David Thackeray and Richard Toye

Age of Promises: Electoral Pledges in Twentieth Century Britain

INTRODUCTION

'I always have and always will refuse to make promises.' R.A. Butler (Conservative) election address, 1935, R.A. Butler Papers, RAB J/21/181.

2 May 1997. The Royal Festival Hall, London. A victory bash, and the end of a long election night. The Labour Party was celebrating a famous landslide after eighteen bitter years in the political wilderness. Tony Blair, the party's leader and the architect of its success, made his way to the podium and started to address the dizzy and ecstatic crowd. As he did so, the sun appeared for the first time, its faint glow heralding the beautiful day that was to come. 'A new dawn has broken, has it not?' he remarked, and, as he told the story in his memoirs, immediately regretted it, thinking it smacked of overreach. He tried to damp down the crowd's expectations, emphasising that he would govern in line with the moderate principles upon which he had campaigned. He wanted to return his supporters to earth. 'Probably it wouldn't have mattered what I said,' he acknowledged later, 'but I was obsessed with the notion that the country might take fright at the mandate it had given us, and believe that we may revert to the Labour Party of old, not the new Labour that we had promised to deliver.' He therefore 'sought to soothe and to settle, conscious that anything that smacked of hubris or arrogance, however faintly, would quickly return to haunt us.'[1]

[1] Tony Blair, *A Journey*, Hutchinson, London, 2010, pp. 11-12.

Writing with the benefit of hindsight, Blair may have exaggerated the extent of his foreboding: his remarks had been prepared in advance and were directed at the national TV audience as much as at the activists in front of him.[2] Nevertheless, the theme he identified – the gap between the dreams of the campaign trail and the reality of government – represents a vital issue of democracy. Though it failed to get much credit, the New Labour government was actually fairly good at fulfilling its specific (rather cautious) election pledges.[3] It was not unusual in this respect. Although politicians have a reputation for breaking promises, modern British governments have in fact been able to translate their electoral commitments into legislative action to a remarkable extent.[4] Indeed, comparative analysis shows that the UK is a high performer in this respect, partly because it has a majoritarian system which tends to deliver a single party 'mandate' rather than a consensual one in which coalition negotiations are the post-election norm.[5] And yet, ironically, it is not clear that the fulfilment of promises is actually what voters are looking for. Rather than wanting politicians, necessarily, to do as they said they would before they were elected, they may in fact prioritise policies devised 'in the national interest' or in line with expert opinion.[6] Certain commitments Blair made in the interests of making it to Downing Street – notably that to restrict public spending in his first two years in office – may actually have inhibited his government's ability, once elected, to improve people's lives in the way hey presumably wished. Blair may have kept most of his promises – but he failed to live up to his *sense of promise*.

[2] Brian Cathcart, *Were You Still Up For Portillo?*, Penguin Books, London, 1997, pp. 168-72.
[3] Polly Toynbee and David Walker, *Did Things Get Better? An Audit of Labour's Successes and Failures*, Penguin, London, 2001.
[4] Judith Bara, 'A question of trust: Implementing party manifestos', *Parliamentary Affairs* 58 (2005), pp. 585-99.
[5] Robert Thomson et al, 'The Fulfillment of Parties' Election Pledges: A Comparative Study on the Impact of Power Sharing', *American Journal of Political Science*, 61 (2017), pp. 527-542.
[6] This is suggested by a recent study of Australian voter preferences, and may be applicable more widely: Annika Werner, 'What voters want from their parties: Testing the promise-keeping assumption', *Electoral Studies*, 57 (2019), pp. 186-195.

The problem was not a new one: something similar could be said of Harold Wilson's 1964 Labour government, for example.[7] In other words, although it seems natural to assume that voters have policy preferences and will reward politicians who successfully carry out pledges that reflect them, the actuality may be rather different. Moreover, this understanding of how politics works – and how political pledges work - is one that has evolved over many decades. In order to show how this came about, this book explores the issue of electoral promises in Twentieth Century Britain – how they were made, how they were understood, and how they developed over time. It does so through a study of general election manifestos (issued by political parties) and election addresses (issued on behalf of individual candidates).[8] We explore the form of these documents in order to cast light on how this helped shape their content. In other words, we suggest that the sorts of things that politicians chose to promise was influenced by the culturally specific but gradually evolving formats in which the promises were contained.

