‘It’s The Sun Wot Won It’: Evidence of media influence on political attitudes and voting from a UK quasi-natural experiment

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A B S T R A C T
Do print media significantly impact political attitudes and party identification? To examine this question, we draw on a rare quasi-natural experiment that occurred when The Sun, a right-leaning UK tabloid, shifted its support to the Labour party in 1997 and back to the Conservative party in 2010. We compared changes in party identification and political attitudes among Sun readers with non-readers and other newspaper readerships. We find that The Sun’s endorsements were associated with a significant increase in readers’ support for Labour in 1997, approximately 525,000 votes, and its switch back was associated with about 550,000 extra votes for the Conservatives in 2010. Although we observed changes in readers’ party preference, there was no effect on underlying political preferences. The magnitude of these changes, about 2% of the popular vote, would have been unable to alter the outcome of the 1997 General Election, but may have affected the 2010 Election.

1. Introduction

“It’s the Sun Wot Won It.” On April 11th, 1992, the day after the UK General Election in the same year, The Sun newspaper ran its notorious headline, claiming to have tipped the electorate to the Conservative Party. Although the paper’s owner, Rupert Murdoch, later said that “the media does not have this kind of power”, the headline articulates a central question in social science: do print media exert a significant impact on political attitudes and electoral outcomes and, if so, how?

Undoubtedly, the media can influence people’s political attitudes and voting behaviour, yet there is ongoing debate as to how and to what extent they affect political preferences and outcomes (Bartels, 1993; Drew and Weaver, 2006; Kinder, 1998; Livingstone and Markham, 2008; Reeves A. and de Vries R. forthcoming). A key question is the direction of any relationship. Do the media provide information that affects their readers’ attitudes, or does this information simply reflect their readers’ preferences (DellaVigna and Gentzkow, 2010; Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2010; Brandenburg and Van Egmond, 2012; Gelman and King, 1993; Morris, 2007)? And if they do have an effect, is it substantively meaningful since, in a competitive media environment, it may be offset by other sources of information?

One set of empirical findings suggests the media’s effect on the electorate is relatively minor (Druckman, 2005) and highly variable depending on context. Classic studies from the USA in the 1960s found that media had only a “minimal effect” on...
attitudinal formation or conversion, but may reinforce existing attitudes (Klapper, 1960). Observational studies from the UK have found that the effect on voting attributable to news media is slight, affecting less than 1% of the popular vote and only occurs if the media provide consistent messages (Curtice and Semetko, 1994; Brynin and Newton, 2003). Thus, these studies have mainly concluded that media influence is largely irrelevant, arguing that “the influence of the press is at most only a marginal one” (Curtice and Semetko, 1994; Bennett and Iyengar, 2008). However, the ability to draw causal inference from these studies is limited and they are potentially underpowered to detect significant relationships (Dillilplane, 2014). The majority of these observational studies have relied on polling or survey data that have not addressed the potential endogeneity arising from people’s selection of newspapers that reflect their underlying preferences. There is also potential reverse causality if media content slants towards the cultural attitudes and norms held by their readership (Curtice, 1997; Kinder, 1998; Bennett and Iyengar, 2010).

Experimental research designs have sought to address these limitations by directly testing whether media can persuade the electorate to adopt particular ideas by randomising exposures (Levendusky, 2013). These find that explicitly ideological news can polarise attitudes in persons who already hold ideologically extreme positions, but that such effects diminish if people can tune out and ignore such media. Another set of experimental studies found that exposing individuals to competing messages contained in new information only had a minimal and short-term effect on attitudes because new information is interpreted through the lens of prior partisan preferences (Chong and Druckman, 2010; Hill et al., 2013). However, when participants could choose the media messages they were exposed to, as they would outside the artificial setting of the laboratory, the persuasive effect was greater and did not decay substantially, suggesting that such experiments may lack external validity (Druckman et al., 2012).

To better account for the social context in which people engage with news, more recent studies have drawn on randomised field trials. One US field experiment randomized participants to receive left- or right-leaning newspapers or, as a control, none at all (Gerber et al., 2009). Those assigned to the Washington Post, a left-leaning paper, were significantly more likely to vote for the Democratic party, but no effect was observed for the Washington Times, a right-leaning newspaper. Recipient’s political attitudes remained unchanged across all groups. These experimental designs situated within people’s lived environments have also been critiqued because they may not correspond to actual media use or apply to readers who already subscribe to the intervention newspapers (Prior, 2013). Additionally not all subjects assigned to receive a free subscription will willingly make use of it, especially if their prior beliefs adhere to a different ideology (Levendusky, 2013), and effects may spill-over and influence non-readers through diffusion via social networks (Bond et al., 2012). Media effects are also likely to vary considerably with individual receptivity, societal circumstances, and the degree of polarisation of the media in a particular context (Bennett and Iyengar, 2010).

More recently quasi-natural experiments, which involve changes in people’s environments outside the control of researchers, have been proposed as an alternative to randomised trials when such trials are infeasible or impractical (Dunning, 2012; Morgan and Winship, 2007). These study designs rely on naturally occurring variation that occurs in the timing, space, or scope of an environmental or policy change. In practice, such natural experiments may be rare or only apply to small segments of the population. One quasi-natural experiment design tracked the differential roll-out of Fox News in U.S. towns finding that, when it became available, there was about a 10% increase in support for the Republican party among voters (DellaVigna and Kaplan, 2007). A similar design found that support for the governing party fell by 8.9% among those obtaining access to independent Russian television channels (DellaVigna and Gentzkow, 2010). However, the differential introduction of such media may reflect to pre-existing market trends, with companies prioritising those areas where they expect most subscribers. In this way the expansion of Fox News might be targeting those most receptive to right-wing political messages. Moreover, the effect of cable television on political attitudes was observed long before Fox News or even MSNBC began broadcasting (Prior, 2013).

