

4

Political Advertising in the United Kingdom

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THE POLITICAL ADVERTISING ENVIRONMENT: THE MEDIA SYSTEM

The political advertising environment of the United Kingdom splits into the two sharply demarcated sectors of print and broadcasting. Paid political advertising is permitted in newspapers and on billboards and is restricted only by the normal law of the land and electoral finance rules. By contrast, it is prohibited completely on television; instead, major parties are allocated rationed blocks of free airtime for party political broadcasts (PPBs), which are labelled party election broadcasts (PEBs) during official campaign periods. This dual configuration of unregulated print and regulated broadcasting mirrors the media system and sets the parameters for the overall importance of advertising, both to parties and to voters. It emerges out of a media system that sits between the free-market “liberal” model of the United States and the more regulated “democratic corporatist” orders of Northern Europe (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). It shares with the United States a commitment to free markets, freedom of speech, and self-regulation as the guiding principles for newspapers. It

shares with Northern Europe a history of strong mass-member parties operating in party rather than candidate systems, highly partisan newspapers, and regulated television markets dominated by well-funded public service broadcasters. To get a clearer idea of the overall environment for political communication and the particular development of advertising, it is helpful to analyse United Kingdom media as two distinct markets: national newspapers and television.

Newspapers: Class and Party

Although newspaper circulation has declined steadily from its postwar peak of more than 16 million in the 1950s to about 12.5 million now, it remains relatively high by comparison with Southern Europe and the United States. Approximately 25% of the population over the age of 16 will buy a national newspaper, or more than 50% of all households. The press is characterised by commercial ownership and national circulation, and readership splits much in line with the socio-demographic characteristics of class, education, and income and by political partisanship.

These divisions lead naturally to the prime cleavages in the press market. The first is between the elite and the “popular” press. The popular press (the tabloids) dominate the market, with 79% of total circulation, with *The Sun* the clear market leader. The tabloid response to market decline and increasingly intense competition has been ever more sports coverage, celebrity gossip, and scandal.

The second cleavage is by partisanship. Coverage of politics generally, and Parliament in particular, has declined relatively over the last decade, a casualty, at least in part, of the circulation wars. However, the press, and especially the tabloids, remain powerful political players, willing and at times apparently able to shape the political agenda, and they continue to throw their weight behind or against parties and individual politicians at election times. The days are gone when papers would operate virtually as propaganda mouthpieces for their favoured parties (Scammell & Harrop, 2002). However, alignments remain and are taken seriously by the parties. In the postwar period, most, occasionally almost all, national newspapers have supported the Conservative Party. However, Labour brought about a historic shift in 1997, when most titles declared for Tony Blair. The courting of the tabloids, their proprietors, editors, and leading political journalists was the key to Labour’s communication strategy. It was determined to avoid the tabloid “assassinations” of previous leaders, Neil Kinnock and Michael Foot, which in Labour mythology were devastating for the parties’ chances in the 1980s and early 1990s (Scammell, 2001).

Television: The Decline of Deference

Gradualism and compromise have been suggested as the defining features of British media (Tunstall, 1997, pp. 244–245): “continuous evolution and policy consensus” coupled with compromise between commercialism and public service. This description is apt in

significant respects. Television from the outset was designed as a compromise with a publicly funded broadcaster (BBC) and a commercial rival (ITV), within an overall remit of public service obligations. The public service load has been gradually lightened on the commercial sector as it has grown over time; also, despite nervous years in the Thatcher era, the BBC has been accepted by both Conservative and Labour governments as the cornerstone of quality for the system as a whole. Notwithstanding the highly charged dispute between Labour and the BBC over its reporting of the Iraq war, the government appears committed to protecting the BBC as an amply funded domestic broadcasting giant.¹ Slow evolution also characterises the life of political advertising on television; the system of allocating PEBs, first started in 1951, has been retained in principle and adapted in practice as more channels came on stream and some smaller parties, especially the Liberals and the nationalist parties of Wales and Scotland, established themselves in Parliament.

However, beneath the big systemic picture there are changes of detail that reveal a more radically transformed political communication context. By 2004, the long-predicted revolution in the media market seemed to be gathering pace. For more than 40 years, British broadcasting had been dominated by the “big two”: BBC1 and the main commercial channel, ITV1 (or Channel 3, as it is now known). Despite the challenge of multichannel satellite in the 1990s, driven by Rupert Murdoch’s BSkyB, with its suite of dedicated sports and movie channels, the old “comfortable duopoly” provided the country’s most-watched television. However, by 2004, the new technologies of cable, satellite, and digital had massively expanded the number of available channels, from four in 1990 to more than 270 by 2004, and for the first time the new competitors achieved a combined audience share that outranked ITV1 and BBC1 in the ratings (see Table 4.1).

4. Political Advertising in the United Kingdom

67

Table 4.1 Annual Percent Share of Audience Viewing (Individuals)

Year	Channel					
	BBC1	BBC2	ITV1	C4	C5	Other
1990	37	10	44	9	—	—
1995	32	11	37	11	—	9
2000	27.2	10.8	29.3	10.5	5.7	16.6
2004	24.7	10	22.8	9.7	6.6	26.2

SOURCE: Broadcasters Audience Research Board (TV facts, 2006).

The media explosion has had a double-edged effect. It has multiplied opportunities to catch political news; viewers of free-to-air digital can now watch three 24-hour news channels and the BBC's dedicated parliamentary channel. However, it has also squeezed the space for political news and documentary in prime time on the mass-audience entertainment channels. ITV1, in particular, has shifted and shortened the time slot of its flagship evening news program to make way for movies and feature-length dramas. At the same time, analysis of the main (ITV1 and BBC1) news over successive elections from 1992 shows, on both channels, a significant decline in political news compared to nonpolitical stories, less visibility for political actors, and a reduction in the length of politicians' sound bites (Semetko & Scammell, 2005). In short, the window for political news in the United Kingdom has been narrowing on both flagship evening news programs, and within that reduced space there is less opportunity for the parties to get their messages across in their own words. These declines are from a relatively high base, as compared to the United States, for example. Nonetheless, the predicted effects of increased competition are biting at last: As Harrison (2002) put it, "television since 1997 has been 'cruel to coverage of politics.'"

