

**An Age of Promises: British election manifestos and
addresses 1900-1997**

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Abstract- This article explores the issue of electoral promises in Twentieth Century Britain – how they were made, how they were understood, and how they evolved across time. It does so through a study of general election manifestos (issued by political parties) and election addresses (issued on behalf of individual candidates). The premise of the article is that exploring the act of making promises illuminates the development of political communication and democratic representation, and that considering the print culture and circulation history aspects of addresses and manifestos helps us understand the relationship between the process of pledging and actual policy outcomes. The article further argues that the Labour Party was an innovator that helped push changes in the ways in which policies were promoted to the electorate. It posits that the years 1900-97 saw an important but slow and contested shift towards a more programmatic form of politics. This did not always favour policies of state expansion, but it did favour promises of state action.

This article explores the issue of electoral promises in Twentieth Century Britain – how they were made, how they were understood, and how they evolved. It does so through a study of general election manifestos (issued by political parties) and election addresses (issued on behalf of individual candidates). 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, which makes them especially suitable for comparison across time. Our premise is that a history of the act of making promises –

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3 which is central to the political process, but which has not been sufficiently analysed in the
4 context of Twentieth Century Britain - illuminates the development of political
5 communication and democratic representation. The period saw a broad shift away from
6 politics viewed as a discursive process whereby, at elections, it was enough to set out broad
7 principles, with detailed policymaking to follow once in office following reflection and
8 discussion.

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17 Over the first part of the century, parties increasingly felt required to compile lists of
18 specific policies to offer to voters, which they were then considered to have an obligation to
19 carry out come what may. From 1945 onwards, moreover, there was even more focus on
20 detailed, costed, pledges. Politics thereby became more 'programmatic', although this is not
21 to say either that elements of such an approach had not been present in 1900 or that
22 manifestos became mere 'shopping lists' made without reference to general principles.
23 Indeed, commentators often expressed anxiety that the growth of election promises, which
24 governments then struggled to enact, was eroding public confidence in politicians. At the end
25 of this period, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair sought to gain the trust of voters by centring
26 their programmes around a small number of detailed pledges.

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40 Manifestos and (to a lesser extent) addresses are frequently referred to in the historical
41 and political science literature, often as a means of mapping policy change. In general,
42 manifestos are assumed to be important but are often treated as fairly straightforward
43 statements of the positions of those who issued them, put forth as a means of appealing to
44 voters' policy preferences.¹ And yet, such approaches tend to be strongly shaped by today's
45 understandings of what manifestos are for, which are in many ways different from those that
46 obtained in earlier periods. There is modest body of work that casts light on this question of
47 historical change, and which has raised important issues about the purposes of manifestos and

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¹ 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.

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3 the question of their intended audience.² Of particular significance is Dennis Kavanagh's
4 observation that 'Labour has long regarded itself as a programmatic party and as a
5 government has seen its role as carrying out the manifesto.'³ Moreover, the contemporary
6 Nuffield *British General Election Studies* cast significant light on the drafting of individual
7 manifestos.⁴ However, as a study of the 2007 national election in Ireland argues, there
8 remains much scope to deepen our comprehension of 'the way parties create their manifestos
9 and how they use them'.⁵

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Previous authors, whilst acknowledging that manifestos and election addresses were multi-purpose documents, focused on them as texts. Various historians of the first part of the twentieth century have used addresses as a means of gauging candidates' attitudes to issues such as social reform, free trade, and Irish home rule.⁶ More recently, Luke Blaxill has built on this approach, using corpus linguistics methods to analyse elections, compiling newspaper datasets to explore the changing prominence of particular issues.⁷ Yet while this work is valuable to our understanding of British electoral culture, manifestos and addresses also need

² Jure Kosec, 'Conservative Party General Election manifesto: objectives and purposes 1945-1983', MA thesis, University of Leiden, 2014; Kit Kowol and Peter Sloman, 'The politics of foresight: British political manifestos and social change, 1945-2010' (London, 2014), https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_politics_of_foresight.pdf (consulted 16 Oct. 2017).

³ Dennis Kavanagh, 'The politics of manifestos', *Parliamentary Affairs* 34 (1981), 7-27, at 13.

⁴ This influential series began with R.B. McCallum and Alison Readman, *The British General Election of 1945* (London, 1947).

⁵ Thomas Däubler, 'The preparation and use of election manifestos: learning from the Irish case', *Irish Political Studies*, 27 (2012), 51-70.

⁶ Neal Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties and the People: The General Elections of 1910* (London, 1972), 315-29; A.K. Russell, *Liberal Landslide: The General Election of 1906* (Newton Abbot, 1973), 64-5, 79, 83, 88; Andrew Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931* (Oxford, 1991); Paul Readman, 'The Conservative Party, patriotism, and British politics: The case of the General Election of 1900', *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), 107-45.

⁷ Luke Blaxill, 'Quantifying the language of British politics, 1880-1910', *Historical Research*, 86 (2012), 313-4 and 'The language of imperialism in British electoral politics, 1880-1910', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45 (2017), 416-48.

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3 to be considered as tangible artefacts with a history of design, distribution, and campaign
4 usage. Doing this creates the potential for a more rounded approach to the policies and
5 promises that manifestos and addresses embodied, by taking into account the strategy and
6 tactics of messaging. In the early twentieth century addresses and manifestos varied widely in
7 content and presentation, and while they became more uniform in appearance thereafter the
8 leading parties continually sought to innovate in their format.
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17 The purpose of this article is to explore what these sources reveal about the changing
18 nature of British politics, both in terms of how it was conducted practically and in terms of
19 assumptions about the relationships between the public, candidates, and parties. This will
20 help cast light on the dynamics of party conflict, as well as on the broad issues of how the
21 United Kingdom adjusted to democracy, centralism versus localism in politics, and the
22 ‘impact of Labour’.⁸ The initial focus of this article is less on *what* was promised than *how* it
23 was promised, although our ultimate interest is in how the ‘what’ may have been influenced
24 by the ‘how’ and vice versa. We offer the hypothesis that although the Labour Party,
25 throughout the century, was only intermittently successful in securing support for its
26 preferred ideological solutions, it was much more effective at driving changes in the ways in
27 which policies were proffered to the electorate.
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42 This article thus offers a bold reinterpretation of what constituted political success, in
43 contrast to established body of literature which emphasises twentieth century Conservative
44 electoral hegemony. We should acknowledge, though, our debt to recent work in modern
45 British political history that has focussed on the relationship between political technologies
46 such as posters, opinion research, and public meetings.⁹ By exploring how the relationship
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57 ⁸ Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Labour: The Beginning of Modern British Politics* (Cambridge, 1971).

58 ⁹ James Thompson, “‘Pictorial lies’? Posters and politics in Britain c.1880-1914’, *Past & Present*, 197 (2007),
59 177-210; Laura Beers, ‘Whose opinion?: changing attitudes towards opinion polling in British politics, 1937-

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3 between manifestos and addresses formed a nexus between parliamentary and constituency
4 politics, this article also builds on the scholarship on party organisation. Furthermore, it
5 shows how party manifestos gained a quasi-constitutional status with the development of the
6 so-called Salisbury Doctrine under the Attlee government of 1945-51. This had implications
7 for the political independence of individual members of parliament, which had at any rate
8 been in decline for some time, and thus for the form and status of the promises they made in
9 their addresses. The evolution of manifestos and addresses illuminates the relationship
10 between politics and print culture in the twentieth century, a topic which is ripe for further
11 exploration.¹⁰

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24 Our subject matter is the addresses and manifestos produced at successive general
25 elections by the main three parties. The manifestos of the Labour and Conservative parties
26 tended to generate a paper trail, from as early as 1906 but especially from 1918. (The records
27 of the Liberal Party are less complete in this respect.) This sometimes reveals evidence of the
28 drafting process and guidance to local parties about how manifestos should be used. The
29 National Liberal Club collected election addresses extensively from 1892 onwards, as a form
30 of intelligence-gathering, as did the Conservative Party after 1922. These were used in post-
31 election analyses of campaigning and in planning future literature. Candidates were also
32 encouraged to collect their opponents' literature. A Conservative Central Office
33 memorandum noted in 1950 that it was particularly handy to keep a record of 'Socialist
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51 1964', *Twentieth Century British History*, 17 (2006), 177-205; Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The*
52 *Hustings in British Politics From Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009).