Given that most of the research conducted on media effects are based in the US it is important to explore these processes in other contexts. Media systems matter and most of the research conducted in this area is based in the US, where the print media market is highly fragmented and largely non-partisan.

In this paper we take advantage of two rare large-scale, quasi-natural experiments in the UK that address these limitations, enabling us assess the effect of media partisanship on both political attitudes and partisanship of readers over time. In contrast to the US, the UK’s print media is highly partisan and papers actively persuade readers to support one party rather than another, making it an ideal setting for assessing media effects. In 1997 The Sun newspaper switched support from the Conservative party to the Labour party just prior to the election and then, in 2009–10, it switched support back again from Labour to the Conservatives. In both cases, the deflections were led by the owner and are not primarily driven by changes in support for either party among the readers. These deflections create a unique quasi-natural experiment where Sun readers are exposed to changes that other groups are not, which, as we will document, were exogenous.

Although previous work has sought to investigate the impact of The Sun’s switch in 1997, it failed to take advantage of the natural experiment design, which may have led to conservative estimates of the media’s effects on voting behaviour (Brynin and Newton, 2003; Curtice, 1997). A more recent study using the British Election Panel Survey covering the years 1992–1997 found that approximately 8.6% of voters altered their party identification in line with newspaper endorsements (Ladd and Lenz, 2009). However, these studies have yet to evaluate two important questions — whether the 2010 shift to the Conservative party impacted partisanship and whether these changes were associated with a change in underlying political attitudes. Further, because the 1997 shift did not involve a change in content it has been impossible in previous work to explore the influence of both an endorsement coupled with a change in ideology. Finally our study design, which draws on a larger...
panel dataset, enables us to ask, if The Sun’s shift did change voters’ preferences, would it have been enough to affect the course of the 1997 and/or the 2010 General Election?

Briefly, we show that in 1997 The Sun’s change in party allegiance increased readers’ support for the Labour party compared with the rest of the population. The 2010 switch led Sun readers to increase support for the Conservative party compared with the rest of the population. However, despite these changes in party identification in both periods, we find people’s underlying political preferences were unaltered. Overall, we estimate The Sun’s decision to switch parties generated about 525,000 votes for the Labour party in 1997 and about 550,000 votes for the Conservative party in 2010.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: in the first section we describe the changes in party support in 1997 and 2010. We then outline the theories of partisan and attitude change. In the third section we describe the datasets and modelling approach employed in the analysis, followed by presentation of the results for each switch in 1997 and 2010. In the final section we discuss our findings and some potential implications for policy and for media regulation.

**UK Quasi-Natural Experiment: The Sun’s Switch to Labour in 1997 and back to the Conservative party in 2010**

On March 18th, 1997, a few weeks prior to the 1997 UK General Election, *The Sun* newspaper, a traditionally right-leaning tabloid with the largest circulation in the UK of 3.9 million and over 10 million readers, switched its support from the Conservative to Labour Party, with the headline, “The Sun Backs Blair.” *The Sun* continued to support the Labour party until 30th September 2009, when it declared that “Labour’s Lost It.” These switches create a series of quasi-natural experiments which can be exploited to assess the causal effects of media endorsements on political attitudes and voting outcomes.

To qualify as a quasi-natural experiment, it is first necessary to demonstrate that the newspaper’s change was exogenous with respect to political attitudes. That is, it is necessary to show that the change itself was not a result of other factors that might also independently lead to changing political outcomes. If, for example, The Sun was responding to growing popularity of the Labour Party, then the newspapers shift may have merely reflected rather than caused political changes.¹

There are at least three reasons why *The Sun’s* shift is likely to have been driven by concerns relevant to Murdoch and therefore unrelated to changes in the readership. These observations reflect how the media’s framing is the product of vested interests of both advertisers and owners. While *The Sun’s* switch to the Labour party was certainly not exogenous to its architect, Rupert Murdoch, we argue that it was exogenous with respect to the readership. Starting with the 1997 switch, in the lead up to the 1997 election Murdoch’s media conglomerate, News International, was threatened by Labour manifestos calling for “common ownership” (Clause 4) and MPs who promised to break up media monopolies. News International is owned by the larger parent-company News Corporation. Rupert Murdoch is founder, chairman and CEO of News Corporation (now News Corp) and Murdoch takes an active interest in News International’s holdings, which include *The Times* (UK) and *The Sun*. This creates a vested interest to use media outlets to protect market interests against the threat of anti-monopoly regulation (Herman and Chomsky, 1994; Robinson, 2005).

Before the campaign, Blair actively courted Murdoch’s support; meeting with Murdoch privately on numerous occasions (Leveson Inquiry 25 April 2012) and publicly advocated policies favourable to Murdoch’s interests, attacking, for example, an “anti-Murdoch amendment to the Competition Bill” which the Labour party espoused and removing ‘Clause 4’ from their manifesto (Abrams and Bevins 11 Feb 1998).

Second, this shift was exogenous for the readers because it was principally determined by Murdoch and occurred over a relatively short period of time. His decision was against the wishes of *The Sun*’s surprised editorial board, who all favoured the Conservative candidate John Major (Greenslade May 19, 1997). Stuart Higgins, *The Sun*’s editor at the time, noted that this change occurred over a relatively short period of time in the build-up to the election in 1997 and had not been planned in advance (Greenslade May 19, 1997). Murdoch was unlikely to be responding to reader’s preferences because their support for Labour had begun declining after 1995 (Norris, 2006).

