

Did Anything Happen During The Campaign?
If So, What?
Which Party Fought The Best Campaign?

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The starting point in considering what, if anything, happened during the campaign is probably a comparison between the state of the parties when the starting gun was fired on 5th April, and what they were saying one month later.

The campaign started a day late because of the funeral of Pope John Paul II. Four start-of-campaign polls were published and, as can be seen from the chart below, when these are compared to the final eve-of-election polls, the short answer to the question posed in our title is 'not a lot'.

Labour lead:

4/5 April polls	4/5 May polls	Actual result
3	6	3
3	3	
2	6	
-5	4	
	5	
	5	

In fact, with the exception of just two lonely polls, Labour retained a permanent lead throughout the whole campaign.

This has been described as the second most boring election in living memory, reflected perhaps in the fact that turnout was the second lowest since 1918.

However, we can identify *some* distinct phases of the election which at times came dangerously close to becoming interesting, especially – as we shall see – at its start.

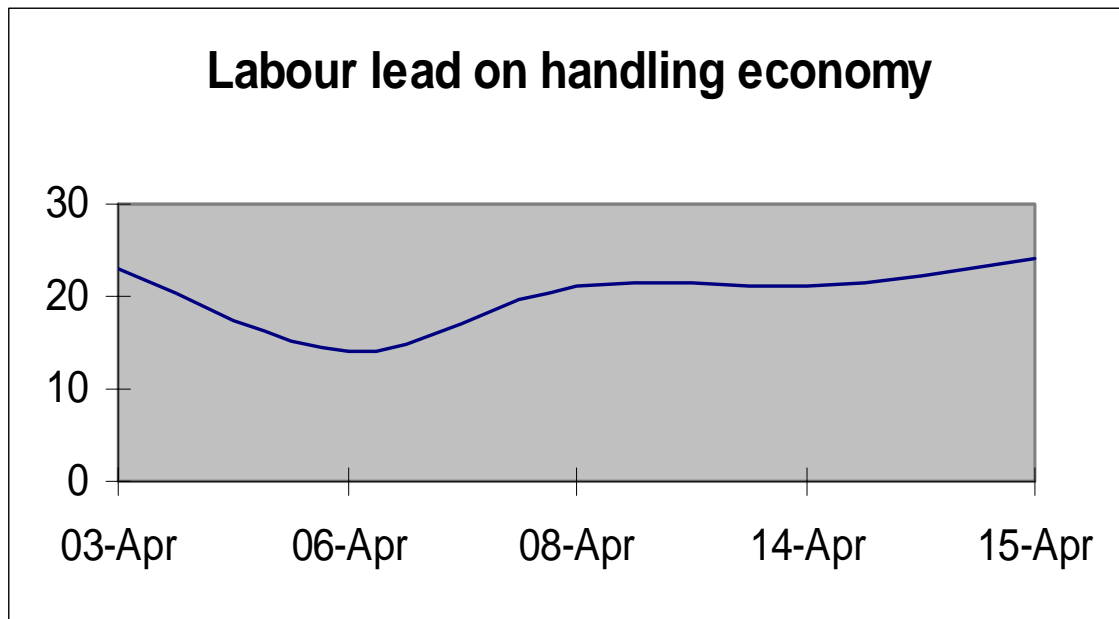
But I'd like to split what I propose to say into three parts – first, to remind us about what happened during the campaign itself; secondly to try to correlate if we can some of the key events of the campaign against what was going on in the polls at the time, and thirdly to look at some of the other indicators which appear to have driven voting intention, and to consider from each of these elements which party fought the best campaign.

So, before looking in detail at the impact that events during the campaign may have had on polls published at the time, here is a quick reminder of what each of the main parties' campaigns looked & felt like at the time.

The campaigns at a glance

All the parties fought their campaign pretty cautiously. The Tories and Labour in particular sought to retain and consolidate their core vote positions (although the Tories' polling adviser subsequently denied this), rather than trying seriously to appeal to each others' supporters. The Lib Dems, by contrast, were out to grab vote share from wherever they could, and especially from Labour.

This is of course an over-simplification, and in particular overlooks the difference between what each of the parties achieved in the so-called 'air war' of national campaigning, and what happened in marginal constituencies where their ground troops were deployed.