The "cruelty" is relative, when considered in the light of a history of at times extraordinary deference to politics. The television era

opened under a voluntary stricture to report, but not interfere with, the processes of politics. The BBC inherited from World War II the "14 Day Rule," which prohibited it from reporting any controversial topic in the 2 weeks preceding debate in Parliament. Although the rule was abandoned soon after the advent of commercial television in 1955, both channels continued to adopt a "sacerdotal" attitude to politics going into the 1970s (Blumler & Nossiter, 1989) and well beyond for election news. The aggressive grilling of politicians in one-to-one interviews did not become staple fare until the 1980s, and the normal public service requirements to deliver impartial and balanced news were interpreted in a particularly strict way for elections. The allocation of PEBs provided the guidelines for appropriate balance between the parties, with both Labour and the Conservatives receiving equal news time. Liberals were apportioned a share according to their ration of PEBs, typically one third to four fifths. The parties and the broadcast organisations timed "balance" with a stopwatch to ensure fair dues. This interpretation meant that television was uniquely vulnerable to politicians at elections, as time quotas had to be filled, regardless of news values. Moreover, it meant that parties could have an effective veto over some stories by refusing to put forward a spokesperson.²

The restrictions have been gradually loosened over time. The ITV unilaterally abandoned "stopwatch balance" for the 1992

general election; news values were to determine the bulletins. Changes to electoral law removed the parties' power of veto, even at constituency level, by 2001, and the rise of celebrity television interviewers, of whom the BBC's Jeremy Paxman is the prime example, fuelled a much-imitated style of distinctly non-deferential questioning of political leaders. The result overall has been declining news space for politics and political spokespeople (as noted earlier), more robust interrogation of leaders, and a wide gulf between the news and parties' agendas (Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999).

It might be thought in these circumstances that parties looking for new ways to reach voters might turn to paid advertising as potentially the most effective means to spread their messages. After all, PEBs, even though strictly limited in number, remain the most important direct, journalistically unmediated means of party communication. However, paid political advertising on television continues to be uniformly opposed by all the major parties and broadcasters.

POLITICAL ADVERTISING: THE REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

Regulatory debates over the last 50 years have centered on three main aims:

1. Provision of a relatively level electoral playing field for the major parties
2. Control of campaign costs
3. Balancing freedom of speech against the other two aims

There has been substantial cross-party consensus on all three aims. The first two are closely linked and between them explain the historic and continued reluctance to open the airwaves to paid political advertising. There have been a number of occasions on which paid TV advertising might have been considered as a realistic option. The first was the

advent of commercial television in 1955. However, the broadcasters preferred to take voluntarily the system of party political and party election broadcasts, which had been established by the BBC, extending long-standing radio practice to television. Another opportunity came with the 1990 Broadcasting Act, which encouraged expansion of competition in the television market and reduced the public service burdens on the private sector. Once again, and with relatively minor dissent, the paid advertising option was disregarded; instead, the PEB-PPB system was written into law for the first time. The third opportunity came in 2002-2003, with the Electoral Commission's review of party political broadcasting. In the light of audience fragmentation across an ever-mushrooming media market, the commission inquired whether the system was valuable or indeed viable any longer. It expressly raised the prospect of paid political advertising and questioned whether prohibition might be a breach of the freedom of expression provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights. Again, the major parties and broadcasters all opposed paid advertising, frequently citing the "level playing field" argument.³

The PPB-PEB system has been protected by law since 1990, and the overarching framework is now overseen by the BBC and Ofcom, the new regulator of the commercial broadcasting and telecommunications sectors.⁴ Ofcom's Broadcasting Code lays down minimum requirements for designated television and radio channels in regard to carrying party broadcasts of specified lengths, currently between just under 3 and 5 minutes. All the main terrestrial channels (ITV, Channel 4, and Channel 5) must air PEBs in peak time for general elections and national referenda. ITV and Channel 5 must carry broadcasts for European parliamentary elections, and ITV additionally is tasked to transmit PEBs for Scottish, Welsh and local elections and to run nonelection broadcasts for the major parties, scheduled

4. Political Advertising in the United Kingdom

69

Table 4.2 Summary of PPB and PEB Rules

	<i>General Elections and Referenda</i>	<i>European Elections</i>	<i>Scottish, Welsh, Local, and Nonelection</i>	<i>Time Spec: PEBs</i>	<i>Regulator</i>	<i>Schedule Guidelines</i>	<i>Allocation and Scheduling Decisions</i>
TV	BBC1 and 2, ITV, Channels 4 and 5	BBC, ITV, Channel 5	BBC, ITV	2:40, 3:40, or 4:40	Ofcom and BBC	Major parties: PEBs must be shown in peak time	BBC and designated broadcasters
Radio	BBC, Classic FM, talk SPORT Virgin 1215	BBC	BBC	Max 2:30		Other parties: between 5:30 and 11:30 p.m.	

SOURCE: Ofcom Rules on Party Political and Referendum Broadcasts (Broadcast guidance: Ofcom, 2004).

around key events in the political calendar (see Table 4.2). The broadcasts must be offered to select “major parties”: Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, plus the Scottish Nationalists and their Welsh counterparts (Plaid Cymru) and four parties in Northern Ireland (the Democratic Unionists, Sinn Fein, the Ulster Unionists, and the Social Democratic Labour Party). “Minor” parties may also qualify for PEBs, provided they are registered with the Electoral Commission and contest at least one sixth of all seats up for election.

Thus the PEB rules keep political advertising on television tightly within the party ambit. They prevent “soft” support from semidetached party backers, which was such a feature of the 2004 U.S. presidential campaign. However, at every general election in recent times, there have been a variety of single-issue, special interest and fringe groups willing to meet the costs of the qualification benchmark. The 2001 general election, for example, saw PEBs from the anti-European Union U.K. Independence Party, the Green Party, and two left-wing groups (the Socialist Alliance and Socialist Labour); previous campaigns have aired PEBs from the antiabortion

Pro-Life Alliance, bizarre exhibitions of transcendental meditation from the Natural Law Party, and pop music from the Monster Raving Loony Party.