Third, Murdoch’s decision to back Labour was unanticipated by readers and had little effect on content or readership. *The Sun* had endorsed the Conservative party in every election since 1979 (Scammell and Harrop, 1997) and up until March 18th, 1997 *The Sun* had attacked the Labour Party candidate, Tony Blair, with headlines such as “Vote Tory to save the pounds” (Greenslade May 19, 1997). Content analyses of *The Sun* found its substantive political positions did not change following its shift in support for the Labour Party (Seymour-Ure, 1997). *The Sun* remained Eurosceptic and expressed opposition to many of Labour’s flagship policies, such as the minimum wage. In May 1997, the editor Stuart Higgins explained that “[t]he two great reservations we had with Blair, and continue to have, were Europe and the unions.” When the switch did occur there is little evidence that readers migrated elsewhere. *The Sun*’s circulation temporarily dropped, although the magnitude of the total decline in circulation was less than 1% (Greenslade May 19, 1997, Seymour-Ure, 1997).

Turning to the 2010 switch, the transition was less rapid, with an erosion of support for Labour followed by a later endorsement of the Conservative party. In the summer of 2009, *The Sun* began moving away from the Labour party. Trevor Kavanagh, a long-time Sun political commentator and conservative advocate, frequently criticised Gordon Brown (e.g., “Gord’s in firing line Dave … finish him”, August 31st 2009). On September 30th, 2009, the day after Gordon Brown’s keynote

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¹ Murdoch might also have been motivated to switch either *The Sun* or *The Times* because it was potentially a poor business decision to have two papers competing for the same segment of the UK newspaper audience. Yet, although *The Sun* and *The Times* were both targeting readers on the political right, they were not competing for the same segments of that market because they are aimed at two different socio-demographics. Further, if Murdoch was concerned about this competition then he would not have moved *The Sun* to the political right after purchasing it in the late-1960s.
address at the Labour party conference, The Sun ran the following headline “Labour’s Lost It.” This marked a turning point in their coverage which became increasingly critical of Gordon Brown. However, it was not until the campaign started in 2010 - and in tandem with their official endorsement of Cameron — that The Sun began to pursue an active political campaign. During 2010 The Sun ran twice as many front-page editorials covering the election as it did in the lead up to the previous 2005 general election. Approximately 75% of all editorials in The Sun during the 2010 election covered the election compared with only 57% in 2005. It described the Liberal Democratic candidate, Nick Clegg as a ‘Brussels Fanatic’, and it was the only national newspaper to believe that Cameron (and not Clegg) won the first televised national debate (Geddes and Tonge, 2010).

How would these shifts in The Sun affect political attitudes and voting? Would they have been enough to alter the outcomes of the 1997 and/or the 2010 General Elections?

1.1. How partisan media influences attitudes

Two main theories predict how The Sun’s switch would affect political behaviour and attitudes. The first set derives from rational-choice models in economics, the most prominent of which is enlightened preferences theory (Gelman and King, 1993; Andersen et al., 2005). People have latent preferences that only become enlightened when the voter attends to information regarding each candidate. Because voters are largely apolitical during most of the election cycle, it is only in the final weeks of the campaign when voters pay the most attention that these latent preferences become stable and enlightened (Blais, 2004). The media is also able to set the agenda for public debate and elections by raising the salience of particular issues along with their relative importance, without affecting underlying policy preferences (Iyengar and Kinder, 2010). Thus, these theories yield two distinctive predictions about The Sun’s switches:

Enlightened Preferences Hypothesis 1a: The Sun’s shift in 1997 will have no short-term effect on readers’ support for the Labour party

Enlightened Preferences Hypothesis 1b: The Sun’s support in 2009 will have no effect but its active campaign for the Conservative Party in 2010 may lead to a short-term increase in readers’ support for the Conservative party because it is closer to the election.

Importantly, enlightened preferences theories predict that media coverage would not affect underlying attitudes. Therefore this theory would predict that there would be no change in political attitudes in either period:

Enlightened Preferences Hypothesis 2a: The Sun’s shift in 1997 will have no short-term effect on readers’ support for Labour policies

Enlightened Preferences Hypothesis 2b: The Sun’s shift in 2010 will have no short-term effect on readers’ support for Conservative policies

In contrast, media-persuasion theories claim that print media can substantially alter political attitudes and also persuade citizens to vote for one candidate rather than another (Andersen et al., 2005). Classic studies found that newspaper endorsements of a presidential candidate increased the likelihood of their readers voting for that candidate (Robinson, 1972), although it is unclear whether these effects reinforce existing support or persuade those previously opposed (Norris, 2006). Experimental evidence has shown that partisan media can persuade voters to adopt more extreme views. Voters also often use decision-making shortcuts in vote choice, responding to endorsements from ‘trusted’ organizations, such as the media, or people, such as celebrities, in order to act like informed citizens (Arceneaux and Kolodny, 2009). Using variation in the timing of newspaper endorsements of political candidates from polling data, Knight and Chiang find that unexpected endorsements also increase support among readers (Chiang and Knight, 2011). Similarly, voters who are aware of celebrity endorsements, such as Oprah’s endorsement of Obama in the 2008 US elections, are more likely to vote for endorsed candidates than those who are not aware (Nownes, 2012).