Of course, political promises are made in speeches, interviews, and party political broadcasts, as well as on posters, and not just in addresses and manifestos. Nor are they always made at election times.[9] We naturally make mention of these other methods. But in terms of their persistence across the century, and in spite of significant changes in format, manifestos and addresses remained a stable element in a rapidly changing political-technological environment. This makes them especially suitable for comparison across time. Addresses and manifestos had a symbiotic relationship. From at least the 1860s onwards, party leaders' election addresses

[7] And indeed was said at the time by its critics: Brendon Sewill and James Douglas, 'Policy Formulation and Presentation', 23 Nov. 1967, OG/67/2, Conservative Party Archive (henceforward CPA), Bodleian Library, Oxford.
[8] For the purposes of clarity: although it is perfectly legitimate to describe an election speech as an 'address', that term when used in this book always refers to a specific kind of formal written document.
[9] See David Thackeray and Richard Toye eds., *Electoral Pledges in Britain since 1918: The Politics of Promises* (forthcoming).

acted as effective statements of party policy and were commonly referred to as 'manifestos'. However, they were by no means the only source of authority. Victorian newspapers and periodicals looked to the addresses and campaign speeches of other leading political figures to discern the likely actions of a future government. After all, coalition governments became a common feature of British politics after the Liberal party's split over Irish home rule in 1886. The importance of addresses declined over the course of the Twentieth Century as election campaigns came to be centred around party programmes articulated in national manifestos. However, they continued to play an importance role in articulating the policies which candidates stood on, and the priority which they gave to certain issues, which could sit uneasily with the messages promoted from party headquarters. As such, exploring the changing relationship between addresses and manifestos is a useful means to analyse the connection between the local and the national campaigns in British politics.

Our premise is that a history of the act of making promises – which is central to the political process, but which has not been sufficiently analysed in the context of Twentieth Century Britain - illuminates the development of political communication and democratic representation. The period saw a broad shift away from politics viewed as a discursive process whereby, at elections, it was enough to set out broad principles, with detailed policymaking to follow once in office following reflection and discussion. Over the first part of the century, parties increasingly felt required to compile lists of specific policies to offer to voters, which they were then considered to have an obligation to carry out come what may. From 1945 onwards, moreover, there was even more focus on detailed, costed, pledges. Politics thereby became more 'programmatic', although this is not to say either that elements of such an approach had not been present in 1900 or that manifestos became mere 'shopping lists' issued without reference to general principles. Indeed, commentators often expressed anxiety that the

growth of election promises, which governments then supposedly often failed to enact, was eroding public confidence in politicians. Previous scholars have noted that politics had become more programmatic as early as 1914, and that Labour in particular had an identity as a programmatic party which saw its role in government as being to carry out its manifesto.[10] We take these insights further, arguing that Labour was an innovator within the political system, which drove other parties to imitate it. Although it was relatively unsuccessful at getting elected, it was highly influential on the way that electoral politics in general was conducted. Labour's legendary 1945 manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, became the model which others sought to imitate, and a subject of nostalgia within the party itself.[11]

Pledges multiplied across the century. At the same time the political parties developed policymaking apparatus and the writing of manifestos became increasingly bureaucratised. In 1900, the manifesto of the Conservative Lord Salisbury offered three promises, two of them rather vague: to restore Britain's imperial power in South Africa, 'to investigate and remove the defects our military system', and to maintain British rights in China.[12] By contrast, a Tory Prime Minister, John Major claimed in his autobiography that his 1992 manifesto contained 350 pledges; an academic analysis puts the number even higher, at 452.[13] This phenomenon was related to the growth of government over the period, as the both the welfare state and the warfare state expanded.[14] Yet, in spite of a brief dip in the Conservative manifesto of 1983, the

---

[10] Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language, and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 3; Dennis Kavanagh, 'The politics of manifestos', *Parliamentary Affairs* 34 (1981), 7–27, at 13.

[11] Speech of Ernest Large of the Tottenham Constituency Labour Party: *Labour Party Annual Conference Report* (henceforward LPACR) 1981, p. 211; David Marquand and Tony Wright, 'Engaging the eggheads', *The Guardian,* 11 Dec. 1995. On Labour's sentimental attitude towards its past, see Richard Jobson, *Nostalgia and the Post-War Labour Party: Prisoners of the Past*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2018.

[12] F.W.S. Craig ed., *British General Election Manifestos 1900-1974*, Macmillan, London, pp. 2-3.

[13] John Major, *The Autobiography*, Harper Collins, London, 1999, p. 300; Bara, 'A Question of Trust', p. 588.

[14] David Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain 1920-1970,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006.

post-1970s neoliberal turn in British politics was followed by the proliferation of promises, not their contraction.

This is not to say that offering more and more policies was the sure-fire route to electoral success. At different stages in their post-war history, both Labour and the Conservatives learned that this was not the case. During the 1970s, manifestos were increasingly seen as problematic.[15] The political scientist Bernard Crick was one of a number of figures who, from this point onwards, diagnosed the problem of 'manifestoitis', a term which meant slightly different things to different people. In Crick's usage, when discussing Labour in 1983, it meant cramming disconnected items into a manifesto without articulating 'simple persuasive ideas and principles that can imply policies without always needing to spell them out in advance of events and opportunities'.[16] By this stage, parties needed detailed policies in order to look prepared and serious, but these could often form hostages to fortune and were never enough, in and of themselves to win an election. What mattered, as some contemporaries realised, were not the policies as such but rather the narratives that could be woven around them by supporters and opponents alike.[17] And just as important as promises were what Luke Blaxill has labelled 'anti-promises', which involved pledging not to do something.[18] R.A. Butler's pledge never to make any promises, quoted above, may now look merely quaint. But it found an echo, for example, in Margaret Thatcher's promise not to make empty promises, and indeed in Blair's commitment to restore trust in politics by not pledging more than could be delivered.[19]