The Ofcom code sets the guidelines but leaves the detail of allocation and scheduling in the care of the individual “designated” commercial broadcasters. In practice, together with the BBC, they pool their deliberations in the Broadcasters’ Liaison Group, which decides how many PEBs each qualifying party should get and at what dates and times they should be shown. By convention since 1964, the Conservative and Labour parties have received five PEBs each per general election and the Liberals not fewer than three, usually four. Allotments to minor parties are based loosely on preexisting strength in Parliament and current strength in the polls but rarely amount to more than one each.

It is not immediately obvious why broadcasters should be granted power of allocation, and the Electoral Commission’s review revealed anxiety among many political parties that broadcasters’ self-interest might outweigh wider democratic concerns. The minor parties in particular complained that present arrangements

favour the status quo and unfairly restrict their opportunities to reach the national audience. The commission recommended that the allocation should be handled directly by Ofcom (Electoral Commission, 2003, p. 21). At the time of writing, the government was considering the recommendation, following a further public consultation, but it seemed unlikely that there would be any major changes. In part, this stems from reluctance to undermine broadcasters' goodwill, without which the entire PPB-PEB system might collapse. Further, successive governments have upheld the principle that Parliament should not interfere with the broadcasters' independence to control the schedules and content of their own services (Electoral Commission, 2003, p. 21).

The second aim, control of costs, has also been a powerful argument in favour of the PEBs and against the introduction of paid political advertising. The ban has "almost certainly" contained the costs of national campaigns, such that "central election spending in Britain is no higher in real terms than in the 1960s and is barely higher than in the pre-war years" (Pinto-Duschinsky, 1992). The standard contrast, which Pinto-Duschinsky makes, is with the United States, where, despite reforms of campaign finance regulations, costs continue to spiral upwards amid the paid television advertising free-for-all. Moreover, the PEBs effectively offer a subsidy in kind, offsetting to some degree the historic fund-raising advantage of the Conservative Party. The Conservatives have at times flaunted their greater financial muscle with heavy spending on newspaper advertising. They spent more than twice Labour's campaign total in the 1983 and 1987 elections, most of it on print advertising. Those campaigns threatened to raise the stakes for campaign spending and exposed the historic anomaly whereby there were tight legal constraints on constituency candidates but no regulation at all of national campaign spending. The rules changed in 2000, when national campaign expenditure was brought under the control of a newly

established independent body, the Electoral Commission. The commission defines the official campaign period—normally 4 to 5 weeks—and sets spending caps for national campaigns, currently just under £16 million per party. Print advertising remains the largest single item of expenditure in the two major parties' campaigns, accounting for 34% of the Conservatives' total 2001 election spending and 46% of Labour's, according to the Electoral Commission's official register.

Freedom of speech is the third regulatory aim, and this is protected in the Ofcom Broadcasting Code, which states that editorial control of PPBs and PEBs rests with the parties. Thus party broadcasts are free from the normal commercial advertising consumer protections of "honesty" and "truthfulness" and are not subject to the complaints procedures that Ofcom adjudicates for regular commercials. However, freedom comes with two caveats: PEBs and PPBs must be announced—"There now follows a party political broadcast from the ____ party"—and the broadcasters are required by law to comply with taste and decency standards. The latter led to a landmark test case by the Pro-Life Alliance against the BBC. The alliance claimed that the BBC had overstepped its powers by insisting, on taste and decency grounds, that graphic images of aborted fetuses be cut from an alliance PEB during the 1997 election. The case was appealed up to the House of Lords, which in 2003 eventually ruled that the BBC had acted within the law. Political freedom of speech in press advertising is near total. Any party, group, or individual may buy advertising in the usual way, and the content is exempt from the complaints process administered by the commercial self-regulatory body, the Advertising Standards Authority.⁵

THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING

There are two seemingly opposed ways to tell the story of political advertising in the United

4. Political Advertising in the United Kingdom

71

Kingdom. First, the narrative of decline: Advertising has become increasingly marginal to campaigns constructed for television news. Second, the rise of political marketing: Parties rely increasingly on marketing and advertising expertise to map electoral strategy and develop party and leader images. In fact, these two views are not contradictory. Both are true.

Political advertising fails to compete with television news as *the* site of the campaign battle. TV provides the most important and the most trusted source of national news for most people,⁶ and given its obligations for impartiality and balance, the major parties can be assured of airtime. Since the 1960s, by which time television had arrived in virtually every home, a succession of party leaders has felt that they won or lost because of television (Scammell, 1995, p. 37). Campaigns have become increasingly dominated by television, to the detriment of some traditional activities, such as local hustings and doorstep canvassing. Leaders' tours have been redesigned around news deadlines and camera-friendly images are *de rigueur* for all facets of the campaign, from the daily round of morning press conferences to evening rallies. Parties compete to influence the television news agenda, to drive their favoured sound bites and issues up the bulletins, and to derail opponents with instant rebuttals and sometimes ridiculous gimmicks. Advertising itself has become a device to influence the news agenda, with the now common practice of combining press conferences with unveilings of billboard posters. At the same time, the parties, especially Labour, have tried with some success to extract news mileage from the PEBs, with private previews for the press and by capitalizing on celebrity, with broadcasts made by film directors and featuring pop stars and other household names.

Given assured opportunities for free publicity through television and partisan press, it is no surprise that relatively costly newspaper advertising has been in long-term decline. The

Conservatives' splurge of the 1980s was against the trend and left the party in considerable debt. Since then, newspaper advertising has decreased at every election. Total pages purchased in 2001 were less than one third of the 1997 figure, and Labour was the only major party to advertise nationally (Scammell & Harrop, 2002, pp. 178–179). Print advertising spending has shifted to billboards, which can be targeted more precisely to battleground constituencies and which offer the added benefit of doubling as photo opportunities.