The persuasiveness of the media tends to be reduced when recipients are politically knowledgeable and have strong and crystallised opinions about not just the content but, importantly, the source of the message (Zaller, 1992). Voters are inevitably exposed to a subset of the available information about candidates, so that the degree to which their preferences become enlightened depends on which media they consume. This raises the possibility that different types of misinformation could influence decisions, particularly among groups with limited media exposure and low levels of background knowledge (Lupia, 1994). While observational studies have found that the media’s persuasive influence is minimal, research with more robust, quasi-experimental designs have detected larger media effects on party preferences (Ladd and Lenz, 2009; Gerber et al., 2009). This generates two further hypotheses:

Persuasion Hypothesis 1a: The Sun’s shift to supporting Labour will increase readers’ support for the Labour party

Persuasion Hypothesis 1b: The Sun’s shift to supporting the Conservative party in 2010 will increase readers’ support for the Conservative party

Media persuasion theories further suggest that the media can alter underlying political attitudes, not just their expression as party preference. Since The Sun changed party identification without altering content in 1997, we would not expect to see...
resulting changes in its readers’ policy preferences. In contrast, *The Sun* did alter its content in 2010 and, therefore, if media persuasion theories hold we would anticipate shifting attitudes in the 2010 period:

*Persuasion Hypothesis 2a: The Sun’s shift to supporting Labour in 1997 will not increase readers’ support for Labour policies*

*Persuasion Hypothesis 2b: The Sun’s shift to supporting the Conservative party in 2010 will reduce readers’ support for Conservative policies*

2. Data

To test these competing hypotheses, we draw on two data sources that contain appropriate survey questions for each research question. First, to assess changes in which party respondents most closely identify with we used the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). The BHPS is a nationally representative longitudinal survey of 5500 households and 10,000 individuals, covering the years from 1991 to 2011. Details of the survey have been described elsewhere; briefly, households were randomly selected from 250 Primary Sampling Units (postcode sectors) and subsequently stratified by socio-economic factors, oversampling impoverished groups (Lynn et al., 2006).

Then, to study variation in political attitudes we use the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, the main source of long-term data on political attitudes in the UK (Park et al., 2012). The BSA is a nationally representative repeated cross-sectional survey of persons age 18 and over. Households were randomly selected from 83 Primary Sampling Units (postcode sectors), giving rise to a sample of 1355 individuals in 1997, 3146 in 1998 and 3421 in 2009 and 3297 in 2010.

2.1. Measuring political affiliation and attitudes

Following previous analyses using the BHPS (Brynin and Newton, 2003), we measured changes in political affiliation between Conservative and Labour as the party respondents are closest to: “which party do you regard yourself as being closer to than the others?” This measures correlated very strongly with voting behaviour in the 1997 General Election ($r = 0.95$) and in the 2010 General Election ($r = 0.97$) (Brynin and Newton, 2003).

BHPS respondents also reported which newspaper they read most frequently in both periods. If they reported the same paper in 1996 and 1997 they were considered a ‘consistent reader’ (86% (n = 898) of Sun readers were ‘consistent’). Between 1996 and 1997, most people are consistent readers of one paper ($r = 0.82$; 85% of those who read a newspaper). For example, 86% of Sun readers in 1997 were still reading *The Sun* in 1998. Among those who transitioned away from *The Sun*, 3.5% (n = 36) moved to the Daily Mail (Conservative Tabloid) and another 3.4% (n = 35) moved to The Mirror (Labour Tabloid). There was not a clear pro-Conservative migration.

Consistent readers of *The Sun* were aware of the switch from the Conservative to the Labour party whereas consistent readers of other newspapers did not observe a change in the party their paper supported (Fig. 1).2

To assess the effects of the *Sun*’s 2010 switch, we used BHPS data from the years 2004 and 2011, because respondents were not asked about which paper they read in the 2010 wave. Self-reported Sun readers constituted 11% of the sample in 2004 (n = 1740) and 10.5% in 2011 (n = 1154). If respondents read *The Sun* in both 2004 and 2011 we assumed that they also had been *Sun* readers in 2010 (80% of *Sun* readers were ‘consistent’ across this period).

Because there are no attitudinal measures in the BHPS, we measured change in political attitudes using one of the items from the British Social Attitudes survey’s welfarism scale. This scale comprised questions aimed at assessing the level of support for the welfare state. Readers are asked to decide whether government should do one of the following: i) Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits, ii) Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now, and iii) Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits — a pro-Labour policy — in 1996–1997 and again in 2009–2010.

2.2. Difference-in-difference modelling

To evaluate potential changes in *Sun* readers’ attitudes and party preferences over time, we implemented difference-in-differences models of the observed changes in their political preferences and, in another set of models, their attitudes ($P$) in the intervention group compared with those in a series of control groups (Morgan and Winship, 2007; Dunning, 2012):

$$\text{Intervention effect} = \Delta P_{\text{Sun readers}} - \Delta P_{\text{control}}$$

2 Even among consistent readers of *The Times*, Murdoch’s other UK paper, which did not directly support either party, there was only a very small rise in the proportion of respondents who perceived *The Times* as now being pro-Labour.
after *The Sun*’s shift for both the intervention group (*Sun* readers) and the control group. We use three control groups as a contrast: 1. All other newspaper readers, 2. All non-newspaper readers, and 3. All non-*Sun* readers (i.e., a combination of control group 1 and 2). Thus, to estimate the political change in the intervention group we sequentially estimate the ‘intervention effect among readers of *The Sun*’,

\[ \Delta P_{\text{Sun readers}} = \alpha + \beta_{\text{Sun readers}} \text{Newspaper} + \epsilon, \]  

(2)

And the ‘intervention effect on the control group’,

\[ \Delta P_{\text{control}} = \alpha + \beta_{\text{control}} \text{Newspaper} + \epsilon \]  

(3)

Changes in this latter group reflect potential unintended consequences of the intervention as well as background trends, such as changing level of support for Labour (or Conservatives) across this period and other factors that influence political

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**Fig. 1.** ‘Which political party does your paper support?’ among regular newspaper readers, 1996–1997 (before and after *The Sun*’s shift): (A) *The Sun*, (B) *The Times*, (C) Non-News Corp publications. (British Household Panel Survey).
preferences (i.e., labour market and macroeconomic circumstances). Thus, the intervention effect is the difference between these two observed effects, yielding the main difference-in-differences estimator:

\[
\text{Intervention effect} = \beta_{\text{Sun readers}} - \beta_{\text{control}}
\]  

(4)

In short, we use these difference-in-differences models to estimate the effect of the intervention of The Sun’s defection on party identification and political attitudes in both 1997 and 2010.

