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**POLITICAL
MARKETING AND
THE 2015 UK
GENERAL ELECTION**

Edited by
**Darren G. Lilleker and
Mark Pack**



Palgrave Studies in Political Marketing
and Management

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Political Marketing and the 2015 UK General Election

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Introduction

Darren G. Lilleker and Mark Pack

Election campaigns are essentially sales campaigns, a culmination of long-term awareness and support-building activities designed to get as many voters to the ballot box as possible to put their cross next to the name of the party or candidate. Studies of UK election strategies have shown parties have increasingly, but to differing extents, been informed about the design of a range of aspects of their product and communication by market intelligence (Lees-Marshment 2001; Lilleker and Negrine 2006; Scammell 2014). Public opinion and bespoke research on attitudes is utilized in order to maximize the persuasive impact of campaign communication, informing strategists what perceptions need to be changed, reinforced or created. This book focuses on the core and most innovative aspects of election campaigning: the long-term creation of the brand, the methods by which ideological stances are married to the sociopolitical context to create a platform, and how the platform, as well as a range of persuasive messages, is then communicated to the electorate. Potential voters seek cues to inform them which of the available options will provide

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the best representation in parliament or in government. Hence analysing the sales campaign is of crucial importance to understanding the strategies and the respective reasons for success and failure.

1 THE UK CONTEXT

Elections in the UK operate on a first-past-the-post voting system where voters in a geographical area, a constituency, vote for their local member of parliament (MP). Voting forms show the names of candidates, with party affiliation in smaller letters. The notion is that voters select the individual who is best placed to represent their area in parliament. However, voting tends to follow party lines on the whole; this is because the party leader whose party has the greatest number of members elected, if that gives them an overall majority in the lower house (House of Commons), at a minimum 326 of the 650 seats, is able to form a government. UK elections are therefore characterized by a national campaign and a series of local campaigns. The latter, as is the case in the USA, tends to focus most on constituencies which are statistically most likely to change hands from one election to another: the marginal constituencies. Therefore, marketing strategies must accommodate broad voter preferences as well as target specific messages at those voters who live in marginal constituencies, have a high propensity to vote but have low partisan affiliation and are susceptible to persuasion. Communication follows a hypermedia strategy (Howard 2006), using all media to deliver messages to as many voters as possible as well as using the affordances of new technology to target specific voters.

While the broad political context presents a range of challenges, the 2015 was a unique and complex contest shaped by a range of factors. Post-recession economic recovery and having a coalition government meant the parties faced challenges in order to differentiate themselves while presenting a coherent plan and image of competence. Polls indicated the contest was too close to call, and the fear of losing votes to challenger parties, such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) or the Green Party which had previously been marginal to the overall results of an election, was a real concern to both Conservatives and Labour (Fisher 2015). The spectres of referenda hung over the election, with the fairly close 'no' result in the 2014 Scottish referendum stoking calls for greater devolution and raging debates over the UK's membership of the European Union (PCRC 2015). These factors meant that two erstwhile marginal parties gained greater significance. The pro-Scottish independence Scottish National Party (SNP), which as leader of the 'Yes to Independence'

campaign and governors in the devolved Scottish parliament, emerged as the official opposition to a ‘No’ campaign which saw the major parties (Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats) form an alliance. Indeed it may have been pivotal that Scottish Labour leaders were figureheads for the campaign as the party had held the balance of power over Scottish seats in Westminster. The SNP sought to capitalize on their positioning as the party of Scotland to undermine their local rivals. Similarly the anti-integrationist UKIP, whose demands for an in–out referendum had seen the party win the most votes at the 2014 European Parliamentary election, appeared to be threatening the Conservatives in key areas of the country. Over the summer of 2014 the UKIP gained two MPs through defections from the Conservatives and subsequent by-elections. Anti-Europeanism, as well as a highly negative campaign against Labour leader Ed Miliband, was also a characteristic of the newspapers (Deacon et al. 2015), while television became dominated by the leaders’ debates. These factors and their implications are important for framing our understanding of the election and its outcome.

The long-term context, dating back to the 2010 general election contest fought on who could best repair the UK economy, remained a key factor. Voter uncertainty is perhaps best reflected in the fact that neither of the leading contenders, Labour (then incumbent) or the Conservatives, gained an outright majority. The Conservative-dominated coalition set in motion a range of economic reforms which coincided and perhaps contributed to economic stability and limited growth. All parties seeking to govern arguably had to have a clear plan for fiscal responsibility and national debt reduction, and accurate and transparent costing was more crucial than ever before for underpinning a successful brand offering. The Conservative Party’s formal coalition with the Liberal Democrats and formation of a government in which they shared power from 2010 to 2015 was also important in shaping the contest. Unravelling the partnership posed challenges for establishing distinct brands that would gain traction among voters. The Liberal Democrat poll rating suggested they were unpopular due to their participation in the coalition and having abandoned some of the core tenets of party policy. As voters appeared to be shifting allegiances towards the SNP and UKIP and away from the Liberal Democrats, polling data consistently showed Labour and the Conservatives virtually neck and neck. Despite Labour leader Ed Miliband’s image problems and low personal rating, the party was predicted to be able to form a government, though unlikely to have a majority. Hence media focused on questions

of possible coalition partnerships with a Labour–SNP alliance deemed a viable combination, one that in the end appeared to advantage the Conservatives.

Beyond the predicted strong result for the SNP, winning 56 of the 59 seats in Scotland, the close showing in the polls proved absolutely inaccurate. Averaging the media predictions based on opinion polls, the Conservatives were suggested to be the largest party, winning 279 seats; Labour was predicted to win 269 seats; the SNP was predicted to gain 51 and the Liberal Democrats were predicted to gain 25. However, the actual result saw the Conservatives win 330 seats, Labour 232, the SNP 56, the Liberal Democrats only 8, the Greens and UKIP 1 seat each.

The analysis across the chapters herein indicates that the economy determined the election, and the Conservatives secured credibility. Miliband failed to establish himself as a credible alternative prime minister and Labour failed to develop a political platform engaged with floating voters. Labour, many of the authors argue, also failed to utilize the communication opportunities fully to get their message across. Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats suffered for having entered into a coalition, perhaps because their progressive left could not reconcile their party aligning themselves with the more right-wing Conservatives. While the UKIP gained 12.6% of the vote share, their support was spread across constituencies and in the end they retained only one of their seats.

The result led to three leaders (Labour's Ed Miliband, Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg and UKIP's Nigel Farage) resigning. The Conservative Party's governing majority is small but secure, though the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU remains potentially divisive in terms of party cohesion and regarding the future of the union of nations that form the UK. The increased SNP presence in parliament will also place pressure on relations between Westminster and Edinburgh as they demand a settlement that reflects the wishes of the Scottish people they represent.

2 UNDERSTANDING THE CAMPAIGN THROUGH POLITICAL MARKETING RESEARCH

A general election campaign can be analysed through the lens of marketing in the same way as any campaign. As Philip Kotler (1972) claimed over 40 years ago that politics is a commodity that can be sold in the same way as soap, although it is recognized that the product is far more complex (Marland 2003). A political party provides a whole range of policies that

are meant to present credible and attractive solutions to problems which exist within a nation (Smith and Hirst 2001). Naturally some problems are seen as more important than others, those which map onto the most important problems declared by citizens in opinion polls (Lilleker and Negrine 2006). Therefore, a key aspect of marketing strategy is developing a position regarding important issues that resonates with a majority of potential voters (Butler and Collins 1996). Election campaigns, therefore, are intense periods when parties attempt to ensure that potential voters are aware of the party's position on key issues and are persuaded to believe that position is salient and resonant with them by whatever means are available (Clarke et al. 2009).

However, presenting an attractive position on an issue of top public concern is not sufficient in itself for electoral success. As with any commercial brand, one can only sell a product if there is a perception that the product will be delivered (Lees-Marshment 2011). Credibility, the perception that a party has the capability to deliver, is predicated on brand experiences and communicated brand character (Cwalina et al. 2011: 45). Arguably this was as crucial for the Conservatives in 2015 as it was in 2010 (Pich et al. 2014). Party brands are a complex combination of the historical associations, past and, importantly, the current leader, and the past and current performance in presenting solutions to societal problems. Associations may involve perceived attachments to an ideology, attachments to members of specific social groups and ownership of specific policy areas. The leader may be able to bring new attachments to a party and equally weaken attachments, for example, to ideologies. Arguably, the most important role of a party leader is to demonstrate possessing the qualities required to lead a nation at a specific time, and to articulate and make relevant the policies of the parties as well as defending those policies and the party's record. The leader therefore combines the roles of a spokesperson, a credible manager, a symbolic leader, and an in-touch and empathic public representative. Perceptions thus are crucial, and they are shaped by campaign and media communication.

Setting out policies is equally not simply a case of discussing matters within the party and relying purely on doctrine or expertise to set out a programme. Firstly, a party must design a policy that is relevant to the current public agenda and which resonates with those groups in society whose votes are most likely to be won. In other words parties must offer manifestoes that are leading on, and responding to, issues of concern (Adams et al. 2004). Secondly, though, a policy must be salient; so relevant and

credible to citizens (Clarke et al. 2009). In order to present an image as a competent government, a party must present a management team that appear capable of delivering the promises they offer. More importantly, the promises themselves must be perceived as deliverable. Thirdly, a policy programme must offer some sense of differentiation, showing unique selling points that make the party stand out (Smith and French 2009). A party must offer clear reasons why voters should elect them rather than the alternatives on offer. Therefore, election campaigns are battles over resonance, salience and credibility, and each element must complement the other and be clearly marketed to as wide a potential electorate as possible. The UK electoral system means that parties must approach a campaign with a clear sense of who they are targeting and how to target those voters who are most susceptible to persuasion or conversion. Targeting is ruthless, and in particular to voters with a high propensity to vote and be likely to be persuaded, and who live in seats likely to change hands. In the first empirical chapter Andrew Mullen addresses the long and short campaign and assesses the targeting strategies of the six major parties.

Alongside the targeted campaign, there is a broad national programme which each party offers the electorate as its core product. Parties normally produce lengthy manifestoes which set out their programme for government, and 2015 was no exception. However, to sustain interest, parties have increasingly tended to launch policies drawn from the manifesto at carefully planned media events. The importance of manifestoes, in terms of both shaping the overall campaign message and providing the substance for policy pronouncements, is reflected in the focus of Chap. 3. Here Andrew White focuses on the way the economy, the most important and resonant policy area at the 2015 UK election, was used to communicate brand character and differentiate the major parties from one another.

