Political Communication in Britain
Titles in this series

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- J. Bartle, R. Mortimore and S. Atkinson (eds.) *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 2001* (Frank Cass)
- D. Wring, R. Mortimore and S. Atkinson (eds.) *Political Communication in Britain: The Leader Debates, the Campaign and the Media in the 2010 General Election 2010* (Palgrave Macmillan)
- D. Wring, R. Mortimore and S. Atkinson (eds.) *Political Communication in Britain: Polling, Campaigning and Media in the 2015 General Election Campaign* (Palgrave Macmillan)
Dominic Wring · Roger Mortimore
Simon Atkinson
Editors

Political Communication in Britain

Campaigning, Media and Polling in the 2017 General Election
This volume marks the tenth instalment of a series that has charted the evolution of political communication in Britain over the last four decades. Collectively the books cover a period that saw both Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair each win three successive elections, the Liberal Democrat (and their antecedents’) surge and eventual fall away, as well as breakthroughs for once marginal forces like the SNP, UKIP and the Greens. Allied to this there have been significant developments in the way campaigns are conducted and cumulatively this series provides invaluable insights here from the vantage point of those most responsible for pioneering strategic and tactical innovations. The transformation of electiioneering is closely entwined with changes in the reporting and polling of elections, two other subjects that have featured prominently in the Political Communications books. Successive volumes demonstrate how news coverage of campaigns has evolved during an era in which broadcast and newspaper journalists have experienced a significant challenge to their past dominance. Central to this has been a fragmentation in audiences for mainstream print and television news that once provided voters with most of their information about rival parties, leaders and policies. This in turn has led the polling industry to experiment with new methods to cope with the growing complexities of understanding how (and if) the public engages with the contemporary electoral process.

Like its predecessor volumes this book offers comment and analysis on the momentous event that was the 2017 General Election. It is fair to say that although several previous elections may have been a tad
predictable, even relatively uneventful, they remain important to study because cumulatively these campaigns provide insights into the continuities and changes in political communication. The 2017 race was both interesting and innovative for reasons explored in this book. When any election is called it piques media if not necessarily public interest even though, in this case, most opinion forming commentators concluded the outcome was in little doubt: Theresa May and the Conservatives were assumed to be on course to a comfortable victory with the only uncertainty being the size of her majority. Successive polling figures and results from the local elections held just after the campaign began reinforced this perception. There had been surprise when the characteristically cautious May had reneged on her promise not go to the country before the current parliament had run its course in 2020. But this was as nothing to the shock felt when it became clear that the Prime Minister had gambled and lost her Commons’ majority. It was an unenviable position to be in for a once seemingly unassailable leader now trying to govern an already complex Brexit process.

The editors are very grateful to numerous people for their help. On this anniversary marking our tenth volume we would like to pay a special tribute to past contributors and, in particular, our predecessors who have served on the editorial team: John Bartle, Ivor Crewe, Brian Gosschalk, Jane Green, Martin Harrop and lastly, and by no means least, Bob Worcester who did so much to support the Political Communications series following its inception. We are delighted to present chapters from a varied group of practitioners and academics that collectively explain and analyse what happened. Each contribution brings a different perspective in addition to offering invaluable insights into this most fascinating of campaigns. We are extremely grateful to our authors for their efforts. We would also like to express our gratitude to the following: Andrew Chadwick, Jon Crannage, Dipesh Dhimar, Klara Isaiah, Rachel Mackenzie, Olly Swanton, Dane Vincent, Denise Wade, Xing Wang and Judy Wing of Loughborough University. Thanks to Helen Tighe of the University’s Institute for Advanced Studies; Jim Kelleher and Suzanne Owens of Ipsos MORI; and Ric Bailey, Sydney Budgeon, Chris Carman, Ivor Gaber, Erik Geddes, Gaby Hinsliff, Dan Holden, Dan Jackson, Michael Jermey, Dennis Kavanagh, Adam Langleben, Kerry-Ann Mendoza, Darren Mott, Anthony Mughan, Charles Pattie, Mike
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The 2017 General Election will live longer in the popular memory than many recent campaigns. It provided another dramatic outcome comparable to that of the Brexit referendum and the American presidential race in the preceding twelve months. If the victories of Leave and Donald Trump stunned most commentators, this election also confounded the many who had predicted its result was a foregone conclusion from the start. There was a prevailing consensus that Theresa May’s calling of the election would deliver the new Prime Minister a landslide victory. Such a result would cement her hitherto commanding reputation as an assured politician who could get things done. As May said in justifying her sudden announcement, a decisive public vote of confidence from the electorate was vital for her and her government going forward into the potentially fraught negotiations over the country’s withdrawal.
from the EU. Seasoned observers predicted this would therefore be the ‘Brexit election’ albeit, they surmised, without the drama and unpredictability of the referendum campaign. But when the exit poll was broadcast on election night it contradicted most expert predictions by correctly anticipating voters would return the second hung parliament in a decade and only the third since the Second World War. Speaking after the full results were known, the broadcaster Jon Snow confessed he ‘knows nothing’ such was the shock of what had just happened. It was a remarkable climax to a frenetic seven weeks of campaigning and one that left the future direction of British politics and government in some considerable doubt.

