

Theses of the Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**FROM CHURCHILL TO THATCHER: THE BRITISH CONSERVATIVE PARTY
AND ITS POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH
CENTURY**

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1. Objectives of the dissertation and the delineation of the topic

The main topic of the dissertation is the examination of the political communication and general election campaigns of the British Conservative Party from 1945 to 1987, during the Cold War era. My central thesis is as follows: With the rise of modern electoral campaigns in the second half of the 20th century, their organization, the structure of political parties, and the tools and channels used underwent significant development and expansion. However, the key themes shaping voter attitudes largely remained unchanged. This dissertation aims to demonstrate this claim through an analysis of the political communication and electoral campaigns of the British Conservative Party. To demonstrate this, the dissertation provides a comprehensive overview of Conservative electoral campaigns across more than four decades, examining the key techniques, tools, communication channels, messages, and events while assessing how the nature of these campaigns evolved. Beyond exploring campaigns, domestic political events, and party operations, this dissertation also addresses several major foreign policy events that played a fundamental role in shaping political processes and directions.

As this research spans multiple disciplines — history, communication, and political science — it is crucial to maintain the right balance. Therefore, while the primary focus remained on historical research, I also sought to incorporate perspectives from the other fields to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the period. A total of 13 general elections took place in Britain during this period, and it is more fruitful to interpret and contextualise these campaigns within their broader political framework, it is necessary to describe the functioning and financing of the party, to describe the main foreign and domestic political events, and to review the role of political actors. In addressing these dimensions, my aim was to present the essential public policy and institutional background required for analyzing the campaigns while ensuring that the dissertation does not shift towards an unnecessarily detailed or exhaustive account of either post-1945 British history or the history of the Conservative Party.

No one had previously dealt with British general election campaigns or their historical overview in Hungary and the field of post-1945 British history remains underrepresented in Hungarian scholarship, so the choice of topic met the important criterion that the thesis should be novel and deal with a topic that has been less researched in Hungarian. In the Anglo-Saxon literature, longer analyses of one general election rather than longer analyses across periods are typical of the literature on campaigns. The latter approach has been taken by David Butler and Ian Dale, but they tend to focus on campaign strategy approaches, the development of voter

attitudes, the background of candidates and more specific case studies. It is important to note that the mere fact that there is no comprehensive research on the subject in Hungarian does not in itself support the professional validity of this thesis. The significance of such a study of the period lies in the fact that it is the initial stage in the development of modern mass campaigns, which still fundamentally determine the direction of political communication and general election campaigns in democratic countries. An understanding of these processes and their antecedents will thus also help us to understand what is happening today.

2. The applied methodology

During the research I relied mainly on primary sources in London and Oxford, in addition to the secondary literature. In London, in the *British Library*, I searched the periodical archives for English-language literature which is not available in Hungary, and also for daily newspapers dating back to the 19th century. In Oxford, the *Conservative Party Archive (CPA)*, part of the *Bodleian Library* at the University of Oxford, contains major documents relating to the Conservative Party from the 19th century onwards. The collection includes pamphlets, newsletters and magazines published by the party from 1868 to the present day, various general election leaflets from 1885 to the present day, election posters from 1910 to the present day, general election manifestos from 1922 to the present day, press releases and speech transcripts from 1950 to the present day. The archive provided access to sources through microfilm and contemporary printed material that were only available locally.

I examined the campaigns along five dimensions, four of which were constant and one of which changed in the last chapter of the dissertation. The first was an overview of the Conservative Party's manifestos, which I examined in terms of content and summarised its promises in certain areas. Their availability was facilitated by the fact that all manifestos of the 20th century can be found on an internet platform. After the thematic foundation, I continued the investigations by presenting various campaign tools. I analysed the speeches of the Conservative prime ministerial candidates in each of the general elections examined, primarily from the point of view of content, but also in order to highlight the main features of the rhetorical style of each politician and to point out how they appeared in their speeches. The latter served more as a supplementary analysis, as the main focus was on the messages, where I wanted to highlight the electoral promises made - how consistent they were with the manifestos - and the themes along which they challenged the rival Labour Party. In the more than four decades between 1945 and 1987, six different politicians - Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan, Alec Douglas-Home, Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher

- led the party during each campaign. Among them, Churchill's selected speeches have been published in both English and Hungarian in a volume, and Thatcher's speeches are available in an online archive maintained by the *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*. In the case of Eden and Macmillan, speeches are available in their memoirs and on the internet, while for Heath I managed to obtain several transcripts from the aforementioned CPA archive.