The biggest challenge that is perhaps faced by campaign strategists is correctly distilling these elements into simple messages to maximize their effectiveness. In the UK political advertising on television is banned, though it would probably be prohibitively expensive should it be allowed. But, as a result, parties attempt to innovate. Campaigns take out advertisements in magazines, newspapers and increasingly online where images can be created and manipulated for a lower cost than in other media. Party branding attempts to provide an overall image of the party; it tells potential voters what the party does, who it stands for and its ethos or social philosophy (Cwalina et al. 2011: 45). Brand communication must attempt to capture the brand essence, make the essence or ethos relevant

to the political and social context, and so provide a reason for voters to give their support (Smith and French 2009). While many citizens may have a sense of the party through long-term exposure, few tend to have high levels of interest and are underinformed about the intricacies of politics. Largely we find most people to be cognitive misers (Popkin 1994), unwilling to think too hard about any topic that is not within a suite of keen interests. To ensure the party message is delivered to have maximum effect, parties must develop a communication strategy to maximize their reach and gain acceptance of their overall brand character message. Parties may also use communication to undermine and attack their opponents. Chapter 4 focuses on online political posters as a way of understanding party strategies; these are pieces of artwork produced for posting online to Facebook profiles and Twitter feeds, all of which could be shared by a party's followers. Vincent Campbell and Ben Lee analyse the frequency and content to explore how parties attempted to get their message across to the less interested cognitive misers whose votes might be crucial given the proximity of the polls.

While online posters and targeted messages are key elements of party communication, their set piece election broadcasts remain important agenda setters. These spots tend to be reported in the media and be a way of presenting the party brand to as many potential voters as possible through the medium of television (Scullion and Dermody 2005). While advertising is often seen as a mechanism for delivering simple messages to consumers, UK Party Election Broadcasts are often highly complex mini-films which juxtapose images of the nation and society with negative messages about opponents and strongly persuasive narratives, usually featuring the leader speaking directly to potential voters to reinforce their credentials for office. The debates around the use of positive and negative advertising are once again raised as Janine Dermody explores the communication strategy using the lens of election broadcasts in Chap. 5. Her work focuses on identifying how the two major parties in particular managed to win and lose the election through having the effectiveness of their approaches to strategic communication.

While direct communication is a signifier of party strategies, we arguably live in a society where most citizens are reliant on a small diet of media for political news. Therefore, while some party communication may be observed, appearances on the media and media analyses of party proposals may be the most important, though least controllable, element of a campaign. All parties attempt some form of media management strat-

egy. However, media management is highly challenging. The broadcast and print media have their own target audiences and agendas, and while UK broadcasters maintain objectivity, print journalism tends to be highly partisan (Wring and Deacon 2010). Yet, to gain credibility the endorsement of the media is deemed important and if the media reinforces the party line, whether bolstering the brand character, the credibility of policy proposals or positive impressions of the leader, public perceptions are likely to be positive. In Chap. 6 Darren Lilleker explores the reporting of the parties and their leaders using data gathered by the Loughborough University Communication Research Centre to demonstrate the imbalance in the relative successes of media management strategies which led to a Conservative advantage in gaining positive coverage.

To some extent the importance of the mass media has been challenged by social media. All parties have colonized the Internet, having websites and profiles on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as a minimum. Digital technologies offer different means of engaging with potential voters and are now embedded as a marketing tool in election campaigns. The key questions when focusing on the use of digital technology is whether the affordances provided are utilized for simple broadcasting or they introduce a more interactive and collaborative dimension to election campaigning where parties and their supportive networks co-create a campaign. The tactics utilized by the major parties are explored by Anthony Ridge-Newman and Mary Mitchell in Chap. 7 to show that different strategies appeared to be emerging during the 2015 UK contest which had some impacts on the relationships between parties and their supporters.

While Chap. 7 looks at the macro-level online campaign, Chap. 8 focuses on social media usage in the marginal constituencies. Due to the UK's first-past-the-post voting system, the marginal constituencies become crucial battlegrounds. Marketing in these strategically valuable regions ideally combines the national party messages with locally relevant contextualization, as well as promoting the local candidate as both an effective local representative and having the ability to represent the region in parliament. The traditional ground war involves a huge amount of street level and doorstep campaigning that is often beyond the bounds of a researcher's study. However, given that all parties tend to fight the ground war in similar ways, the cutting-edge innovations may be found online. Using social media, local candidates can market themselves directly to supporters and engage in dialogue with potential voters as well as providing a more personalized image of themselves and prospective representatives.

In order to capture the extent of innovations at the local level, Ivor Gaber and Coral O'Connor explore whether social media is having any impact within the intense campaigns in three marginal seats.

The marketing campaign is therefore built upon a brand, embodied by party history, the leader and a broad programme. Policies are developed to meet the current context, and overarching themes focus on key voter concerns. Themes are blended with context to form core messages disseminated through both simple and complex advertisements; messages are targeted to key voter groups as well as being broadcast in speeches, media appearances and expositions of the overall programme. Dissemination utilizes every means with significant attention paid to the crucial marginal seats. Cumulatively these all, to some extent, determine victory or failure. The authors cumulatively explore a range of elements of the campaign using case study approaches; in each case they suggest how this element contributed to the overall result building a picture of the election campaign and how marketing contributed to the successes and failures witnessed in the small hours of 8 May.

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Election Strategies, Campaign Themes and Target Voters

Andrew Mullen

I THE UNOFFICIAL LONG CAMPAIGN (APRIL 2009–MAY 2015)

Age of Austerity

Sensing an opportunity to exploit the 2008 economic crisis and the Great Recession it precipitated, Cameron insisted that public spending cuts were inevitable and that Britain was entering an ‘age of austerity’ (Cameron 2009). The ideological objective was to return to the Thatcherite agenda of ‘rolling back the state’. During the course of the 2010–2015 Coalition Government, Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers routinely stressed at press conferences and in television interviews that Labour had ‘wrecked the economy’, that the Coalition Government was ‘clearing up Labour’s mess’ and, to avoid the fate of Greece, ‘there is no alternative’ to austerity. On a more positive note, they also emphasized that austerity was being pursued in a socially just way and, consequently, ‘we are all in this together’ (d’Ancona 2013). An effective austerity narrative was thus

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constructed: ‘the problem was not the banks, and it certainly was not capitalism, it was government overspending’ (Seymour 2014: 118).

To provide ideological and rhetorical cover for austerity, and building upon the ‘Compassionate Conservative’ narrative, Cameron, as prime minister, launched his Big Society project in 2010. During the 2010–2015 period, the Conservatives—sometimes with the support of the Liberal Democrats but often without—further expanded their discursive arsenal. In 2011, the Conservatives promoted their ‘march of the makers’ narrative in an attempt to convince the electorate that, in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, the Coalition Government was rebalancing the economy away from finance towards manufacturing. Private polling conducted in 2012, following the so-called ‘Omnishambles Budget’ and the jeering of Osborne at the London Paralympic Games, suggested that the party needed a more focused, positive message. The Conservatives subsequently emphasized the need for Britain to effectively compete in the ‘global race’ and that the Conservatives were the ‘party of aspiration’. That same year, they introduced their ‘strivers versus shirkers’ narrative in an advertising campaign which targeted 60 marginal constituencies. In 2013, the Conservatives adopted a dual strategy of focusing upon the economy and the perceived weaknesses of Ed Miliband as Labour Party leader. And in 2014, the Conservatives attempted to project themselves as the ‘party of working people’ (Seldon and Snowden 2015). Each narrative was developed to position the Conservative-led coalition as being on the side of ‘hard-working families’ and policy initiatives were sold as contributing to ensuring this large and amorphous group were better off.

Policy-wise, the Coalition Government exploited Britain’s economic situation to impose austerity in the form of the 2010 Emergency Budget and the Comprehensive Spending Review. The Coalition Government subsequently adopted the 2011 Charter for Budget Responsibility which legislated for two new fiscal rules aiming to balance the budget and to reduce national public sector debt (Treasury 2011). During the first three years of the Coalition Government, the economy was stagnant as public spending cuts, together with the Eurozone crisis, reduced demand in the economy. This resulted in a ‘double-dip’ recession—although the economic statistics were subsequently revised upwards—a credit rating downgrade and speculation about a possible ‘triple-dip’ recession. Real earnings fell, as did living standards, and the parlous state of the public finances (i.e. low and falling tax receipts) meant that neither fiscal rules were met (Johnson and Chandler 2015).

Despite the ideological commitment of the Conservatives to the free market and a small state, the Coalition Government pursued an interventionist economic policy which encompassed quantitative easing (i.e. printing money) by the Bank of England and the introduction of new initiatives and schemes such as Funding for Lending (credit for businesses), Help to Buy (mortgage subsidies), a National Infrastructure Plan, a Regional Growth Fund (business subsidies), and a renewed interest in industrial policy and an activist state. As a result of such measures, the economy began to recover in 2013. Nevertheless, having failed to eliminate the budget deficit and reduce national public sector debt, as it had promised, the Government was forced to revise its fiscal rules by adopting an updated Charter for Budget Responsibility in December 2014 (ibid.). This was part of the Conservatives' long-term strategy to set the agenda of the next parliament by locking-in austerity and, in effect, outlawing Keynesianism (Sawyer 2015). It is also significant that pensioners were protected from public spending cuts throughout this period (Johnson and Chandler 2015). Tactically, the Conservatives were aware that older people were more disposed to vote and were more likely to vote for them. On the eve of the 2015 General Election, the British economy was outperforming most others and this boosted the electoral prospects of the Conservatives (Kellner 2014).

Austerity-Lite

Having initially condemned austerity, having insisted that there *was* an alternative (Balls 2010, 2011), from summer 2011 Ed Balls as Shadow Chancellor and the Shadow Cabinet merely criticized the Government for going 'too far' and 'too fast' with public spending cuts. Labour launched its 'cost of living crisis' and 'squeezed middle' narratives in 2011, plus the 'responsible versus predatory capitalism', 'pre-distribution' and 'One Nation Labour' narratives in 2012 (Gaffney and Lahel 2013). Of these, only the 'cost of living crisis' narrative gained any traction with the electorate but, with the economy improving from 2013 and living standards and wages rising in 2015, it proved less than effective. Inexplicably, the Shadow Cabinet failed to point out that the economy had started to recover in late 2009 under the Labour Party and that the Coalition Government, by imposing austerity, effectively prolonged and deepened the recession (Darling 2011; Keegan 2012). Inexplicably, the Shadow Cabinet also failed to defend neither the economic and social achievements of the 1997–2010

Labour governments (Diamond and Kelly 2011; Keegan 2012) nor Labour's pre-crisis record on the budget deficit and national public sector debt levels which, although not unproblematic (Henderson 2011), compared favourably to that of previous Conservative administrations (Keep 2015). Equally inexplicably, the Shadow Cabinet failed to challenge the austerity narrative (Seymour 2014). By not doing so, the electorate came to view the Cameron and Osborne team as more economically competent than that of Miliband and Balls, and substantial pluralities, and sometimes majorities, supported the Coalition Government's austerity measures (see Tables 2.1 and 2.2).