---

[15] Anthony King, 'Death of the manifesto', *The Observer*, 17 Feb. 1974; S.E. Finer, 'Manifesto Moonshine', *New Society*, 13 Nov. 1975.
[16] Bernard Crick, 'The Future of the Labour Party', *Political Quarterly*, 54 (1983), pp. 346-353, at 349.
[17] James Douglas, 'Style and Promise', OG 67/8, CPA.
[18] Luke Blaxill, 'Election Promises and Anti-Promises after the Great War', in Thackeray and Toye eds., *Electoral Pledges*.
[19] David Thackeray, ''I promise you this. I won't make empty promises'. The election manifestos of Margaret Thatcher', in Thackeray and Toye eds., *Electoral Pledges*.

Individual party manifestos are often discussed in biographies of party leaders and in more general histories. There are also useful compilation volumes, which include some helpful editorial commentary.[20] Manifestos in general have also been the subject of much previous academic discussion, from which we have benefitted greatly.[21] Particularly noteworthy is the multinational Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) which uses a (semi-) computerized content analysis methodology to track parties' policy positions. As Nicolas Merz, Sven Regel and Jirka Lewandowski explain, 'trained native-language expert coders are asked to split the electoral programs into statements (so-called quasi-sentences) and to allocate to each statement some category of an extensive coding scheme of policy goals.' This creates a machine-readable data-set which can be used to show where parties sit on a Left-Right spectrum.[22] In this model, manifestos are assumed to be important but are often treated as fairly straightforward statements of the positions of those who issued them, put forth as a means of appealing to voters' policy preferences. The CMP estimates are regarded by their proponents as highly dependable, being said to 'actually chart the party's position at each election on the basis of its own authoritative policy pronouncement'.[23] Notwithstanding certain problems with the data, they carry with them the aura of objectivity.[24]

---

[20] Craig ed., *General Election Manifestos, 1900-74*; F. W. S. Craig ed., *British General Election Manifestos, 1959–1987*, Dartmouth, Aldershot, 1990; Iain Dale ed., *Labour Party General Election Manifestos 1900–97*, Routledge, London, 1999; Iain Dale ed., *Liberal Party General Election Manifestos 1900–97*, Routledge, London, 1999; Iain Dale ed., *Conservative Party General Election Manifestos 1900–97*, Routledge, London, 1999.

[21] In addition to items cited elsewhere in this introduction, see Richard Rose, *Do Parties Make A Difference?*, Macmillan Press, London, 1984, esp. Chapter 4; Special Issue of *Party Politics* (24/3, 2018) on 'The How's and Why's of Party Manifestos'. In the 1960s the late Anthony King began a study of manifestos which he never completed; his outline in preserved in his papers at the University of Essex (Box 9a).

[22] Nicolas Merz, Sven Regel, and Jirka Lewandowski, 'The manifesto corpus: a new resource for research on political parties and quantitative text analysis', *Research & Politics* 3 (2016), 1-8. Quotation at 1.

[23] Ian Budge, 'Mapping policy preferences: 21 years of the comparative manifestos project', *European Political Science*, 1 (2002), 60-8. Quotation at 60-1.

[24] Kostas Gemenis, 'Proxy documents as a source of measurement error in the Comparative Manifestos Project', *Electoral Studies*, 31 (2012), 594-604.

Without question, the CMP is a highly valuable project that has yielded important insights into policy preferences. Nevertheless, its approach is problematic, because it is strongly shaped by today's understandings of what manifestos are for. Moreover, the assumption that manifestos are authoritative statements of a party's position glosses over those occasions when parties have in fact been heavily divided. It also ignores the question (upon which election addresses can cast light) of how far individual candidates have considered themselves bound by the centralised manifestos of their respective parties. Furthermore, it neglects simple questions such as how many manifestos were printed, who (if anyone) read them, and the actual uses to which they were put during elections. Therefore, although the CMP approach should certainly not be cast aside, it will prove insufficient and potentially misleading unless supplemented by an informed understanding of how the manifesto genre evolved over time as an aspect of electoral culture.