For Labour the priority was to hammer home the key message of continued investment in public services, security and above all economic stability and competence. It seems to have worked since, as the chart above shows, their lead over the Tories as the party expected to do the best job in managing the economy remained fairly constant and, apart from the period at the start of the campaign, Labour remained about 20 points ahead of the Tories on this measure.



The economy aside, from day one Tony Blair and his team were eager to stress that the election was a stark choice between them and Michael Howard, with frequent references to the "bad old days" of the last Tory government.



Their campaign started with a controversial and disputed claim that the Tories would make £35 billion cuts in public services, followed by a manifesto launch which put the emphasis wholly on the team and off the prime minister.



Then there was the so-called TBGB roadshow - the joining at the hip of the prime minister and Gordon Brown who, on the war in particular, spectacularly supported Mr Blair and, into the bargain, probably cemented his position as leader-in-waiting. It ended with another team event and a repeat of the warnings that had grown during the campaign that a protest vote for the Liberal Democrats or a stay-at-home by Labour supporters would put the Tories into power through the back door.

Michael Howard, meanwhile, started his campaign with the slogan "Are you thinking what we're thinking?" and suggested it was time to wipe the smirk of Tony Blair's face.

Imagine 5 more years of it.

Violent crime soars but
Labour puts gloss on it

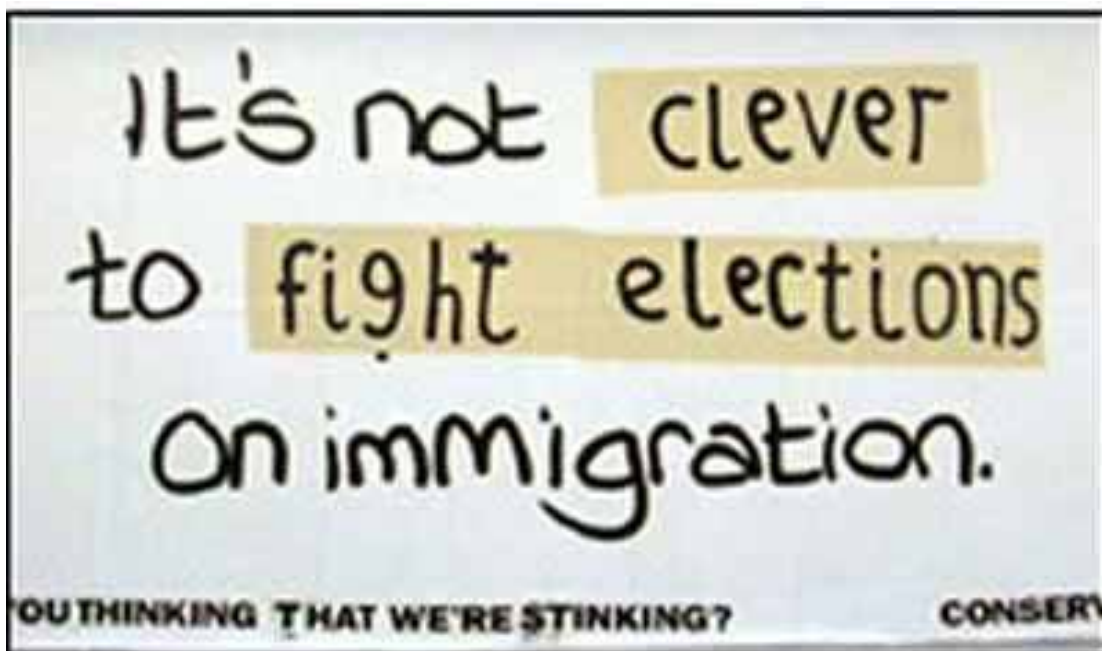
Daily Telegraph, 22 October 2004

ARE YOU THINKING WHAT WE'RE THINKING? VOTE CONSERVATIVE

Mr Howard sought to drive home five key themes of lower taxes, school discipline, controlled immigration, more police and cleaner hospitals combined with the controversial attack on Tony Blair as a liar, on Iraq and previous election pledges. However, Mr Howard also found himself accused of concentrating too much on immigration and appealing to people's fears on the issue, as well as personalising the contest.



Half way through the campaign he appeared to switch tack with a new slogan, "taking a stand on the issues that matter", and calls for voters to send a message to Tony Blair. But throughout the campaign, it was perhaps the 'are you thinking what we're thinking' slogan that caught what little public attention there was towards the election, and this also gave graffiti artists a field day.