While many consistently believed that austerity was being pursued in an unfair way, too deeply and too quickly, clear majorities in 2010, 2014 and 2015 believed that austerity was *good* for the economy and, throughout the 2010–2015 period, austerity was *necessary*. Significantly, despite the fact that austerity was imposed by the

Table 2.1 Public opinion on economic competency (2010–2015)
Team most trusted to run the economy (Cameron–Osborne vs. Miliband–Balls)

<i>Date of poll</i>	<i>Cameron and Osborne (%)</i>	<i>Miliband and Balls (%)</i>	<i>Neither/do not know (%)</i>	<i>Coalition Government lead</i>
September 2010	50	31	20	+19
October 2010	44	30	26	+14
February 2011	42	34	23	+8
October 2011	37	26	37	+11
December 2011	44	23	33	+21
January 2012	46	28	26	+18
March 2012	42	25	34	+17
April 2012	44	31	25	+13
May 2012	44	35	19	+9
June 2012	36	27	37	+9
July 2012	40	29	31	+11
October 2012	31	27	42	+4
December 2012	35	24	41	+11
June 2013	28	19	52	+7
August 2013	40	24	36	+16
December 2013	39	23	38	+16
April 2014	40	22	38	+18
October 2014	39	19	41	+20
April 2015	44	17	39	+27
Average	40.3	26	33.7	+14.2

Source: ICM

Coalition Government, more respondents blamed the Labour for the public spending cuts. Such polling suggested that much of the Coalition Government's austerity narrative resonated with the electorate. Consequently, Labour lost the economic argument—evidenced by the results of focus group research and private polling conducted by Michael

Table 2.2 Public opinion on austerity (2010–2015)

Q. Thinking about the way the government is cutting spending to reduce the government's deficit, do you think this is...

<i>Good or bad for the economy</i>				
Year ^a	Good (%)	Bad (%)	Don't know (%)	
2010 (average of 17 polls)	44.20	37.8	18	
2011 (25)	35.2	48.4	16.4	
2012 (23)	33.6	49.3	17.1	
2013 (30)	38.4	44.5	17.1	
2014 (25)	44	36.6	19.4	
2015 (9)	44.7	36.2	19.1	
<i>Being done fairly or unfairly</i>				
Year ^b	Fairly (%)	Unfairly (%)	Don't know (%)	
2010 (average of 17 polls)	36.10	45	18.9	
2011 (25)	27.4	58.7	13.9	
2012 (23)	25.3	59.7	15	
2013 (30)	29.4	55.7	14.9	
2014 (25)	28	54.4	17.6	
2015 (9)	29.3	53	17.7	
<i>Necessary or unnecessary?</i>				
Year ^c	Necessary (%)	Unnecessary (%)	Don't know (%)	
2011 (average of 23 polls)	56.70	30.3	12.8	
2012 (23)	55.8	29.8	14.4	
2013 (30)	56.8	28.7	14.5	
2014 (25)	56.7	27.3	16	
2015	56.6	28.2	15.2	
<i>Too deep, too shallow or at about the right level?</i>				
Year ^d	Too deep (%)	Too shallow (%)	About right (%)	Don't know (%)
2011 (average of 23 polls)	46.90	8.3	27.6	17.2
2012 (23)	43.7	11.3	25.8	19.2
2013 (30)	37	12.2	24.7	26.1
2014 (25)	37.1	11.7	30.5	20.7
2015 (9)	38.3	9.3	32.9	19.5

(continued)

Table 2.2 (continued)

Being done too quickly, too slowly or at about the right place?

Year ^e	Too quickly (%)	Too slowly (%)	About right (%)	Don't know (%)
2011 (average of 23 polls)	46.90	11.1	27.7	14.3
2012 (23)	47.7	11.4	26	14.9
2013 (30)	41.9	13.6	26.5	18
2014 (25)	38.3	12	32	17.7
2015 (9)	38.9	10.1	33.6	17.4

Having an impact on your own life, or not having an impact?

Year ^f	Having an impact (%)	Not having an impact (%)	Don't know (%)
2010 (average of 16 polls)	57.50	24.6	17.9
2011 (25)	68.6	22	9.4
2012 (23)	63.5	24.9	11.6
2013 (29)	57.1	31.2	11.7
2014 (25)	52.1	34.5	13.4
2015 (9)	47.6	37.7	14.7

And who do you think is to blame for the current spending cuts?

Year ^g	Coalition (%)	Labour (%)	Both (%)	Neither (%)	Don't know (%)
2010 (average of 18 polls)	20.20	45.7	20.4	7.6	6.1
2011 (25)	24.6	39	24.6	6	5.8
2012 (23)	26.2	35.7	26.7	4.8	6.6
2013 (29)	26	35.7	26.4	4.2	7.7
2014 (25)	26.4	35	24.9	4.3	9.4
2015 (9)	29.8	35.1	21.7	4.1	9.3

Source: YouGov

^aPolls conducted between June 2010 and May 2015 (i.e. up to the General Election)

^bPolls conducted between June 2010 and May 2015

^cPolls conducted between January 2011 and May 2015

^dPolls conducted between January 2011 and May 2015

^ePolls conducted between January 2011 and May 2015

^fPolls conducted between June 2010 and May 2015

^gPolls conducted between June 2010 and May 2015

Ashcroft for the Conservatives and post-election analyses (e.g. Ashcroft 2015). Given the centrality of the economy to performance politics and the importance of economic competence as a valence issue (Clarke et al. 2009; Whiteley et al. 2013), this was to prove decisive during the 2015 General Election.

Labour's 'economy problem' was compounded by the fact that, from 2013, the Shadow Cabinet adopted much of the Coalition Government's austerity agenda leading McDonnell (2013) to argue that the party was pursuing a form of 'austerity-lite'. The Shadow Cabinet backed the public sector pay freeze; the elimination of the budget deficit and national public sector debt—albeit over a longer period of time; and the welfare benefits spending cap (Milne 2014). Indeed, Balls declared in January 2014 that a future Labour government would not reverse the Coalition Government's public spending cuts and tax rises, would have to govern with less money and would have to make further cuts (Balls 2014). While there were significant differences between Conservative and Labour budget deficit reduction plans in 2010 and again in 2015 (Crawford et al. 2015)—most voters were oblivious to the technicalities of the public finances (O'Brien 2009).

Labour's 'economy problem' was also compounded by its 'Miliband problem'. The 2010–2015 period witnessed the continuation of the press partisanship which had re-emerged during the 2010 General Election (Wring and Deacon 2010). Aided by their allies in the right-wing press, the Conservatives launched a series of sustained and personal attacks on Miliband, labelling him as a 'geek' who was 'out of touch' and 'weird', questioning his abilities, character, judgement and leadership qualities. In short, they argued that Miliband was not 'prime ministerial material'. Demonstrating the effectiveness of negative campaigning (Ansolebehere and Iyengar 1995; Walter 2014), a YouGov poll in March 2014 found that 41% of respondents thought that Miliband was 'weird' and this figure was even higher amongst men, young people and those who lived in the south of England—particularly in marginal constituencies. The net result was that, for much of the 2010–2015 period, Cameron enjoyed higher leadership satisfaction ratings than Miliband (see Fig. 2.1).

As Kellner (2014) pointed out, Labour's electoral prospects looked bleak because 'there is no example of a party losing when it is ahead on both leadership and economic competence'.

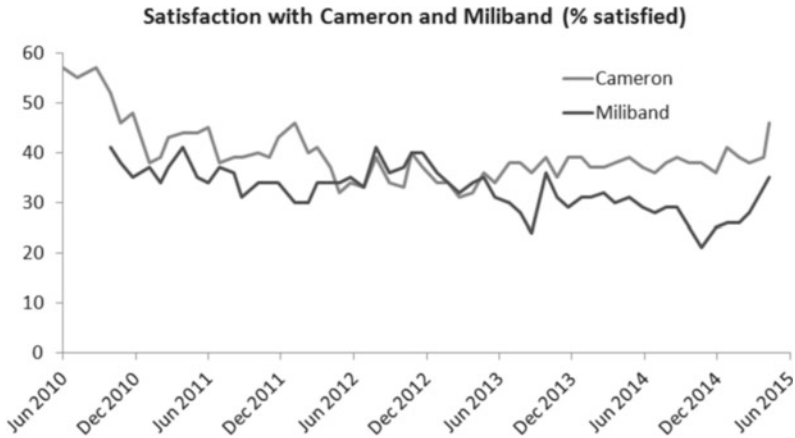


Fig. 2.1 Party leader satisfaction ratings (2010–2015)
(*Source*: Ipsos MORI)

The Scottish Question

The 2015 General Election was preceded by the Scottish Independence Referendum in September 2014 which transformed the Scottish political landscape (Geoghegan 2014) and, to a lesser extent, English politics (Goodwin and Milazzo 2015). Although the pro-independence campaign was defeated, the referendum boosted the fortunes of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the 2015 General Election, while proving nearly fatal for Labour in Scotland. Six factors contributed to this dramatic turn of events. Firstly, the referendum campaign increased support for independence from around 30% of Scots prior to the plebiscite to around 45–50% on the eve of the poll. This benefited the SNP. Secondly, the referendum energized the Scottish electorate, particularly young people, and this translated into a higher than average turnout, again benefiting the SNP. Thirdly, the SNP adopted an anti-austerity narrative and convinced many Scots that it, rather than Labour, was the party of social justice. Fourthly, SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon performed well in the television election debates during the 2015 General Election campaign and this helped to sustain the ‘SNP surge’ in the polls with 46% indicating they would vote SNP, a lead of 19% over Labour.

Fifthly, as a result of the party’s participation in the pro-Union campaign, many Scots viewed Labour as part of the Establishment and it lost support accordingly. Sixthly, the first-past-the-post system ensured

that the ‘SNP surge’ translated into major gains for the party in terms of Westminster seats (Ford 2015).