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54 ¹⁰ For pioneering contributions, see Thompson, 'Pictorial Lies', and Gary Love, 'The periodical press and the
55 intellectual culture of Conservatism in interwar Britain', *Historical Journal*, 57 (2014), 1027-56 although the
56 latter does not use the specific term 'print culture'. Thompson challenges the interpretation offered by James
57 Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c.1815-1867* (Cambridge, 1993), which
58 portrays print culture as a deadening and elitist force.
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3 pledges and promises' to use against Labour candidates.¹¹ The addresses can be placed in the
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5 context of 'normative evidence' in the form of contemporary election manuals, agents'
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7 journals, and model addresses. These sources show how addresses were supposed, in theory,
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9 to be prepared and used, and it seems clear that such guidance was widely adopted in
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11 practice. Addresses can therefore be revealing about the relationship between constituency-
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13 level politics and the central party machine, casting light on how far, and by what processes,
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15 general elections campaigns were 'nationalised.'

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19 This article does not, however, deal at length with the reception of addresses and
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21 manifestos by ordinary voters. This requires some justification. After all, with the advent of
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23 opinion polling and the sociological research organisation Mass Observation (MO) in the late
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25 1930s, we have rich survey evidence of the electorate's attitude to a wide range of issues.
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27 Therefore, one might think, it should be surely be possible to find out what the public thought
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29 of these documents. Yet, in fact, popular responses are for the most part veiled from the
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31 historian. On the one hand, pollsters and researchers usually wanted to know what voters
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33 thought of particular parties, politicians, and policies. By contrast they showed little interest
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35 in how people reacted to the precise documentary forms in which the policies in question
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37 were embodied. On the other hand, and equally understandably, voters too appear to have
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39 been interested in what they regarded as the substantive issues rather than with the nature of
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41 election literature as such – whereas, with regard to political speeches, the manner of delivery
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43 was often a key point of concern to them. With almost vanishing rarity, a diarist recorded
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45 having read a manifesto in a newspaper, or more often (in the later part of the period) noted
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47 the press launch of one, generally without further comment. Some diarists wrote about being
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49 inundated with election literature and occasionally described the content in some detail – but
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51 normally without specifying if they were talking about an election address or some other type

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58 ¹¹ Bodleian Library, Oxford, Conservative Party Archive [CPA], CCO4/3/80, Percy Cohen memorandum to
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60 Conservative agents, 'General Election. Election Addresses and Local Literature', 5 Jan. 1950.

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3 of pamphlet. The search for authentic popular reactions – the actual effect is therefore
4 somewhat frustrating. That is not to say that we cannot draw certain inferences. Manifestos
5 were, as will be seen, genuine mass circulation documents and parties presumably found a
6 value in producing them in such large numbers. It also seems reasonable to conclude that the
7 150-word Labour manifesto of 1900 was read in full by many more people than the Tory one
8 of 1992, which was almost two hundred times that length.
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17 Moreover, if we turn from the effects on voters to the intentions that lay behind
18 manifestos and addresses, and their practical usage, we encounter a much richer seam of
19 evidence. These themes, therefore, form the focus of this article. First of all it describes, in
20 turn, what addresses and manifestos respectively were, and how this changed over time, in
21 terms of length and format. Then it examines how both types of document articulated
22 promises and the ways in which this reflected the changing political and constitutional
23 terrain. We suggest that even as addresses declined in importance over the century they
24 retained some totemic significance as late as 1997, under specific conditions. More
25 importantly, as manifestos became longer (and thus presumably less read) they actually grew
26 in symbolic significance as a feature of the electoral process and in practical importance as a
27 feature of policy-making and statecraft.
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49 Election addresses emerged in the nineteenth century from a vibrant tradition of broadsides,
50 ballads, and hustings speeches.¹² Following the ending of formal hustings meetings in 1868
51 the issue of election addresses acted as the formal start of the campaign, and became the key
52 means for candidates to set out their cause. Throughout the late nineteenth and early
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58 ¹² Vernon, *Politics and the People*; Hannah Barker and David Vincent, *Language, Print and Politics:*
59 *Newcastle-under-Lyme Election Broadsides, 1790-1832* (Woodbridge, 2001).
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3 twentieth centuries, writers of election manuals stressed the value of taking great care with
4 the production of these documents.¹³ Early addresses were usually no more than two
5 paragraphs, declaring the candidate's decision to stand due to popular demand and indicating
6 that they represented local interests (of electors and non-electors alike). Yet with the
7 development of political print media, these documents developed into longer statements of
8 policy, averaging around 1000 words by the 1910 elections.¹⁴ Candidates were encouraged to
9 avoid detailed statements of policy and leave minor questions to public meetings. As W.H.
10 Rowe noted in an 1890 pamphlet produced for Conservative Central Office, 'the average
11 elector will not at election times take the trouble to wade through three or four pages of
12 printed matter'.¹⁵ Bearing in mind that most voters took little interest in politics, candidates
13 needed to avoid long-winded prose and emulate the 'catchy headlines' of the tabloid press,
14 especially given the tendency for local newspapers to reproduce election addresses in full
15 during the early twentieth century.¹⁶ Election addresses became less text-based during this
16 period, with increasing space given to slogans and illustrations. Including a photo of the
17 candidate became increasingly common and was a feature of most addresses after the First
18 World War, often accompanied by a picture of the candidate's wife or husband and children.
19 Bill posting of election addresses appears to have been common, offering a means to reach
20 the non-electors, until it was effectively outlawed by the Representation of the People Act
21 (RPA) 1918.¹⁷

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¹³ Henry Houston and Lionel Valdar, *Modern Electioneering Practice* (London, 1922), 19, 21; William Woodings, *The Conduct and Management of Parliamentary Elections: A Practical Manual* (Lewes, 1892), 13-14.

¹⁴ Blewett, *The Peers, the Parties, and the People*, 315.

¹⁵ W.H. Rowe, *A Practical Manual on the Conduct and Management of Parliamentary Elections for the Use of Conservative Candidates and Election Agents* (London, 1890), 13-14.

¹⁶ Houston and Valdar, *Modern Electioneering Practice*, 20; see also J. Seymour Lloyd, *Elections and How to Fight Them* (London, 1905), 63.

¹⁷ Seymour Lloyd, *Elections and How to Fight Them*, 64.

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3 The importance of the election address grew following the introduction of the RPA
4 which entitled election agents to free postage of one election communication of up to two
5 ounces. This was equivalent at the time to forty percent of total election expenses in a
6 borough constituency.¹⁸ Addresses became the central means to lay out a candidate's
7 programme given they were the one communication which would be sure to reach the home
8 of every registered elector. As late as 1966 the production and distribution of addresses
9 accounted for about a quarter of candidate's permitted election expenditure.¹⁹ Gallup polls
10 suggested they were consistently the most widely viewed piece of locally-produced election
11 material, with around half of voters claiming to have read at least one election address at each
12 election between 1964 and 1979.²⁰ We do need to ask, however, how many of the
13 respondents actually had the expertise to distinguish an address from others forms of election
14 literature.

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Much literature takes the progress of political parties as its starting point, but
addresses indicate the limited significance of party loyalty and the continuing importance of
the candidate's personal appeal at the beginning of the century. Candidates were expected to
address issues of local interest, consulting their election agent and leading figures in the
constituency association where appropriate.²¹ The previous diversity of electoral identities
came under challenge after 1918 with addresses becoming increasingly uniform, in part as a
result of increasing use of material supplied by party press services, with Labour taking a lead
in this respect. As early as 1906, the Labour Representation Committee prepared a model
election address, and from the early 1920s onwards several Labour candidates used stock

¹⁸ Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters*, 110.

¹⁹ D.E. Butler and Anthony King, *The British General Election of 1966* (London, 1966), 98.

²⁰ The highest figure was 53 percent for 1970 and the lowest 43 percent in October 1974.

²¹ Woodings, *Conduct and Management of Parliamentary Elections*, 13.