2.3. Analysing the 1997 switch

To test the hypotheses during the earlier period, we used two waves of data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), 1996 and 1997. Data collection began in September 1996 and was completed before March 1997 (pre-intervention wave) and The Sun’s switch on 18th March 1997. Data collection for the seventh wave of the BHPS began on the 29th August 1997, several months after the The Sun’s switch (post-intervention). We estimate the intervention effect on party identification by comparing the change among Sun readers with a series of controls (all other newspaper readers, all non-newspaper readers, and all other people). Similarly, we estimate the intervention effect on political attitudes by comparing Sun readers with the control groups using the BSA between 1997 (before the 18th March 1997) and 1998.

2.4. Analyzing the 2010 switch

Data collection for the BHPS in 2010, which had now been incorporated into the Understanding Society survey, began in January (ISER December 2012). Following prior methods to evaluate effects of media switches (Ladd and Lenz, 2009), we used the 2004 wave of the BHPS as our baseline (the most contemporary wave in which we have both party identification and newspaper readership) and estimate the divergence in support for the Conservative party among those interviewed in 2010. Here we estimate two difference-in-differences models. In the first we compare those interviewed in 2004 and then interviewed again in 2010 but before April - this group capture any divergence due to The Sun’s announcement in 2009 that ‘Labour’s Lost It!’ In the second model, we compare those interviewed in 2004 and then interviewed again after April 1st 2010 to capture the effect of the (post-) campaign period. Within these two groups we are interested in contrasting the change in support for the Conservative party for Sun readers and non-Sun readers.

Although the data fulfil the criteria for a quasi-natural experiment, as a series of robustness checks we further adjust models for age, sex, occupational class, and educational attainment which were not plausibly affected by the intervention. Using the STATA module CLARIFY, we simulate from the probability distribution of using 1000 repeated draws the uncertainty around effect sizes in the intervention and control groups (King2000). We also conduct a series of robustness checks to establish the sensitivity of our findings. All models were analysed in STATA v12.1.

3. ‘The Sun backs Blair’: The Sun’s 1997 switch

To examine the impact of the The Sun’s support for Labour in 1997 we first report results on changes in respondent’s party identification. Then we estimate the impact of this switch on the outcome of the 1997 general election. Using the British Social Attitudes survey we estimate the influence of The Sun’s switch on political attitudes. Finally, we test the robustness of these

Fig. 2 shows the results of the difference-in-difference models comparing changes in party identification among Sun readers. We found that the swing in support for Labour among consistent readers of The Sun was 6.62 percentage points larger than all other persons in the sample (95% CI: 0.30%–10.3%). Compared to all newspaper readers (excluding The Times - because Murdoch also owned this paper), the swing in support for Labour among consistent readers of The Sun was 7.88 percentage points larger (95% CI: 0.42%–11.6%) (Fig. 2). These effect sizes were similar when comparing Sun readers with persons who did not read a newspaper (4.92%, 95% CI: 0.94%–8.90%). The largest differences emerged between The Sun and those papers that did not change their support, including the Conservative-backing Telegraph (10.2%, 95% CI: 0.45%–20.0%) and the Labour-backing Mirror (13.1%, 95% CI: 6.37%–19.8%) (SI 1).

To what extent would this shift have impacted upon the result of the 1997 General Election? Our conservative estimate of this Sun effect suggests that, adjusting for those who voted in 1997, there was a 7.43 percentage point (95% CI: 0.45%–14.4%) increase in support for Labour over and above the trend. Respondents voting behaviour in 1997 is highly correlated with their reported affiliation in both 1997 (r = 0.95) and 1996 (r = 0.92). Assuming that affiliation can reliably predict voting, we can estimate the proportion of voters that were in Sun readers.

To what extent would this shift have impacted upon the result of the 1997 General Election? Our conservative estimate of this Sun effect suggests that, adjusting for those who voted in 1997, there was a 7.43 percentage point (95% CI: 0.45%–14.4%) increase in support for Labour over and above the trend. Respondents voting behaviour in 1997 is highly correlated with their reported affiliation in both 1997 (r = 0.95) and 1996 (r = 0.92). Assuming that affiliation can reliably predict voting, we can estimate the proportion of voters that were influenced by The Sun. If this effect influences the entire readership of The Sun, adjusting for the proportion of this readership who voted, then approximately 525,000 voters changed their vote because of the switch on March 18, 1997 (95% CI: 32,000 to 1,000,000) (SI 2).

Were these changes a result of endorsement or did they correspond to underlying political attitudes? Using the BSA survey, we tested changes in support for core Conservative values with difference-in-differences models. Looking across this period (1997–1998), we found no evidence of divergence in support for more welfare spending when comparing Sun readers with non-readers, all other newspaper readers, or all other people (Table 1).
3.1. Robustness tests for the 1997 models

To test the robustness of the BHPS findings we modelled the impact of this shift on variables where we would hypothesize a null effect (i.e., probability of paid employment, general health, owning a computer, or having a mortgage). In each case the transition was not significant at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level (SI 3). After adjusting for socio-demographic factors such as age, gender,
Table 1
Divergence in support for more government spending before (before 18th March 1997) and after (18th March 1997–1998) shift in The Sun (British Social Attitudes).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>B (Diff-in-diff) (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Sun vs Non-readers</td>
<td>2380</td>
<td>0.0031</td>
<td>-0.014 (0.058)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sun vs All other papers</td>
<td>2392</td>
<td>0.0060</td>
<td>0.037 (0.056)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sun vs All other people</td>
<td>4175</td>
<td>0.0028</td>
<td>0.015 (0.053)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01. Adjusted for time trend and baseline differences.