Prior to the campaign there were huge expectations on the Liberal Democrats, in part encouraged by what we can now judge to be excessively optimistic statements by some of their own front benchers. But Labour in particular were right to be fearful of them, since much of the movement in the polls since last October had been due to people swinging from Labour to the Lib Dems and back again. In retrospect it seems unlikely that the Liberal Democrats' objective of decapitation in key Tory seats could ever have worked, but that's with the benefit of hindsight.



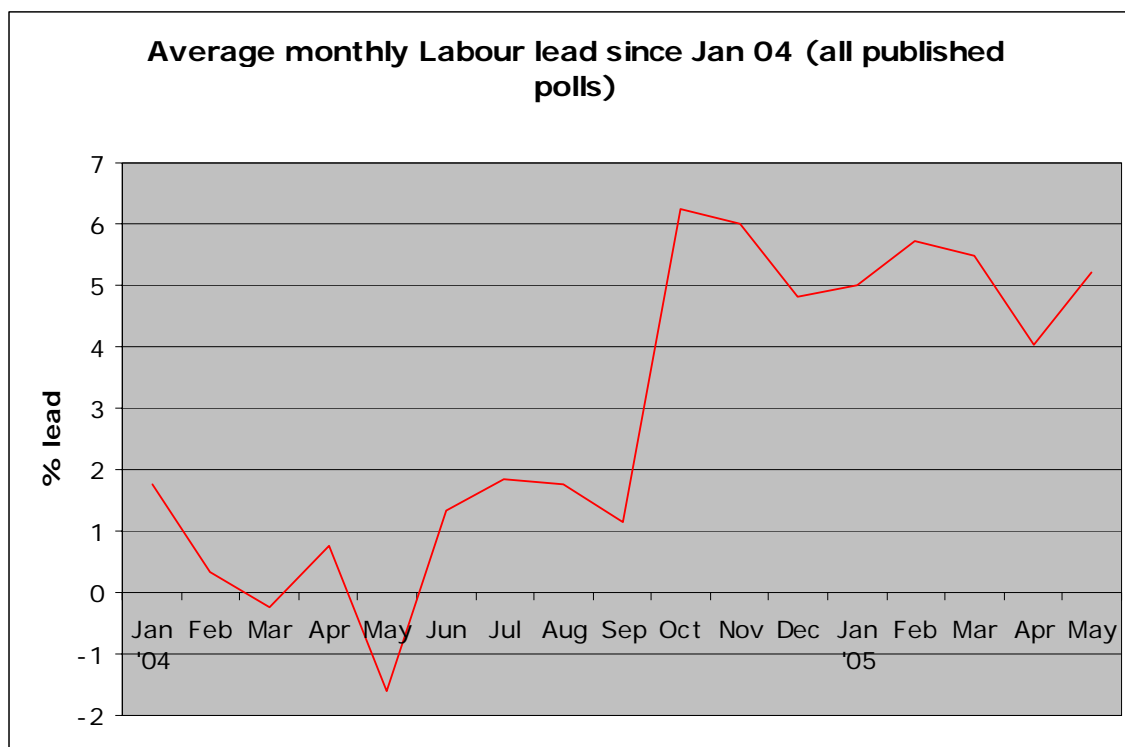
The Liberal Democrats do however take the prize for one of the few entertaining moments of the election, when Charles Kennedy forgot the details of his own tax policy and blamed his confusion on sleep deprivation caused by young son Donald.

He avoided the temptation to call Tony Blair a liar, promising to run a positive campaign centred around his plans to increase tax on earnings over £100,000, to scrap the council tax in favour of a local income tax, abandon student fees and give free long term care for the elderly. But he was attacked for lacking charisma and raising the practice of being an "ordinary bloke" into an art form. While it appeared that some voters were, perhaps for the second election running, attracted by some of those qualities, overall the Liberal Democrats missed the open goal of Iraq, and failed dismally – with the sole exception of Tim Collins in Westmoreland and Lonsdale – in their decapitation attempts. Charles Kennedy has, perhaps for now, avoided the more serious problems that might have been caused by the party's failure to live up to expectations.

But did any of these tactics, or any events exterior to the campaigns themselves, make a serious impact upon the opinion polls conducted over the election period? By reading a timetable of the main incidents alongside the opinion charts from all the pollsters, it is possible to analyse whether anything happened during the campaign that was significant in terms of translating into votes - and if so, what.