The story of the decline of PEBs is in one sense inevitable, given the history of television. Before the introduction of commercial TV, the PEBs *were* the campaign on television. The BBC was so concerned to appear politically neutral that it eschewed any campaign coverage at all, apart from an election night results service (Scammell & Semetko, 1995, pp. 22–23). Instead, the BBC persuaded the parties to take PEBs, one each for the major parties in the 1951 and 1955 elections. From such unique beginnings, there was really no way but down for the PEBs. However, the true golden age of PEBs came later, from 1959 to 1966, with the arrival of commercial television and the rapid growth of the audience. By 1959, most homes had a set, ITV had transformed political coverage, removing some of the self-denying shackles of the ultracautious BBC, pioneering the reporting of campaigns and rejecting the former BBC custom of supplying an advance list of questions to interviewees. At the same time, PEBs were becoming established as the main campaign tool on television. The allocation gradually increased in number to the current ration of five each for the Conservatives and Labour by the 1964 election. The broadcasts were shown simultaneously on both channels, thus ensuring a huge captive national audience. Initially reluctant, politicians began to adapt to the new monster of TV and to relish its potential power. The 1959 campaign was the watershed, the first “TV election.” Labour seized its opportunity to

reach over the heads of the mainly Conservative press and talk directly to voters. It produced the first genre-conscious PEBs, using a news bulletin format with a presenter (Labour MP Tony Benn) introducing themes and party spokespersons. However, it was the Conservatives who made the first “great” PEB, one of the few that could ever be said to have had significant electoral influence. It was the last ad of the campaign and featured then-Prime Minister Harold Macmillan alone, standing and speaking directly to the camera. It was rehearsed, with Macmillan tutored for the performance, and, what was highly unusual for the time, it was recorded in advance. Toward the end of the broadcast, Macmillan walked over to a vast globe, spun it, and turned to the camera: “Let me tell you what I’m going to do about the rest of the world,” he said. The *Supermac* PEB entered Conservative mythology as an election winner: It was “dramatic,” according to future Conservative Prime Minister Ted Heath; “It changed everything” (Cockerell, 1988, p. 74).

Television historian Seymour-Ure (1991) called the period from 1960 through 1974 the coming of age of political broadcasting. From deeply deferential beginnings, television expanded the boundaries of political coverage, but prudently, picking its way toward an appropriate balance between the public’s right to know and undue interference in the political process. The emergence of investigative documentary and more direct interviews gave rise to TV’s first celebrity political journalists, but the politicians were the real personalities of the screen. Typically, politicians complained at television treatment: Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, in particular, felt the BBC was biased against him, and his first period of government (1964-1970) saw the first stirrings of threats to privatise the BBC. However, in retrospect, it is fair to say that the politicians had never had it so good. Parliamentary and political coverage had a protected place in the schedules in peak time. The PEBs had become

institutionalised and were a major part of the campaign on television, broadcast simultaneously on all channels; their allocation set the terms for “balance” in political news. Blumler and McQuail (1968) provided the first in-depth study of broadcasting of an election campaign, and they concluded that PEBs were *too* dominant; they might guarantee balance in political reporting but risked boredom and alienation of viewers. They suggested scrapping the simultaneous transmission of PEBs and urged journalists to make more bold and challenging programs.

In fact, concurrent transmission continued on BBC and ITV until the 1987 general election. However, by then the decline thesis was strongly rooted. Although Blumler and McQuail (1968) found that PEBs were the most significant source of campaign learning for undecided voters in the 1964 campaign, the expansion of news coverage had long since usurped their educational function. Martin Harrison’s reviews of broadcasting in every general election from 1974 tell a consistent story of decline. Although by 1974 PEBs had dwindled to less than a tenth of television’s election output, Harrison (1974, p. 158) could still comment that they had “a special place in campaign strategy.” At every election since then, he has remarked on their withering significance, as they were undermined by continually shortened time slots and loss of audience as the television market expanded out of all recognition. “Election broadcasts have been wasting away for many years” was his verdict on the 2001 offering (Harrison, 2002, p. 149).

The decline thesis is unarguable in some ways. It is undeniable that the value of PEBs has decreased. How could it be otherwise, as we have moved from the time of two channels and captive audiences to an era when there are some 270 television channels and only five of them are obliged to show PEBs? However, it is equally true that advertisers and their crafts of attitudinal research have moved to centre stage in party communication. The Conservative

4. Political Advertising in the United Kingdom

73

Party intermittently had employed advertising agencies since the 1929 general election, but it was the hiring of Saatchi & Saatchi in 1978 that broke the mould. At first the difference seemed relatively modest. The agency was tasked to script as well as produce the party broadcasts, thus enabling them to import techniques from product commercials, with the use of actors, music, and voiceovers. Until then, PEBs had largely been controlled by politicians, and the media experts' role was confined primarily to technical advice. Saatchi prepared all advertising and collateral material, such as leaflets for doorstep delivery—again, a small but significant step toward the unified, disciplined communications that have become a defining feature of modern campaigns. Print and television advertising became coordinated, the one to reinforce the message of the other, and all party publicity was linked by common themes, slogans, and visuals. It is no exaggeration to describe much of modern campaigning as one long advertising campaign. Most important, the agency pioneered the use of focus group research that supplemented the quantitative polling that had already become fairly standard for the two major parties. It was a decisive innovation, because the agency's expertise in rendering market data into communication strategy effectively transformed the role of advertisers. It elevated them from technical and tactical advisers to communications strategists and "ensured their involvement in the political machinery to a degree unprecedented for an advertising agency" (Scammell, 1995, p. 274). Labour copied much from Saatchi for the 1987 election, establishing the Shadow Communications Agency, whose leading figure, Philip Gould, remains close to Tony Blair and a key party strategist.