Although it is well-known that manifestos grew in length, this has not been precisely quantified until now.[25] Our figures are presented in Table 1 and visualised in Figure 1. These should be looked at together with the Flesch-Kincaid scores for each manifesto, presented in Table 2.[26] The Flesch-Kincaid formula is used to calculate the readability of texts and to give a score equivalent to a US educational grade level.[27] Longer sentences with multi-syllable words result in higher scores, i.e. complex texts have high scores and simple texts low ones.[28] On the basis of these statistics it can be seen that the Conservatives, on average, produced the longest

[25] For some broad-brush observations, see Kavanagh, 'Politics', 8.
[26] For the purposes of calculating Flesch-Kincaid scores, full-stops were inserted after headings and where they were missing at the end of some sentences, in order to prevent distortion of the results.
[27] Clearly, this technical measure of readability is only partial guide to how easily a reader might find it to understand a particular text in practice. It cannot take into account the use of jargon terms or obscure references that might baffle comprehension.
[28] J.P. Kincaid, R.P. Fishburne, R.L. Roger and B.S. Chissom, 'Derivation of new readability formulas (automated readability index, fog count, and Flesch reading ease formula) for Navy enlisted personnel', Research Branch Report 8–75, Chief of Naval Technical Training: Naval Air Station Memphis-Millington TN, 1975.

manifestos, ahead of Labour and the Liberals/Alliance/Liberal Democrats ('Liberals' for the purposes of shorthand). Indeed, in sixteen out of twenty elections theirs was the lengthiest. It was the Liberals, by contrast, whose manifestos were most complex (in Flesch-Kincaid terms), slightly ahead of the Conservatives, whose manifestos were themselves on average 1.5 grades above those of Labour; a significant but not startling difference. The average complexity of the three parties' manifestos fell from 12.5 in 1900 to 10.5 in 1997. Thus manifestos had become easier to read (at least in a purely technical sense) even as they had become much lengthier. At the same time it should be noted that the simplification of political language was far less drastic than that which can be seen in US presidential rhetoric (admittedly a very different genre) across the same period.[29]

These broad generalisations, however, mask a more complicated picture. In the Edwardian period, Labour looks like an aggressive new entrant, undercutting the other parties by using radically simpler language. During the interwar years the Liberals show no clear pattern, whereas the Conservatives persisted with high levels of complexity throughout the twenties, but in 1931 converged with Labour (which had abandoned any effort at extreme simplicity) with a score of 12.6. After 1945, only the Liberals ever achieved a score of more than 13 (in February 1974). On the other hand, they achieved scores of less than 10 on two occasions (in 1959 and 1970) as did Labour (in 1950 and 1951). The Conservatives score 9.9 in 1966 but at no other point in the century did one of their manifestos fall below 10. On the whole the differences between the parties were not dramatic after 1945, and in 1997 all three manifestos converged very closely around the average of 10.5. So greater *uniformity* of readability level can be added to our two other identified long-term trends of greater length and simplicity. The

[29] Elvin T. Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.

most striking of these trends, that of length, is some ways the easiest to explain. The most obvious reason relates to expectations surrounding political promises – not merely the increasing numbers of pledges that were expected but the greater level of detail that was required to surround them.

This growing length had obvious potential consequences. ‘Election campaigns in Britain always start when the parties issue their manifestos’, quipped the humourist Miles Kington in 1987. ‘The next thing that happens is that nobody reads them.’[30] From a scholarly perspective Jure Kosec suggests that the ‘considerable length’ of post-1945 manifestos meant that they had ‘little appeal to the average voter’.[31] Politicians too have been dismissive. Lord Hailsham’s described them as ‘unread and unreadable’ might well seem plausible.[32] Chris Patten, one of the authors of the 1979 Tory manifesto, argues that such documents ‘were largely treaties between different factions in the party and read, if at all, by very few outside Whitehall and special interest groups.’[33] However, their impact on voters should not be dismissed too quickly. True, the woman who in 1979 wrote asking for a copy of the Welsh Labour manifesto in order to help her make up her mind was a pretty rare individual.[34] But manifestos were, as will be seen, genuine mass circulation documents well into the second half of the century; parties presumably found a value in producing them in such large numbers. It also seems reasonable to conclude that the 150-word Labour manifesto of 1900 was read in full by many more people than the Tory one of 1992, which was almost two hundred times that length. Moreover, the intermediary role played by interest groups, the media and others was itself crucial in

[30] Miles Kington, ‘The Alliance believes in free speech, and will make one at any time’, *The Independent*, 1 June 1987.
[31] Jure Kosec, ‘Conservative Party General Election manifesto: objectives and purposes 1945-1983’, MA thesis, University of Leiden, 2014, p. 3.
[32] ‘Elective Dictatorship’, *The Listener*, 21 Oct. 1976, quoted in Kavanagh, ‘Politics’, 14.
[33] Patten, *First Confession: A Sort of Memoir*, Allen Lane, London, 2017, p. 139.
[34] Letter of 25 Apr. 1979, Labour Party Wales Papers, Box 46, National Library of Wales (hereafter NLW), Aberystwyth. We have omitted the woman’s name in order to preserve her anonymity.

maintaining the manifesto's symbolic significance and continuing importance to the electoral process. 'A party's manifesto, however little it is read, is always a crucial political document', noted the journalist Hugo Young in 1974. 'It defines the party's very being and purpose, fixing the analysis of problems, listing the pledges, enumerating the priorities which are repeated in a thousand candidates' speeches across the country.'[35]

The Nuffield Election Studies, an academic enterprise which has yielded a book-length investigation for every general election since 1945, have done much to shape understandings of what election addresses and manifestos were for and their relative importance in campaigning. In introducing *The British General Election of 1951*, David Butler noted that the various surveys and statistics compiled by psephologists since the end of the Second World War combined to show:

> How little the behaviour of the voter seems to be determined by ordinary campaign activities. It appears the quality of the candidate and his organisation matter remarkably little; the great majority of electors will vote as they have always done, and the few who are swayed from one side to the other are influenced [largely] by the utterances of the party leaders and by the national rather than the local campaign.[36]

While the Nuffield series of election studies had started a few years earlier with McCallum and Readman's account of the 1945 election, Butler authored or co-authored every volume from 1951 until 2005 and his approach to studying elections would prove highly influential.