marital status, country, education, and occupational class our results do not qualitatively change (SI 4). One potential limitation of these longitudinal data is the gap between the intervention (18 March 1997) and the post-intervention data collection period (August–December 1997). Intervening factors may undermine the causal claim implied in this longitudinal research design. Using a within sample contrast in the British Social Attitudes data — a different data set to the BHPS that we used to estimate changes in party identification above—we test whether the proportion of Sun readers that supported Labour changed before and after the switch on March 18th 1997. Sun readers were 20% more likely to support Labour after the paper backed Blair (p = 0.08; n = 124), although only significant at the 0.1 level, while there was no difference across this period for any other group (p > 0.1) (SI 5). Finally, we re-estimate our models including those who were not consistent readers of The Sun between 1996 and 1997, we find that including these individuals does not significantly alter our results (SI 6).

Taken together, these 1997 data indicate that The Sun’s switch from Conservative Labour increased support for the Labour party to a greater extent than other groups but that this switch appears to have had very little effect on political attitudes. We now turn to the reversal; the shift in support from Labour to the Conservative party by The Sun in 2010.

4. ‘Labour’s Lost It’: The Sun’s 2010 switch

To examine the impact of The Sun’s support for the Conservative party in 2010 we first report results on changes in the proportion of respondents who identified with the Conservative party. Then we estimate the impact of this switch on the outcome of the 2010 general election. Using the British Social Attitudes survey we again estimate the influence of The Sun’s switch on political attitudes in 2010. Finally, we test the robustness of these findings using a series of modelling techniques and additional adjustments. Fig. 3 shows the results of our statistical models. Fig. 3 shows the results of the difference-in-difference models comparing changes in party identification among Sun readers. Between 2004 and 2010, support for the Conservative party increased across almost all groups. Looking at those interviewed in 2004 and before April 2010, we find that the increase in support for the Conservative party among Sun readers was not significantly different from the increase in support for the Conservative party among non-readers or other newspaper readers (Fig. 3). In contrast, Sun readers diverged from other groups after the campaign began. Among those interviewed after the campaign began, we find that Sun readers were more likely to support the Conservative party than other newspaper readers (12.9%, 95% CI: 2.05%–23.8%), than other non-readers (15.8%, 95% CI: 5.58%–26.1%), and across the rest of the sample (14.7%, 95% CI: 4.69%–24.7%) (Fig. 3). In short, any increase among Sun readers in support for the Conservative party over and above the background trend occurred in the period after The Sun campaigned to get David Cameron elected.

Would this shift have been large enough to affect the outcome of the 2010 General Election? Again, our conservative estimate of this Sun effect shows that there was a 14.7% increase in support for the Conservative party over and above the trend. Using the same method described for 1997, assuming that affiliation can reliably predict voting and adjusting for the proportion of Sun readers who voted in the 2010 election, we estimate that approximately 550,000 voters changed their vote because of the switch on May 6th, 2010 (95% CI: 18,000 to 940,000). Although this would not have been enough to provide Labour a victory at the election it would have substantially undermined the Conservative majority and may have given Labour a slight advantage depending on the distribution of the votes.

Were these changes matched by a shift in political attitudes? Similar to the results from 1997, there is no evidence of any change in political attitudes among Sun readers compared to non-readers, all other newspaper readers, and all other people (Table 2).

4.1. Robustness tests for the 2010 models

SI 7 provides a series of specification tests. Inclusion of additional socio-demographic controls such as age, gender, marital status, country, education, and occupational class our results do not qualitatively change our results. For example, there was no effect of The Sun’s shifts on the probability of paid employment, health, owning a computer, having a mortgage, whether the respondent regularly watches the news on TV, or cognitive ability measured through verbal test scores (SI 7). SI 8 shows the results of specificity checks, where we check that there is no effect where we hypothesise that none should occur, which would indicate a potential omitted variable. Unlike the 1997 election, in 2010, the Liberal Democrat party won a substantial proportion of the votes. Using a Multinomial Logistic regression model, we find that, even after adjusting for the change in the Liberal Democrats’ vote, our results do not qualitatively change (SI 9). We also tested whether The Sun’s initial rejection of the
Before the campaign

Readers of *The Sun* compared with all others

Change in probability of feeling close to Conservatives, 2004-2010

After the campaign starts

Readers of *The Sun* compared with all others

Change in probability of feeling close to Conservatives, 2004-2010

Readers of *The Sun* compared with non-readers

Change in probability of feeling close to Conservatives, 2004-2010

Readers of *The Sun* compared with all other newspapers

Change in probability of feeling close to Conservatives, 2004-2010

Notes: Source: BHPS. All models are estimated using difference-in-differences models for those interviewed in 2004 and before the campaign began (Column 1) and those interviewed in 2004 and after the campaign started (Column 2). Consistent Sun readers are the intervention group (solid line). We compare them with three different control groups (dashed line): all other people (Row 1), all non-readers (Row 2), and all other newspaper readers (Row 3). Standard errors are adjusted for repeated observations and clustered at the individual level. All difference-in-differences coefficients are non-significant at the α = 0.05 level before the campaign and are all significant after the campaign began at the α = 0.05 level.

Fig. 3. Divergence in support for the Conservative party before the campaign and after the campaign began, 2004–2010 (British Household Panel Survey).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>B (Diff-in-diff) (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Sun</em> vs Non-readers</td>
<td>2910</td>
<td>0.0017</td>
<td>0.039 (0.060)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Sun</em> vs All other papers</td>
<td>1788</td>
<td>0.0039</td>
<td>0.0022 (0.064)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Sun</em> vs All other people</td>
<td>4246</td>
<td>0.0011</td>
<td>0.27 (0.058)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01. Adjusted for trend and baseline differences.
Labour party on September 30\textsuperscript{th} 2009 influenced party identification. As shown in SI 10, we found no evidence of an increase in support for the Conservative party among Sun readers \((p = 0.074)\).

