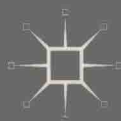




# POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN BRITAIN

The Leader Debates, the Campaign and  
the Media in the 2010 General Election

EDITED BY DOMINIC WRING,  
ROGER MORTIMORE  
AND SIMON ATKINSON



# Political Communication in Britain

## The Leader Debates, the Campaign and the Media in the 2010 General Election

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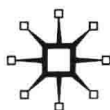
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First published 2011 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN: 978-0-230-30145-0 hardback

ISBN: 978-0-230-30146-7 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

# Political Communication in Britain

Previous volumes in this series sponsored by the UK Political Studies Association's Elections, Public Opinion and Parties Group:

*Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 1979*/edited by Robert M. Worcester and Martin Harrop. London: Allen & Unwin, 1982

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*Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 2005*/edited by Dominic Wring, Jane Green, Roger Mortimore and Simon Atkinson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007

# Preface and Acknowledgements

Since our series of books began with a volume on the 1979 election, political communication is now unquestionably a central facet of the modern democratic process, and one increasingly about strategy and not just tactics. That campaign over thirty years ago proved to be important in signalling the embrace of a more capitably intensive form of electioneering, focused on what was perceived to be an increasingly volatile and more heterogeneous voting public. Following the Conservatives' victory, the Saatchi and Saatchi brothers' agency became Britain's most famous advertisers and were indelibly linked with their client Margaret Thatcher. Intriguingly, by 2010, the same iconic firm was working for a Labour party whose leadership had once denounced the firm for debasing elections and 'selling politics like soap powder'. It should, however, be noted that the founders who had given their name to the company had long departed to form their own rival agency, M&C Saatchi, and once again found themselves advising the Conservatives during this campaign.

So-called spin doctors, image-makers, policy wonks and pollsters now play a major role in the kitchen cabinets that surround every politician aspiring to high office. Underlying this development is a desire to communicate with the public, both through direct persuasion and indirectly via the news media. However, conscious of the growing pervasiveness of what they have often dismissed as spin, journalists routinely doubt politicians as a default position. Tony Blair attacked this attitude when he bemoaned the destructive competitiveness of the contemporary media in a speech he made days before stepping down as Prime Minister in 2007. The seemingly rapacious nature of journalism was something Menzies Campbell also identified as one of the reasons for his own resignation as Liberal Democrat leader later that same year. Campbell's turned out to be a momentous decision that paved the way for the succession of Nick Clegg, a politician their predecessor Paddy Ashdown had supported for the job, citing his abilities as a communicator. The introduction of the Prime Ministerial Debates in this election turned out to be the ultimate gift for Clegg, which he gratefully exploited.

The focus on image and personality regularly informed much reporting of Tony Blair's and latterly Gordon Brown's leadership

of the government throughout Labour's third consecutive term in office. Brown's long-awaited succession to the premiership failed to stem febrile media speculation as to whether his position was secure. Inevitably, Conservative leader David Cameron attempted to exploit the Prime Minister's discomfort by presenting himself as a capable, personable alternative. He did so through a carefully orchestrated campaign over five years that was initially overseen by the marketing consultant Steve Hilton and latterly by Andy Coulson, the former editor of the best-selling paper *The News of the World*. Both advisers would join Cameron as key lieutenants overseeing strategy from 10 Downing Street. The proximity of these communications specialists to the Prime Minister is a telling feature of how both governments and elections operate in modern Britain. This volume is devoted to exploring the latter by focusing on the campaigns, debates, polling and mediation of the 2010 General Election.

We are grateful to various people for their help. Philip Cowley, David Denver, Andreas Murr, Anja Neundorf, Paul Whiteley and members of the UK Political Studies Association's Elections, Public Opinion and Parties group provided support that helped make this volume possible. All the authors have made valuable contributions and we would like to put on record our thanks for their work and involvement in producing this book. We would also like to pay tribute to Jane Green, our editorial colleague on the last edition, whose wisdom has continued to inform the series. We are grateful to Michael Cockerell and David Seawright for their support, and Jo Sheriff has been a great help to the project. Special thanks go to Tilly Wring and her friend Diane. Amber Stone-Galilee, Amy Lankester-Owen and Liz Blackmore of Palgrave Macmillan, and Vidhya Jayaprakash and her team at Newgen Imaging Systems have been patient and very helpful from the outset, and we are immensely grateful for their encouragement and dedication to continuing this unique series.

*DW, RM and SA*

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# 1

## Introduction

*Dominic Wring*

For the first time in a general election since the hung parliament of 1974 no single party emerged as the winner of the 2010 campaign. The Conservatives came first with 36.1 per cent of the vote (306 seats, up ninety-seven), Labour next on 29 per cent (258 seats, down ninety-one), the Liberal Democrats third with 23 per cent (fifty-seven seats, down five) and the rest on 11.9 per cent (twenty-nine seats, down two). In 2005 a 3 per cent margin of victory had been sufficient to enable Labour to form a government with a comfortable working majority. The electoral arithmetic this time meant that, although the Tories' lead was larger, they won fewer than half the seats necessary to govern alone. And, although a hung parliament had been widely predicted, the reality of it still appeared to come as a surprise to some commentators. What followed was a protracted period of negotiations over several days, principally involving the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, which ended in these parties agreeing to join together in a formal Coalition, the first of its kind since 1945. If this was a departure from past practice, then so was the campaign itself, given the arrival of the first ever Prime Ministerial Debates.

The UK General Election of 2010 was always going to be a different kind of campaign once the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties had agreed to participate in the Debates. That they took place at all was helped by the fact that this would be the first campaign since 1979 in which there would be three politicians fighting their first election as leader. Furthermore, each believed they could gain leverage from these broadcast encounters: David Cameron was widely viewed as the best communicator; Gordon Brown perceived that his party's trailing in the polls might be offset by his explaining his role during the economic crisis; and Nick Clegg needed little incentive to accept the invitation to