The Permanent Campaign

Symptomatic of the Americanization of political communication and political marketing (Dulio and Towner 2009), the ‘permanent campaign’ represents a ‘combination of image making and strategic calculation that turns governing into a perpetual campaign and remakes government into an instrument designed to sustain an elected official’s popularity’ (Blumenthal 1982: 7). In other words, ‘the process of campaigning and the process of governing have lost their distinctiveness’ (Ornstein and Mann 2000: 219). Characterized by the prominent role played by political consultants in governing; the extensive use of market research; the pre-occupation with ongoing fundraising; and an increased emphasis on image, presentation, voter perceptions and media management (Needham 2005) the permanent campaign model has been widely exported (Sparrow and Turner 2001).

The long campaign is both a manifestation and an integral feature of permanent campaigning. Another important point, neglected within the existing political communication and political marketing literature—if not the political science literature, for example, the ‘statecraft’ (Bulpitt 1986) and ‘adaptation model’ (Heppell 2014)—is that the governing party’s legislative programme can play a decisive role in the permanent campaign. Such a programme reflects not only the ruling party’s manifesto but also its desire to discursively and institutionally transform the political system so as to facilitate continual re-election. In other words, it involves permanent campaigning *in* government and campaigning *for* permanent government where general elections become mere rude interruptions in a long-term strategy to transform Britain’s political economy across several electoral cycles.

Echoing, and perhaps drawing lessons from the launch of the Thatcherism project (Gamble 1994), Cameron and Osborne aimed to recast British politics following the New Labour interregnum. With Osborne as chief political strategist, the Conservatives strove to reshape the British political system to their advantage. In an attempt to achieve their long-term objective of a small state, the Conservatives persisted with their austerity narrative and policy agenda (i.e. the 2011 and 2014 Charter for Budget Responsibility) and, to achieve the associated goal of ‘welfare

reform’, they repeatedly set traps (e.g. parliamentary votes) in an attempt to portray Labour as the ‘party of welfare’ (Grice 2014).

Furthermore, in an attempt to achieve electoral supremacy, the Conservatives successfully defeated the proposals for electoral reform during the 2011 Alternative Vote Referendum thus pre-empting the formation of a majoritarian left-progressive bloc and safeguarding the possibility of future minority or majority Conservative governments (Whiteley et al. 2011). The Conservatives also introduced individual electoral registration in 2014 resulting in a ‘disenfranchised generation’ of up to a million young people—those more likely to vote for the Green Party, Labour or the Liberal Democrats—who were reported as missing (Grice and Fearn 2015). The Conservatives included in their 2015 manifesto a pledge to reform the rules regarding strike ballots and trade union subscriptions cognisant that such changes would, in effect, outlaw industrial action—and thus severely constrain the ability of public sector trade unions to resist future austerity—and would significantly reduce the funding available to trade unions and thus the Labour Party. They pledged to review (i.e. re-draw) Britain’s electoral boundaries—so as to reduce the total number of Members of Parliament (MPs) and to create constituencies with roughly equal numbers of voters—knowing that this will cost Labour and the Liberal Democrats more seats than the Conservatives (Curtis and Stratton 2011). They also pledged to legislate for English votes for English laws. During the 2015 General Election campaign, commentators and pollsters acknowledged that if Miliband had been deprived of a sizeable Scottish contingent of Labour MPs, then the legislative programme of a minority Labour government, or Labour-dominated coalition, could have been blocked by English Conservative MPs (Price 2015). In other words, a Conservative-dominated England could have prevailed over a Labour-ruled Britain. Taken together, these initiatives suggest that the Conservatives under Cameron and Osborne, as under Margaret Thatcher, have developed a permanent campaign approach to governing.

The impact of the unofficial long campaign on voting intentions is clear. During the first half of the 2010–2015 period, Labour enjoyed a small poll lead over the Conservatives. During the second half of this period, however, the margin of difference steadily narrowed and, by March 2015, the Conservatives and Labour were fairly evenly matched. These trends encouraged the Conservatives to pursue an *offensive* strategy during the short campaign, while the Labour and Liberal Democrat strategies were largely *defensive*.

2 THE SHORT CAMPAIGN (MARCH–MAY 2015)

The state of the polls in March 2015 led many commentators and pollsters to predict that there would be another hung parliament and another coalition government (Pickard 2015). This, in turn, encouraged speculation about what difference, if any, the political consultants hired by the three main political parties would make.

The Conservatives and the Crosby Strategy

The Australian Lynton Crosby, often referred to as the ‘Wizard of Oz’, was employed by the Conservatives as director of election strategy in 2012 and was joined the following year by American Jim Messina who was part of the Barack Obama campaign team in the 2008 and 2012. Cognisant that the Conservatives had failed to secure a majority in 2010 and that the party had not won a general election since 1992, Crosby’s 40–40 strategy involved targeting 40 seats, particularly those held by the Liberal Democrats, and defending a further 40 seats against Labour.

The Crosby strategy had eight main components. Firstly, Crosby insisted upon total control over the election strategy and its implementation. He also demanded unwavering discipline from all sections of the party to ensure that everyone was ‘on message’. Consequently, Cameron’s engagement with the general public and the televised debates was minimized. Secondly, building upon ongoing focus group research and private polling conducted by Ashcroft, Crosby commissioned additional private polling in 2013 and 2014 to identify the salient issues in the target seats. Such research also helped to identify the main campaign themes. Thirdly, Crosby pursued his trademark ‘under the radar’ approach by concentrating the party’s resources in the key target seats. Within these constituencies, the Conservatives aimed to fend off Labour, to ‘decapitate’ their former allies the Liberal Democrats and/or to encourage former Conservatives tempted to vote United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) to return to the fold. A force of 100,000 volunteers, known as Team 2015, assisted constituency activists to achieve these goals. Fourthly, Crosby deployed another of his trademark tactics, known as ‘wedge politics’, which involves finding an issue that can be exploited to prise off your opponent’s traditional supporters. That issue was Scottish nationalism. Fifthly, Crosby exercised yet another of his trademark tactics, known as the ‘dead cat’ approach. As Johnson (2013) explained, ‘there is

one thing that is absolutely certain about throwing a dead cat on the dining room table ... and that is that everyone ... will be talking about the dead cat'. That 'dead cat' was a possible Labour–SNP coalition. Sixthly, Crosby effectively utilized fear—that is, swing voters' concerns that a weak Miliband dependent upon a left-wing SNP would imperil the economy—to encourage waverers to support the Conservatives. Seventhly, as opinion polls seemed to indicate that the Crosby strategy was not working, Crosby reinforced the threat from a possible Labour–SNP coalition to focus the minds of waverers and encourage target voters to turnout to vote Conservative. Eighthly, Crosby enlisted the help of Messina to reach target voters via new technologies and social media. Drawing upon the successful 2012 'Obama Model' (Issenberg 2013)—data mining, micro-targeting and personalized messaging—Messina developed a new database and voter profiling system known as Merlin (Rigby and Bounds 2015) which was used to predict 'how certain categories of voters would vote' (Ashcroft and Oakeshott 2015: 511). Indeed,

The system was so finely tuned that MPs and activists canvassing in target seats found themselves being directed to specific properties to talk to a specific individual or family. It might be the only household they were asked to approach on that particular road and the next property on that hit list could be two or three streets away. Letters and leaflets delivered to voters were so specific that a piece of direct mail might have up to 4,000 variations. (ibid.)

In addition, the Conservatives spent up to £100,000 a month on Facebook advertising and up to £3,000 on individual constituency operations (Hawkins 2015). Such techniques, when combined with the thorough integration of traditional and social media operations, prompted Elder and Edmonds (2015) to declare that 2015 was Britain's first 'digital general election'.

The Conservatives developed a set of campaign themes that were deployed *nationally* in the 'air war' (in the media) and the 'ground war' (in the constituencies). Studiously avoiding the issues of immigration and the National Health Service (NHS)—issues on which the party was consistently outpulled by the UKIP and Labour, respectively—the Conservatives emphasized that only they had a 'long-term economic plan'. They chose five main campaign themes: the elimination of the budget deficit, reducing income tax, creation of more jobs, capping immigration and welfare, and delivering the best schools and skills for young people; for example,

using the strapline ‘Let’s stay on the road to a stronger economy’ on one positive advertisement.

These campaign themes were enthusiastically amplified by the right-wing press (See Chap. 6). The Conservatives also developed a set of additional campaign themes to be used in *target seats*. These included ‘Miliband’s weakness as a leader and the damage that would be done to economic stability if a Labour–SNP coalition government were to be formed. All the economic progress made since 2010 would be put at risk’ (Seldon and Snowdon 2015: 514). That such campaign themes resonated with target voters was confirmed by one Conservative MP: ‘every night on the doorsteps we are finding that the line is working in every type of target seat’ (quoted in Seldon and Snowdon 2015: 514).

The Crosby strategy was an unexpected success. The Conservatives polled 36.8% of the national vote, an increase of 0.7% on the 2010 General Election result, and secured 330 seats, an increase of 24 on 2010, to give them a majority of 12 (Hawkins et al. 2015). Furthermore, the Conservatives held or won 69 of the 89 seats that were eventually targeted. While the Conservative vote only increased by 0.7% nationally, in the 89 target seats it increased by an average of 3.82%. The swing from Labour to the Conservatives in the 89 target seats averaged 2.07%, while the swing from the Liberal Democrats averaged 10.64%. And while the UKIP polled an average 14.6% outside of Scotland, it polled 13.6% in the 89 target seats. In other words, at least *some* former UKIP voters were brought back into the fold.

Labour and the Axelrod Strategy

Building upon the long-standing relationship between Labour and the US Democrats, the American David Axelrod—who, along with Messina, engineered Obama’s successful 2008 and 2012 campaigns and coined the slogan ‘Yes We Can’—was hired by Labour in 2014. Unlike Crosby, who insisted upon total control, Axelrod was one of several senior figures—alongside the Shadow Foreign Secretary and election chief, Douglas Alexander, and the head of the party’s 2012–2014 policy review, Jon Cruddas—who vied for control of the election campaign. Axelrod was criticized for being too remote and for providing advice by email, text or telephone for much of the short campaign.