5. Discussion

Our analysis of the quasi-natural experiment of The Sun’s endorsements of first the Labour Party in 1997 and then the Conservative Party in 2010 reveals three important findings. First, The Sun can substantially influence party preferences among some of its readers. Second, although there were changes in party preference, there was no corresponding change in political attitudes. Third, these effect sizes were substantial; media endorsements were associated with a \(\sim 2\%\) increase in the share of the popular vote for the party supported by The Sun.

5.1. Enlightened preferences, naïve preferences and persuasion

Neither the theory of enlightened preferences nor persuasion theories can fully account for our findings. Consistent with the theory of media persuasion (Persuasion Hypothesis 1a) but in contrast to the theory of enlightened preferences (Enlightened Preferences Hypothesis 1a), in 1997 voters changed their political party preferences based on an endorsement rather than new information about policy. Readers of The Sun were more likely than both non-readers and readers of other newspapers to feel closer to the Labour party after The Sun endorsed Labour in 1997. The same pattern occurred, but in reverse, in association with the 2010 endorsement of the Conservative Party. In line with the enlightened preferences theory (Enlightened Preferences Hypothesis 1b), however, the impact of The Sun was greatest when its switch occurred closer to the election period (Gelman and King, 1993).

While the print media may impact party identification, the short-term influence on political attitudes appears minimal. Persuasion theories (Persuasion Hypothesis 2b) would anticipate a change in political attitudes in 2010 because The Sun’s campaign coverage intended to persuade voters to support Tory policies as well as the Conservative candidate. Yet, there is no evidence of any change in political attitudes in 2010 or 1997, as theories of enlightened preferences would predict (Enlightened Preferences Hypothesis 2a and Enlightened Preferences Hypothesis 2b).

One alternative interpretation is that Sun readers tend to be politically ambivalent, so that policy information plays a less substantive role in choosing candidates (Brynin and Newton, 2003). Rather, ambivalent persons’ preferences may be rooted in characteristics unrelated to the direct content of their policies, but instead their perceived competence or charisma. That is, ambivalent voters may have preferences that are not linked to the policy positions of candidates and may in fact remain relatively naïve about candidate’s ideology.

We term this a theory of ‘ naïve preferences’, which is conceptually distinct from the theory of enlightened preferences. Neither theory requires that individuals be able to articulate their preferences - only that they know enough that decisions are based on the true position of their fundamentals values. However, the difference is that these fundamental values differ. Among persons whose preferences become enlightened, their values are based more heavily on ideologies and policies. In this circumstance the campaign then communicates to voters the candidates’ ideologies and their positions on major issues; allowing them to match candidates with these fundamental values. Persons who have naïve preferences have values grounded in issues other than ideologies or policy positions, typically involving perceived charisma or competence.

The theory of naïve preferences has a number of implications that can be explored in future work. First, it would predict a shift in party identification when a leader is endorsed, especially when that leader is regarded as dynamic, capable and trustworthy. The Sun described both Tony Blair and David Cameron in these terms during the 1997 and 2010 general elections. In this situation the campaign may signal competency or demonstrate charisma without enlightening voters about ideologies or policies. This enlightenment may not occur because people ‘tune out’ or are quiescent, simply not responding to such information. In other words, the preferences that become enlightened are determined by the information that is most salient to the voter. Fundamental preferences pertaining to ideology and policy remain relatively naïve for those who are basing decisions on competence or charisma.

Second, the theory of naïve preferences would predict that the impact of these endorsements will be weakest among politically engaged and informed readers. For example, if The Times newspaper (a politically conservative broadsheet newspaper which is also owned by Murdoch) had endorsed Blair during the 1997 campaign the theory of naïve preferences would predict a smaller effect if this endorsement were focussed on Blair’s personality rather than his policies.

Third, the theory of naïve preferences suggests that endorsements matter most when they are closest to an election. For the politically disengaged, endorsements become associated with party identification when vote choices are being decided but they will likely fail to register in terms party identification when such decisions are cognitively present. For example, the initial rejection of Gordon Brown in September 2009 barely registered among Sun readers while the endorsement of Cameron during the campaign had a large influence on Sun reader’s support for the Conservative party.

This ‘ naïve preference’ interpretation of our findings is consonant with other evidence. Such voters are more likely to be influenced by endorsements or advertising and they often utilise voting heuristics to make political decisions (Arceneaux and Kolodny, 2009). For example, candidates who are perceived as being more physically attractive tend to benefit more greatly from media exposure among less politically knowledgeable than knowledgeable citizens (Lenz and Lawson, 2011). Data from the British Election Study in 2010 show that UK voters care whether the candidate can ‘do the job’ (Clarke et al., 2011). Additionally, some voters believe particular newspapers represent their interests to a greater extent than others and so, when
newspapers communicate their preferred candidate to readers, they will use this endorsement as a competence heuristic in their voting decisions (Green et al., 2002). Such preferences are not necessarily enlightened even though such signals of competence are most salient just prior to an election. These voters will switch irrespective of whether new information is provided regarding policy. Fundamental ideological preferences are not enlightened but remain naïve.

Sun readers are less politically knowledgeable and have weaker commitments to particular ideologies and are therefore more likely to exhibit naïve preferences than other newspaper readers (Norris et al., 1999). As such, the theory of enlightened preferences fails to capture the dynamics of party defections by the media on different groups of voters. Of course, among other newspapers, the proportion of readers who are enlightened by the campaign may be larger and are less likely to be influenced by such defections (Zaller, 1992). The theory of enlightened preferences should be merged with a theory of naïve preferences in order to understand the impact of the media on vote switching in the UK and the decoupling of political attitudes from party identification.