It is no coincidence that nearly all the more memorable party advertising belongs not in the "golden age" but in the Saatchi and post-Saatchi period. With the exception of *Supermac*, few ads of the pre-Saatchi era stand out. The Saatchis transformed the look of

party advertising, adopting commercial production values, radically reducing politicians' speaking appearances, all but abandoning the tired format of politician talking head, and pioneering an aggressive negative style of advertising. Three Saatchi ads stand out in particular; all were controversial, and two can stake claims to electoral influence. The first and their most famous was the summer 1978 poster, "Labour isn't working." This was posted on only about 20 sites nationally but created such strong protests from Labour that it generated millions of pounds worth of free publicity in news stories. Labour complained that the poster's picture of a dole queue snaking into the distance was a fraud, made up not of the genuinely unemployed but of actors or Saatchi staff. As with all individual pieces of advertising, it is virtually impossible to estimate its overall impact on the election. However, some Conservative campaigners believed that it unsettled the then-Labour government, encouraging them to delay for 9 months the general election that had been widely anticipated in the fall of 1978 and thereby squandering their best chance of victory (Scammell, 1995, p. 72). The second striking Saatchi effort was the combined poster and PPB "Labour's Tax Bombshell" offensive for the 1992 general election. Not for the last time, Saatchi's broadcast owed much to U.S. political advertising in use of imagery and sound effects reminiscent of George H. Bush's attack on Michael Dukakis. The "Tax bombshell" became a motif of the Conservative campaign, and again, although it is impossible to be precise about the effectiveness of individual ads, there is some polling evidence that suggests that the issue of taxes leapt in significance as a barrier to a Labour vote (Scammell, 1995, p. 261).

The third Saatchi ad, *New Labour, New Danger*, again a combined print and PPB campaign, came in the year before the 1997 election. It has become colloquially known as "Demon Eyes" because of one ad that

depicted Labour leader Tony Blair with a scary smile and crazed, red eyes. “Demon Eyes” achieved infamy by being the only party political advertising to fall foul of the Advertising Standards Authority’s (ASA) code of practice. The ASA ruled that Blair had been shown in a dishonest and sinister way and asked for the advert to be withdrawn. The particular Blair poster was withdrawn, but the Conservatives kept a less personalised demon eyes motif. This episode encouraged the ASA to withdraw altogether from adjudication of political advertising, arguing that its integrity would be threatened if it were to be drawn into party political disputes. Instead, it brought the matter up with the Neil Committee on Standards in Public Life, which suggested that parties might agree on a voluntary code of conduct. To date, no progress has been made in that direction. “Demon Eyes” upset the regulator, but it impressed the advertising industry. The trade journal *Campaign* awarded it the “campaign of the year” accolade, claiming it raised effectively the legitimate issue of Blair’s character and generated £5 million worth of free publicity on the back of a £125,000 expenditure (Culf, 1997).

The Conservatives’ use of shock tactics to whip up news value has been emulated by Labour, most notably in its 1992 weepy, *Jennifer’s Ear*. This was a groundbreaker in that it was a minidrama made by a celebrity director, Mike Newell (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*) and purported to be a fictional but true-to-life story of a little girl forced to wait in agony for an ear operation because of Conservative government neglect of the National Health Service. The *Jennifer’s Ear* saga became a bizarre news event, as the Conservatives reacted with outrage, the name of the girl on whom the PEB was based was mysteriously leaked to the press, Jennifer’s parents gave conflicting accounts of the accuracy of the story, and the media began its own mole hunt to track the source of the leak.

The energetic effort to turn advertising into news has been one of the most impressive

features of elections over the last 10 years. Shock is a continuing tactic, especially for the Conservatives, who produced more fear-laden shockers for the 2001 campaign, with scenes of street muggings and truant school children burning cars and taking drugs. However, Labour, in particular, has developed a strategy of capitalizing on the media appetite for celebrity. Mike Newell, again, composed *Angel*, the final broadcast of the 1997 campaign: It was a politician-free zone, a minidrama starring actor Peter Postlethwaite, the working-class hero of the popular British movie *Brassed Off*. *Lifted*, the party’s opening shot of the 2001 campaign, was a pop video-style celebration of Labour’s record in government, which stoked media interest with the appearance of former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell. Trevor Beattie, celebrated for his controversial “FCUK” advertising campaign for the fashion chain French Connection, was awarded the Labour account for both the 2001 and the 2005 elections. The hiring of Beattie itself ensured news value, adding the allure of “cool” to Labour advertising and prompting attention from the normally nonpolitical media sectors of fashion and lifestyle.

Chariots of Fire director Hugh Hudson started the trend to celebrity admakers when, in 1987, he made the first biography spot in PEB history, with a 10 minute film of Neil Kinnock, then Labour leader. The acclaim for *Kinnock—The Movie* encouraged politicians to step into previously off-limits territory. In 1983, Margaret Thatcher had rejected Saatchi’s offer of a biopic, saying it was too presidential for British taste and the “Grantham tape,” a rough cut made by (Lord) Tim Bell, was not authorised for development. However, after Hudson’s breakthrough, all three parties have emulated the formula, and the biog PEB is now standard electoral fare. John Schlesinger (*Midnight Cowboy*) produced one for Conservative Prime Minister John Major in 1992, acclaimed documentary film maker Molly Dineen made a home movie portrait of

Table 4.3 Campaign Experiences of the Electorate (2001 British Election)

Q: During the past few weeks, have you...? (If Yes) Which party was that?

	All (1997)	Conservatives	Labour	Liberal Democrats
Received leaflets ^a	69 (89)	43	40	23
Saw TV PEBs	58 (73)	39	43	28
Saw posters	50 (70)	31	35	7
Saw leaders on TV	43 (36)	32	32	23
Saw press ads	37 (na)	23	25	11
Heard radio PEBs	16 (15)	10	10	7
Was called on	14 (24)	6	7	2
Received letter	12 (20)	6	6	2
Was telephoned	5 (7)	2	3	0
Party Web site	2 (na)	1	1	0
Attended meeting	1 (2)	0	1	1
Received party video	1 (na)	0	1	0
Received party e-mail	1 (na)	<1	<1	0

SOURCE: Market and Opinion Research International, Ltd., for 24-30 May 2001 (from Butler & Kavanagh, 2002, p. 214).