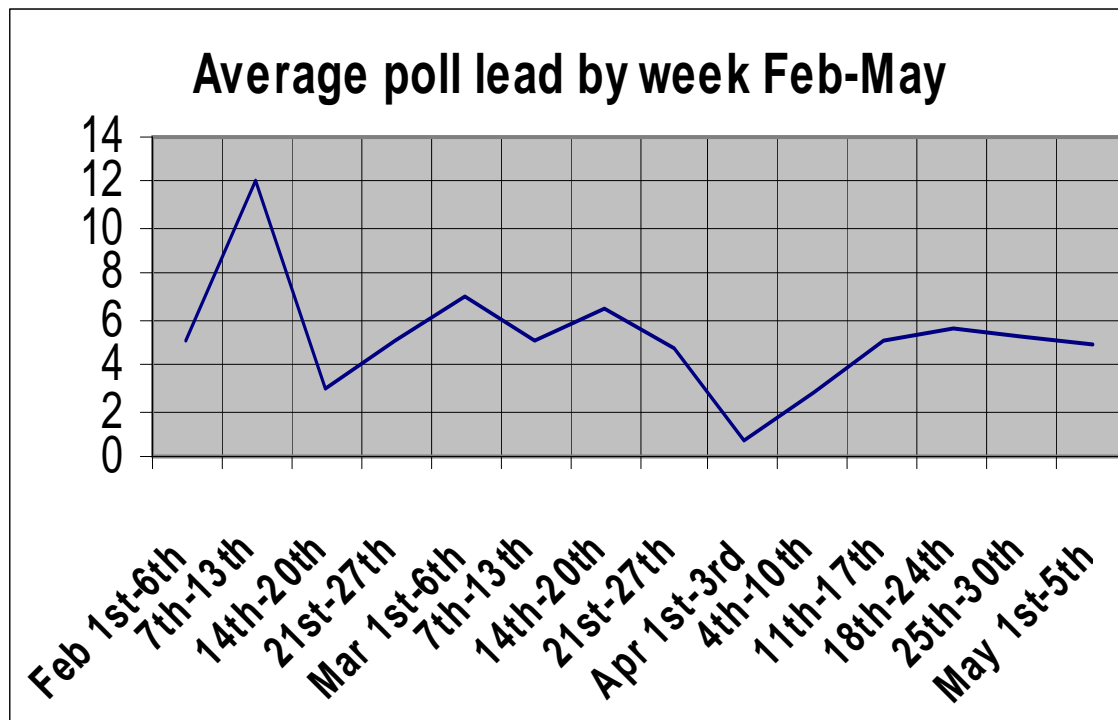
First, though, the campaign itself needs placing in the context of what had happened during the preceding year or so. The following chart traces the average Labour lead across all published polls on a month-by-month basis from January 2004 up to polling day.

The scale means that very small changes in Labour's lead look large and we can see that the Conservatives pulled in front of Labour only twice, both times briefly, in the period running up to the election – and these were in the aftermath of the Hutton Inquiry.



So, after a period of turbulence for Tony Blair's Government, summer 2004 marked a restoration of Labour's fortunes which lasted right through to May 2005. The 2004 conference season proved surprisingly bad for the Tories. For those who were there, Labour's Conference at the end of September was a hostile affair at which delegates openly called Tony Blair a war criminal and demanded his resignation. The following week the Conservative Conference was by comparison a love-in at which Michael Howard basked in the adoration of the party faithful. But, bizarrely, Labour's lead rose by three points post-Conference while the Tories dropped two points. Indeed, from the end of September 2004 until the first week of the election campaign proper, not a single poll was published in which the Tories were equal to or ahead of Labour.

What happened to the polls during the election campaign?



Below are listed the key events of the campaign, at least as far as media coverage was concerned. There is some correlation between these events and the average Labour poll lead week-on-week (see chart above). For instance, the average lead fell from 12% to 3% between weeks two and three, which coincided with the Tories starting their campaign in earnest. Harder to explain was Labour's dip to just 1% average lead at the start of the campaign, although this figure was depressed by one unexplained poll which showed the Tories with a 5% lead – well out of line with all the other polls published around the same time. Most interesting of all perhaps is the smoothness of the curve in the latter stages of the campaign, a time when all the parties were campaigning at their hardest but could only manage to preserve the status quo.