The Axelrod strategy, which involved importing key aspects of the ‘Obama Model’, had five main components. Firstly, Axelrod persuaded

Labour to target 106 marginal seats and mobilize Labour's core vote in these constituencies. Minimalist by design, it was predicated on 'shrinking the offer' and 'taking no risks'—hence Miliband's lack of engagement with the general public—in an attempt to achieve the 35% of the national vote deemed necessary to deliver a minority Labour government. This required increasing voter turnout in the target seats from 60% to around 70% which, it was believed, could deliver these constituencies to Labour. Secondly, Labour commissioned extensive focus group research and private polling which Axelrod used to fashion the party's main campaign themes. Thirdly, being aware that much of the press was hostile to Labour—and Miliband in particular—and, consequently, that the party would lose the 'air war', Axelrod focused Labour's resources on the 'ground war'. It employed an army of paid canvassers—around 300 in each of the target seats—and these individuals worked alongside constituency activists for more than a year before the general election. Utilizing its Contact Creator database and Nation Builder software to organize and support this operation, Labour aimed to conduct at least five million face-to-face conversations with voters on the basis that this would increase turnout rates. Rather than utilize the sophisticated voter segmentation approach (Burton 2012) employed by the Conservatives, however, Labour invested its 'money into sending out vast volumes of literature to all groups' (Seldon and Snowdon 2015: 515). Fourthly, recognizing that Labour would be outspent by the Conservatives, Axelrod encouraged the party to undertake a crowd-funding operation. Attracting 149,000 donations—mainly small amounts—this operation generated £2.7 million to help fund the election campaign. Fifthly, Labour used Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to convey its campaign themes. This included 'a "Thunderclap" technique where thousands of supporters put out the same message simultaneously. Some 1.7 million people used a Labour app celebrating the NHS's 66th birthday' (Pickard 2015).

In contrast to the Conservatives, who focused exclusively on the economy to provide an overarching election campaign narrative, Labour shifted from one campaign theme to another during the short campaign. In January, it urged target voters to support Labour to 'save the NHS'. In February, it emphasized how the party would assist young people, while in March it returned to the 'cost of living crisis' narrative and the fragility of the economic recovery. Using a five-item pledge card entitled 'A better plan. A better future', the party pledged a stronger economic foundation; higher living standards for working families; an NHS with the time to

care; controls on immigration; and a country where the next generation can do better than the last. The pledges perhaps demonstrate how Labour attempted to match the Conservative promises differentiating with them only in advertisements suggesting Conservative cuts would damage core institutions such as the NHS.

While Labour arguably won the ‘ground war’—in the sense that the party achieved its target of five million conversations and thus enjoyed a higher ‘contact rate’ than the Conservatives—and while Labour’s share of the national vote increased by 1.5% from the 2010 result to 30.4%, the Axelrod strategy failed in its key objectives. It fell short of the required 35%; Labour secured 232 seats, 26 fewer than in 2010; and it lost all but one seat in Scotland (Hawkins et al. 2015).

The Liberal Democrats and the Coetzee Strategy

As former election campaign chief for the Democratic Alliance in South Africa, the Liberal Democrats employed Ryan Coetzee in 2012 to serve as special advisor to the Party leader Nick Clegg and, from 2015, election campaign director. The Coetzee strategy, which was largely defensive, had six main components. Firstly, Coetzee insisted the Liberal Democrats maintain their equidistance between the Conservatives and Labour and refrain from re-positioning themselves to the left. This approach, of splitting the difference, was predicated on trying to defend existing Liberal Democrat seats. Secondly, reluctantly accepting that the party was likely to lose many of its then 57 seats, Coetzee focused resources on 23 marginal constituencies. Thirdly, rather than promoting a Liberal vision of Britain’s future, Coetzee decided to emphasize the Liberal Democrats’ record as part of the Coalition Government. Fourthly, Coetzee commissioned extensive focus group research and private polling in Liberal Democrat seats to identify the salient issues. Fifthly, armed with such insight, Coetzee encouraged Liberal Democrat candidates to campaign on local issues and, where appropriate, to emphasize their record as incumbents. As one senior party figure explained, ‘this is a general election where there are going to be big issues about the future of the country, there will also be a sense of 650 by-elections’ (quoted in Watt and Wintour 2015). Sixthly, like the other main political parties, the Liberal Democrats utilized new technologies and social media to engage with target voters.

The party decided upon three main campaign themes: the Liberal Democrats, as partners in the Coalition Government, had moderated

Conservative excesses, that the Liberal Democrats had, and would continue to, deliver economic competence and stability, and that the Liberal Democrats offered a centrist alternative to their rivals who were lurching to the left and right.

The Liberal Democrats' target voters were 'soft conservatives'. These were people 'who want to support a party with economic credibility' but who were concerned about the Conservatives' budget deficit reduction plan for the next parliament. As one senior party figure explained, the core objective was to 'persuade these "soft conservatives" that by voting Liberal Democrat they can guarantee economic security while saving their conscience' (quoted in Watt and Wintour 2015).

The Coetzee strategy was an unmitigated disaster. By his own admission, 'our election campaign was fought on three fronts and we lost on all of them'. In Scotland, 'a tidal wave of nationalism engulfed us, as it did Labour'. In Labour-facing seats 'many 2010 Liberal Democrats felt we had betrayed them by going into government with the Conservatives'. And in Conservative-facing seats, 'we got routed by what I call the Fear ... in the event the polls and the SNP conspired to ratchet up the Fear to Terror levels because they showed Labour's only path to power would be via the SNP' (quoted in Wintour 2015). The Liberal Democrats won only eight seats and polled 7.9% of the national vote—a fall of 15.1% on the 2010 result (Hawkins et al. 2015).

The United Kingdom Independence Party

The UKIP strategy under leader Nigel Farage aimed to sustain the 'UKIP surge' which gathered pace in 2014 and to further exploit the popular perception of being an anti-Establishment movement determined to 'shake things up' at Westminster just as it had in Brussels. Indeed, despite his Establishment credentials, Farage styled UKIP as an insurgent 'people's army'. The UKIP triggered a 'political earthquake' in 2014 by winning the European Elections, securing 27% of the national vote and 24 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). It was the first time in over a century that a minority party had won a national election. That same year, two Conservative MPs defected to the UKIP and, in subsequent by-elections, both were returned as UKIP MPs.

The UKIP election strategy had five main components. Firstly, UKIP aimed to encourage former Conservative voters, known as 'blue kippers' (Dahlgreen 2015), to switch allegiances to pressurize the Conservatives

into adopting a more Eurosceptic, anti-immigrant position. Secondly, the UKIP encouraged former Labour supporters, known as ‘red kippers’ (ibid.) to also switch allegiances. Thirdly, the UKIP attempted to win Thanet South for Farage. Fourthly, the UKIP targeted 12 Conservative-held seats where it believed it had a good chance of winning and fifthly, the UKIP hoped to come second in more than 100, mainly Labour-held, northern constituencies. Under the slogan ‘vote for change’, the UKIP promoted two main campaign themes tailored to appeal to both ‘blue kippers’ and ‘red kippers’. Their pledge card offered five simple messages: say NO to the EU; control our borders, extra £3 billion for the NHS; cut foreign aid spending; and no tax on the minimum wage. The main pledges, however, were ramping up the campaign for withdrawing Britain from the European Union (EU) and controlling immigration.

The UKIP’s election strategy was a partial success. Only one UKIP MP held their seat and Farage failed to secure Thanet South. Nevertheless, the UKIP obtained 12.6% of the national vote, an increase of 9.5% on the 2010 result, and it came second in 120 constituencies—75 Conservatives seats and 44 Labour (Hawkins et al. 2015).

The Green Party

The Green Party’s strategy under leader Natalie Bennett was to sustain the ‘Green surge’ following the party’s performance in the 2014 European Elections—when it came fourth, ahead of the Liberal Democrats, with 1.2 million votes (7.9% of the total) which translated into three MEPs—and in the 2014 local elections whereupon it formed the official opposition in five councils. The strategy had four main strands. Firstly, to field candidates in as many constituencies as possible to maximize the Green Party vote nationally. Their successful crowd-funding operation meant that the Green Party stood in nearly 90% of seats, rather than their 75% target. Secondly, to target 12 seats where the party believed it had a good chance of winning and, in six of these, a realistic chance. These included the defence of Brighton Pavilion, where ex-leader Caroline Lucas was incumbent, plus the Conservative seat of Reading East; Labour’s Holborn and St Pancras—where Bennett was the candidate—Liverpool Riverside, Oxford East, Sheffield Central and York Central; and Liberal Democrat seats Bristol West, Cambridge, Norwich South, Solihull and St Ives. Thirdly, to position itself as an anti-Establishment party on the left and, fourthly, to capitalize on the significant increase in the number of

party members, particularly young people, who joined since the summer of 2014 by encouraging them to become activists and campaign in the target seats.

The Green Party focused upon six main campaign themes: that they would take action to tackle climate change, rebuild the economy and ensure that everyone gets a fair share, deliver quality education, provide affordable housing, rescue the NHS and invest in the public transport system. As one of the challengers—having forged an ‘anti-austerity alliance’ with Plaid Cymru and the SNP (Perraudin 2014), and having announced they would consider joining a multi-party coalition or supporting a minority Labour government on a ‘confidence and supply’ basis—the Green Party produced a series of campaign posters, including one entitled ‘Standing for the Common Good’, and another arguing ‘It’s time to call curtains on austerity’ to deploy in their target seats.

The party also focused upon particular groups of voters in target constituencies, including those disillusioned with the three mainstream parties—former Conservative voters concerned about fracking and building on the ‘green belt’; former Labour voters who rejected ‘austerity-lite’; and former Liberal Democrat voters opposed to nuclear power, nuclear weapons and university tuition fees—plus students and young people more generally. The Green Party’s election strategy was partially successful. It retained its Brighton seat, came second in four seats and polled 3.8% of the UK vote—a 2.8% increase on the 2010 result (Hawkins et al. 2015).

Plaid Cymru

In Wales, unlike Scotland, support for independence—a key Plaid Cymru objective—is very low. An Independent Communications and Marketing (ICM) poll in September 2014 found that just 3% of the Welsh people favoured independence, compared to 49% who supported greater powers for the Welsh Assembly; a March 2015 poll found an increase to only 6%. Unlike the Scottish nationalists, Plaid Cymru has not been governed alone and, consequently, has not been able to dominate the Welsh political scene as the SNP has done in Scotland. While it formed a governing coalition with Labour in the Welsh Assembly between 2007 and 2011, and had successfully campaigned for greater powers in the 2011 referendum, Plaid Cymru came third behind Labour and the Conservatives in the 2011 Welsh Assembly elections with a total of 11 members out of 60. Hoping to build upon the 2014 European Elections, in which it

gained one MEP out of four, and hoping to increase its representation at Westminster where it had three MPs out of 40, Plaid Cymru was polling fourth behind the UKIP, at around 11%, in early 2015.