Note: PEB indicates party election broadcast.

a. All candidates are enabled by law to post, free of charge, one leaflet to all registered voters in the relevant constituency.

Blair in 1997, and the Liberal Democrats have produced, albeit less celebrated, bio ads of their leaders, Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy, for the 1997 and 2001 campaigns, respectively.

Saatchi's impact and the response from Labour have transformed PEBs such that they now bear little resemblance to the broadcasts of the "golden age." They are documentary evidence of the rise in prominence of the advertiser in British political communication. Even in the early 1980s, commentators might have hesitated before labelling PEBs as advertisements; in the cases of Labour and the Conservatives, at least, there would be few such qualms now. Ironically, although PEBs have indisputably declined as a proportion of the overall electoral information environment, they have significantly raised their profile as news. Moreover, survey data for recent elections indicates that advertising, PEBs, and posters are the most commonly experienced direct party communication with voters (Table 4.3), eclipsing meetings, rallies, phone calls, and

doorstep canvassing—in fact, all other campaign material except individual candidates' leaflets, which, by law, are posted free to all registered electors. All these factors have contributed to a recent revival of research interest in the content and effects of PEBs.

POLITICAL ADVERTISING: TRENDS OVER TIME

Overall, the main features of party advertising over the last 10 years may be summarised as follows:

- Reduced length of PEBs
- Cultivation of nonpolitical language and promotional styles
- Dominance of issue advertising
- Conservative negativity within predominantly positive campaigns

Reduced Length of PEBs

The maximum length has declined progressively, from 30 minutes in 1955 to four

Table 4.4 Politicians Speaking in PEBs: Leaders Versus Other Party Spokespersons

<i>Party (Year)</i>	<i>Leader (%)</i>	<i>Other Party Spokesperson (%)</i>
Labour (1992)	29.2	70.7
Labour (1997)	100	0
Labour (2001)	100	0
Conservatives (1992)	81.3	18.6
Conservatives (1997)	100	0
Conservatives (2001)	100	0
Liberal Democrats (1992)	60	39.9
Liberal Democrats (1997)	99.40	0.6
Liberal Democrats (2001)	94.5	5.5

Note: PEB indicates party election broadcast.

minutes 40 seconds for the 2001 campaign. Although Harrison (as noted earlier) interpreted reduced length as evidence of decline, the parties themselves encouraged the trend. The Conservatives once again led the way. In the 1983 election, they decided unilaterally not to fill their then 10-minute full quota but to produce shorter, sharper broadcasts. The 10-minute slot had become the standard from 1970 onwards, but increasingly, parties have opted not to run to the maximum. In 1997, only Labour ran a full-length piece—the biography PEB for Blair. All the other PEBs, from all the three main parties, kept to the minimum prescribed length of just under 5 minutes. The pattern was repeated in 2001, when the maximum time was cut to 4 minutes 40 seconds and the minimum reduced to 2 minutes 30 seconds. Again, only Labour, and only on one occasion, chose the maximum. Declining length was a predictable step as soon as production was put in the hands of agencies: Commercial advertisers are most comfortable with films of less than 1 minute.

Cultivation of Nonpolitical Language and Promotional Styles

This trend is marked in a number of ways but most clearly by the personalisation of the PEBs, as exemplified in the leader-focused biography ads that emphasise personal character

and values rooted in life experience. Moreover, leaders have progressively eclipsed all other party spokespersons. As Table 4.4 shows, speaking appearances by party spokespersons *other* than the leader have all but disappeared in the last two general elections. This is a striking effect of professionalized communications and a stark contrast to the pre-Saatchi era, when it was the norm for the various members of leadership teams to present issues related to their individual portfolios. It is, as a number of researchers have noted (Hodess, Tedesco, & Kaid, 2000; Scammell & Semetko, 1995), an indicator of Americanization.

Less noted but equally striking is an increasing tendency for ads not to use politicians at all. The politician-free PEB was unthinkable in the golden age and well beyond; on the contrary, the PEB was *the* campaign platform through which politicians could talk directly to voters. However, by 1997, we started to see PEBs that did not feature any images of politicians, even nonspeaking ones. The only politicians who now seem assured of speaking parts are the party leaders, and even the leader's place is not sacrosanct; rather, it is contingent upon strategic calculation of his or her vote-winning appeal. Thus Figure 4.1 shows a dramatic plunge in speaking time allotted to William Hague in 2001, as compared to John Major in 1997. The agency

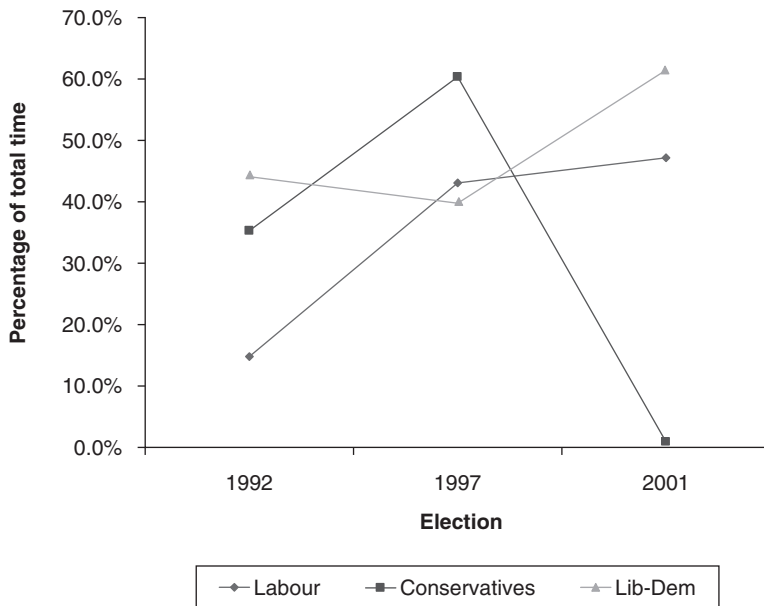


Figure 4.1 Party Leaders Speaking in PEBs (Percentage of Total Time), 1992 to 2001

SOURCE: Based on all 42 PEBs for the three main parties.