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3 images.²² In 1945 the party's Secretary provided a model address, although he emphasised it
4 was merely a guide: 'So long as you keep within the ambit of approved Labour Party policy,
5 by all means express yourself in relation to your own individuality and what you believe to be
6 a sound line'.²³ Readman and McCallum noted that at least 23 Labour candidates drew on the
7 document when writing their addresses, employing identical paragraphs and adopting a
8 similar layout.²⁴ Central party assistance in the production of election addresses became
9 increasingly sophisticated over time. Model addresses were widely distributed to
10 constituency parties during the 1950 election, and were seen as being particularly useful in
11 cases where there was little in the way of established local organisation.²⁵ That year,
12 Conservative Central Office (CCO) urged that the word 'Conservative' should be prominent
13 on the front page of the address.²⁶

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Another key factor in explaining the increasing uniformity of election addresses was their growing tendency to draw on the language of national manifestos. At the beginning of the twentieth century election manuals assumed that candidates would seek to issue their addresses within a few days of the calling of an election as this marked the formal start of their campaign, providing the basis for subsequent activity in print and on the platform.²⁷ Thereafter, however, it became increasingly common for addresses to duplicate material from national manifestos. In 1931, when party labels were fluid, the Liberal National Walter Runciman adopted the National Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald's manifesto as

²² Labour History Archive and Study Centre [LHASC], Manchester, C25/115i, Labour Representation Committee, 'Model Election Address', 1905-6.

²³ LHASC, BF/1945/3, Morgan Phillips to candidates and agents, 2 June 1945.

²⁴ McCallum and Readman, *British General Election of 1945*, 94.

²⁵ H.G. Nicholas, *The British General Election of 1950* (London, 1951), 211.

²⁶ Churchill Archives Centre [CAC], Cambridge, Duncan Sandys papers, DSND13/16, Conservative and Unionist Central Office, 'General Election Memorandum No. 4', Appendix B, 18 Jan. 1950.

²⁷ Woodings, *Conduct and Management of Parliamentary Elections*, 13-14; Houston and Valdar, *Modern Electioneering Practice*, 18-20; Seymour Lloyd, *Elections and How to Fight Them*, 63.

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3 his election address.²⁸ MacDonald's Labour opponent in his constituency based his address
4 mainly on the Labour manifesto.²⁹ After 1945 it became common practice to finalise the text
5 of addresses after the national party manifesto had been released, with a result that candidates
6 tended to often borrow phrases, sub-headings and their general layout from manifestos.³⁰
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12 The growing importance of the national party manifesto did not spell the end for the
13 election address as a meaningful form of political communication. Indeed, the spiralling word
14 count of national party manifestos (and the growing challenge of minor parties from the
15 1970s), made it increasingly imperative for candidates to produce eye-catching and readable
16 addresses well targeted at local interests. In 1964, Tony Benn wrote in his diary: 'We agreed
17 that in the Election address would go my message, a special folder dealing with my advice
18 service, a leaflet with the main points of Labour's manifesto....On the back is a space for
19 questions and comments and I am hoping in this way to get in some material which will be
20 useful at my meetings.'³¹ With rapid advances in technology in the 1990s the idea of
21 candidates producing a single election address aimed at voters across their constituencies
22 seemed increasingly outmoded, as targeted mailings of election literature became common
23 and were cheap to organise. During the 1997 campaign Labour candidates, in particular,
24 produced variations on their standard address targeting particular social groups, especially
25 voters who were identified as having been likely to vote for other parties in previous
26 elections.³² By the end of the century the role of printed election communications was
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48 ²⁸ 'Mr. Runciman Addresses Conservatives', *The Cornishman*, 15 Oct. 1931; Parliamentary Archives, London,
49 Herbert Samuel papers, SAMA/81, Walter Runciman to Herbert Samuel, 23 Oct. 1931.

50 ²⁹ "'Refused to be deceived'", *Nottingham Evening Post*, 19 Oct. 1931.

51 ³⁰ D.E. Butler, *The British General Election of 1951* (London, 1952), 54, 56 and *The British General Election of*
52 *1955* (London, 1955), 29-30.

53 ³¹ Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963-67* (London, 1987), 143.

54 ³² These difficulties in identifying the candidate's main address meant that the Nuffield studies ended their
55 traditional practice of providing a detailed analysis of the content of addresses in 1992. David Butler and Dennis
56 Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1992* (London, 1992), 233; In 1997 Labour produced a standard
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3 essentially to filter and target national programmes to suit the needs and interests of particular
4 localities. It should be emphasised, though, that parties had long experimented with stratified
5 election appeals.³³ The targeting of particular groups within constituencies could be seen, for
6 example, in Keir Hardie's bilingual Welsh-English election address published for his contest
7 at Merthyr in December 1910.³⁴

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10 We can see, then, that the election address persisted as a specific form largely because
11 of the provision in the RPA regarding free postage. Although formats of addresses became
12 more uniform over time, and messaging became more centralised, this did not equate to total
13 homogeneity of content. Rather, by 1997 the New Labour model of targeted material – what
14 might be called centrally-inspired diversity – had largely though not completely replaced
15 spontaneous local heterogeneity that had been the norm in 1900. This tends to confirm the
16 picture of Labour as an innovator, albeit this was less obvious in the case of addresses than of
17 manifestos, to which we now turn.

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The evolving relationship between the local and the national can also be seen in the history of manifestos. In 1834, Sir Robert Peel's 'Tamworth manifesto' was a novelty and a sensation; nominally directed at his own constituents, it was also given to the press and thus achieved national publication.³⁵ (Arguably, though, it should be seen as a government manifesto rather than a party one.) By the end of the Nineteenth Century, the practice of the party leader

version of the 'Rose' election newsletter, and a special edition aimed at former Conservative voters in various seats such as Ealing and Acton, and Hammersmith and Fulham.

³³ David Jarvis, 'British Conservatism and class politics in the 1920s', *English Historical Review*, 111 (1996), 59–84.

³⁴ LHASC, LP/ELEC/1910/1, J. Keir Hardie election address, Dec. 1910.

³⁵ Norman Gash, *Sir Robert Peel: The Life of Sir Robert Peel after 1830* (London, 1972), 95-9.

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3 issuing an election address that was, in reality, a national manifesto, had become well
4 established. In 1892, Lord Salisbury, who as a peer did not have a constituency, broke new
5 ground by issuing an ‘Address to the Electors of the United Kingdom’, which was also
6 printed as a leaflet.³⁶ The Labour Party, from its inception, did issue its own manifestos
7 (indeed initially it did not have a single established leader). From 1918, party manifestos
8 became more common – but the address-as-manifesto did persist. In 1929, the Liberals did
9 not produce a manifesto, and instead relied on Lloyd George’s election address, in which he
10 solicited the suffrage of his ‘fellow-electors of Caernarvon Boroughs’, adding that, having
11 served them continuously since 1890, he need not give any ‘elaborate explanation’ of his
12 political opinions.³⁷

26 Such an approach was now archaic. In 1945, the Conservative manifesto, paying lip
27 service to the old form, was cast as ‘Mr. Churchill’s Declaration of Policy to the Electors’.
28 This, however, was part of a conscious strategy to put Churchill himself at the centre of the
29 campaign, and to present his government as ‘National’ rather than Conservative.³⁸
30 Churchill’s (much shorter) address to his own constituents was issued separately.³⁹ From that
31 point on – perhaps influenced by the success of Labour’s iconic *Let Us Face The Future* – the
32 Tories opted to use the explicit party manifesto format. They also generally followed
33 Labour’s preference for naming their manifestos in a catchy fashion – initiated with *Labour’s*
34 *Call to the People!* in 1918.

51 ³⁶ John Barnes and Richard Cockett, ‘The Making of Party Policy’, in Anthony Seldon and Stuart Ball eds.,
52 *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party Since 1900* (Oxford, 1994), 347-82 at 354-5.

53 ³⁷ F.W.S. Craig (ed.), *British General Election Manifestos, 1900-74* (London, 1975), xi, 86.

54 ³⁸ On the avoidance of reference to the Conservative Party in the manifesto, see Churchill papers (electronic
55 edition), CHAR2/554/13-14, Winston Churchill to Ralph Assheton, 11 June 1945, and Assheton to Churchill,
56 15 June 1945.

57 ³⁹ ‘Premier fit as ever to shoulder burdens’, *Daily Telegraph*, 22 June 1945.