Theresa May and the Conservatives received the largest UK wide vote share of 42.4%, up from 36.9% in 2015, and ordinarily this would have been enough to secure a commanding majority in the House of Commons. But with only 317 MPs returned, the party was down 13 seats and thereby forfeited the right to form a government on its own. This was because the growth of support for Jeremy Corbyn and Labour in successive polls during the campaign materialized on election day, securing them 40.0% of the vote. The Parliamentary Labour Party grew from 232 to 262 seats in the Commons and thereby denied May her widely anticipated majority. The Scottish National Party (with 35 MPs, down from 56 in 2015, on a UK wide 3.0% share of the vote this time) and Liberal Democrats (12, up from 8 seats, on a 7.4% share) came third place in terms of seats and votes won respectively in a disappointing outcome for both. The election also marked a setback for the Greens who retained their sole existing seat but fell back in terms of vote share. More spectacularly UKIP suffered a haemorrhage in support in the aftermath of a Brexit referendum that had delivered on their core demand for British withdrawal from the EU. Northern Ireland’s main parties fared better with both the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein further asserting their electoral dominance within the province. The 10 DUP MPs would subsequently provide Theresa May with the vital support necessary to ensure she continued as Prime Minister after her electoral setback.¹

¹This volume focuses on what might be called process aspects of this General Election as others in our series have traditionally done. The book also complements others that have appeared on the 2017 campaign, each taking a distinct focus of its own. *The British General Election of 2017* offers a comprehensive account of a dramatic election, drawing on interviews with many of the key people involved (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018). *Britain Votes*
The Road to 2017: Brexit and Its Aftermath

Theresa May’s calling of a snap election surprised the large numbers of professional pundits who comment on politics. It proved to be a bold move for a politician hitherto noted for a cautious approach that had served her well in her ascent to the highest office. Previously May had repeatedly denied that she would go to the country and seek her own parliamentary mandate in place of the slender one she had inherited from David Cameron. The Prime Minister had originally emerged as Cameron’s most likely successor following his resignation in the aftermath of Remain’s defeat in the 2016 Brexit referendum. The subsequently truncated contest for the Conservative leadership involved only two rounds of voting among MPs and confirmed May’s frontrunner status as various pro-Leave figures vied to present themselves as credible alternatives. Despite her previous support for Remain, the Home Secretary’s reputation only grew as those of rival candidates Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and Andrea Leadsom suffered under intense media scrutiny. They and others bowed to the seemingly inevitable and were voted out or withdrew from the race, enabling May to be anointed leader and the new Prime Minister.