The third area of analysis was the posters used by the Tories during the campaigns, which are freely searchable by everyone in the *Bodleian Library's* online archive in varying quantities per election (usually between 12 and 20). In their case, I used nearly a hundred posters in total, and focused mainly on analysing and contextualising the content and exploring the symbolic meanings in a complementary way. The fourth constant point was the review of the contemporary press. I examined a total of approximately 500 issues of two daily newspapers, the traditionally conservative *Daily Mail* and *The (Manchester) Guardian*, which was initially liberal and then became Labour after 1945. During the press representation of the campaigns, I sought answers to the questions of what the atmosphere of the campaign was like in the daily newspapers, what were the most important topics and how they appeared, what topics were used to attack the opposing side and its prime minister candidate, and to what extent they supported their own party.

The fifth dimension was provided by the publications (leaflets, pamphlets, etc.) published by the party between 1945 and 1979 in connection with the general elections, which I also personally collected and examined in the party's Oxford archives. I examined more than 300 of these written materials – primarily from a content-based perspective – and matched them to the main thrusts of the campaign. In the last chapter, I examined television advertisements and election broadcasts, as the period of the Thatcher-era campaigns was characterised by a changed mediatization space and the increasingly significant use of television for political purposes during the election campaigns. An interesting contribution could have been made by analysing the television debates between the prime ministerial candidates, but unfortunately, although we were close to it in 1979, this did not take place once during the period under study. In addition to all this, in connection with the last campaign (1987) I had the opportunity to make use of the tools of personal interviewing and oral history, as I was able to conduct a personal interview with one of the important backbenchers of the campaign, Margaret Thatcher's adviser and speechwriter John O'Sullivan.

The methods applied in the individual sub-chapters, which I call supplementary topics, can be divided into two parts. The content units concerning the organization, operation and

financing of the party are mainly based on the processing of available literature. In this regard, no previous academic work on the Cold War era has been published in Hungarian, so although these sections do not contain new, independent research results, they are summaries in Hungarian that fill a gap. Since the campaigns and their analysis, as well as the overviews of the periods between each election, have a significant domestic policy focus, I wanted to examine and present the development of the most important foreign policy issues, as well as the two most significant military events that affected the British, the Suez Crisis and the Falklands War. What these have in common is that, in addition to a historical overview, I examined their description in the daily newspapers of the time (*Mail* and *Guardian*). This also involved an analysis of approximately 500 newspapers, as well as the memoirs of the two reigning prime ministers during the armed conflicts mentioned, Anthony Eden and Margaret Thatcher.

3. Scientific achievements of the dissertation

I initially formulated four research dimensions and related hypotheses to justify my basic thesis statement. I tried to find affirmative or refutable answers to all of these and the related sub-questions during the writing of the dissertation and the research preceding it.

Over the 42 years and 13 general election campaigns of the period under review, most campaign themes remained consistent over time with some highlighted areas constantly emerging. All this also assumed that voters were mostly concerned with the same questions and problems after the end of the Second World War as they were a few years before the end of the Cold War. Related to this, I also wanted to examine the organizing principle by which the Conservatives incorporated current domestic and foreign policy events into their campaigns, both in government and in opposition. The central topics of the campaigns were always contained in the Conservative Party manifesto. This functioned as a kind of guide, the party's general election program. Sometimes a sub-topic was taken up from a different angle by the prime minister-designate of the day, and sometimes a new theme was added in response to an event or an attack from the left but unless something extraordinary happened, the whole campaign was largely dominated by the same theme in the manifesto. Among these, there were indeed a number of themes that have been repeatedly raised over a period of more than four decades.

In domestic policy, the issue of housing was central to every campaign. In 1945 it meant rebuilding as quickly as possible after the war so that people could move back into homes

destroyed by bombing, in the 1960s it meant stopping the slums and building homes that met the expectations of the time (for example, with separate bathrooms), while in the Thatcher era it meant encouraging people to buy their own homes through a wide range of schemes. Without exception, every campaign focused on people's wallets, which basically meant curbing inflation and cutting taxes in the language of politics. The Tories have always promised voters that if they came to power they would cut taxes and curb inflation. Rising prices were consistently a major concern, if they came to a campaign from the government, they tried to highlight the extent to which they had managed to keep it under control, while if they came from opposition they would usually talk about record levels of inflation caused by Labour. These two topics were constantly expanded to include the issue of pensions since the 1960s and the Wilson's government, when the Tories also argued that they had lost their purchasing value. An aging population and an increasingly large middle-aged electorate gave understandable reasons for this. Another constant was the theme of job creation and better jobs and higher wages, which was also a theme in all the campaigns.