Whereas early post-war election studies had taken an interest in the appeals made in election addresses, Butler felt that addresses were largely moribund, broadly uniform in presentation, and heavily reliant on national manifestos.[37] As such, the 1945 and 1950 Nuffield studies

[35] Hugo Young, 'The very strange omissions of the Tory manifesto', *Sunday Times*, 15 Sept. 1974.
[36] D.E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1951*, Macmillan, London, 1952, 3-4.
[37] D.E. Butler and Richard Rose, *The British General Election of 1959*, Macmillan, London, 1960, 133.

included separate chapters analysing election addresses but coverage gradually diminished after Butler took charge of the series. By the time that the 1959 Nuffield study appeared coverage of these documents had been reduced to three pages, focused on outlining the prevalence of particular issues in the addresses of candidates representing the three main parties. Butler was also sceptical about the influence of national manifestos, doubting whether more than five percent of voters read them.[38]

During the 1950s and 1960s a field of 'electoral sociology' developed which found its most authoritative statement in David Butler and Donald Stokes' *Political Change in Britain* (1969). Such studies relied heavily on opinion polling and sample surveys of voters.[39] Advocates of this approach stressed the importance of social forces in shaping voting behaviour and explained parties' relative success over the previous century in terms of their ability to adapt to social change.[40] In addition, Butler and Stokes used the concept of political generations to explain the changing fortunes of political parties. In this reading, most voters' political viewpoints were moulded in their youth and early adulthood, once they had developed an allegiance to a political party they were unlikely to change their preference thereafter.[41] In focusing on how parties responded to the changing class structure of Britain, this was an approach which tended to downplay the importance of the documentary forms of campaigning as well as wider issues of trust in politicians and their promises of action.[42] In retrospect, the appeal of electoral sociology can be seen as a product of the unusual dominance of the two

---

[38] Butler, *General Election of 1951*, 52.
[39] David Butler and Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain: Forces Shaping Electoral Choice*, Macmillan, London, 1969.
[40] Jon Lawrence and Miles Taylor, 'Introduction: Electoral Sociology and the Historians', in Idem. eds., *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain Since 1820*, Scolar Press, Aldershot, 1997, 1-26 at 1; Butler and Stokes, *Political Change in Britain*, 17, 432.
[41] Butler and Stokes, *Political Change in Britain*, 17, 304; In making this claim Butler and Stokes built on conclusions from several local election studies in the 1950s, which stressed that most voters did not change allegiance between elections, see Joseph Trenaman and Denis McQuail, *Television and the Political Image: A Study of the Impact of Television on the 1959 General Election*, Methuen & Co, London, 1961, 147.
[42] Butler and Stokes, *Political Change in Britain*, 173.

main parties in British politics between the end of the Second World War and the mid-1960s. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Liberal leader Jo Grimond was unimpressed. According to his memoirs: 'To the detriment of the country most political academics had swallowed the bait of "psephology", the collection and interpretation of statistics about who was going to win. They had become racing tipsters.'[43]

Electoral sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s emphasised the 'remoteness of politics' from most people's everyday life; the emergent Liberal 'community politics' approach would seek soon to reconnect them.[44] As Mark Abrams and Richard Rose observed in *Must Labour Lose?* (1960), 'surveys often find that up to one-third of the electorate knows nothing about major political questions at any given time….The number who are well informed is probably no more than one-tenth of the electorate, on the great majority of issues. The electorate is not only uninformed, it is also uninterested'.[45] Such claims were based on studies such as Benney, Gray and Pear's *How People Vote* (1956).[46] As critics of 'electoral sociology' note, such accounts need to be treated with caution as they were often hampered by financial constraints, crude categorisations of social class, and a sampling of voters which reflected the biases and flaws of official figures.[47]

---

[43] Jo Grimond, *Memoirs*, Heinemann, London, 1979, p. 204.
[44] The phrase is taken from Butler and Stokes, *Political Change in Britain*, 40.
[45] Mark Abrams and Richard Rose, *Must Labour Lose?*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1960, 73.
[46] Mark Benney, A.P. Gray and R.H. Pear, *How People Vote: A Study of Electoral Behaviour in Greenwich*, Routledge & K. Paul, London, 1956, 23-5, 125; Similar findings were produced by A.H. Birch, *Small-town Politics: A Study of Political Life in Glossop*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1959, 95; Mass-Observation, *The Press and its Readers*, Art & Technics, London, 1949, 23 and *Voters' Choice: A Mass-Observation Report on the General Election of 1950*, Art & Technics, London, 1950, 5.
[47] Mark Roodhouse, ''Fish-and-Chip Intelligence': Henry Durant and the British Institute of Public Opinion, 1936-63', *Twentieth Century British History,* 24 (2013), 224-48 at 226, 235-43; Penny Summerfield, 'Mass Observation: social research or social movement?', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 20 (1985), 439-52 at 442-3; James Hinton, *The Mass Observers: A History 1937-1949*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, ch. 11.