Note: Lib-Dem indicates the Liberal Democratic Party; PEB, party election broadcast.

Yellow M replaced Saatchi for the Conservatives for the 2001 campaign, and its PEBs were extraordinary in that they cut back radically on the use of any speech at all, preferring music, sound effects, and inter-titles to carry the message.

These trends, the personalised leader portraits, the absence of other politicians, and the emergence of the politician-free ad are of a piece with the move toward nonpolitical styles of presentation. Blair's Labour has pursued the nonpolitical style with particular vigour. News and documentary have been the predominant formats of PEBs generally over many years, but Labour increasingly has been willing to experiment with genre, using soap opera, romantic drama, spoof horror, satire, and pop video over the last two campaigns. By range of genre, Labour's broadcasts stand

apart from both their main rivals (Scammell & Langer, in press). The Conservatives' genre range has been far more limited: In 2001 especially its PEBs borrowed heavily from the crime and horror genres. In 2001, the Liberal Democrats were the only party that did not stray at all from the news-documentary format.

Dominance of Issue Advertising

Research over successive U.K. elections continues to find that PEBs are informative. They provide a reasonable guide to the main parties' key proposals and to the difference between the party platforms (Blumler & McQuail, 1968; Hodess et al., 2000; Scammell & Semetko, 1995). Content analysis shows that in the 1997-2001 campaigns, 75% of the three

Table 4.5 Information Content in Party PEBs in the Elections of 1997 and 2001

<i>PEB Content</i>	<i>Labour % (n)</i>	<i>Conservatives % (n)</i>	<i>Lib-Dem % (n)</i>	<i>Total % (n)</i>
Emphasis				
Issue	70 (7)	80 (8)	75 (6)	75 (21)
Image	30 (3)	20 (2)	25 (2)	25 (7)
Policy proposals				
Vague	50 (5)	80 (8)	62.5 (5)	64.3 (18)
Specific	30 (3)	40 (4)	62.5 (5)	42.9 (12)

Note: Lib-Dem indicates the Liberal Democratic Party; PEB, party election broadcast.

main parties' PEBs emphasised issues; 43% contained specific policy proposals (see Table 4.5). The influence of professional advertisers has not diluted the dominance of issues. This might seem surprising, given the trends to nonpolitical styles and because commercial advertising itself has shifted from hard-sell, information-based campaigns to soft-sell, entertainment-oriented audience pleasers (Corner, 1995). One might expect that Labour's PEBs, as the most overtly nonpolitical stylistically, might be less issue focussed than the others and, indeed, that is the case. However, it is clear that, for all parties, issues remain the prime tool of differentiation, a finding that conforms to Kaid, Tedesco, Dimitrova, and Williams' (2003) internationally comparative study: Issue-based advertising is the norm in long-established democracies.

Negative Advertising

The dominance of negative advertising and its potential damage to voter engagement has been a major thrust of research in the United States over the last decade (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Jamieson, 2000). However, as Kaid et al. (2003) have shown, negative dominance is a peculiarly American problem. Despite clear evidence of U.K. campaigners' willingness to draw lessons from America (Plasser, 2002; Scammell, 1995), they have for the most part declined to go heavily negative. For the three elections from 1992, the PEBs overall have been predominantly positive

(Table 4.6), and both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have become slightly more positive over time. The Conservatives are the persistent exception. Their advertising has become more negative, culminating in the 2001 campaign, which was overwhelmingly attack focussed and contained the most negative series of PEBs yet. Party is the only clear correlation to the propensity to use negative advertising: The Conservatives favoured it whether they were entering the election as the incumbent government (1992 and 1997) or the opposition (2001). Their 2001 campaign, with its horror themes and failure to make any dent in Labour's landslide majority, was heavily criticised after the event. Under the leadership of William Hague, the party had failed to make headway in the polls since 1997 and trailed well behind Labour going into the official campaign, and their negativity was in part a desperate device to try to drive down voter turnout. Although the evidence is not completely conclusive, some research finds that negative content has no effect on U.K. voters (Norris et al., 1999; Sanders & Norris, 2002), and, worse from the Conservative point of view, Pattie and Johnston (2002) suggest that negative ads may backfire on the perpetrator.

PEBs: Do They Work?

PEBs do not enjoy an enviable reputation. An Independent Television Commission (2001) survey of the 2001 election reported

Table 4.6 Negative Appeals in Party PEBs in the General Elections of 1992 through 2001

<i>Dominant Focus</i>	<i>Labour % (n)</i>	<i>Conservatives % (n)</i>	<i>Lib-Dem % (n)</i>	<i>Total % (n)</i>
Positive	67 (10)	20 (3)	75 (9)	52 (22)
Negative	27 (4)	60 (9)	0 (0)	31 (13)
Balanced	7 (1)	20 (3)	25 (3)	17 (7)

Note: Lib-Dem indicates the Liberal Democratic Party; PEB, party election broadcast.

that 57% of respondents turned off or switched channels when PEBs were announced; only 2% found them persuasive, and just 32% said they paid any attention. A survey for the Electoral Commission (2001) presents more dismal findings: 53% of viewers said PEBs were boring, 19% regarded them as dull, and just 13% thought them informative. These results are consistent over time. Audience research carried out for the broadcasting authorities in the 1980s also reported that nearly half the viewer sample found PEBs “boring” (Wober & Svennevig, 1981; Wober, Svennevig & Gunter, 1986). Market & Opinion Research International tracking surveys for the *London Times* over the three elections from 1992 to 2001 reported on each occasion that only about one third of respondents claimed some interest in party broadcasts (cited in Electoral Commission, 2003, p. 12). For all the professional expertise, PEBs have not improved their standing in public esteem.