What happened?

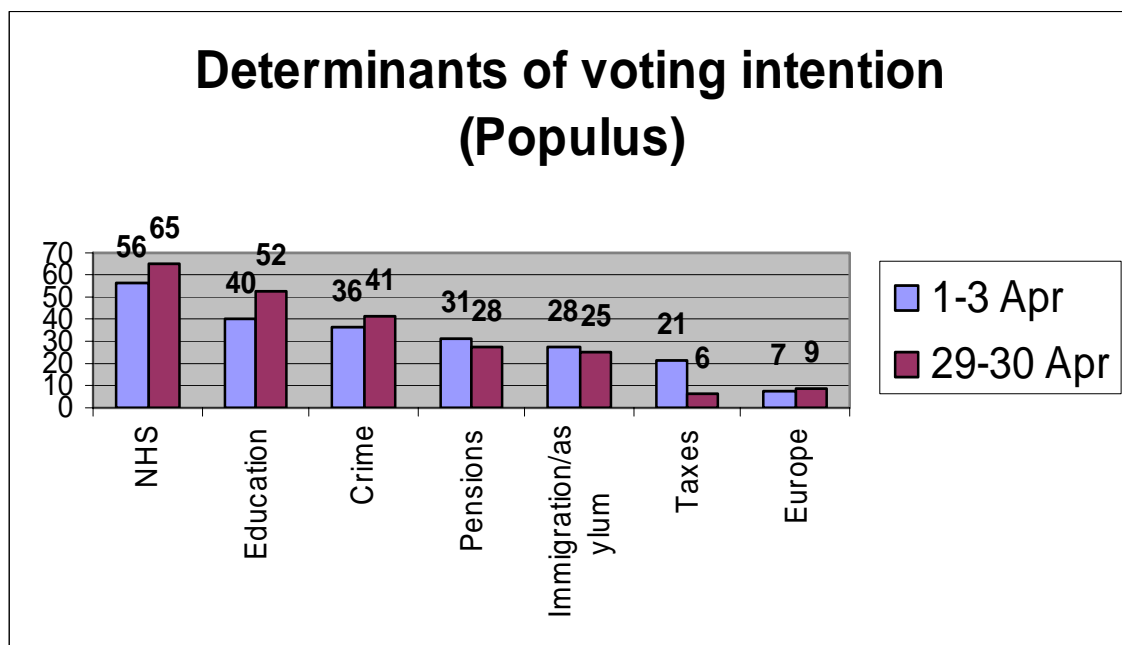
- February 11th – Labour unveil six election pledges
- February 21st - Tories announce £340million council tax cuts for over-65s
- March 2nd - Howard raises Margaret Dixon/NHS case in the Commons
- March 4th-6th – Charles Kennedy reveals election slogan - 'The Real Alternative' - at Harrogate Conference
- March 11th-Government's anti-terror bill passed with sunset clause
- March 14th- Howard raises abortion issue in **Cosmopolitan** magazine
- March 16th – Brown delivers budget
- March 22nd – Lib Dem advert campaign - ten 'Positive Proposals'
- March 25th – Howard Flight deselected after comments about public spending
- April 2nd – Pope John Paul II dies
- April 5th – Blair calls General Election

- April 11th - Tory manifesto unveiled
- April 12th - Sarah Kennedy gives birth
- April 13th - Labour manifesto unveiled
- April 14th - Lib Dem manifesto unveiled
- April 21st – **The Sun** comes out in support of Labour
- April 22nd – Blair accuses Tories of scaremongering on immigration and asylum.
- April 26th – Brian Sedgemore defects from Labour to Lib Dems
- April 26th - Tory posters unveiled calling Blair a liar
- April 28th - Advice on legality of Iraq war published
- May 2nd - British soldier Anthony Wakefield killed in Iraq - widow blames Blair.

What happened to other indicators during the campaign?