Plaid Cymru's strategy under the leader Leanne Wood had three main components. Firstly, to emulate the SNP by precipitating a 'Plaid surge' in Wales; Plaid Cymru forged a 'Celtic alliance' with the SNP, entitled '4 Wales 4 Scotland', to maximize influence in the event of a hung parliament (Perraudin 2014). Secondly, to exploit such a result to extract increased funding and powers for Wales and, thirdly, to stand on an anti-austerity platform. With this in mind, Plaid Cymru joined the other challengers in an 'anti-austerity alliance' and indicated they would consider joining a multi-party coalition or a 'confidence and supply' relationship with Labour. Plaid Cymru opted for four main campaign themes. It demanded greater devolution for Wales—more specifically the same funding arrangements and legislative powers as the Scottish Parliament; an end to public sector austerity and the introduction of a living wage in Wales; to rescue the NHS; and adopted a clear pro-EU position. It targeted several seats attempting to reach beyond its core, typically Welsh-speaking, voter base.

Plaid Cymru's election strategy was a failure. While the party held its three Westminster seats, and while its share of the Welsh vote increased by 0.9% on the 2010 result to 12.1%, it came fourth behind Labour, the Conservatives and the UKIP (Hawkins et al. 2015). The result prompted a former leader to complain that Plaid Cymru's election campaign had been 'too focused on Scotland and not enough on Wales' (cited in Deans 2015).

The Scottish National Party

The SNP constructed a formidable electoral machine during the 2000s—underpinned by the Activate software package which produced detailed voter profiles, social media operations and the development of positive campaign messages—which delivered SNP victories in the 2007 and 2011 Scottish Parliament elections (Torrance 2011). The 2015 result was thus the culmination of a long campaign that started in 2001 and which encompassed the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum. The SNP's election strategy under Sturgeon drew upon these victories, the achievements of the Scottish government and the referendum outcomes. Although the pro-independence campaign was defeated, there was a significant influx of new party members and, according to polls from October 2014 onwards, the momentum was clearly with the SNP.

In early 2015, the party leadership obtained the results of the extensive focus group research into voter perceptions. Labour was typically seen as untrustworthy and weak. It was commonly associated with the Conservatives (i.e. Better Together) and, significantly, participants often expressed multiple reasons for disliking Labour. By contrast, the SNP was seen as credible and trustworthy because of its record in office (Gordon 2015). On the basis of these findings, and with the independence issue neutralized, the SNP publicized three main campaign themes. Firstly, the SNP argued MPs equate influence, with the poster ‘The more seats we have here (depicting Westminster), the more powers we’ll have in Scotland’. Secondly, the SNP offered an alternative to the main political parties which, to varying degrees, all supported austerity, and thirdly, it insisted the SNP was a credible vehicle for change. As part of the ‘anti-austerity alliance’, the SNP signalled it would consider joining a coalition on similar terms to Plaid and the Greens. Delivered on the ground via an extensive network of party activists in each constituency—which eclipsed the efforts of its rivals—and via mainstream and social media operations, these campaign themes resonated.

Unlike previous general election campaigns, where the party focused its resources on a limited number of target seats, in 2015 the SNP conducted an all-Scotland election campaign guided by industrial-scale canvassing. The SNP’s election strategy was an unprecedented success. The party won 56 of the 59 Westminster seats and obtained 50% of the Scottish votes (Hawkins et al. 2015).

3 CONCLUSION

Seven key points can be made about the 2009–2015 period and the 2015 General Election. Firstly, it is not possible to explain the results of the 2015 General Election without understanding the broader context of the unofficial long campaign. From 2009, and aided by the right-wing press, the Conservatives succeeded in setting the agenda regarding the economy and the question of Miliband’s leadership. By the time of the launch of the official short campaign, the Conservatives were already winning on the two key issues that effectively framed the 2015 General Election. Secondly, exploiting such an advantage, the Conservatives adopted an offensive election strategy which utilized negative campaigning and an array of techniques to put Labour on the defensive. Thirdly, the 2015 General Election demonstrated that political consultants, whatever their reputation or past

achievements, do not always possess the ‘magic ingredients’ for electoral success. Fourthly, the 2015 General Election witnessed the importance of new political communications and political marketing techniques associated with the 2012 ‘Obama Model’. Fifthly, while the UKIP and the Green Party performed relatively well, the 2015 General Election demonstrated that, in the absence of electoral reform, the first-past-the-post system ensures that challenger parties remain a marginal force in British politics. Sixthly, the 2010–2015 period serves as a case study, and provides ample evidence of the embedding of the permanent campaign in British politics. Seventhly, from their discursive constructions and legislative actions, it seems the Conservatives have rediscovered a permanent approach to governing with the general elections in 2020, 2025 and beyond in mind. Over and above these observations, however, ultimately the 2015 election demonstrated that ruthless, data-driven targeting as a political marketing strategy is successful provided the message resonates, fear of alternatives are accepted and the messages reach significant numbers of the voters who matter most. The Conservative targeting, building on a long-term political marketing strategy of positioning themselves as the party of hard working families and economic stability, neither of which were effectively contested, arguably was important for delivering their victory.

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Manifestos as an Extended Branding Campaign

Andrew White

Manifestos are one of the main means by which parties project their ‘brand’, chiefly by presenting policy prescriptions which collectively position them at clearly identifiable points along the political spectrum (Cwalina et al. 2011: 25–26). This chapter focuses mainly on the manifestos of the two governing parties in the run up to the 2015 UK General Election, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats, as well as the main opposition party, Labour. It will also include the manifestos of the other leading ‘national parties’, the Green Party and United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The chapter does not discuss the manifestos of the parties whose electoral activities are confined to only one of the constituent nations of the UK, but because of its prominence in the national (UK) campaign, and the fact that it is the third largest party at Westminster; an exception has been made for the Scottish National Party (SNP). The following analysis focuses on the manifesto as a platform to project each party’s brand, as well as how that brand is communicated to the electorate through mini-campaigns and media events. Space does not allow a consideration of all policies; so, given that it was a key concern of the public, was central to the campaign and featured prominently in the main parties’ manifestos, economic policy is the main focus of this analysis.

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1 THE MANIFESTO AS BRAND PROJECTION

In addition to enabling the party to establish itself at a specific point on the political spectrum, the manifesto also gives parties the opportunity to project their reputation and trustworthiness. This ‘valence’ approach to politics, whereby parties seek to convince the electorate of their competence in broad areas that voters deem to be important, has become particularly significant in modern British politics as differences on individual policies have narrowed so much that there is little differentiation in the positions of the main parties. An example of a valence issue is ‘a strong economy’ and, given its prominence in the 2015 election, this paper focuses on just that issue (Whiteley et al. 2005: 148).

Many academic discussions on political marketing in the UK use the Lees-Marshment tripartite schema of the market-oriented party, the sales-oriented party and the product-oriented party (POP) (Lees-Marshment 2008: 20, 30, 33). She argues that in contemporary democracies parties are primarily market-oriented, evidenced by the continual use of market intelligence. In this sense, like commercial marketing, parties are selling a *product* which they *adjust* in light of the feedback that they receive from the *buyers*, in this case the electorate (Lees-Marshment 2008: 21–23). Lees-Marshment implies the product is essentially each party’s manifesto and this is the understanding of others who have used her model (Lilleker and Negrine 2006: 38).

However, a major drawback of using this theoretical framework for this particular paper would be that it is difficult to measure empirically how the parties responded to—or *adjusted* their product—the following feedback from the electorate. In the time and space available, it is not feasible to survey this interaction between the parties and the electorate. Instead, drawing on the work of Cwalina et al. (2011), the paper examines the 2015 manifestos within the context of brand identity and valence. Here, the paper employs the two foundational layers of the four-layer pyramid brand equity model, which is a modification of Keller’s (2001) non-political construct. The base layer is ‘brand salience’ and refers to the identity of parties, especially where they position themselves on the left–right spectrum. While the manifesto is an important facet of this positioning, it is important to note that this is established through the programme and associated pronouncements in their totality rather than through individual policies (Cwalina et al. 2011: 25–26). The next layer comprises ‘brand performance’ and ‘brand imagery’, where meaning is established when ‘consum-

ers believe the brand has attributes and benefits that satisfy their needs and wants such that a positive overall brand attitude is formed' (Cwalina et al. 2011: 26). If the first layer can be associated with brand identity, the second encapsulates the valence approach to political marketing that was explicated above, both of which provide the theoretical framework for the study of the 2015 manifestos. The following analysis is therefore concentrated on the way in which parties project their own brand, as well as how they respond to the electorates' most important valence issue, the parties' respective capacity to run a strong economy.

2 THE MANIFESTOS ROLE IN PROMOTING ECONOMIC COMPETENCE AS BRAND IDENTITY

The manifesto of the leading party in the 2010–2015 Coalition and subsequent outright winner of the 2015 election, the Conservative Party, was dominated by economic policies, with issues other than the economy, taxation or job creation barely featuring until page 27 of the 81-page document (2015a). The emphasis on its economic plan was the chief means in which it attempted to both defend its own record in government and differentiate it from the previous Labour government's economic performance. This tone was established in the first sentence of David Cameron's foreword, where he quoted the ill-conceived words of the departing New Labour Treasury Minister Liam Byrne in 2010: 'there is no [government] money' (Conservative Party 2015b: 5). The Conservatives attempted to convince the reader of their trustworthiness by highlighting their setting up of the Office for Budgetary Responsibility (OBR), arguing that it gives independent verification of the soundness of their economic plan (Conservative Party 2015: 7). Interspersed with the plain black text of the manifesto were large blue and bolded italicised sentences as well as blue panels with a large single white text sentence in each, both of which occurred around once a page. On one occasion, the same phrase—'To eliminate the deficit we must continue to cut out wasteful spending'—appeared largely out of context on separate pages near the beginning and end of the manifesto, thus bookending the main message of the campaign (Conservative Party 2015: 9, 47).

While the manifesto is an unashamed defence of traditional conservative policies, the emphasis on low taxation and help for new and existing home-owners was directed, as the Conservatives made explicit in their

accompanying publicity, to ordinary ‘working people’ (Conservative Party 2015a). This message was reinforced by the bold panelled message that: ‘The richest are paying a greater share of income tax than in any of Labour’s 13 years’ (Conservative Party 2015: 9). The manifesto does not mention that, to the extent to which this is accurate, it was largely a result of the insistence of their coalition partner that the threshold at which tax was levied should be significantly raised (Ashcroft 2013). But it provided a convenient means of countering the oft-repeated criticism that the Conservative Party was, as it always had been, a party mainly for the rich. It weaved this message into policies, like health and education, where its austerity programme made it vulnerable, by asserting that these vital sectors of society could only be adequately supported if the economy was strong.