The campaign could not have passed without two subjects that are still the subject of constant debate and discussion today: education and health. In these areas, the focus was constantly on development, capacity building and improving the quality and accessibility of services. Also a constant theme was security and stability, which meant both stability of living standards, jobs and incomes, and collective security, which in the summer of 1945 meant the end of the Pacific War and the Allied victory, and from then until 1987, with varying degrees of intensity, the Soviet threat and the rise of communism. A constant element was that the Tories, due to conservative ideology, especially after Thatcher and the rise of neo-conservative thinking, sought to focus on the empowerment of the individual and the creation of opportunities by the state, civil liberty and the avoidance of an over-regulating state. And in the foreign policy context, the importance of the Commonwealth and the need for London to lead the way for the whole of the Third World and help the former colonies to catch up was almost always emphasised. In addition to these, of course, new themes have emerged for one (or even several) cycles, but the emphasis has always been partly or entirely on these themes. Of course, the campaigns were also constantly reacting to domestic political events and statements by Labour leaders, as we saw with European integration, the Nissan factory, a left-wing politician's trip to Moscow or even nuclear disarmament.

Secondly, I predicted that, **although the Tories constantly reacted to events and the statements and promises of their opponents or the mistakes in government, there were**

constant topics that were used to attack the Labour Party. A review of the campaigns also confirmed this claim. Although there were countless occasions when the press reflected on Labour's manifesto or the statements of its leading politicians, Labour's performance in government during their years in opposition and deteriorating indicators such as inflation, unemployment or even the increase in the real value of pensions, many elements remained constant. Churchill, in the 1945 campaign, framed British Labour as ideologically aligned with Communism and their plans with the Sovietisation of the country. All this, the equation between socialism and communism, remained until the Thatcher campaigns. It was also a constant point of attack from the right that the left was overreaching and wanted to create an over-regulated state (on the model of the Soviet system) which would control every detail of citizens' lives. This line of reasoning is evident in the rhetoric employed during the Thatcher-era campaigns, that for the Conservatives it is the individual that matters, while the left suppresses the individual.

From campaign to campaign, the issue of nationalisation has also emerged as one of the main fault lines. The Tories argue that this will impose a huge burden on the budget and will also seriously damage the performance and productivity of businesses, which would be much more efficient under a free market framework. A common accusation has been that trade unions are too powerful, with the strikes that go with it, and that left-wing governments are powerless, in fact they are dictated to by the unions. They were keen to deal with intra-party conflicts, mainly between the centre and the left wing of the party, and highlighting these - in some ways natural - fault lines also helped to undermine Labour's ability to govern. During their years in opposition, there was also constant criticism of the socialists' dismantling of Britain's image and prestige in the world, including in education and health.

The third claim – this is not only the campaigns but also the armed and foreign policy events mentioned - is that **during the interpreting of foreign and domestic policy topics, and during the campaigns, the right and left press (the Mail and the Guardian) remained within the bounds of objective storytelling, but at the same time, during the formation of the narrative, their receptiveness to the ideological orientation of a particular party became apparent**. My preliminary hypothesis, then, was that **the institution of a partisan press could be very subtly but consistently detected in the period, both in the selection of topics, in the scope, and in the tone of individual newspaper articles.** The political orientation of the dailies was known and well defined, with the *Mail* following the Conservative and the *Guardian* the Labour Party's lines of communication. In answering this

question, it is important to point out a fact that John O'Sullivan also drew attention to during the interview: although the parties and their backbenchers or leaders had direct contact with journalists on an ad hoc basis, there was no organised and controlled press coverage from outside.