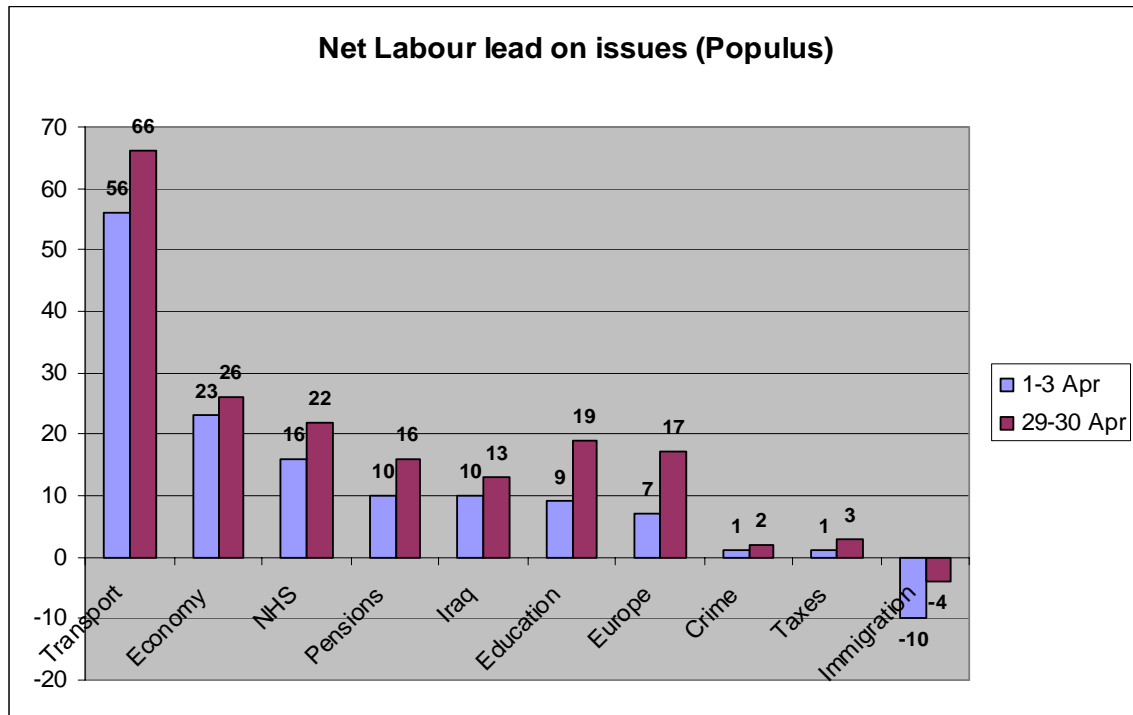
The chart below shows how seven key determinants of voting intention changed during the course of the campaign.

During the campaign the NHS, education and crime each increased in importance by at least 5%, while of the others the most striking issue was level of taxes. Bearing in mind this should have been one of the Tories' strongest issues, it is surprising to see a 15-point fall in importance. This is not a perfect set of measures (for instance it omits trust), but the fact that immigration and asylum – one of the Conservatives' flagship campaign messages – actually decreased in importance, and the other major area (taxes) where the party could have made some serious running failed to resonate with voters, suggests that the party's messages simply did not press the right buttons with the electorate as a whole.