As perhaps expected from a party that had been in opposition for 5 years prior to the election and whose economic record in the latter years of its previous administration made it vulnerable, the Labour Party began its manifesto with an economic pledge in the form of the ‘Budget Responsibility Lock’ (Labour Party 2015: 1). This Lock was much more prescriptive than would be expected of a manifesto, its main features being:

- A promise that every single manifesto item would be paid for without additional borrowing
- To bring forward legislation to ensure that in the future manifesto commitments from all parties would be audited by the OBR
- The first line of the first Labour government budget would be: ‘This budget cuts the deficit every year’. Subsequent budgets would be required to cut the deficit and this process would be audited by the OBR (Labour Party 2015: 1)

This message was reinforced by the argument that the Coalition government had reneged on its promises on reducing the deficit: ‘The Conservative-led Government promised to balance the books in this Parliament. But this promise has been broken. The Conservatives will leave the country borrowing over £75 billion this year’ (Labour Party 2015: 17).

The Labour Party’s manifesto emphasised traditional concerns relating to ‘fairness’ in taxation and measures to combat inequality. Surprisingly, though, discussion on the economy was lengthier than that on health and education combined, the two issues Labour has traditionally focused on

and where a sizeable number of the electorate believed that these services had declined under the Coalition government (The British Election Study Team 2015). This seeming lack of consistent messaging reflected a problem which at that time still bedevilled the Labour Party: to what extent was the New Labour brand still a part of its identity? Ed Miliband's seeming rejection of the term as long ago as 2010 suggests that by 2015 it had very little relevance to the way in which the party presented itself. However, former government communications director Alastair Campbell lamented that his pleas to the party at the beginning of the Miliband's leadership to challenge the Conservative Party's narrative about the debt were ignored, thus hampering Labour setting the agenda on economic policy: 'When Miliband was elected leader, he felt uncomfortable defending the Blair-Brown record. He wanted to disassociate himself from the past and talk about the future' (quoted in Wintour 2015). Therefore, the view of the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats on the national debt gained traction with the electorate early in the previous parliament, assuming a valence that the Labour Party could not ignore in its manifesto. But, as Campbell intimated above, this was just the sort of issue that exposed the division in the party's view of itself, between those who wanted to brand it as a social democratic movement primarily concerned with addressing inequality and a more centrist, dare I say New-Labour-type, party focused on fiscal rectitude. This resulted in the manifesto appearing to be at odds with some of Ed Miliband's public pronouncements, so making it difficult for the party to project a clear message on the deficit (Wintour 2015).

The manifesto of the Conservatives' junior coalition partner from 2010 to 2015, the Liberal Democrats, also devoted a considerable amount of content to the economy. However, the treatment of it was divided into two sections, 'responsible finances' and 'prosperity for all', with the latter being more than twice as long (Liberal Democrats 2015a). While the policy on deficit reduction outlined in the first section was broadly similar to the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats were keen to put distance between themselves and their erstwhile Coalition partner in emphasising, most prominently in a bold all-page graphic, that they would cut less from services and raise taxes where necessary (Liberal Democrats 2015a: 19, 20). This illustrates the delicate balancing act that the Liberal Democrats had to carry out in both defending their record in government, as the manifesto of a governing party should do, *and* making clear how they are distinct from their Coalition partner. This is difficult as it implied that the Liberal Democrats were opposed to some Coalition

policies, not unsurprising given that it was the junior partner. Thus, it is noticeable that the first section on responsible finances was not only short (five pages including a one-page graphic) but also did not employ the striking tabular ‘a record of delivery’ boxes highlighting the translation of 2010 manifesto commitments into government policy that other sections did (Liberal Democrats 2015a). This suggests that the Liberal Democrats differed from the Conservatives in their approach to cutting the deficit during the Coalition period itself, even if for obvious reasons this could not be expressed in its manifesto.

But this also reflected divisions within the Liberal Democrats between fiscal hawks and those who were more concerned about the consequences of starving public services of much needed investment. This division was at the heart of long-held differences over the party’s identity between those who wanted to use the state to advance a liberal social and economic agenda, which would include interventions in the market to reduce inequality, and those libertarians who wanted to reduce the power of the state, especially in the economic sphere (Dale 2013; Perraudin 2015). The divisions might explain why, despite distancing the party from the Conservatives on investment on the public services, its policy on reducing the deficit was not substantially different from them. This internal tension was occasionally expressed in statements in the manifesto which made a virtue of fiscal rectitude at the expense of more socially progressive policies: ‘For too long, sickness benefits were used as a way of parking people away from the unemployment statistics’ (Liberal Democrats 2015a: 48).

The SNP’s manifesto was characterised by its demand that the policies of austerity should end, and proposed that an extra £140 million should be set aside to fund public services, including the National Health Service (NHS) (SNP 2015: 5). There was a commitment to tackle the deficit ‘as part of a medium term strategy to ensure prudent levels of debt are achieved’ (SNP 2015: 4) but very little detail on precisely how this would be done and in what timescale. One advantage that the SNP had was that it was not competing with the Conservatives for seats and hence was not concerned with being viewed as insufficiently tough on the deficit. In that sense, Labour’s need to market its policies to English voters in Conservative/Labour marginal seats meant that it could not afford not to attempt to offer a credible plan to cut the deficit, a policy that could be interpreted in Scotland (especially by the SNP) as an extension of austerity.

As parties that were never likely to play a significant role in the post-election government, it could be argued that UKIP and the Green Party

were under little pressure to compromise their principles and hence would have a freer rein than the other parties to construct an internally coherent and convincing brand. And this was borne out by the very short sections on the economy, with UKIP's plan to reduce the deficit being merely a pledge that its MPs would pressurise the government into adhering to the current Treasury plan (UKIP 2015: 8); the Greens, as would be expected, proposed a more environmentally sustainable economy (Green Party 2015). UKIP's reference to the problems of 'political correctness' and multiculturalism appear to bolster its self-styled identity as a party that, unlike the mainstream parties, is prepared to speak its mind even when that makes some people uncomfortable. However, this did not mean that both parties were not concerned with their public image, and this can be seen in relation to their portrayal of their leaders. Party leader Nigel Farage only featured once in the UKIP manifesto after the foreword, with each of its 28 sections introduced by the relevant party spokesperson (though in true 'politically incorrect' style UKIP refers to each, including when female, as a 'spokesman!') (UKIP 2015). Similarly, the foreword that party leader Natalie Bennett gave at the beginning of the Green Party manifesto masked her distinct lack of profile in the main body of the document. In the case of Farage, concerns that UKIP was viewed by the public as a 'one-man band' led the party to appoint a number of spokespersons in June 2014 to promote its policies and the manifesto reflects this push to give prominence to a wider range of politicians than have been associated with the party in the past (Morris 2014). Bennett's lack of profile in the Green Party manifesto followed a series of poor media interviews. There was even a request to broadcasters from the Green Party that its only MP Caroline Lucas replace Bennett in some of the TV debates (Boffey 2015). This request was turned down but it is not surprising that Lucas was so prominent in the manifesto. Indeed, the frequent references to her work as an MP not only was an attempt to deflect attention from Bennett's media appearances but also served to highlight the Green Party's record when in actual power, albeit in the form of one seat in the House of Commons.

To give their economic policies more credibility, both parties laid out very detailed and fully costed financial plans for the next parliament, with UKIPs being subject to an independent audit by Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR). Superficially, it seems odd that parties that had little chance of being in a government after the election would expend so much time providing this amount of detail. There is a historical precedent for this in the detail that the Liberals and then the Liberal

Democrats put into their manifestos during the twentieth century, even when the parties were at their lowest ebb. That was because, in the absence of real power, activists were motivated mainly by the chance to develop very detailed policies (Brack 2000: 16). It could also be argued that this also gives the impression that these parties are to be taken seriously, an indication that, despite their self-proclaimed ‘outsider’ status, the UKIP and Green party brands to a certain extent are intended to project ‘responsibility’. This was especially important in relation to economic policy, an issue which gained more media coverage than all other policy issues in this election (Loughborough University 2015a, b). That one of Natalie Bennett’s most disastrous media interviews involved her inability to adequately explain the cost of her party’s housing policy, demonstrated the Green party’s need to be able to articulate their economic policies even when they are not the centrepiece of the manifesto; this could be said to be true of UKIP too. However, this scrutiny of their economic policies was likely to have mainly benefited the party for whom this policy was the most associated, namely the Conservatives.

3 THE 2015 MANIFESTOS AS MINI-CAMPAIGNS AND MEDIA EVENTS

Because they also have a programmatic function, in that they offer a programme of government as well as selling a party’s brand, a key characteristic of UK manifestos has been their growth over time. There has been a four-fold increase in the length of all parties’ manifestos from 1945–59 to 1983–97 (Kavanagh 2000: 5) and the size of the 2015 offerings is likely to have deterred all but the most devoted of political aficionados. Nonetheless, while it could be argued from survey evidence taken during the 2015 election that the electorate is not as well informed about each party’s manifesto as would be expected, a majority of voters recognised the NHS and the economy as being priorities for the Labour Party and the Conservatives, respectively (British Election Study 2015). This suggests that some of the major manifesto commitments of the parties were resonating with a sizeable section of the public. Given the findings of a Loughborough University (2015a, b) study that more than 40% of mainstream media coverage of the 2015 election was devoted to the so-called ‘horse-race’, then how did parties get their message across?

From around the 2001 general election, parties started to reduce the number of, what hitherto had been daily, press conferences, as it was felt

that these benefited journalists more than they did the parties (Gaber 2011: 265). This trend continued into subsequent elections, with the Liberal Democrats being the only leading party to hold one on most days in the 2010 campaign; indeed there was no one day in that campaign where all three of the main parties held a press conference (Gaber 2011: 265). These press conferences were replaced by a smaller number of what might be described as mini-campaigns. The Conservatives were much more advanced in moving towards this model of campaigning in the 2010 election, focusing mainly on ‘manifesto’ or ‘contract’ launches fronted by David Cameron rather than press conferences, of which there were only three (Gaber 2011: 265).