Nonetheless, despite whatever flaws it appears to have in retrospect, the electoral sociology attracted the attention of both of the main political parties, as they sought to understand their changing fortunes.[48] Anthony Crosland's Fabian pamphlet *Can Labour Win* (1960) drew heavily on its insights and its then-fashionable focus on the importance on party images. According to Crosland: 'Contrary to what most politicians assume, the election campaign and the short-term manifestos normally do little to swing votes; their purpose is rather to reinforce, crystallise and validate the voting intentions of people already wholly or half committed to one Party'.[49] Crosland's remarks indicate that, despite the growing influence of electoral sociology, many political activists continued to value the manifesto as a way of reaching the voter even if they assumed their effect was largely to mobilise people who had an existing attachment to the party.

The Nuffield studies provided the basis for a number of works which have analysed elections between 1892 and 1945.[50] While some have paid attention to the visual style of election literature, they have tended to follow the Nuffield studies' approach in analysing election addresses primarily as texts, counting the frequency with which certain issues appeared. By doing so, they sought to get a better sense of what the key issues placed before voters during particular election campaigns. Yet addresses (and manifestos) also need to be considered as

---

[48] Laura Beers, 'Whose opinion? Changing attitudes towards opinion polling in British politics, 1937-1964', *Twentieth Century British History*, 17 (2006), 177-205 at 191ff., 197, 199-203; Andrew Taylor, ''The record of the 1950s is irrelevant': The Conservative Party, electoral strategy and opinion research, 1945-64', *Contemporary British History*, 17 (2003), 81-110 at 81-92.

[49] Anthony Crosland, *Can Labour Win?*, Fabian Society, London, 1960, 7.

[50] Naomi Lloyd-Jones, 'The 1892 General Election in England: Home Rule, the Newcastle programme and positive Unionism', *Historical Research*, forthcoming; Paul Readman, 'The 1895 general election and political change in Victorian Britain', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 467-93 at 471, 475 and 'The Conservative Party, patriotism, and British politics: The case of the General Election of 1900', *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), 107-45 at 114-16; A.K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide: The General Election of 1906*, David and Charles, Newton Abbot, 1973, 64-5, 79, 83, 88; Neal Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People: The General Elections of 1910*, Macmillan, London, 1972, 315-29; Andrew Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991; Tom Stannage, *Baldwin Thwarts the Opposition: The British General General Election of 1935*, Croom Helm, London, 1980.

tangible artefacts with a history of design, distribution, and campaign usage. Doing this creates the potential for a more rounded approach to the policies and promises that they embodied, by taking into account the strategy and tactics of messaging. Addresses could be distributed in a variety of forms: as handbills, leaflets, and (until 1918) as posters. During the early twentieth century they varied widely in content and presentation and candidates were encouraged to take great care in their production.

Of course, they could be seen as just 'another leaflet' given that the production of election literature proliferated during the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, election addresses took on an important symbolic role as the key means by which candidates articulated the policies on which they stood. Such was the importance of the address as a form of political communication that the National Liberal Club collected them for future reference at each election from 1895 onwards and the Conservative Party did so since 1922. It was valuable to have sitting MPs' old election addresses on file as they could be used against them if they were seen to have failed to deliver the pledges on which they were elected. The development of the address as a means to reach a mass electorate was connected to the growth of the parties as mass member organisations from the late nineteenth century onwards. As William Woodings noted in his 1892 election manual: 'Unless the agent resorts to an addressing agency….he will require a large staff to get the envelopes written. Frequently a number of voluntary helpers can be found. Women's aid is valuable at this stage, and it usually obtainable without difficulty.'[51]

Election addresses became more uniform after 1918 as a result of closer control of messaging by central office, but they were by no means as dull as David Butler supposed. Yes, most

[51] William Woodings, *The Conduct and Management of Parliamentary Elections. A Practical Manual*, South Counties Press, Lewes, 1892, p. 22.