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Although it is well-known that manifestos grew in length, this has not been precisely quantified until now.⁴⁰ Our figures are presented in Table 1 and visualised in Figure 1. The growing length of manifestos can be explained by 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. (We shall recur to this point in a later section.) This was linked to the increased bureaucratisation of policymaking, which in the case of Labour’s 1918 constitution mandated the National Executive Committee and the Parliamentary Labour Party to determine the manifesto jointly.⁴¹

At various times across the century, all three parties struggled to reconcile the perceived need to be comprehensive with their desire for punchy propaganda.⁴² This was related to the fact that, from the interwar years onwards, manifestos often drew upon more extensive published party programmes and policy documents. In 1979, a draft speaking note prepared for Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan commented on the extensive committee work done over the two previous years. This had produced ‘about 30,000 words of very good stuff but 30,000 words is not a manifesto – it is a book.’⁴³ Worse still, in 1983, Labour’s internal crisis meant that it was ‘unable to prepare a short, popular and lively *manifesto*’ and instead fell back on a previously prepared 22,000 word ‘Campaign Document’, which Gerald Kaufman famously described as ‘the longest suicide note in history’.⁴⁴ Yet politicians were not of course powerless to cut length if they wished, as is suggested by some of the

⁴⁰ For some broad-brush observations, see Kavanagh, ‘Politics’, 8.

⁴¹ For the text, see G.D.H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party from 1914* (London, 1948), 73.

⁴² Parliamentary Archives, Lloyd George papers, LG/G/12/5/21, Herbert Samuel to Lloyd George and Philip Kerr, 2 Mar. 1929; CPA, CRD2/48/13, Percy Cohen to David Clarke, 9 Dec. 1949; Kosec, ‘Conservative Party’, 17.

⁴³ The National Archives [TNA], London, PREM16/2296, David Lipsey to James Callaghan, 5 Apr. 1979.

⁴⁴ LHASC, 1983 general election file, Denis Healey, ‘The General Election of 1983’, n.d. (emphasis in original); David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983* (London, 1984), 61-2; Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London, 1989), 500.

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3 manifestos of the 1950s, and by Labour's successful efforts in 1987 and 1992 to avoid
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5 another overlong document.
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8 Considering the format and design of manifestos helps us make further sense of their
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10 length as well as their actual use in elections. Labour's report on the first election of 1910
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12 noted that 'The usual Election Manifesto was issued both in poster and in leaflet form' and
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14 claimed a circulation for it of 800,000.⁴⁵ In 1922, candidates were sent a proof copy of the
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16 manifesto the day before the text was due to appear in the *Daily Herald*. They were also
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18 promised that it would be printed as a leaflet 'in much more striking form' and that they
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20 would be provided with a free supply sufficient to cover all voters in their respective
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22 constituencies.⁴⁶ The 1924 Tory manifesto appears to have been the first from any party to
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24 have been issued as a booklet
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26 but it took some time for this to become the norm. In 1955 and 1959, Labour reverted
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28 temporarily to leaflet form.⁴⁷ The 1959 Liberal manifesto came in the form of an innovative
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30 fold-out leaflet with photographs.⁴⁸ The 1964 Conservative manifesto contained photos but,
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32 in spite of some striking covers, 1970s and 1980s manifestos were lacking in illustrations. By
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34 1997, though, manifestos were notably glossy, accessible-looking, and even brash. The use of
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36 colour was not in itself new – garish printing had been a noteworthy feature of Edwardian
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38 politics – but in the post-Thatcherite era of hegemonic market ideology, the fact that
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40 manifestos now looked much like company brochures was surely no accident.⁴⁹
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49 ⁴⁵ *Report of the Tenth Annual Conference of the Labour Party* (London, 1910), 6.

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51 ⁴⁶ LHASC, LP/ELEC/1922/1. Memo by J.S. Middleton, 25 Oct. 1922. This file also contains a copy of the
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53 leaflet.

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55 ⁴⁷ LHASC, 1955 general election file, copy of 1955 manifesto; 1964 general election file A.L. Williams to
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57 Agents and Secretaries of Constituency Labour Parties, 10 Sept. 1964.

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59 ⁴⁸ Copy in 1959 general election file, LHASC.

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⁴⁹ Labour left-wingers had regarded the rebranding of the party in the 1980s and the associated use of market
research as ideologically suspect. Dominic Wring, *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party* (Basingstoke,
2005), 111. On colour, see Thompson, 'Pictorial lies'.

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3 The earlier, shorter manifestos may well have found a mass audience with their
4 circulation peaking in 1929.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Jure Kosec suggests that the ‘considerable length’
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6 of post-1945 manifestos meant that they had ‘little appeal to the average voter’. He also notes
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8 that Conservative officials believed that they found only a tiny readership, and that they were
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10 really targeting the ‘informed public’, i.e. those who they hoped would influence opinion
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12 more broadly.⁵¹ It is certainly true that the use of manifestos was often indirect. One of their
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14 key functions was to act as a briefing document for candidates and activists, to be read in
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16 conjunction with speakers’ handbooks, campaign guides, and daily campaign notes from
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18 party HQ.⁵² This could affect the messaging As the Deputy Chairman of the Conservative
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20 Party noted in 1966, ‘we must think of the customers’ – by which he meant candidates and
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22 party workers. It was no good writing the manifesto in the style of the populist, left-wing
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24 *Daily Mirror* if it was going to be widely read by party members who preferred the *Daily*
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26 *Mail*.⁵³

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33 It seems that Labour’s move back to pamphlet form in the sixties restricted the
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35 readership. Whereas the 1959 manifesto sold 1,464,540 copies, the 1964 booklet was not
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37 considered suitable ‘for mass distribution’; nonetheless, 130,000 copies were produced.
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39 Moreover, a shorter, ‘popular’ version was produced, as was a four-page leaflet entitled
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41 ‘Points From Labour’s Plan’, 850,000 copies of which were printed. On top of that, each
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43 Labour candidate sent a short summary ‘which you might care to use in your election
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49 ⁵⁰ In 1929 nearly 9 million copies of the Labour manifesto were sold to constituency organisations, a figure
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51 which the Conservatives came close to matching and did not subsequently surpass. Cockett, ‘The party,
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53 publicity, and the media’, 557.

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55 ⁵¹ Kosec, ‘Conservative Party’, 3, 53.

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57 ⁵² Speakers’ handbooks and the like of course also provided the material for attacks on other parties’ manifestos.
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59 See, for example, the Conservative party’s *General Election 1945: Notes for Speakers and Workers* (London,
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1945), 297-304.

⁵³ CPA, CRD 3/9/33, ‘Note on Meeting to consider Second Draft of 1966 Manifesto’, 17 Feb. 1966. We are
grateful to Emil Sokolov for this reference.

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3 address.⁵⁴ From 1951 the Conservatives also produced short illustrated leaflets highlighting
4 the key points of their manifestos.⁵⁵ In 1997, the Labour Party took this approach to its
5 extreme when it produced its 'pledge card', which contained five clear promises. In the words
6 of the journalist Andrew Rawnsley, 'The famous five were plastered on billboards, engraved
7 on coffee mugs, emblazoned on campaign buses, and compressed on to small pieces of
8 cardboard and posted through the letter boxes of two million swing households.'⁵⁶
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17 Moreover, manifestos were for a long time reproduced in their entirety in the
18 newspapers. Coverage of this type did decline after the sixties and seventies, by which time
19 full reprinting was already the preserve of the quality press, but even as late as 1983 the
20 *Financial Times* reproduced the Conservative and Alliance manifestos in full, as well as
21 exceedingly lengthy extracts from the Labour one.⁵⁷ In 1992, *The Guardian* paraphrased the
22 Labour and Conservative manifestos over two broadsheet pages.⁵⁸ These may have been
23 pages that were quickly turned, but even if few read them in detail such coverage helped
24 reinforce the centrality of manifestos to the electoral process. The notion of a press
25 conference to 'launch' a manifesto seems to have originated with the Conservatives in 1955
26 and became standard thereafter; from 1959 at least some of these were televised.⁵⁹ Early TV
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⁵⁴ LHASC, 1959 general election file, 'General Election 1959: Report by the Secretary'; 1964 general election file, Williams to Agents and Secretaries, 10 Sept. 1964; 'General Election 1964: Preliminary Report by the General Secretary', Williams to Agents, Sept. 1964; Williams to Agents, 14 & 17 Sept. 1964.