However, these surveys also provide reasons to suggest that PEBs are potentially valuable opportunities for the parties. The Electoral Commission (2003, pp. 12-13) reported that at least one PEB was seen by between 55% and 62% of the electorate, and although this figure is down from 73% in the 1997 election, all the survey evidence indicates that PEBs still have considerable reach (also see Table 4.3). Moreover, survey respondents claimed that PEBs had been more influential on voting decisions (22%) than opinion polls (13%), posters (10%), and the Internet (4%). Only the news media rated significantly

higher. Thus, the decline thesis notwithstanding, poll evidence suggests that PEBs remain the parties’ most important direct campaign tool.

By comparison with media-commissioned surveys, there has been relatively little academic research into PEB effects since the 1960s. Blumler and McQuail’s seminal study (1968) confirmed the reinforcement thesis of media effects: PEBs appeared to have little impact on the vote of the two major parties. However, these authors also found that PEBs were important learning resources for undecided voters, that they did influence impressions of parties’ competence to govern, and that the Liberals, in particular, benefited. The more uncommitted voters were exposed to Liberal broadcasts, the better their opinion of the party. Pattie and Johnston (2002) revisited PEB effects with an analysis of panel data for the 1997 campaign. Echoing Blumler and McQuail, they found no impact on voting intentions for Labour and the Conservatives but a significant third-party effect: Viewing a Liberal Democrat broadcast increased support for the party. They plausibly explain the third-party effect by simple exposure: Elections provide the only occasions when the party receives high levels of media attention, and the near-equal ration of PEBs assists significantly in raising a third party’s profile. Pattie and Johnston also found more general PEB effects: improved assessments of leaders’ qualities and, to a lesser extent, overall opinions of parties; also, Labour PEBs (alone) reduced cynicism, encouraging viewers to agree that politicians were interested in more than just buying votes. These authors concluded: “The impact of PEBs is not

large . . . but they do have some bearing on election outcomes in Britain" (p. 355).

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING

Political advertising in the future can be expected to stay on current trend paths: increasingly personalized around leaders on the one hand, politician-free on the other, predominantly issue based, and predominantly positive. Perhaps, if Labour is the trend setter, there will be a further move to more commercial, "nonpolitical" styles and uses of genre. Negative advertising failed for the Conservatives in 2001, and there is little evidence in the United Kingdom to support the thesis that negative campaigns are more effective than positive. As the parties start to gear up for the next election, we can be certain of plenty of attack advertising, especially in print. However, it would be equally surprising if the Conservatives did not wage a more positive PEB campaign.⁷ Given declining audiences for the PEB-obliged channels, one would also expect the parties to continue to use a variety of tactics to draw news attention to their advertising. Shock and celebrity are the standards, but Labour in February 2005 gave us a taste of the future with its use of Internet interactivity. A selection of eight posters, all attacking Tory leader Michael Howard, were e-mailed to supporters, who were invited to vote for their favourite. The initiative back-fired somewhat after claims that one of the posters was a suspiciously anti-Semitic portrait of Howard. Nonetheless, the use of e-mail and Web sites for the dissemination of advertising looks set to be a new trend.

Will PEBs survive? They seem increasingly anachronistic in a multichannel world, and their chances of being seen at all will diminish as broadcast audiences fragment. They are not well regarded, and one of their major justifications—that they control campaign costs—has been removed by the imposition of

national campaign expenditure limits. For all that, they have proved remarkably resilient. They are still the parties' and broadcasters' overwhelmingly preferred alternative to paid political advertising on television, and the latter prospect is nowhere on the horizon. Public opinion, judging by poll evidence, is in favour of retaining PEBs. Even as most claim to be bored with them, a large majority says it is important that they be shown (Electoral Commission, 2003, p. 11). Moreover, and despite broadcast channel proliferation, PEBs are still the most important direct party communication with voters.

They will survive for the foreseeable future, and it is quite likely that they will be protected. In 2003, the Electoral Commission recommended to the government that the obligation to transmit party broadcasts be extended beyond the present narrow group of terrestrial channels and that any TV channel reaching a prescribed threshold of audience share be required to broadcast PEBs. The commission recommended further that parties be given more flexibility and allowed to choose between packages of fewer, longer broadcasts or more, shorter ones. Government responded positively in principle to the recommendations, although by press time it had not produced formal proposals for reform. However, the commission's recommendations seem to be proposals that the parties will find hard to resist. The future thus may well be more and shorter PPBs or PEBs, increasingly in the form of commercial advertising but without the payment. It would be a typically British compromise.

NOTES

1. The BBC operates under Royal Charter, currently renegotiated every 10 years. The charter is due for renewal in 2006. In March 2005, the government made clear that it intended to extend licence fee funding for the BBC, payable by all homes with televisions.

2. Provisions in the Representation of the People Acts ensured that no parliamentary candidate feature in television news without similar opportunity

4. Political Advertising in the United Kingdom

81

for his or her competitors. Although this rule has not applied to national leaders talking about national issues, it has been applied strictly to local constituency reports and, indeed, any themes or issues that featured candidates in a nonleadership capacity.

3. There was some minority dissent from some commercial radio organisations and from a professional association, the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (Electoral Commission, 2003, p. 42).

4. Ofcom was established by the Communications Act of 2003, and it replaced separate regulators for each of the television, radio, and telecoms sectors. The BBC continues to be regulated separately, by a board of governors whose remit is established by Royal Charter, following parliamentary debate.

5. The Advertising Standards Authority opted out of any regulatory control of political advertising following the 1997 election. It argued that it might damage the advertising industry's self-regulatory system if it were seen to have been deployed against one political party but not another. It also felt unable to rule sufficiently quickly to affect an election campaign. Thus its Codes of Practice completely exempt political advertising.

6. The commercial TV regulator is required by law to survey public attitudes about television content, including perceptions of news, its impartiality, and TV's importance as a provider of national and world information relative to newspapers and other sources. These surveys have consistently shown TV to be the most important and trusted source of national and world news.

7. Preliminary analysis of the 2005 election suggests that the Conservatives were less negative than previously, although both Labour and the Liberal Democrats were more negative.

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