candidates did not significantly dissent from the standard manifesto programme in their addresses, but they also provided an important means for political outsiders to make their case to the electorate. They could be used to articulate the politics of place and locality ('VOTE FOR CRONE: YOUR FRIEND AND NEIGHBOUR: A West Willesden Man for West Willesden').[52] Some used their addresses to lecture the voters ('Is it always someone else's job to vote Liberal and not yours?')[53] In addition, they were a useful means for figures from previously marginalised groups, such as women and Labour candidates, to discuss their backgrounds and make their case for office.[54] Furthermore, from the late 1960s onwards the Liberals and Scottish and Welsh nationalists revitalised election literature with their challenge to the Conservative-Labour Westminster duopoly. Given their focus on the key governing parties, the Nuffield studies paid little attention to how these minor parties articulated their appeal at local level.[55] Moreover, leaflets remained the key means for individual candidates to connect with the electorate.[56]

There are, however, problems in terms of analysing the reception of both addresses and manifestos. This may seems surprising. After all, with the advent of opinion polling and the sociological research organisation Mass Observation (MO) in the late 1930s, we have rich survey evidence of the electorate's attitude to a wide range of issues. Therefore, one might

[52] John S. Crone (Liberal), 1918 election address, National Union of Women Teachers (hereafter NUWT) Archive, UWT/D/35/2, Institute for Education, London.
[53] Oliver Smedley (Liberal, Saffron Walden), 1951 election address, R.A. Butler Papers, RAB J/24/3, Trinity College Library, Cambridge.
[54] Lisa Berry-Waite, 'The parliamentary election campaigns of women candidates in Britain, 1918-1931', University of Exeter Ph.D. thesis, forthcoming.
[55] The 1970 Nuffield study broke new ground in containing an appendix on Scottish nationalism, however it gave an overview of the SNP's electoral progress and its development of policy at conference rather than offering a substantial analysis of its election literature, James G. Kellas, 'Scottish Nationalism', in David Butler and Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, *The British General Election of 1970*, Macmillan, London, 1971, pp. 446-62. Even in October 1974, when the SNP accounted for 30 percent of the Scottish vote they did not feature in the Nuffield study's analysis of election addresses.
[56] David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1992*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1992, p. 242; The British Election Study for 2017 found that voters were far more likely to receive leaflets from candidates than be canvassed, emailed, or engage with the candidates on social media, Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2017*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2018, p. 301.

think, it should be surely be possible to find out what the public thought of these documents. Yet, in fact, popular responses are for the most part veiled from the historian. On the one hand, pollsters and researchers usually wanted to know what voters thought of particular parties, politicians, and policies. By contrast they showed little interest in how people reacted to the precise documentary forms in which the policies in question were embodied. On the other hand, and equally understandably, voters too appear to have been interested in what they regarded as the substantive issues rather than with the nature of election literature as such – whereas, with regard to political speeches, the manner of delivery was often a key point of concern to them. With almost vanishing rarity, a diarist recorded having read a manifesto in a newspaper, or more often (in the later part of the period) noted the press launch of one, generally without further comment. Some diarists wrote being inundated with election literature and occasionally described the content in some detail – but normally without specifying if they were talking about an election address or some other type of pamphlet. The search for authentic popular reactions – the actual effect on voters - is therefore somewhat frustrating but we have done our best with the limited sources available. Happily, the evidence for other parts of our story is incredibly rich, not least because parties archived each other's election addresses as a way of gathering intelligence and ammunition to use against their foes.

This book focuses on the development of political promises by the three main parties in the United Kingdom, discussing minor parties only where their activities can be shown to have had an impact on how the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberals/Alliance/Liberal Democrats undertook their own campaigning. (Because the distinctive Irish culture of manifesto-making did not influence the conduct of politics on the British mainland, we do not deal with it here,

but it is certainly deserving of further study.)[57] Of course, the idea that politicians make promises and then fail to deliver long pre-dated the Twentieth Century. But the particular experience of the years since 1900 can do much to illuminate the issues of declining trust and competing mandates that bedevil British politics in the era of Brexit. 'The age of promises was past', observed Keir Hardie, Labour's first leader, after the party's electoral breakthrough in 1906, 'and the age of performances had set in.'[58] In fact, the Age of Promises had only just begun.

[57] In 1918 Sinn Féin broke new ground by centring their election campaign around a manifesto (their cause was helped by the British administration's decision to censor it). Following partition, manifestos became a common feature of election campaigning in the Irish Free State. However, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), which dominated politics in Northern Ireland, did not issue its own manifestos. By contrast, Sinn Féin followed common practice in the Irish Republic in issuing an election manifesto. However, the one-page manifestos produced for 1955 and 1959 were statements of the republican principles of the party rather than a programme for government; after all, Sinn Féin was committed to abstention from Westminster. Until 1972 the UUP took the Conservative whip at Westminster and considered themselves Conservative MPs. It was only after the Unionist movement fractured with the onset of the Troubles that it became common for Northern Irish parties to issue election manifestos.

[58] 'The Independent Labour Party', *Aberdeen Journal*, 16 Apr. 1906.

Table 1. Word-counts of party manifestos.