Theresa May’s coronation and her declaration that ‘Brexit means Brexit’ helped the Conservatives avoid a potentially protracted leadership contest that had threatened to reignite the divisions over Europe that had long divided the party. By contrast Labour was convulsed by the fallout from the Brexit referendum despite having outwardly promoted a relatively united pro-Remain message during the campaign. Party leader Jeremy Corbyn came under sustained criticism that led to a major challenge from his parliamentary colleagues. An unprecedented number of frontbenchers resigned in protest at what they claimed had been Corbyn’s ineffectual campaigning on behalf of Remain, a charge he himself denied. A no confidence ballot of Labour MPs calling on him to contains a wide-range of chapters on all aspects of the election including the rival parties, voter behaviour, key debates and how the campaign affected the different constituent parts of the UK be they geographical or demographic (Tonge et al. 2017). The Britain at the Polls volume is especially useful in setting the varying fortunes of the contending parties in the dramatic context of the last two years (Allen and Bartle 2018). Betting the House offers a journalistic account of what happened (Ross and McTague 2017) while Steve Howell, a campaign advisor working for Jeremy Corbyn, offers his perspective on Labour’s dramatic recovery and is suitably entitled Game Changer (Howell 2017).
resign was passed by a large margin, but the leader refused to step down, having been emboldened by extra-parliamentary support from the party grassroots and trades union affiliates. In a critical showdown Labour’s National Executive Committee narrowly allowed Corbyn to participate in a new leadership contest forced by his opponents. After a protracted debate a majority on the NEC agreed that incumbency negated the need for the leader to attract the requisite number of fresh nominations from MPs he might have found difficult to obtain. The National Executive vote over whether the leader should be able to defend his position against eventual challenger Owen Smith proved closer than the subsequent ballot of members which overwhelmingly returned Corbyn by a slightly larger margin than in his initial victory of 2015.

Against all prior expectations, including those of his supporters, Jeremy Corbyn had won the 2015 leadership contest following the resignation of Ed Miliband. First elected in 1983, the veteran left-winger and anti-austerity campaigner had struggled to gather sufficient nominations from fellow MPs and only got on the ballot paper by gaining several endorsements from non-supporters who thought his inclusion would broaden the debate over Labour’s future. Corbyn subsequently articulated a message that found huge resonance with the large numbers who swelled the ranks of the party and contributed to his extraordinary campaign. This gave him the momentum that proved unstoppable as he overcame former Cabinet ministers Andy Burnham and Yvette Cooper as well as Liz Kendall to triumph in the first ballot with just under 60% of the votes. And although comfortably re-elected leader in 2016, many of his internal critics remained hostile to Corbyn’s vision, believing he was turning Labour into what several of them complained was ‘a party of protest not power’.

Theresa May’s initial experiences as party leader could not have been more different to those of Jeremy Corbyn. The new Prime Minister enjoyed consistently favourable coverage from her many supporters in the press and this proved useful in maintaining a sense of unity and purpose within government, particularly during the initial negotiations regarding Brexit. This comparatively calm period in office made what subsequently happened during the 2017 campaign all the more of a surprise, wrong-footing the many commentators who believed there would be a landslide Conservative victory. Unfortunately for May the election she herself had called marked the period where her fortunes abruptly changed—for the worse. Despite having had the element of surprise and
having also reassembled the team of strategists who had guided the party to success two years before, the Conservative leader appeared underprepared for the weeks ahead that would come to define her premiership.

The travails surrounding the Conservative and Labour leaderships dominated the political landscape between the elections of 2015 and 2017 to the detriment of other parties vying for exposure. Following the extraordinary media phenomenon of ‘Cleggmania’ in 2010, new leader Tim Farron struggled to attract attention for the Liberal Democrats in the aftermath of their electoral rout in 2015. The party hoped 2017 would enable them to recoup much lost ground (see Chapter “The Liberal Democrat Campaign”), buoyed by a performance in the local elections that was their best since joining the Coalition government in 2010. The by-election capture of Richmond Park from Zak Goldsmith in December 2016 had also boosted their confidence and hopes that they could make gains in this campaign through virtue of being the only major party that unequivocally opposed Brexit.

