news on political knowledge, commonly focusing upon the characteristics of textual and audiovisual stimuli and the common journalistic practices associated with each mode. Yet, we suggest that these claims have often confounded analysis of the medium of transmission with analysis of the typical content of that medium within a particular society. We theorize that the structure



**Figure 2.** Decay in knowledge of party policies. Rolling call back surveys were conducted daily among a subgroup of 201 participants. Knowledge of party policies was gauged on a 5-point scale. Shown is the mean change in the percentage of respondents exposed to campaign information from any news source who could correctly identify the party advocating each policy in call back interviews. See Table 1 for details of the items. (Source: Campaign Learning Study.)

of the news industry can have an important impact upon the typical contents of the major information sources like television news, newspapers, and party websites within each country, and therefore what the electorate can be expected to learn during campaigns from these sources. We sought to test this argument, particularly variations in levels of campaign learning according to the type of media and the prior knowledge of voters in the context of the last British election campaign. The major conclusions from this study are as follows.

1. *Campaign learning did occur.* In the midst of the June 2001 British general election, despite extensive political news available on radio, television, current affairs programs, newspaper supplements, and the Internet, about half the public appeared unaware about some of the key issue features in party political debates, such as the stance of the Conservatives toward the Euro and their promise to cut taxes. Nevertheless, after relatively brief exposure to more information about these issues, interspersed by other election and non-election news, the public's issue knowledge rose significantly on eight out of eleven items. Moreover, controls monitoring changes in knowledge with items where no information was provided in the experiments demonstrated that this was not merely an unintended effect or artifact of experimental conditioning. The increase in awareness of party policies persisted after the experiments, with minimal decay, for the period monitored by the call back study.
2. *Campaign learning was similar among different media.* People learned as much from exposure to television news and party websites as from newspapers (confirming Hypotheses 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3), lending no support to the claims of print superiority.
3. *Campaign learning was greatest among the least informed.* The learning gains were strongest among those who were least knowledgeable prior to the experiments (confirming Hypothesis 2.1), thereby closing the knowledge gap found in the pre-test measures. Nevertheless, the less knowledgeable gained as much or more from reading broadsheet as tabloid newspapers, contradicting our expectations (Hypotheses 2.2 and 2.3) that there would be an interaction effect between the type of media and type of voter.

We argued earlier that any differences in campaign learning from exposure to different information sources can be attributed to *the mode of transmission*, the *common journalistic practices* associated with each mode, or the *typical contents of news carried by different media within each society*. If we can extrapolate from these results more broadly, they suggest that the third claim seems most convincing. Any evidence of "print superiority" in the United States probably reflects the typical contents of the news industry in America, rather than the inherent benefits of textual over audiovisual modes of transmission, or even universal differences between news and current affairs coverage in newspapers and television. Of course, the contrasts between claims of print superiority reported by many U.S. studies and the findings presented here could be attributed to differences in research design, especially given the complexities of measuring political knowledge and the contrasts often found between survey-based and experimental research (Hovland, 1959). But it seems reasonable to suggest (although it cannot be proved in the absence of strictly comparative experimental data) that our results differ from many comparable American studies at least in part because of the typical campaign coverage provided by the public service tradition of television news (permeating both the BBC and ITV) and the existence of a mass tabloid market in Britain.

Moreover, more generally there is both bad news and good news for those concerned, like John Stuart Mill, about the capacity of election campaigns to raise civic engagement and public awareness in democratic societies. We can conclude that despite the barrage of political commentary and election news, and the efforts by parties to convey their core message during the general election, in the pre-test survey the British public remained unaware of many basic issues at the heart of the campaign. But although many electors are “know-nothings,” or at least “know-littles,” under certain conditions, when exposed to more information, the evidence shows that the public *can* learn, quite a lot, quite rapidly, and from television news, party websites, *and* newspapers. The effects of campaign learning were especially strong for those who proved poorly informed prior to the experiments. This suggests that in election campaigns, public service television can indeed still service the public. The real challenge for journalists, broadcasters and politicians—indeed, the challenge for civic engagement in general—is how to achieve this transformation in real life.

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**Appendix A: Demographic Profile of Participants**

	Experimental participants, June 2001 (%)	Greater London population 1991 (%)	Difference (%)	
Gender				
Men	55.1			
Women	44.9			<b>25</b>
Tenure				
Owner occupiers	60.9	58.2	+2.7	
Rent privately	21.2	11.4	+9.8	
Rent: Housing Association	5.2	5.2	0	
Rent: LA/New Town	12.7	23.5	-10.8	<b>30</b>
Ethnicity				
White	80.8	80.6	+0.2	
Black	8.3	7.8	+0.5	
Asian	8.5	7.4	+1.1	
Other	2.4	4.1	-1.7	<b>35</b>
Social class				
Middle class (ABC1)	58.1	59.1	-1.0	
Working class (C2DE)	41.9	40.9	+1.0	
1997 Vote				
Lab 1997	54.8	53.1	+1.7	<b>40</b>
Con 1997	31.3	31.4	-0.1	
LibDem 1997	13.7	15.0	-1.3	