5.2. Naïve preferences and decoupling political attitudes from party identification

Another important implication of the theory of naïve preferences is that people can decouple political attitudes from party identification. This decoupling occurs when an individual supports a party who policies do not match their own policy preferences. Of course, if people’s capacity to decouple policy attitudes from party preferences was merely a feature of this period in British politics then the theory of naïve preferences would have little value. Yet, this capacity to decouple party and policy — as discussed previously — has also been observed in the US (Gerber et al., 2009), suggesting that this decoupling was not an anomaly. Rather, combining our results with Gerber et al.’s findings suggests that some citizens are willing to vote for parties that are not necessarily aligned with their underlying political preferences.

The theory of naïve preferences suggests that, for some people, voting and ideology are the products of two distinct but related factors. For example, and as described above, voting could be tied to competence. In this circumstance, voters are most concerned about whether candidates can ‘do the job’ and will attend to those symbols and cues which they believe signal competence (Clarke et al., 2011), such as newspaper endorsements. If competence is the primary predictor of vote behaviour then it is unsurprising that policy preferences are separable from party identification.

Instead some other factor is linked to policy preferences, such as perceptions of the social reality (which have relatively little influence on party identification). Take for example whether Britons support more government spending on health, education, and social welfare (SI 11). In the UK, support for less taxation and less spending on health, education, and social benefits has remained less than 10% since 1983. Yet, following many years of Conservative government in the 1980s and 1990s, support for more taxes and more government spending doubled. State retrenchment during the Thatcher years may have led people to feel more spending was needed, which altered policy preferences but not voting behaviour (recall that the Labour party won the general election in 1997, at the height of support for more spending). Then, after many years of Labour government in the 2000s support for more taxation and spending halved. Years of state expansion under New Labour may have led people to perceive that government spending was now sufficient, and again influenced policy preferences.

Hence, The Sun’s ability to influence voting behaviour is rooted in a segment of their readership, i.e., those with ‘naïve preferences’, who have the capacity to decouple party identification from policy preferences.

5.3. Elite power and media effects

The theories of enlightened and naïve preferences also have implications for the role of the media in democratic societies, particularly where there is a lack of ideological diversity among the print media. Our results demonstrate that the media does influence voters and that it might influence election outcomes. What makes this media influence potentially worrisome is that the UK print media market is oligopolistic, highly partisan, overwhelmingly right-leaning, and remains a major source of information regarding politics in the UK (Barisione, 2009). Only 12% of all newspaper circulation in 2011 supported the Labour party during the 2010 election. This ideological homogeneity of the UK’s print media appears to be partially driven by owners; who influence both the content and tone of election coverage (Dunaway, 2008). This owner-driven slant is particularly problematic if it can inaccurately signal competence through an endorsement. In 1997, for example, after Murdoch called for The Sun to switch parties, the then editor invited both candidates (John Major and Tony Blair) to meet with the editorial board. After the meeting, the editor reported that ‘in many ways, the staff were more impressed by Major than by Blair’ and that Major appeared the more competent (Greenslade May 19, 1997). The decision to endorse a particular candidate is based on a variety of factors, factors that are commonly obscure to most readers and so they remain unenlightened about competence despite the signals offered by the print media (Andersen et al., 2005).

5.4. Study limitations

Our study has several important limitations. First, attrition within the panel may create some bias in our findings. Yet, because any bias in 1997 would be against the Labour party these results reflect conservative estimates of the persuasive influence of the media on voters. In 2010, attrition is non-differential with respect to sex, age, education, and party identification and is therefore unlikely to substantially bias our results. Second, a fairly short panel interval limits our ability to test the assumption of parallel trajectories in both treated (Sun readers) and the control (e.g., non-Sun readers). This would be
particular problematic if unobserved factors influencing readership were also responsible for creating divergent trajectories. Similar trends in support for Labour among non-readers and readers provide more confidence in this assumption. Third, data collection for the BHPS is often separated by some months, and even years, before and after these changes in The Sun occurred. The temporal gap between the endorsement and the data collection events weakens our ability to claim a direct effect because of potentially intervening factors. However, our within sample contrast provides a direct test of the immediate effect of the shift; and these results are consistent with the estimates from the longitudinal data. Fourth, The Sun’s various defections did not occur in a vacuum. Other newspaper covered this story in their newspapers and so there may have been spillover effects to readers from other newspapers. However, if The Sun’s defections increased support among other readers then our estimates of The Sun’s effect are likely conservative. Fifth, Sun readers are different other types of newspaper readers and it is unclear whether readers of The Times, for example, would have responded in the same way. This study is not intended to estimate the average effect of an endorsement for all people across all newspapers, rather we want to estimate the effect of an endorsement for Sun readers. This narrow research question is still vitally important precisely because Sun readers may constitute a larger proportion of ‘swing’ voters in any given election.

More work is needed to understand whether competence shifted in tandem with rising support for Cameron among Sun readers. Further, this study has not been able to examine in sufficient detail the long-term role of the media in shaping political attitudes. For example, The Sun’s shift away from the Conservative party coincided with a rhetorical shift regarding welfare recipients, labelling them as ‘scroungers’, and it is unclear whether this has had an effect of hardening attitudes to welfare.

Contrary to the enlightened preferences theory of media influence, changes in party political support within newspapers can persuade people to alter their party identification. This shift occurs even when there is no change in the policy content of the newspaper, indicating that some voters use endorsements as a heuristic device in political decision-making. Understanding the influence of both enlightened and naïve preferences on vote choice and political attitudes is critical to determining the importance of ownership, vested interests, and corporate control on the viability of democracy.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2015.11.002.

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