Election	Conservative/Unionist	Liberal/Alliance/Liberal Democrat	Labour	Combined total
1900	880	1790	150	2820
1906	992	2349	237	3578
Jan-Feb 1910	3112	677	557	4346
Dec. 1910	424	397	255	1076
1918	1924	825	1118	3867
1922	1519	967	1285	3771
1923	1557	2146	1133	4836
1924	2894	2209	2226	7329
1929	6572	1205	2464	10241
1931	824	938	2081	3843
1935	3311	1128	1037	5476
1945	6094	3387	4993	14474
1950	7430	3018	4898	15346
1951	2628	2077	1789	6494
1955	11834	2399	2858	17091
1959	5053	2556	5051	12660
1964	8053	4154	9731	21938
1966	4573	5933	10650	21156
1970	10676	2871	11734	25281
Feb. 1974	13778	9902	4735	28415
Oct. 1974	14298	5853	8692	28843
1979	8694	7061	9295	25050
1983	12009	13253	22650	47912
1987	17823	19510	9075	46408
1992	29893	17191	6175	53259
1997	21053	14007	17657	52717
Total	197898	127803	142526	

Figure1. Word-counts of party manifestos.

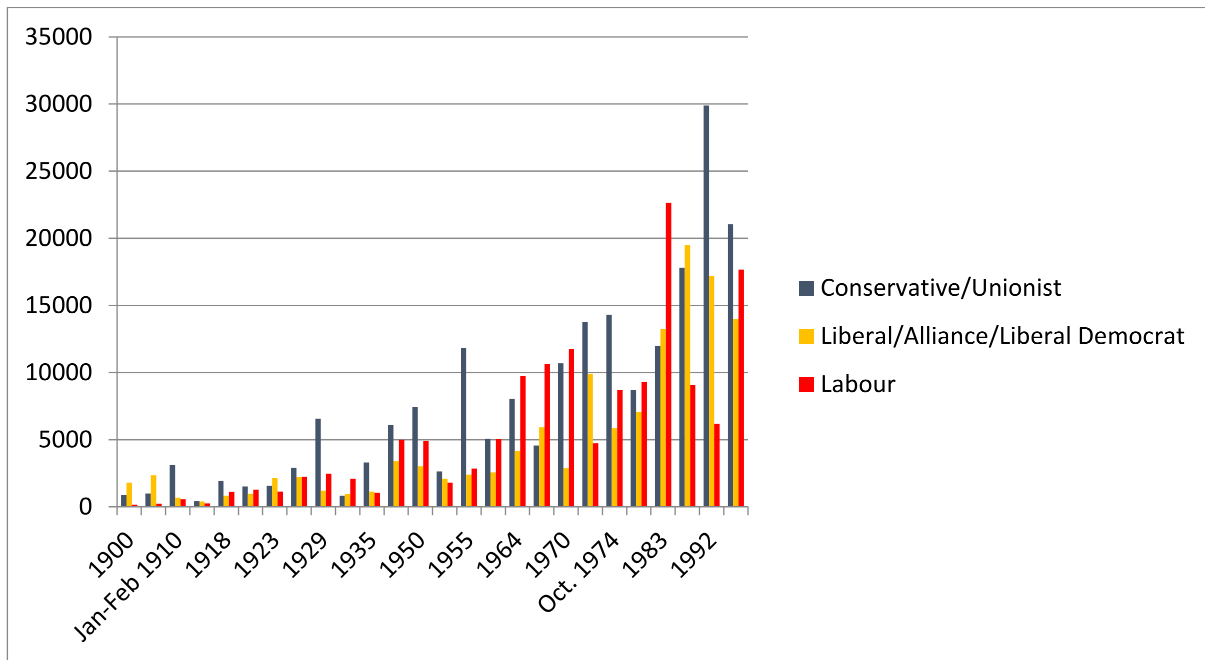

Table 2 Flesch-Kincaid scores for party manifestos

	Conservative/Unionist	Liberal/Alliance/Liberal Democrat	Labour	Average
1900	13.1	14.3	10.1	12.5
1906	14.9	15.4	8.2	12.8
Jan-Feb 1910	10.8	13.6	7.5	10.6
Dec. 1910	13.7	17.1	6.4	12.4
1918	16.5	12.8	11.1	13.5
1922	17.5	12.7	11.8	14
1923	17	12.1	12.5	13.9
1924	15	13.1	14.4	14.2
1929	13.7	15	11.3	13.3
1931	12.6	16.9	12.6	14.0
1935	13.7	10.6	13.4	12.6
1945	11.2	12	10.7	11.3
1950	10.7	12.1	9.8	10.9
1951	10.3	10	8.4	9.6
1955	10.4	12.9	10	11.1
1959	10.4	8.9	10.4	9.9
1964	11	10.6	12	11.2
1966	9.9	10.6	11.4	10.6
1970	12.3	9.4	11.2	11.0
Feb. 1974	12.1	13.8	12.1	12.7
Oct. 1974	10.8	12.9	11.5	11.7
1979	10.6	12.9	10.9	11.5
1983	10.4	12.1	11.3	11.4
1987	10.4	12.1	11.6	11.4
1992	10.5	12.9	10.8	11.4
1997	10.5	10.6	10.4	10.5