*Note.* Information about the Greater London population is derived from the 1991 census. This limits strict comparability, for example with the growth of council house sales during the last decade. The 1997 vote for the three major parties is based on analysis of British Parliamentary Constituencies compared with recalled vote in the previous election, excluding nonvoters and others. Quotas were employed by the fieldwork company in the initial selection of participants to match their background against the characteristics of Greater London population. **45**

Source: Campaign Learning Study. **49**

## Appendix B: Selection of Political Stimulus Materials 1

Materials were selected on the basis of two decision rules:

1. We decided to use a selection of “real” campaign materials, chosen from actual news stories, party web items, and election broadcasts, to maximize the ability to generalize from the results of the experiments to the actual exposure to these sources of campaign information experienced by the electorate during the general election. Accordingly, although we rearranged the order of the items and stories, we did not choose to edit or otherwise manipulate their contents or style. For example we decided not to use a transcript from the TV news to create dummy “artificial” newspaper stories, because we felt that such a manipulation of the contents would have improved experimental equivalence but at the cost of being unable to generalize from the artificial stories to the “real” world of print journalism. 5  
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2. We decided to present each participant with 30 minutes worth of functionally equivalent information about the issues being tested in each of the different media under comparison, interspersed with other typical materials to disguise the purpose of the experiments and reduce conditioning, so that participants would encounter similar but not identical opportunities for campaign learning. 15  
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### *TV News*

The compilation of television news stories was chosen to represent a “typical” evening news program during the campaign. We drew on stories recorded from all of the main news programs on the terrestrial channels in the three months prior to polling day. The videos were edited to follow the same format. This consists of a “sandwich,” with 20 minutes of identical, standard nonpolitical footage at the top and at the bottom of each program, such as stories about floods, crime, entertainment, sports, and international news, with one of the different 10-minute experimental video stimuli placed in the middle “core.” Respondents were not told which 30-minute video was being shown to which group, or even that different videos were being watched by different groups of respondents. We interspersed selected items from different channels, but all followed similar formats. The transcripts from two of the experimental information items (on baby bonds and the Euro) are given below for illustration. All of the TV news stories on each informational item were similar in terms of presentational style, length, balance of reporter and video footage, use of graphics, deployment of party spokespersons, and other interviews. 25  
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### *Newspaper Stories*

For comparison across media, similar processes were used to select a sample of broadsheet and tabloid newspaper stories. Stories were selected from a range of national daily newspapers and compiled into a photocopied “booklet.” Again the first section of the compilations contained “typical” nonpolitical stories from the newspapers, such as those about entertainment, sports, and the weather, and the middle section consisted of the stories containing the campaign information that was being tested by the experiments. Participants were asked to read the compiled materials for 30 minutes, to make sure that the exposure was equivalent to the TV news experiments. Stories were labeled with their newspaper source, headline, and date. The complete compilation of broadsheet 40  
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items used in the experiments is available at <http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~.pnorris.shorenstein.ksg/data.htm>. 1

**Website**

5

A special website was constructed containing selected items downloaded from each of the major party websites during the campaign. The website was shown offline so that participants could only surf the experimental stimulus materials. People were asked to surf the website for 30 minutes. Again the website contained functionally equivalent information about the campaign in general, such as about the leaders and membership in each party, with sections labeled “news,” “people,” “members,” and “issues,” alongside information about the particular issues that were being tested. Graphics were included as well as text. The party origin of all items was clearly labeled, with words, graphics, and symbols. The complete website is also available for scrutiny at <http://ksghome.harvard.edu/~.pnorris.shorenstein.ksg/data.htm>. 10 15

**PEBs**

Party political broadcasts were selected which contained information on the same issues, along with other campaign information, choosing functionally equivalent broadcasts by the Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrat parties. The footage was not manipulated or edited in any way, so again this represented “real” campaign materials that would have been viewed by the electorate. 20

**Informational Items**

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For illustration, the transcripts of two of the items that were selected in television news are given below to show the sort of information that was presented to participants. Similar transcripts of all items used in the experiment, along with the questionnaires, are available from the principal investigators. 30

Speaker	Baby bonds transcript (2 min 10 sec)	Graphic	
John Suchet	A scheme to give newborn babies up to £500 to be invested for their future was announced by the government today. The PM said that it would give every child a sound financial platform later in life. But the Tories claim it’s a tiny amount compared to recent tax rises. Lauren Taylor reports:	Intro	35
Lauren Taylor	Flanked by no fewer than three senior Cabinet ministers, the PM announced what Labour sees as one of the big ideas for its election manifesto. Baby Bonds, or Children’s Trust Funds, are designed to allow all children to build up a nest egg, with payments from government. Relatives would also be encouraged to contribute.	News conference	40 45