⁵⁵ See for example 'What the Conservatives will do: a shortened version of the Conservative and Unionist Party's policy' (1950), 1951/57, X. Films 63/6; United for peace and progress, A short version of the Conservative and Unionist Party's policy (1955), X. Films 63/7, 1955/68, both CPA, microfiche.

⁵⁶ Andrew Rawnsley, 'The worst thing about New Labour's election pledges on health and education is that they will honour them', *The Observer*, 31 May 1998.

⁵⁷ 'Working Together for Britain - programme for Government', *Financial Times*, 13 May 1983; 'Labour Party's Pledge: The New Hope for Britain', *Financial Times*, 17 May 1983; 'The Challenge of Our Times', *Financial Times*, 19 May 1983.

⁵⁸ 'How the manifestos map out the battle lines for governing Britain during the five years ahead', *Guardian*, 19 March 1992.

⁵⁹ 'Our London Correspondence', *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Apr 1955.

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3 election broadcasts were also designed to complement manifestos, providing an opportunity
4 to explain how pledges would be met and critique the policies of opponents. In 1959 and
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6 1964 both Labour and the Conservatives produced broadcasts named after their manifestos.⁶⁰
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8 In 1992 an article in *The Guardian* asked: ‘How on earth do you read a manifesto?’ Was it to
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10 be read like a book? ‘Or is a manifesto – thereafter buried in dust – merely an excuse for a
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12 launching party, an ephemeral event?’⁶¹ The answer was, perhaps, a bit of both. On the one
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14 hand they were texts with a real political significance that lasted well beyond election-day; on
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16 the other they were an important part of the ‘the symbolic ritual dimension of politics’, or the
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18 carnival element of electioneering.⁶²
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24 On the face of it, then, the growing length and detail of manifestos might appear to
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26 have turned them into forbidding, elitist documents which were of little interest to the mass of
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28 the electorate. Lord Hailsham’s description of them as ‘unread and unreadable’ might well
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30 seem plausible.⁶³ It is true that we know far too little about popular responses, but when the
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32 circulation and usage of manifestos (and documents based upon them) is considered it is clear
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34 that they did receive genuine mass dissemination. Indeed, the longer they became the more
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36 scope there was to argue over their contents, and arguably their centrality to election
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38 campaigns increased rather than diminished from 1945. We now turn to the ways in which
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40 this had an impact on the promises made in election addresses- the main forum through
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42 which individual candidates laid out the principles of their campaigns.
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51 ⁶⁰ Labour’s 1959 broadcasts shared the manifesto’s title ‘Britain belongs to you’, while the 1964 broadcasts,
52 ‘The New Britain’ were taken from the manifesto’s sub-title. The broadcasts are available via
53 <http://pebs.group.shef.ac.uk/>.

54 ⁶¹ ‘The little booklets’, *The Guardian*, 19 March 1992.

55 ⁶² Alan Finlayson and James Martin, “‘It ain’t what you say...’”: British politics and the analysis of speech and
56 rhetoric’, *British Politics*, 3 (2008), 445-64, at 448.

57 ⁶³ ‘Elective Dictatorship’, *The Listener*, 21 Oct. 1976, quoted in Kavanagh, ‘Politics’, 14.

III

Writing for an American audience in 1911, George Fox noted that the British politician was required to use his election address ‘to put himself implicitly on record respecting the important questions that confront the nation for settlement, and to state what would be his general position should they come before the House of Commons’.⁶⁴ Election addresses were therefore both a way of stating the candidate’s own political agenda and a means of indicating how they were likely to vote on the key issues of the day. In the early twentieth century addresses were also a key reference point in cases where the party agenda was unclear or undecided. In 1906, the Liberal government had to change its trade union policy in response to the pledges made by individual Liberal candidates during that year’s general election. As the government (which came to office shortly before the election) did not clearly instruct its supporters against supporting union demands that their funds should be exempted from liability in suits for civil injuries, many Liberals promised to support such claims in their addresses. The result was that the Cabinet abandoned its own plans and adopted the Labour Party’s policy.⁶⁵ Election pledges also played an important role in shaping the policies of the early Labour Party. The 1913 Labour conference voted to ratify support for the previous year’s Government of Ireland Bill. This backing of Irish home rule was explained in the parliamentary report by reference to ‘definite promises made to the constituencies’. Two-thirds of Labour election addresses at the January 1910 election had included support for Irish home rule.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ George Fox, *The British Election Address: A Notable Feature of English Political Campaigns* (New Haven, CT, 1911), 399-400.

⁶⁵ A. Lawrence Lowell, *The Government of England, II* (New York, 1912), 69.

⁶⁶ Geoffrey Bell, *Hesitant Comrades: The Irish Revolution and the British Labour Movement* (London, 2016), 8.

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3 In the absence of detailed manifesto commitments, policy statements expressed in
4 election addresses could be a cause for embarrassment amongst party organisers. During the
5 pre-1914 period there was considerable scepticism of those politicians who sacrificed their
6 future freedom of action by making specific promises to interest groups. The growing
7 influence of non-party auxiliary leagues in electioneering during the Edwardian years, and
8 the relative weakness of formal party organisations, helps explain this anxiety. Auxiliary
9 leagues could give unlimited financial support to candidates, challenging the authority of
10 party central office over constituency campaigns. After 1918 the participation of auxiliary
11 leagues in election campaigns was severely restricted as they were no longer able to support
12 candidates without contributing to their official expenditure. Thereafter, non-party
13 organisations increasingly sought to participate in elections by producing questionnaires and
14 encouraging candidates to pledge support for their policies. The practice had become so
15 widespread that the national agents of the three main parties decided to take the unusual step
16 of issuing a joint statement at the beginning of the 1929 election campaign instructing
17 individual candidates not to answer questionnaires submitted by lobby groups.⁶⁷ Of course,
18 this did not end the practice, and party efforts to produce standard replies, which candidates
19 could make use of in their election addresses and subsequent statements, reveal the growing
20 influence of central headquarters in shaping campaigns.

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22 In 1929 the Conservative government established a Cabinet Emergency Business
23 Committee. As well as being charged with preparing material for Stanley Baldwin's address,
24 which acted as the party's manifesto, the committee assessed responses to questionnaires
25 drawn up by central office, which could be adapted for use by individual candidates. At one
26 meeting alone the committee assessed thirteen questionnaires, ranging from a plea from
27 Arthur Conan Doyle for the legal protection of spiritualists to an enquiry from the Divorce

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⁶⁷ Malcolm Petrie, "'Contests of vital importance': By-elections, the Labour Party, and the reshaping of British radicalism, 1924-1929", *Historical Journal*, 60 (2017), 121-48 at 121-2.

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3 Law Reform Union. Replies were compiled into a series titled 'Questions of Policy', which
4 became a regular feature of campaigns.⁶⁸ At the 1966 election over 100 documents were
5 compiled for this series, including standard responses to questionnaires on the Vietnam War
6 and nuclear weapons.⁶⁹ The picture was similar for the Labour Party, which in 1950 urged its
7 candidates not to enter into 'unauthorised commitments' that went beyond the terms of the
8 manifesto. 'Members of Parliament should be free to weigh up Parliamentary issues in the
9 circumstances obtaining when they arise: 'The signing of questionnaires "on the dotted line"
10 which would commit candidates in detail in the event of their being elected to Parliament, is,
11 therefore, to be deprecated.'⁷⁰ NGO activity expanded rapidly from the 1960s onwards and
12 organisations such as Stonewall devoted significant attention to lobbying MPs, scrutinizing
13 party pledges, and analysing the content of manifestos.⁷¹

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15 While the expansion of NGOs provided opportunities for activists to influence and
16 scrutinize party policy, after 1945 central party HQs increasingly dominated election
17 campaigns. As most candidates waited until the party manifesto had been released before
18 finalising their own election address, this meant they were less likely to issue pledges which
19 might clash with the national programme.⁷² Yet central coordination of message did not
20 eliminate localised content, but rather ensured that such content did not cause embarrassment

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⁶⁸ For the committee's activities see CAC, Churchill papers, CHAR 22/239.

⁶⁹ CPA, CRD4/30/4/3, 'General Election 1966. Questions of policy'.

⁷⁰ LHASC, B/F1959/1, Herbert Morrison and Morgan Phillips, printed circular to candidates, agents and constituency party secretaries.