Some parties approached this election with considerable anxiety and none more so than UKIP who had won an eighth of the vote in 2015 under Nigel Farage’s leadership when the demand for a referendum on EU membership had been very much a live issue. But the party found it difficult to re-establish a raison d’être now that the vote for Brexit had been won. It also didn’t help that Farage’s immediate successor Diane James stepped down as leader days after having been elected to the post in September 2016. Under James’ replacement Paul Nuttall, UKIP suffered sweeping losses in the local elections and it became clear that in many constituencies they would not nominate a candidate for the general election. Since Theresa May was appealing for a mandate to implement Brexit it seemed reasonable to expect much of party’s votes might swing to the Conservatives. Labour candidates in seats that had delivered a “Leave” majority in the referendum, particularly in the North of England, were reportedly nervous that the Tories could be poised to capitalize from UKIP’s demise.

If the Tories’ positioning weakened UKIP, a more radically inclined Labour party presented an obvious threat to the Greens now jointly led by their only MP Caroline Lucas. The similarly left-leaning Scottish National Party also faced a potentially stronger challenge from a reinvigorated Corbyn led opposition having previously won 50% of the votes in Scotland and all but three of the seats in 2015. It would be a difficult feat to repeat, particularly as the party and leader Nicola Sturgeon, now in power at Holyrood, were receiving lower ratings for their performance
than they had two years before. The First Minister had recently called for a second referendum on Scottish independence in the aftermath of the UK wide vote for Brexit. While the country had supported Remain, voters were more divided over separatism and the issue contributed to the resurgence of the Scottish Conservatives under their youthful, pro-unionist leader Ruth Davidson. Together with a modest recovery by Labour in one of its former traditional heartlands it made it more difficult to predict the electoral outcome north of the border.

**Foregone Conclusion? The Voters Decide**

When Theresa May called the election, most observers believed her government would be returned with a substantially increased majority. The opinion polls at the time were almost unanimous in giving the Conservatives a lead of twenty or more percentage points and there was widespread speculation that Labour might be facing a more devastating defeat than in the nadir that was the election of 1983. The assumption that May was on course for victory, possibly by a landslide, was shared by many in the Conservative dominated press as well as several despondent Labour candidates, some of whom argued May’s calling of an election should and could have been more forcefully resisted. The local elections on 4 May appeared to confirm such fears when Labour received the national equivalent vote share of just 28%, the worst performance by the opposition in the years these figures have been calculated including those during the leadership of Michael Foot in the early 1980s. Writing two weeks later Trevor Kavanagh, Associate Editor of *The Sun* (22 May), was still confidently predicting that: ‘Mrs May will have to settle for a paltry 94 (majority)… don’t worry she’ll do much better than that’. What came next, however, completely confounded most commentators’ initial expectations as to what would happen, producing one of the most dramatic election campaigns and certainly one that generated some of the largest recorded movements in the polls.

During the seven week long campaign Labour increased its support from an average 26% share of the vote in the polls immediately after the election was called to 41% in the eventual result, the biggest sustained

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2These figures measure share of the vote in Great Britain, as is the practice of almost all opinion polls; the share of the vote for the whole United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland where Labour runs no candidates, is slightly lower.
movement in party support during a British election campaign in at least three-quarters of a century. Much of this movement was evident at the time from the opinion polls, although most of the polls significantly under-estimated Labour’s final vote and there was still a general expectation of a clear Conservative victory on election night; with the benefit of hindsight, and the help of further data, it is possible to observe a clearer picture of what happened. Although the Conservatives lost support during the campaign, their losses were much more moderate than Labour’s gains and in fact they achieved a substantial increase in their total vote compared to the previous election. They lost some votes to Labour, especially among those who had voted “Remain” in the referendum, but picked up other votes from Labour among “Leavers”, and direct switching from Conservative to Labour probably made a relatively small net contribution to the overall swing.