The Daily Mail has been owned by the Harmsworth family - known to be supporters of traditional British Conservative politics - since 1896. This, of course, was also evident in the papers. During the campaigns this manifested itself in a number of ways. The first level was the choice of subject and focus. Content analysis showed that during the general election there was much greater coverage of Tory priorities, from Thatcher's last campaign and the issue of nuclear disarmament and defence of the country, to the relationship between Labour and the unions during the 1960s campaigns, and the countless articles on the conflicts within the party on the left. The second level was the distribution of coverage. During each campaign, although the paper gave sufficient space to campaign events and prime ministerial candidates from both parties, the proportion was always tilted towards the Conservatives. To give a simple example, during Thatcher's last campaign, in the thirty days before the general election, the Prime Minister's name or image appeared on the front page twelve times, compared with nine for rival Kinnock, not to mention the absence of any related content (the former with little or no negative content, the latter with almost none). The third level is that of narrative and storytelling, by which we mean interviews, articles with a personal tone, or even the publication of writings from the pens of politicians. Here again, we see the same elements throughout, from the portrayal of Churchill's personability in saving the country and the world, through Heath's often personal interviews, to the portrayal of Thatcher. In no issue of the *Mail* during the general election was there a single interview with Labour's prime ministerial candidate. I would also include here the *Mail's* numerous attempts to thoroughly explore and explain the background to the issues on which the Conservatives were attacking their rival. The combination of these can also be used to determine the extent to which the paper openly supported the party. In this sense, and in the strength of tone of their articles, there was of course no uniformity, as there were many campaigns where the paper strongly and intensely supported the right-wing candidate and attacked the left's programme or achievements, but there were also cases where they treated a campaign with much greater detachment, almost neutrality. The fact that we cannot speak of a clearly partisan press has been illustrated by the outlook analyses of the press coverage of events such as Suez, Falklands or the failure to join the Common Market. On these

occasions, as well as in the event of any negative governmental results, the paper did not fail to offer implicit or overt criticism of the Conservatives' performance, where justified.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in the *Guardian*. Originally a liberal and pro-Whig paper founded in 1821, its shift to a pro-Labour orientation began between the two world wars and lasted until Attlee's first government. From the 1950 campaign we can speak of clear support. All of the claims outlined in relation to the Mail apply here, with the difference that it was perhaps all done in a softer way and generally a step further away or less intensively. Behind this, in addition to the traditional behaviour of the paper, there was probably also the background of ownership, which in their case was a company (Scott Trust) rather than a family. Overall, therefore, it can be concluded that the political orientation of each newspaper during the campaigns and the support of the party closest to them, and the attack on their rivals, were naturally felt. *The Guardian* was the only one to have an almost neutral narrative in one or two campaigns.

My last point was that **there was a great deal of modernisation and professionalisation in the organization and structuring of campaigns insofar as they became more focused by the end of the era.** If we just compare 1945 and 1987, the differences in the specific campaign tools are clearly demonstrable. The manifestos became increasingly complex and covered a wider range of issues and related messages in line with today's framework for modern political communication. Posters also evolved significantly in their presentation, becoming simpler and more streamlined (in many cases more creative) by the end of the period, helped by the involvement of professional outsiders and companies. The increasing coverage of newspapers allowed for much more detailed monitoring of campaigns, which necessitated a more thorough and professional approach from political parties, as a mistake in the press and the next day in the hands of readers (and, with increasing circulation, more voters). The various internal publications of the Conservative Party, which provide help and resources to volunteers and their supporters in their campaigning and mobilisation efforts, also document this evolutionary process that has taken place in the various organisational processes of the parties. Finally, the real expansion of television from the late 1950s onwards provided a boost that further widened the spaces and frameworks for publicity and campaigning. The hinterland, i.e. party functioning, organisation, funding and the increase in the amount of money spent on campaigns, also documents the way these processes have played out.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (5)

1. **Hegedűs, Z.:** A brit külpolitika jellemzői és változásai a második világháború utáni két évtizedben.
Tört. Tanulm. 32, 261-278, 2025. ISSN: 1217-4602.
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3. **Hegedűs, Z.:** A szuezi válság Anthony Eden memoárja és a korabeli brit sajtó tükrében.
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In: Tavaszi Szél 2018 : Tanulmánykötet. Szerk.: Keresztes Gábor, Szabó Csaba,
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List of other publications

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

7. Debreczeni, M., **Hegedűs, Z.**: 20. századi egyetemes történeti szöveggyűjtemény-interaktív tananyagok a középiskolai és egyetemi történelem oktatásban.
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