(Continued on next page) 49

<b>Speaker</b>	<b>Baby bonds transcript (2 min 10 sec)</b>	<b>Graphic</b>	<b>1</b>
Tony Blair	By the time they're ready to start life on their own, every child in every family in every home across the country will have a sound financial platform which could help pay for lifelong learning, for training, owning that first home, or indeed setting themselves up in business.		<b>5</b>
LT	The Baby Bonds will be for every child. Those from less well-off families would get £500, followed by 3 top-ups of £100, eventually giving them a minimum £800. Babies from better-off families would get £250, with top-ups of £50, amounting to at least £400.	Graphic with details of amounts and details of new	<b>10</b>
	A young adult now has to pay for many essential services. 18 years ago there were no tuition fees for higher education, and students received grants. Now it costs up to £1,050 per year, and the average graduate leaves with debts of more than £5000. Prescription charges have rocketed: In 1979 they were 45p, now they're £6.10.		<b>15</b>
	The opposition are skeptical about the scheme, and its timing.		<b>20</b>
Michael Portillo	The money that government gives away isn't government money, it's people's money. It's the money that they've already had to pay to the Chancellor in taxes.	Interview	<b>25</b>
	...but I do think that quite a lot of people will be a bit cynical that this rabbit was pulled out of the hat weeks before a likely general election.	Interview	<b>30</b>
LT	Still to be decided is at what age children could cash in their funds, and the conditions attached to spending the money.	Nice child painting to camera	<b>35</b>
	Ministers believe Baby Bonds would help to create a new savings culture, but they also admit this is all part of changing the welfare state to encourage more self-sufficiency. One charge they'll still have to face during an election campaign is that this is simply a preelection bribe. Lauren Taylor, ITN, Westminster		<b>40</b>
<b>Speaker</b>	<b>Euro transcript (2 min 30 sec BBC1)</b>	<b>Graphic</b>	<b>45</b>
Peter Sissons	Europe was catapulted to the top of the political agenda by the Tories, with William Hague's rallying	Intro	<b>49</b>

	cry for a last-ditch stand to save the pound. The issue of the Euro is likely to be raised time and time again during the campaign, as Peter Morgan reports:		<b>1</b>
Peter Morgan	Within the year, a dozen proud European currencies will be rounded up and shovelled into furnaces, as new Euro notes and coins enter circulation. During the next Parliament, the British may decide whether the pound sterling should disappear from the high streets, and be confined to history alongside the French Franc and the DM. It's a momentous political and economic decision, and the single issue over which the major parties are most profoundly divided.	Money	<b>5</b>
			<b>10</b>
Michael Portillo	We have to take this election as though it were our last chance to vote to keep the pound, and the only way that we can be sure of keeping the pound is by voting Conservative.	Interview	<b>15</b>
Matthew Taylor	Liberal Democrats believe this is a debate that needs to be had. Let's get it over and done with in a referendum, once the election's been held; and the question for the Conservative party is why they won't let the British people decide.	Interview	<b>20</b>
			<b>25</b>
Peter Morgan	The battleground of the Euro debate has already been staked out: The Conservatives rule out British membership during the next parliament.	Join the Euro?	
	The Lib Dems would join as soon as a realistic exchange rate for entry could be reached. That would mean a sharp devaluation of the pound.	Graphic with party options	<b>30</b>
	Labour would decide within 2 years if Britain would benefit from membership. If so, it would hold a referendum. Labour will apply five economic tests of whether joining the Euro would create more jobs and help the economy grow. But there's no disguising the fact that the decision to join or not is fundamentally political.		<b>35</b>
			<b>40</b>
Gordon	The divide at this election will be between a party like ours, that is in favor of being part of Europe, that will judge the single currency on what's best for Britain, and therefore we take a pragmatic and commonsense view, as against a Conservative party that takes a wholly dogmatic view, and would leave Britain completely isolated in Europe, which is not in the interests of British jobs and British business.	Interview	
			<b>45</b>
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(Continued on next page)

<b>Speaker</b>	<b>Euro transcript (2 min 30 sec BBC1)</b>	<b>Graphic</b>	
			<b>1</b>
Peter	The British public tells pollsters they're adamantly opposed to joining the Euro, which explains why William Hague is so keen on the issue, and describes the scale of the challenge a re-elected Tony Blair will face if he's to call—and win—a referendum on Euro membership. Peter Morgan, BBC News	To camera	<b>5</b>
<p>The Campaign Learning Study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (ESRC Grant R000239333) and administered from the University of Essex under the invaluable management of Jane Carr and a team of assistants from the Government Department.</p>			<b>10</b>
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