The polling in this campaign followed on from the 2015 debacle when none of the final polls by the major research companies had anticipated the Conservatives winning an outright majority. This time around, the overwhelming consensus among the published polls was that the Tories were on course to win handsomely if not by a landslide (see Chapter “The Polls in 2017” on the performance of the polls). There were two notable outliers whose findings pointed to the eventual result. Survation’s final poll indicated Labour would secure at least 40% of the vote and that this was likely to lead to another hung parliament (see Chapter “‘Yer Jaiket Is Hanging by a Shooglie Peg!’: Fear, Groupthink and Outliers”). YouGov research also suggested a potential upset was on its way. Despite headline voting intention figures in line with those of rival companies, the firm also used new statistical techniques to make detailed constituency-level projections that surprised commentators and even attracted ridicule. Significantly these studies forecast possible Labour victories in the previously safe Conservative seats of Canterbury and Kensington, and, overall, also pointed to a hung parliament.

The turnout in 2017 was the highest for some years, and this was an important element in the swing: most of these new voters voted Labour. Early post-election estimates of the vote suggested a dramatic increase in the turnout of 18–24 year olds: this “youthquake” was interpreted in some quarters as the primary and even sole explanation for Labour’s near success, and there was much discussion of how much it owed to developments in the party’s campaigning practices so as to reach and win over young voters more effectively. But data from the British Election Study has since cast doubt on whether there was really a significant rise
in turnout among the youngest group, suggesting this factor is not so crucial to explaining the increase in Labour’s vote. More importantly there is, however, agreement that Labour achieved a greatly increased share among those younger citizens who did vote, not only as regards the 18–24 year olds but within all age groups under 45. The so-called ‘youthquake’ might be better termed a ‘youthful quake’ and this more than offset the swing of older voters to the Conservatives by giving Labour a higher share of the vote among the younger age groups than for many years; age is, for the moment, the clearest dividing line in British voting behaviour (for further analysis of this see Chapter “Seismographs for Youthquakes—How Do We Know How the Public Voted in British General Elections?”).

One of the most prominent aspects of political communications in modern elections is the publication of opinion polls. At the simplest level, they can make up a significant part of the subject matter that is reported by the media, especially the voting intention polls whose measurements allow coverage of the “horserace”, which is sometimes the biggest part of the media’s narrative (see Chapter “Why Polling Matters: The Role of Data in Our Democracy”). They also allow the voters a channel of communication with the parties, giving feedback on what is being done and said, which can sometimes prompt changes in the conduct of a campaign. Further, they can be agenda setters, influencing understanding of the context in which the election is being fought, which comes to be reflected in the way journalists frame their stories and in how editors distinguish the important from the unimportant whether reporting events, issues or personalities. An important part of that context, of course, is the standing of the parties, which may have implications for the very meaning of the votes that will be cast. Somewhat paradoxically, the criticism of the polls arising from their collective failure to anticipate what came as a surprising result in 2015 meant there was less noticeable reporting of their findings in 2017 and yet the headline trend, suggesting the Conservatives were on course to win, still clearly informed a great deal of the media coverage.

Because of the shift in party support over the seven weeks of the campaign, there has arguably never been a modern British election in which the political context changed so dramatically between the opening manoeuvres and polling day. In April, it seemed almost certain that the government would win easily, and that a vote for Labour was a vote to restrict the increase in Theresa May’s majority; seven weeks later the Conservative lead had evaporated and a vote for Labour was, in a very meaningful sense, an endorsement of Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister. Without the opinion polls, the voters would have had only the
judgments of the journalists and the claims of the politicians on which to base their understanding of the contest in which they were participating. But although they reflected the direction of movement during the campaign correctly, many polls under-estimated the final Labour vote and left most observers expecting a Conservative majority rather than the hung parliament that followed. One of the main talking points of the 2017 election was, once again, the discrepancy between the final projections of the polls and the results as they emerged on election night (for further commentary on this see Chapter “Election Night: The View from Sky News”).