⁷¹ For an introduction to NGO efforts to lobby MPs from the 1960s onwards see Matthew Hilton, Nick Crowson, Jean-François Mouhot and James McKay, *A Historical Guide to NGOs in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2012), 330-45; Stonewall, *Vote For Equality: A Gay and Lesbian Guide to the General Election* (London, 1997); Vicky Powell, 'No promises in Labour's manifesto', *Gay News*, Aug. 1996, 41-2 (which included a commentary by Stonewall on a preliminary Labour manifesto document); Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford, 2011), 252, 256, 258-60.

⁷² Kosec, 'Conservative Party', 35-6; LHASC, 1979 general election file, 'Campaign Handbook Update', Apr. 1979.

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3 to the national party. Indeed, Conservative and Labour candidates placed increasing attention
4 on local concerns in their addresses during the 1979 election, in response to breakthroughs by
5 nationalist parties at the 1974 contests and the ongoing success of the Liberals' 'pavement
6 politics'. While there was a growing awareness that addresses needed to simply avoid
7 repeating the language of manifestos, few candidates made their own specific individual
8 pledges during this contest. In general, addresses concentrated on assessing the record of the
9 government and outlining how national programmes would affect the constituency,
10 highlighting those manifesto pledges most relevant to the particular locality.⁷³

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22 This combination of the central and the local can be seen in the use made in addresses
23 in 1997 of the New Labour 'pledge card' (mentioned above). Labour had made 'five early
24 promises' for government in a 1996 policy document, *New Labour, New Life for Britain*,
25 which subsequently featured heavily in Labour election addresses and other campaign
26 literature. And yet, while some candidates paraphrased the manifesto pledges in their own
27 words, they were usually presented as a contract between party leader Tony Blair and the
28 electorate, an approach which party strategist Philip Gould believed was central to their
29 appeal.⁷⁴ The breakdown of Conservative party unity over Europe in 1997 showed both the
30 limits of central party discipline and the continuing salience of election addresses as a form.
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As the Labour peer Lord Donoughue noted in his diary, 'The Tories have started to squabble
over Europe, with ministers putting anti statements in their constituency manifestos, contrary

⁷³ A sample of Conservative and Labour addresses for the 1979 election for one in ten constituencies was conducted for the National Liberal Club (NLC) collection at Bristol University. The following examples of specific pledges by individual candidates were found: Birkenhead (Labour), Chelsea (Conservative), Winchester and Andover (Conservative), Lowestoft (Conservative).

⁷⁴ Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London, 1998), pp. 270. A sample of thirty-six Labour addresses from the NLC collection found fifteen with pledges addressed from Blair to the voter, and another six which reprinted the pledges but without Blair's signature. A further eleven of these addresses contained a list of pledges, usually presented as bullet points and drawing on commitments made in the party manifesto.

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3 to [John] Major's wishes.⁷⁵ The *Daily Mail* invited Tory or Labour candidates who wished
4 to declare their opposition to the single currency to fax their election addresses to the paper.⁷⁶
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6 This suggests the continuing significance of election addresses as a forum for candidates to
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8 dissent from official party policy. Nonetheless, on the whole, by the end of the century,
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10 government MPs were chiefly considered representatives of a party with a formal mandate to
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12 carry out manifesto pledges (which themselves formed the main focus of election addresses).
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14 Given that manifestos became the key document for parties to articulate their programme for
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16 government, we will now explore the changing ways that they presented political promises.
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24 IV

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28 Together with the increasing length of manifestos, another very obvious trend was the growth
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30 in the number of pledges they contained. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman's 1906 election
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32 address-cum-manifesto, in spite of its promise to uphold 'time-honoured principles of
33
34 Liberalism', made no specific promises other than to battle against attacks on free trade.
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36 Indeed: 'Our own policy is well known to you, and I need not here repeat the terms of the
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38 public declaration which it fell to me to make shortly after assuming office.' Although the
39
40 document promised 'strenuous legislation' for social and economic reform, it was certainly
41
42 not a checklist of what the party intended to do in government.⁷⁷ Contrast that with the
43
44 *Twenty Point Manifesto of the Liberal Party* in 1945, with the 452 identifiable pledges that
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51 ⁷⁵ Bernard Donoghue, *Westminster Diary: A Reluctant Minister Under Tony Blair* (London, 2016), 179.

52 ⁷⁶ 'Battle for Britain', *Daily Mail*, 15 Apr. 1997.

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54 ⁷⁷ Craig, *Manifestos, 1900-74*, 13. The 'public declaration' Campbell-Bannerman referred to here was the
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56 speech he had given on 21 December 1905. This had indeed included more specifics, but the new Prime
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58 Minister was careful to make clear that he was not offering 'A general programme of policy'. 'Sir H. Campbell-
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60 Bannerman At The Albert-Hall', *The Times*, 22 Dec. 1905; Samuel H. Beer, *Modern British Politics: A Study of
Parties and Pressure Groups* (London, 1965), 58-9.

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3 the Conservatives made in 1992, or with the 177 that Labour made in 1997, and the direction
4 of travel is clear.⁷⁸ At the broadest level, this represented a shift away from the assumption
5 that electoral arguments should be focused on issues of principle, with parliament resolving
6 issues of detail at a subsequent stage. This move towards manifesto-as-policy-blueprint could
7 also be seen as signalling the demise of a specifically Liberal ideal of political behaviour.
8 This valorised ‘government by discussion’ (as Bagehot had labelled it), with its claimed
9 virtues of flexibility and intellectual openness.⁷⁹

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Yet this notion of principled arguments being progressively being replaced by
increasingly long and detailed programmes of commitments (or electoral bribes) deserves
qualification. To begin with, the idea of a political programme was already familiar in the
Nineteenth Century and, indeed, to the Liberal Party. Joseph Chamberlain’s ‘Unauthorised
Programme’ of 1885 and the party’s ‘Newcastle Programme’ of 1891 illustrate the point.
Nor, in fact, were all pre-1914 Conservatives averse to programmatic politics. Tariff Reform
– advocated by Chamberlain, after he left the Liberals and allied himself with the Tories –
seemed to fill the party’s need for a positive and dynamic policy to counter the threat of
socialism.⁸⁰ However, Tory manifestos for a long time lagged behind in that respect, although
not always to the party’s electoral detriment. John St. Loe Strachey, editor of *The Spectator*,
complained of Baldwin’s 1924 address-cum-manifesto: ‘It is almost purely negative and as
dull as a King’s speech. You cannot fight people who are in earnest with certain clear and
specific proposals by a string of damp generalities.’⁸¹ In fact, Baldwin won by a landslide, but

⁷⁸ Judith Bara, ‘A question of trust: Implementing party manifestos’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 58 (2005), 585-99 at 588.

⁷⁹ Richard Toye, ‘Keynes, Liberalism, and “the emancipation of the mind”’, *English Historical Review*, 130 (2015), 1162–1191.

⁸⁰ E.H.H. Green, ‘Radical Conservatism: the electoral genesis of tariff reform’, *Historical Journal* 28 (1985), 667-92.

⁸¹ Parliamentary Archives, St. Loe Strachey papers, STR14/9/1, John St. Loe Strachey to Lord Younger, 15 Oct. 1924.

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3 Labour's tactic does seem to have paid off in the longer run. It was not a simple case of
4 making more and more promises, however. The sixteen Labour pledges of 1900 had
5 increased to only eighteen in 1945; what was new, at that point, was the level of specificity.⁸²
6
7 Labour's adoption of detailed pledges in its manifestos from the 1920s onwards, stemmed in
8 part from its concerns with avoiding misrepresentation of its policies. By offering a detailed
9 and specific programme for government the relative newcomer sought to challenge anti-
10 socialist scaremongering and present itself as a credible party of government.⁸³ *Labour's*
11 *Immediate Programme* (1937) was notable for its focus on outlining policies which a Labour
12 government would introduce in a single term if given a parliamentary majority, providing
13 much of the basis for the party's 1945 election planning.⁸⁴
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26 The Conservatives – who in 1929, 1931, and 1935 produced posters pouring scorn on
27 their opponents' promises - soon felt compelled to catch up.⁸⁵ Following Labour's narrow
28 victory in 1950, an internal Tory post-mortem reported that the party's supporters felt that the
29 manifesto 'was not sufficiently explicit and that some of the wording appeared to be
30 deliberately vague.' Therefore, future statements of policy should be worded with an eye on
31 those 'mistrustful and cynical' voters who were deliberately looking out 'for sentences which
32 they can construe as being intentionally vague.' It urged the use of specific formulations such
33 as 'We can and will ...' and 'We are determined to ...' in place of 'We want to see ...', 'We
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47 ⁸² Bara, 'Implementing party manifestos', 588.