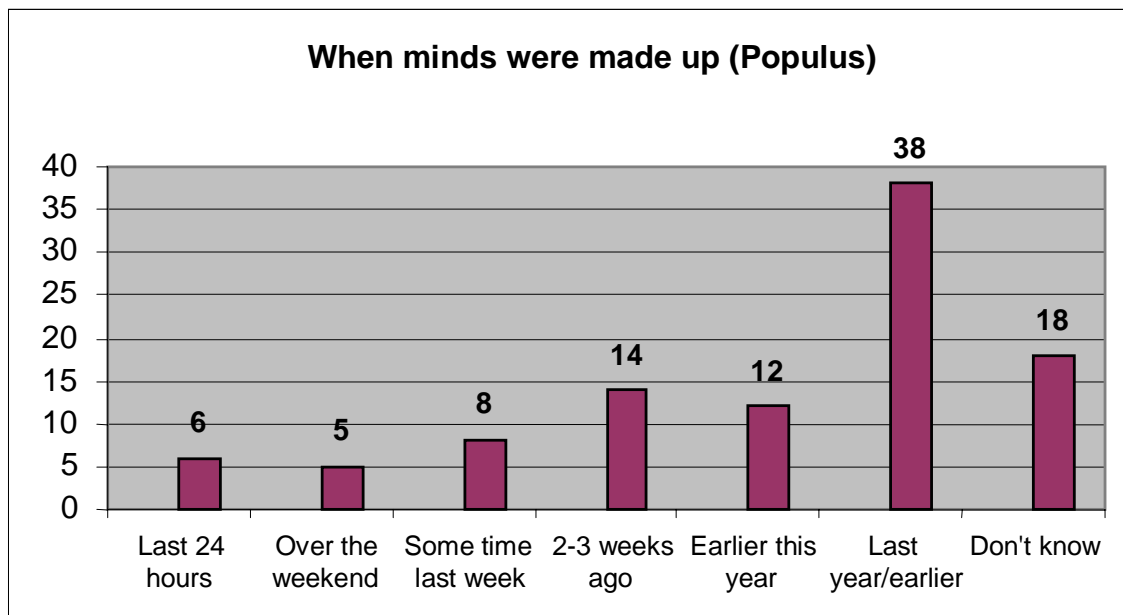


If there is a crumb of comfort for the Conservatives (and it really is no more than that), on the issue of immigration and asylum the electorate rated them higher at the end of the campaign than they did at the beginning.

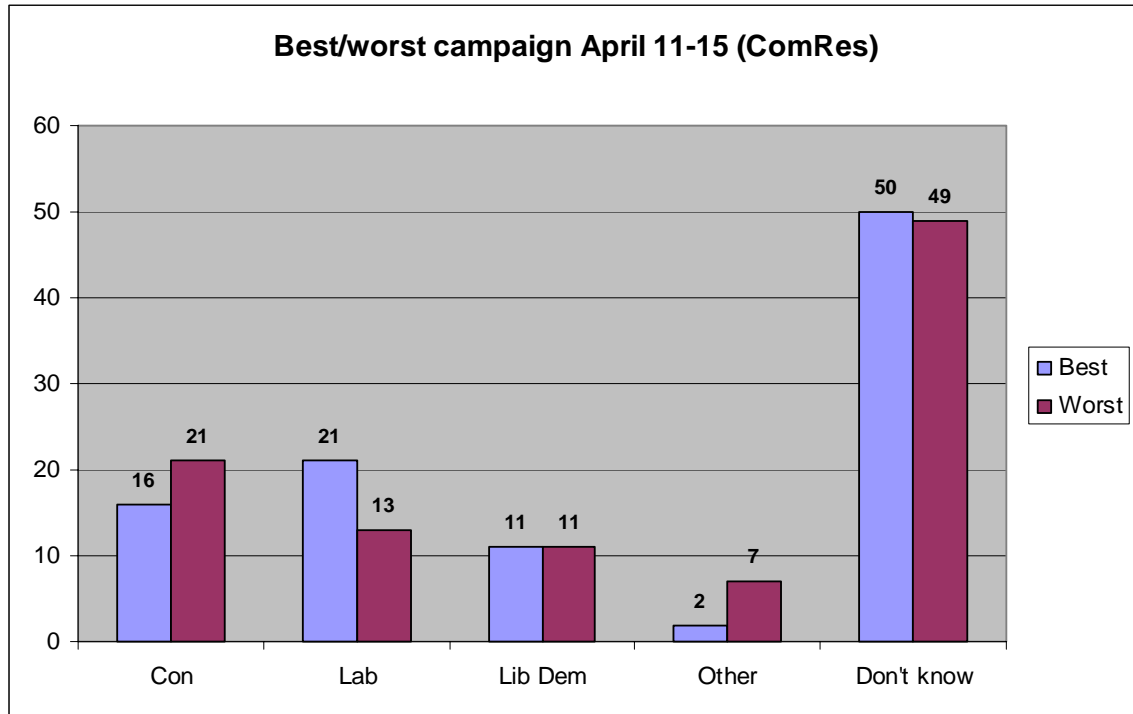
But this success seemed to be at a price. On every other indicator shown, Labour increased its lead over the Conservatives and by election day led on transport, the economy, NHS, pensions, education, crime, level of taxes and Europe. Labour even increased its lead over the Tories on Iraq.