TRADING PLACES: A TALE OF TWO LEADERS

Announcing the election against the backdrop of Downing Street, the Prime Minister pointedly used the term ‘strong and stable’ three times in her brief speech. But an obvious problem in communicating the party’s message became self-evident once Theresa May began campaigning. Her seeming over reliance on (and yet apparent awkwardness in repeating) the party’s core slogan ‘Strong and Stable in the National Interest’ detracted from the impression strategists wanted her to convey. If the phrase made for potentially decent print advertising copy it sounded unconvincing when uttered by the leader herself. May’s robotic use of the words in speeches and a Party Election Broadcast might not have mattered had the ensuing campaign turned out differently. But it would subsequently prove near impossible to avoid the slogan given it adorned all aspects of the party’s election branding together with the leader’s personal battlebus. The Prime Minister’s central rationale for asking the public to give her an endorsement to strengthen her hand in forthcoming negotiations over Brexit was also not without problems in that it placed considerable emphasis on telling the electorate what they could do for her government, rather than primarily what her government could do for the country.

When the Prime Minister opted not to participate in the face to face leader debates this sent out a contradictory message from a politician who had explicitly stood on a platform of being ‘strong’. May’s strategists had likely calculated appearing in a televised encounter was an unnecessary risk because of the Conservative lead in the polls and given the format could boost the prominence of rival politicians in the way it had Nick Clegg and Nicola Sturgeon in 2010 and 2015 respectively. The Prime Minister explained her refusal to appear in the televised debates
(that attracted millions of viewers) was because she preferred to meet the public and listen to what they had to say. But this claim was undermined by news footage of her on the campaign trail knocking on doors and receiving no response. When May did meet a member of the public in her one of her rare campaign encounters with a voter in Oxfordshire it was to receive criticism of the government’s welfare policies.

Theresa May’s approach to campaigning revolved around making short speeches to supporters in controlled locations in the hope of generating favourable photo-opportunities and media exposure. The format suited May’s style but produced predictable copy and staid images (see Chapter “‘Strong and Stable’ to ‘Weak and Wobbly’: The Conservative Election Campaign”). This might not have mattered so much but for the drama that unfolded in the aftermath of the Conservative manifesto launch. Initially the document had been praised as an effective programme for government which marked a break with the past and a new direction for the party and country. This narrative soon changed when ordinarily supportive commentators in newspapers like the Mail and Telegraph criticized the party’s proposals relating to social care provision for the elderly. The policy was attacked for its potentially negative impact on people seen as natural Conservative supporters who had saved prudently to become home owners.

Although it took a weekend for the implications of this manifesto pledge to get fully picked up, May’s response failed to assuage doubts about the proposal. The Prime Minister subsequently claimed her clarification of the policy did not amount to the change many media commentators and others were calling it. But the veteran observer of British elections, Sir David Butler saw it differently, tweeting “In the 20 general election campaigns I’ve followed, I can’t remember a U-turn on this scale – or much that could be called a U-turn at all.” The overall impact of this incident was to raise significant doubts as to whether the apparently panicked May was as ‘strong and stable’ as her slogan suggested (for discussion of voter reactions see Chapter “An Ever-Changing Mood: Qualitative Research and the 2017 Election Campaign”).

May’s initial spell in Downing Street prior to the election had gone well if judged by successive polls on her leadership, the party’s standing and the government’s handling of Brexit. The campaign brought this to a humiliating end and in the most highly public of ways. The confusion over what became known as the ‘dementia tax’ caused significant problems for an incumbent who had called an election because of her desire, as she explained, to guarantee ‘strong and stable leadership with me in the national interest where what you see is what you get’ before warning
the alternative would be a ‘coalition of chaos under Jeremy Corbyn’. This gamble ultimately failed in that it denied her the large majority she craved although the Conservatives’ standing in the polls never collapsed. Rather what successive opinion surveys picked up was the narrowing of the Tory lead over Labour, the only other party with a realistic chance of forming a government. For their part Jeremy Corbyn and his colleagues appeared to benefit from a surge in enthusiasm from among their core voters and younger people including students. Corbyn’s own support network Momentum played a role in cultivating this support (Chapter “Movement-Led Electoral Campaigning: Momentum in the 2017 General Election”). Growing confidence and an outbreak of unity in Labour was reinforced by a distinctive and broadly well received manifesto which included pledges on housing, education and the NHS that collectively marked a break with the prevailing pro-austerity consensus (see Chapter “The Labour Campaign”). The document’s title ‘For the Many, Not the Few’ also provided the party’s main campaigning slogan.