48 ⁸³ Francis Williams, *Fifty Years' March: The Rise of the Labour Party* (London, 1949), 330; For the politics of
49 anti-socialism in inter-war Britain see Laura Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Making of the Labour Party*
50 (Cambridge, MA, 2010), chapter 3.

51 ⁸⁴ Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (2nd edition, Basingstoke, 2001), 86; Williams, *Fifty*
52 *Years March*, 347.

53 ⁸⁵ Bodleian Library Conservative Party poster collection: 1929-3, 1929-28, 1931-2, 1931-13, and 1935-19. Note
54 also, however, 1929-17, which presented the Conservatives as the party that kept its promises, a theme later
55 revived in 1955-08 and in a series at the end of the Major era (e.g. 1997-20). A 1970 series (e.g. 1970-03
56 focused on 'Labour's broken promises' – which obviously made sense when the Tories were out of office.
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3 would like to ...' and so forth.⁸⁶ Although the precise phrases recommended did not occur in
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5 the 1951 manifesto – which contained the eye-catching pledge to build 300,000 houses a year
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7 - it would seem that the general advice was indeed implemented. By the 1960s, the
8
9 Conservatives had moved to a yet more programmatic approach. The 1966 manifesto
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11 included 'no less than 131 specific promises covering everything from beating crime to
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13 protecting the countryside.'⁸⁷ Of course, this tendency did not prevent the party being
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15 accused of producing vague and woolly proposals.⁸⁸ Indeed all parties engaged in some
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17 degree of fudging. As Chancellor Denis Healey admitted privately, many of Labour's
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19 manifesto commitments in 1979 were 'carefully phrased to avoid being too specific [...] we
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21 do not want to commit ourselves to specific levels of expenditure where we have deliberately
22
23 used words like "more" or "further".'⁸⁹
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31 As Healey's comments indicate, there were limits to how much leading politicians
32
33 were willing to offer an increasing number of election promises, especially given that the
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35 economic and industrial crises of the 1970s created a sense that government was hampered by
36
37 an 'overload' of responsibilities. Margaret Thatcher sought to tap into public disillusionment
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39 with state intervention, organising Conservative election manifestos around a few, detailed
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41 pledges. In doing so, she clearly sought to distance herself from the excessive promises and
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43 u-turns which had tarnished the reputation of her predecessor as Conservative leader, Edward
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45 Heath.⁹⁰ The later New Labour approach drew on Thatcher's practice. For example, the
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51 ⁸⁶ CPA, CCO4/3/249, Public Opinion Research Department, 'Confidential Supplement to Public Opinion
52 Summary No. 14', 5 Mar. 1950.

53 ⁸⁷ John Campbell, *Edward Heath: A Biography* (London, 1993), 208.

54 ⁸⁸ 'Labour condemns promises as vote-catching bribes', *The Times*, 7 March 1966.

55 ⁸⁹ TNA, PREM16/2152, Denis Healey to James Callaghan, 8 Apr. 1979.

56 ⁹⁰ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London, 1993), 570; For a more detailed discussion of this
57
58 issue see David Thackeray, 'I promise you this. I won't make empty promises'. The election manifestos of
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pledge card highlighted a number of key promises from amongst the many that were offered, reflecting an understanding winning more votes did not depend on simply presenting more policies. As Tony Blair put it in his introduction to the 1997 manifesto, he wanted to renew Britain ‘by making a limited set of important promises and achieving them.’⁹¹

New Labour’s emphasis on ‘small but basic pledges rather than grand overblown stuff’ represented a (heavily focus-grouped) attempt to forestall the classic Conservative claim that the party’s plans were unaffordable.⁹² As far back as 1922, Labour had tried to blunt this type of attack, with a manifesto section headlined ‘How To Find The Money’.⁹³ It was not long after this that governments started using civil servants to formally assess their opponents’ policies, with a view to making political attacks, the Labour Party’s programme *Labour and the Nation* and the Liberal Party’s pamphlet *We Can Conquer Unemployment* both receiving this treatment in 1928-9.⁹⁴ The first attempt to use the official machine to ‘cost’ an Opposition manifesto as such appears to have been carried out by the Conservatives in 1964.⁹⁵ Labour’s plans were then attacked on the platform as ‘a menu without prices’.⁹⁶ In 1966, Labour turned the tables, claiming that the Tories ‘grandiose plans’ were ‘uncosted and mutually inconsistent.’⁹⁷ Either way, it had become essential for manifestos to demonstrate their credibility in this respect, and this had been driven in large part by Labour’s perceived weakness in handling the economy.

Margaret Thatcher’, in David Thackeray and Richard Toye eds., *Promises, Promises: Electoral Pledges in Britain Since 1918* (Forthcoming).

⁹¹ Iain Dale (ed.), *Labour Party General Election Manifestos 1900-97* (London, 1999), 345.

⁹² Alastair Campbell, *The Alastair Campbell Diaries Volume One: Prelude to Power 1994-1997* (London, 2010), 459.

⁹³ Craig, *Manifestos, 1900-74*, 38.

⁹⁴ Cambridge University Library, Stanley Baldwin Papers, D.4.4 1928 Political 14; Peter Clarke, *The Keynesian Revolution in the Making 1924-1936* (Oxford, 1990), 93-4.

⁹⁵ TNA, T218/664.

⁹⁶ “‘Labour offering menu without prices’”, *The Times*, 14 Sept 1964.

⁹⁷ Craig, *Manifestos, 1900-74*, 299.

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There were other dynamics relating to manifestos which were particularly influenced by Labour's experience and culture. For Labour, being programmatic was not merely an electoral technique but an ideological choice, which perhaps was based to a degree on the distant memories of Chartism's six points, and which also reflected a developing vision of Parliament as a machine for processing legislation.⁹⁸ There was also a relationship to the party's internal democratic structures whereby, in theory, the party conference was sovereign and thus the source of policy. Left-wingers could therefore aspire to use a general election manifesto as 'a means of carrying the radical input of the extra-parliamentary Party into an election mandate which would bind the next Labour Government.'⁹⁹ The Left had some success in this respect in 1944-5, when a conference rebellion helped ensure that specific nationalisation proposals were included in the manifesto.¹⁰⁰ This victory took on a mythological aspect which encouraged further such efforts, especially during the Wilson-Callaghan years. However, the leadership was generally able to use its de facto power to enforce a moderate line; in 1979, Callaghan dramatically and successfully insisted that abolition of the House of Lords would never appear in a Labour manifesto while he led the party.¹⁰¹

The House of Lords itself played a significant part in the evolution of manifestos and the concept of the 'mandate' as an unofficial part of the constitution. In 1880, Lord Salisbury - the third Marquess - articulated the doctrine that it was the duty of the Lords 'to represent

⁹⁸ Richard Toye, "'Perfectly parliamentary'?: The Labour Party and the House of Commons in the inter-war years', *Twentieth Century British History*, 25 (2014), 1-29.

⁹⁹ Lewis Minkin, *The Labour Party Conference* (Manchester, 1980), 327. See also A.H. Birch, 'The theory of representation and British Practice', in S.E. Finer (ed.), *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform* (London, 1975), 55-70, at 61-2.

¹⁰⁰ Bernard Donoughue and G.W. Jones, *Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician* (London, 1973), 330-1; Ian Mikardo, *Back-Bencher* (London, 1988), 74-9.

¹⁰¹ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Callaghan: A Life* (Oxford, 1997), 687.