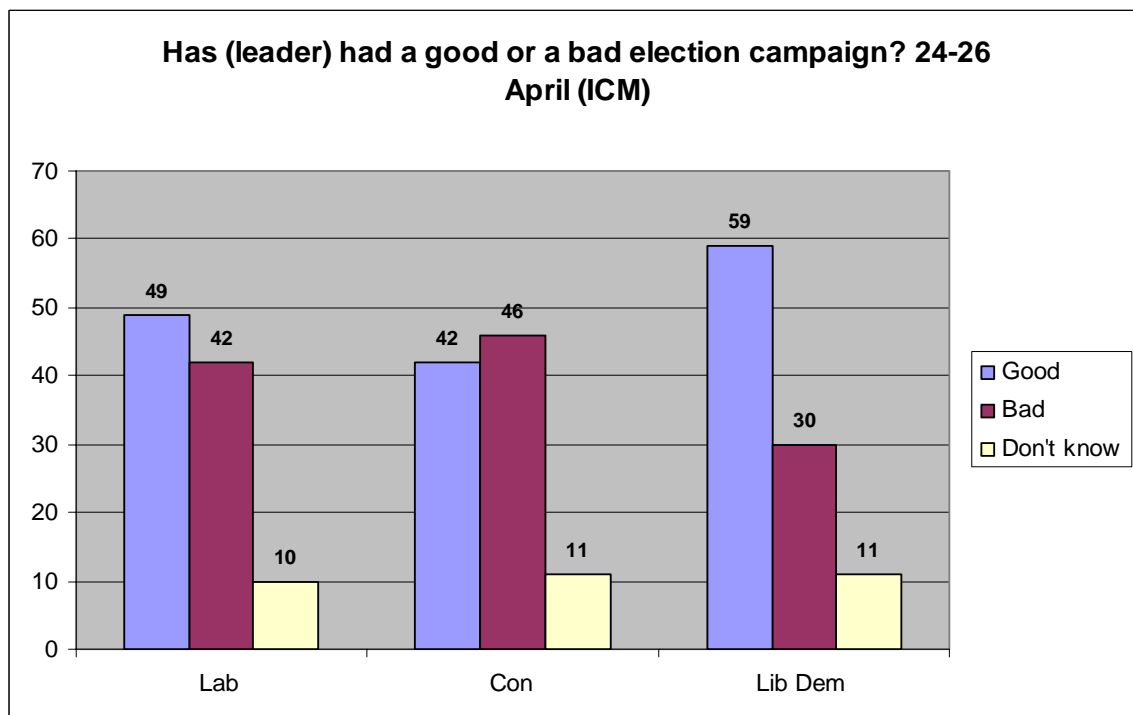
It is interesting that, from the chart below, at least a third of voters made their minds up during the campaign period itself. This supports the view that Labour won the national campaign, even if the outcome was fewer House of Commons seats than they would have liked.



The Conservative Party did win one contest at least – half way into the campaign the electorate rated their campaign the worst so far by a margin of 21% to 13% for Labour and 11% for the Lib Dems.



Similarly, at the end of the campaign, Michael Howard was judged to have had the worst election campaign of all three main party leaders. Charles Kennedy was judged by most to have had a good election campaign (despite its well publicised hiccups).



What conclusion?

So, which party fought the best campaign?

1. The Conservatives?

They ended up with fewer MPs than Michael Foot had post-1983, lost ground to Labour on almost every determinant of voting intention during the campaign, and it was claimed afterwards (by the Lib Dems) that for every eight votes Labour lost, seven went not to the Tories but to the Lib Dems.

But the Conservatives gained 31 seats from Labour on an increase in share of the vote of just 0.5% so, while they probably ran the worst national campaign, locally they ran the best one. They lost the air war but won on the ground.

2. Labour?

They face the bigger problem of historical decline in vote share – from 43% in 1997 to 41% in 2001 to 36% in 2005. Their 'historic' third term will also go down in history for the lowest share of the vote that any winning party has achieved, losing 47 seats into the bargain and seeing support ebb away among some key groups (such as C1s).

But Labour conducted a seemingly unpanicked campaign to return an eminently workable majority in the wake of profound turmoil of the Iraq war.

3. The Lib Dems?

The party did worse in Lib Dem/Tory marginals than expected and failed to live up to pre-election hopes of a 'breakthrough'.

But the party picked up most votes nationally, up from 19% to 23%, and gained 12 seats from Labour with some notable surprises.

This could have gone down as one of the more exciting election campaigns in recent history. But the Conservatives never really threatened Labour's overall majority and the Lib Dems missed the open goal presented to them by distrust over the Iraq war.

Perhaps we should therefore give the last word to a voter comment posted on the BBC website during the campaign:

"When all is said and done, the only sensible option is to vote for the party you think will do the country least harm".