The 2017 election was a turning point for a Jeremy Corbyn now liberated from having to defend his leadership on a regular basis including, by coincidence, on ITV Good Morning Britain a couple of hours before May announced the election would be taking place. When asked by presenter Piers Morgan to name one mistake he had made, Corbyn disarmed his interviewer by saying he couldn’t because there were ‘too many’. This lightness of touch would prove an asset in the coming weeks. Corbyn clearly benefitted from his considerable experience as a campaigner although he was not as central to his party’s branding as May was to hers, perhaps an acknowledgement that his personal ratings trailed those of the Prime Minister. But perceptions of both were about to change, and it would be the Labour leader who emerged stronger and more stable from this election. During the early stages of the campaign Corbyn was compared with Michael Foot, a fellow left-winger who had been leader when the former was first elected an MP. The spectre of 1983 was invoked by several commentators who saw parallels with that landslide defeat and one they believed was again about to befall Labour. But rather than 2017 heralding another meltdown, the leader was met with seemingly genuine enthusiasm wherever he appeared.

Like Michael Foot, Jeremy Corbyn wanted to take his message out directly to the electorate by addressing large crowds in public gatherings as part of an attempt to bypass impartial broadcasters and the largely hostile press. Such events appeared even more compelling because of their apparent spontaneity and an authenticity that set them apart from
the rival gatherings involving May, not to mention most Labour leaders since Foot. The sheer scale of the crowds also acted as a buffer against interventions by detractors that might have otherwise diverted the focus away from the goodwill being generated. Corbyn’s reception provided favourable images that repeatedly went viral on social media and cumulatively helped underline his growing credibility as an alternative prime minister rather than, as mainstream news media had often framed him, a beleaguered leader of the opposition.

GAME CHANGERS? THE RIVAL MEDIA

Jeremy Corbyn had been the significant beneficiary of social media in his successful campaign for the party leadership. When neither of the two Labour sympathizing national newspapers endorsed him in the 2015 contest, potential Corbyn backers could look beyond the *Guardian* and *Mirror* to a burgeoning range of web-based sources for more supportive commentary and analysis about him. The new online platforms that either emerged or grew during that campaign helped the veteran left-winger win and then defend his position in the 2016 leadership race. This experience helped forge an independent network of supportive sites including The Canary, Another Angry Voice, Skwawkbox, Evolve Politics, London Economic and Novara Media. These and a myriad of other like-minded web-based operations proved valuable to Labour going into the 2017 election because they facilitated the swift mobilization of activists who were able to rapidly share messages and memes on Facebook, Twitter and elsewhere throughout the seven-week-long campaign (Chapter “Alternative Media: A New Factor in Electoral Politics?”). In one notable post, the leader was seen in conversation with musical artist JME in a widely circulated video that urged people to register to vote. This and other encounters between Corbyn and celebrities popular among the young appeared more natural when compared to the contrived meeting between his predecessor Ed Miliband and eventual endorser Russell Brand in 2015 (see Chapter “#GE2017: Digital Media and the Campaigns”).

In the two years since the 2015 election there has been a rapid development in online news be it of a mainstream or alternative character, and whether it was attached to a traditional provider. Prominent among the latter, established brands were the *Guardian* and *Mail* who had successfully pioneered UK originated digital platforms, albeit with much American oriented content (Chapter “Alternative Agendas or More of the Same? Online News Coverage of the 2017 UK Election” includes a study of these and other sites). Familiar media organizations like the *Mirror* and *Sun*
have also invested resources in their web content as their print sales have declined. The increasingly varied market for news has been further complicated by growth in online only sites including those likely to appeal more to younger adult audiences and that have taken a specific interest in reporting on British politics such as Huffington Post, Vice and BuzzFeed.