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3 the permanent as opposed to the passing feelings of the English nation'.¹⁰² That is to say,
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5 Conservative leaders reserved the right to use their built-in majority in the Lords to overturn
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7 the will of the Commons if it did not – in their view – represent the genuine will of the
8
9 electorate. The Edwardian constitutional crisis and the partial Lords reform of 1911 did not
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11 terminate the doctrine, but after the Liberals ceased to be a viable party of government it was
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13 Labour governments that faced this particular challenge. Nevertheless, in the face of Attlee's
14
15 huge majority, the Lords needed to wield its power carefully. Therefore, the Conservative
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17 leader in the Upper House – Lord Cranborne, who succeeded as the fifth Marquess of
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19 Salisbury in 1947 - reached agreement with his Labour opposite number, Viscount Addison.
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21 This was the so-called Salisbury-Addison convention, which specified that the Lords would
22
23 not attempt to frustrate policies that had been included in the governing party's manifesto.
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25 (Those that had not, such as the abolition of capital punishment, could still fall victim to the
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27 third Marquess's doctrine.) There were plenty of ambiguities in the convention – for instance,
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29 could a minority government be said to have a mandate? – but it did represent a generally
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31 recognised and workable understanding during the second half of the century.¹⁰³ It was not
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33 only Labour governments that might need to claim a mandate but its special position with
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35 respect to the Lords gave it a special incentive to envelope controversial policies in the cloak
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37 of the manifesto-mandate in the hope of forestalling a key potential barrier to legislative
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39 success.
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47 Thus, in the years from 1900 to 1997, manifestos evolved into the form that is still
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49 recognisable today: programmatic (with strong rhetorical elements), detailed (albeit the
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51 precision could be phony), costed (with the costings naturally subject to challenge), and
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54 ¹⁰² Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (London, 1999), 494.

55 ¹⁰³ House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, 5th Report of Session 2017–19, 'The Salisbury-
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57 Addison Convention', 20 Oct. 2017. The ambiguities became clearer after the formation of the Coalition
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59 government of 2010 – which was composed of two parties with competing manifestos - and were thrown into
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even sharper relief by the result of the 2017 election.

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3 embodying the search for a mandate (particularly important for Labour governments facing
4 opposition from the Lords). Laura Beers has argued that the pre-1945 Labour Party was more
5 media-savvy than scholars have been willing to credit.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, in terms of the shaping of
6 manifestos and election addresses, Labour paved the way - in part through positive
7 innovations and partly through reactions to circumstance and the attacks of other parties.
8 Labour, though limited in its electoral success, can in this way be seen as a pathfinder in
9 terms of the way in which politics was carried out.
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26 Our aim in this article has been to illuminate the relationship between the drafting, design and
27 circulation history of election addresses and manifestos and the types of political
28 commitments they embodied; in other words we have tried to show how form influenced
29 content, and the potential implications of that for subsequent political action. We have shown
30 that as election addresses became more standardised in format they also tended to reproduce
31 the central party line. In spite of clear trends towards lengthier manifestos and centralised
32 messaging, there were countervailing tendencies too: the trends were not relentless nor,
33 perhaps inevitable. We have further endeavoured to rescue manifestos from the supposition
34 that, as they became longer and more detailed, they declined in relevance to the electorate.
35 Manifestos have long been recognised, including by the parties themselves, as multipurpose
36 documents.¹⁰⁵ It is surely true that, as they grew in length, manifestos were increasingly
37 aimed at the political classes rather than at the electorate more generally, but, even if they did
38 go unread by voters in their full form, they retained a symbolism and a salience to the
39 electoral process. They were, to some degree, designed to be *brandished* – on the platform or,
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58 ¹⁰⁴ Beers, *Your Britain*, particularly chapters 7-9.

59 ¹⁰⁵ Butler and Kavanagh, *General Election of 1983*, 60.
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3 latterly, at photo opportunities and press conferences. Our broader point is that, by
4
5 considering manifestos and addresses as an aspect of print culture, we can reconnect the
6
7 history of political texts to their material formats, in order to better explain the varied and
8
9 evolving practices of political promising.
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12 As we have shown, the persistence of election addresses as a specific form, in spite of
13
14 the declining autonomy of local candidates, can largely be explained by the free postage
15
16 provision of the 1918 RPA. The persistence and expansion of manifestos, by contrast, must
17
18 be explained to a large extent by the quasi-constitutional significance they achieved after
19
20 1945, in spite of the fact that they had no formal status in law. The part that they played in
21
22 Britain's informal constitution was related to manifestos' symbolic value as a supposed
23
24 embodiment of the will of the people, a weapon that could be used to overcome the obduracy
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26 of the civil service and the obstructionism of the House of Lords. Labour's status as an
27
28 innovator in the development of programmatic manifestos stemmed, in part, from the
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30 obstacles they faced in enacting their legislation. In the first half of the twentieth century it
31
32 also resulted from their status as a newcomer who lacked the entrenched status of their
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34 opponents.
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40 Being programmatic was an ideological choice that manifestos and addresses
41
42 increasingly reflected over the course of the century. There was an interdependent
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44 relationship between the nature of the documents and the programmes they contained; the
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46 causality between the two is, however, hard to disentangle. Programmatic politics could, it
47
48 must be emphasised, encompass a range of different policy approaches. At times, especially
49
50 from 1918-79, it might have seemed as though as though the politics of programmes went
51
52 hand in glove with the politics of state expansion. Yet, as it turned out, the Thatcherite and
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54 post-Thatcherite rolling back of the state also required a programme – albeit of privatisation
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56 and retrenchment rather than of nationalisation and welfare provision. More subtly, then,
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3 programmatic politics favoured promises of state *action* if not of state growth, a discourse of
4 governing that turned on dynamic leadership and the notion of parliament as a legislative
5 machine. It is this broad, gradual, and contested shift towards politics and government
6 understood as a primarily programmatic rather than a discursive process that leads us to
7 suggest that the Twentieth Century as a whole should be seen as an ‘Age of Promises’.
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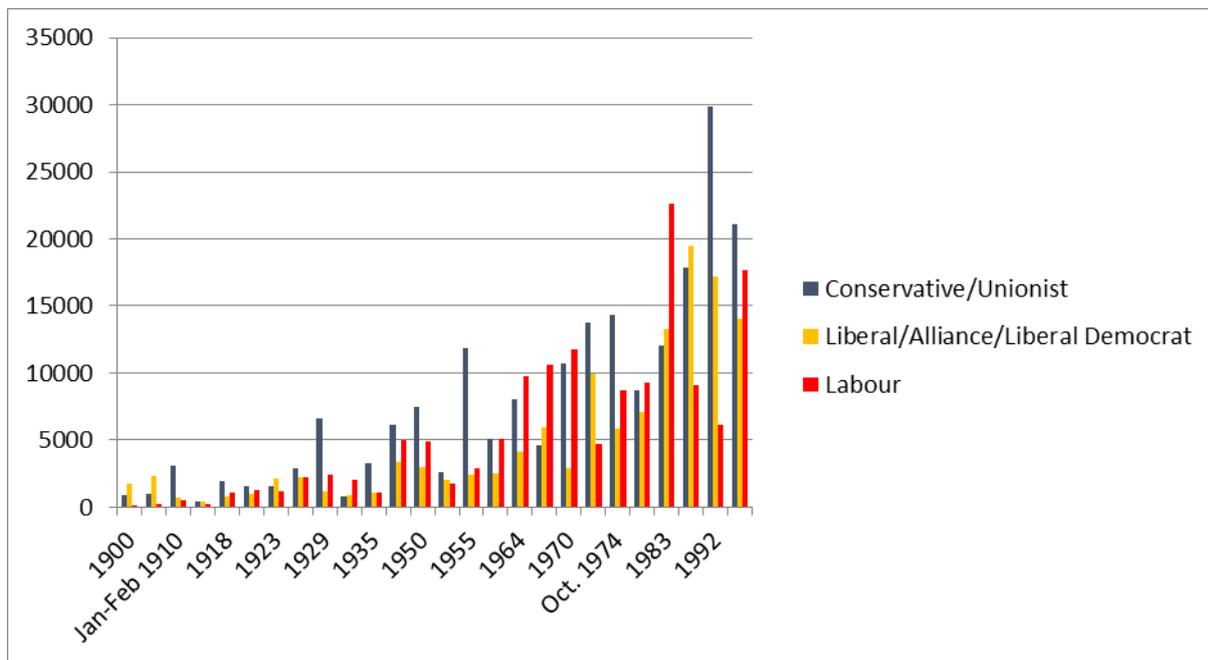
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For Peer Review

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.



Peer Review

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3 **An Age of Promises: British election manifestos and addresses 1900-1997**
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12 We would like to thank Helen McCarthy and the participants at the Age of Promises workshop in
13 Exeter for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.
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For Peer Review