The 2015 election and 2016 referendum underlined the apparent potency of the traditionally partisan national newspaper despite the marked reduction in hard copy sales. Like the previous campaign, 2017 saw another concerted attempt by pro-Conservative titles like the *Sun, Mail* and *Express* to question and undermine the credibility of the Labour leadership (Chapter “A Tale of Two Parties: Press and Television Coverage of the Campaign”). Corbyn was accused of being an apologist for, or even a supporter of, various groups involved in political violence. This potentially mattered because these and other print newspapers remain popular with older people, the age demographic traditionally most likely to exercise their right to vote. The press also has a still enduring significance beyond its immediate readership in that it can and does influence the wider news agenda (Chapter “The Agenda-Setting Role of Newspapers in the UK 2017 Elections”). The most obvious example of this are the dedicated slots that are routinely given over by the major radio and television outlets to reviewing stories that originate from paper copies of the said publications.

Partisan press content can and does shape media narratives that inform how leading politicians are treated by broadcasters (for a wider discussion of how television covered the election, see Chapters “Broadcasting the Snap Election: Surprising Politics but Familiar Production” and “BBC Campaign Coverage Policy”). At the outset of the campaign the veteran BBC journalist David Dimbleby joined more radical commentators in expressing concern over what he suggested had been the excessively critical mainstream news coverage of Jeremy Corbyn. Nonetheless Corbyn subsequently found himself repeatedly questioned over his past links with various causes including in his main set-piece interrogations by the BBC’s Andrew Neil and Sophy Ridge of Sky News. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically an increasingly confident Labour leader was able to defend his record when dealing with such robust questioning whereas Theresa May attracted varying degrees of ridicule for her awkward responses to seemingly innocuous queries from ITV’s Julie Etchingham and other journalists about her formative experiences and personal life during supposedly ‘soft’, human interest orientated interviews on network television. This performance, together with her decision not to debate opponents live on air, detracted from May’s attempt to portray herself as a strong leader and despite
appearances in more conventional programming where she appeared to cope better when being interrogated by Neil, Ridge and the other leading interviewers.

**STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK**

This volume is divided into three main sections, each devoted to the media, campaigning and polling aspects of the election. The first section of the book, focusing on how the race was covered, is introduced by a piece from the Loughborough University team who monitored the mainstream print and television news organizations’ outputs during the campaign. David Deacon and his colleagues provide a comprehensive assessment of the issues and personalities that defined this election. In marked contrast to 2015, reporting of the 2017 race was dominated by the two major parties and particularly their leaders Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn to a far greater degree. Coverage of the so-called ‘electoral process’ was once again to the fore but not as much as last time, reflecting the way Labour’s leaked manifesto together with the Conservative’s ‘dementia tax’ problems helped boost reporting of policy related matters. Significantly the fallout from the debate over May’s social care plans led to some Tory supporting press titles to briefly switch from attacking Corbyn to criticizing the government. And despite the recency of the EU referendum, and the related controversy over immigration, this topic was not as dominant as some predicted at the beginning of the campaign. This reflected the way other issues, such as security in the aftermath of the Manchester Arena and London Bridge attacks, asserted themselves on the news agenda.

The media section of the book features three contributions that complement one another by focusing on different aspects of the news services provided by the main television channels. In his chapter ITV Political Correspondent Paul Brand reflects on his experiences covering a surprise election and an ensuing campaign that would have ordinarily been the subject of considerable planning. The piece notes the extent to which 2017 was dominated by the two major parties to the exclusion of rivals that had enjoyed far more coverage in 2015. The contrasting approaches of the Conservatives and Labour to journalists are discussed: whereas Theresa May tended to be remote and guarded in her carefully controlled appearances, Jeremy Corbyn appeared to be more accessible and expansive in the various open public meetings he attended. Paul Brand also acknowledges the impact of other factors on the campaign,