A timeline of the 2015 election shows that it was the Labour Party that appeared to host more of these mini-campaigns. As far back as December 2014, a draft version of its manifesto, *Changing Britain Together*, was launched for public consultation (Labour List 2014). While there seems little difference in policy terms between the two iterations of the manifesto (Labour Party 2014, 2015), this could be considered an effective way of fixing in the public mind its key messages, especially on the deficit, before the official campaign even started. In addition to the launch of its election manifesto on 13 April, the Labour Party unveiled an additional five specialist manifestos as well as, in the last week of the campaign, an election pledge stone (Moore and Ramsay 2015, see Chap. 7 for more detail). The other parties had fewer mini-manifesto launches, but orchestrated or exploited a series of media events at crucial points during the campaign. Thus, the Conservatives benefited from a letter from 100 prominent business figures claiming that a Labour government would be bad for the economy which appeared two days after the latter launched its business manifesto (Moore and Ramsay 2015: 11–12). As only governing parties can do, the Conservatives and, to a lesser extent, the Liberal Democrats were helped by the surely not coincidental timing of ‘pension freedom day’ on 6 April, which completely opened up pensioners’ retirement funds in order to allow them to spend or invest the money in any way they wished (Charles 2015).

Away from these formal launches, there was also a lot of marketing activity taking place online, with the Liberal Democrats and Greens in particular producing many different mini-manifestos to appeal to various demographics. This trend was evident as far back as the 2005 election, when Labour and the Liberal Democrats both produced separate women’s manifestos and this can be an effective means of, in marketing

terms, appealing to different segments of the electorate. The development of and widespread access to broadband in the last 10–15 years has provided a cheap public platform for the hosting of these ancillary materials and the Greens and Liberal Democrats in particular exploited that. But the use of new media technologies can have mixed success, as illustrated by a video that the Liberal Democrats (2015b) produced to criticise the Labour Party’s launch of a separate manifesto for women. Opening with a woman washing-up, this attempt at satire largely failed, especially when it is considered that the Liberal Democrats produced many such discrete manifestos in the election as well as a women’s manifesto in 2005.

Despite all these additional activities, the continuing importance of the launches of the main manifestos was illustrated by the Conservative Party’s decision only days before it was due to take place to change the date of its launch to avoid a clash with the Labour Party’s so that, in its view, each would be subjected to a full-day scrutiny (presumably from the mainly Conservative-supporting press) (ITV 2015).

4 THE WINNING MANIFESTO

Notwithstanding the obvious danger in making an explicit link between the parties’ respective marketing of their manifestos and their performance in the election, I will nonetheless finish with a few observations about the role of political marketing in the 2015 campaign.

The Conservatives concentration on the economy and the deficit was viewed as making for an uninspiring (Kellner 2015) and, up until the exit poll at 10 pm on election night, unsuccessful campaign. But it was an effective campaign, in which the Conservative message was consistent and relentless—55% of its candidates’ tweets were about the economy (Morris 2015: 57)—and the party was helped by a press which was almost overwhelmingly anti-Labour and a mainstream media which devoted one-third of policy discussion on its news programmes to the economy (Morris 2015: 20, 28, 57). The manifestos were part of the process of keeping the economy in the news, as one survey showed mainstream media interest in this policy peaking around the time of their launches (Morris 2015: 46).

The Conservatives’ brand focused, as it has in previous election, on its self-proclaimed economic competence. It defined the debate on the deficit early in the 2010–2015 parliament and, as such, all parties to a greater or lesser degree had to discuss this issue on the Conservatives’ terrain. This, in turn, established economic competence as the most important issue in the

election. The Conservatives were thus able to more convincingly portray its policies as closer to the concerns of the electorate than the other parties. But, my caveat above about being reluctant to link branding and valence explicitly to the election result is reinforced by the observation that the Conservatives' share of the overall vote was only 36.9% (Shephard 2015: 29).

Indeed, there is the intriguing question of whether many people voted for the Conservatives not out of great enthusiasm but in order to prevent a government in which the SNP would hold the balance of power. The fact that 25% of all voters and 38% of those who voted Conservative did not think that the election result gave the party a mandate to eliminate the deficit (The British Election Study Team 2015) suggests that many people went to bed on the night of 7 May with the expectation that the manifesto policies that they voted for would be diluted in coalition negotiations. Claims that there was a significant surge in the membership of the Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party in the week following the election (Beck 2015) might indicate that, while the Conservative manifesto was successful as a marketing product, the programmatic function of putting its mandated policies into legislation is proving to be less popular with a significant section of the public.

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Party Branding: A Case Study of Online Political Posters

Vincent Campbell and Benjamin Lee

Despite claims that the “brand is the key communicative tool of contemporary politics” (Cosgrove 2012: 121), and “constant adjustment of image is why branding *is* now the permanent campaign” (Scammell 2014: 82), the application of branding to politics remains a rather contentious exercise (Lloyd 2005). In the context of debates about the nature and strategic function of political brands, this chapter explores how UK political parties presented their brands in the months leading up to the 2015 General Election, concentrating on *online political posters* (OPPs) as expressions of the core brand campaign messages. OPPs are still images posted openly to parties’ Facebook pages, rather than distributed as targeted online advertising like YouTube videos, for instance. OPPs are similar to national billboard posters (used in British elections for well over a century, but currently in decline) and the window and lawn signs put up by party supporters at the constituency level. Traditional political posters have been argued to have several functions including persuasion (Seidman 2008a: 7; Baines et al. 2011), familiarisation and engagement (Lewis and Masshardt 2002: 401) and establishing a campaign’s presence in particular locations, signifying the strength of the campaign with possible mobilisation consequences

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(Seidman 2008b; Dumitrescu 2011). Like those traditional formats, OPPs provide opportunities for political parties to extend their voter reach, particularly amongst those low engagement and participation voters for whom branding is especially helpful in their typically peripheral processing of political messages (Cacioppo et al. 1986) through the potential for OPPs to be shared by users within their Facebook networks. Moreover, that capacity for users to share content provides parties with opportunities to use existing party supporters online to disseminate party messages for them, a kind of supporter-initiated two-step flow of persuasion and influence (Norris and Curtice 2008). This makes OPPs a potentially good illustration of the gradual transition from traditional transactional marketing and short-term party campaign communication techniques in offline media to more interactive, long-term relationship marketing in online environments.

1 THE PROBLEM OF THE POLITICAL BRAND

In Britain, there is evidence of the application of principles of marketing and branding by British political parties at least as far back as the 1930s (Wring 2004) and some key political figures have had their electoral (and governmental) successes attributed to their adoption of principles and practices of political marketing in general, and branding in particular (such as Tony Blair; see Scammell 2014). Yet:

Branding has been seen to produce unwanted effects such as narrowing the political agenda, increasing confrontation, demanding conformity of behaviour/message and even increasing political disengagement at the local level. (French and Smith 2010: 461)

Even prominent British political campaigners have questioned the applicability of branding to politics, such as Maurice Saatchi's comment that "politics is not a market and a political party is not a brand" (Lees-Marshment 2009: 24). Aside from normative debates about the legitimacy of the use of marketing and branding in politics, the central question rests on the nature of what political brands actually *are* and the appropriate strategies for successful branding. Brands are often associated with and have their roots in information symbols like logos, slogans and even colours used for party/candidate recognition (Lloyd 2006: 59; Scammell 2014: 69). The marketing model attributed to traditional politics has been to view politics as a set of *products* being sold to electorates within what is known as *transactional marketing* (Lilleker and Jackson 2014; Baron et al. 2010).

A key normative criticism of the product-oriented, transactional ideas of political marketing is that, essentially, it is treating politics like selling corn-flakes or soap powder (e.g. Franklin 2004). Pich and Dean argue that this “misjudges the nature of the political brand which comprises complex inter-related components that are both institutional and ideological but embodied in the personal character of the elected members and leadership” (2015: 1353–1354). In practice, branding involves more a complex array of “intangible” components over and above personnel and packaging, such as aspects of reputation and image that emerge through combinations of aspects of presentation and performance (Scammell 2014: 69). Lees-Marshment offers a useful summary:

Branding is about how a political organisation or individual is perceived overall. It is broader than the product; whereas a product has a functional purpose, a brand offers something additional, which is more psychological and less tangible. It is concerned with impressions, images, attitudes and recognition. (Lees-Marshment 2009: 111–112)

Intangible elements, like image, reputation, performance and perception, contribute to the perceived “added value” of a brand (Lloyd 2006: 61). These elements also indicate that politics is arguably more like a *service* than a product, not least in how promises to govern are wrapped up in issues of reputation and performance of figures within political parties (leaders and candidates) (Lloyd 2005: 31–32), and to elements like party ethos that signal how parties might act in future unknown situations. Rather than seeing the emergence of political brands as making politics superficial, all style over substance, therefore, research data indicates that for many voters branding aides the voting decision-making process. As Schneider asserts:

As established, differentiated perceptual images of parties and candidates, political brands facilitate easier information processing for voters, lower the risk of making the wrong decisions and, finally, create sentimental utility through generating feelings of group belonging and identity. (Schneider 2004: 59)

This last potential role of brands is important because it relates to the idea that the marketing of services is not transactional but *relationship* marketing (Lilleker and Jackson 2014; Baron et al. 2010). As Baron et al. state,

the “desired outcomes of relationship marketing efforts of organizations with their customers” are that “customers should be *loyal to*, and have a close affinity with the organization, and even love the organization and what it represents” (2010: 7, emphasis added). The idea of branding for relationship marketing is particularly significant in an era of the emerging “cyber party” (Margetts 2001), a result of a series of changing circumstances for parties including: declining memberships, the growth of single issue political activity, a growing reliance on symbolic actions rather than mass mobilisation and more generalised expectations amongst the public that political support, as with other activities, should be possible online. Evidence increasingly suggests parties “are taking on the characteristics of cyber-parties... mobilised and organized around online rather than offline activities, and building a participatory architecture for supporters” (Lilleker 2015: 123).

Online environments offer political parties comparative freedom and flexibility in communication and campaigning opportunities when compared to traditional media. With paid-for political advertising on broadcast media still banned in Britain, and print media advertising seeing significant decline—to the extent that commentators in the 2015 campaign openly discussed the death of the campaign poster (Wheeler 2015)—online channels offer new opportunities for campaign communication, and for relationship marketing for loyalty building. They offer the promise of:

[...] direct, free and easy involvement (or disengagement); regular updates and information; and active participation from members. This can help generate a sense of ‘*virtual belonging*’ towards the specific online group enhanced also by the possibility of interacting directly with likeminded people from all over the world. (Bartlett et al. 2013: 11–12, emphasis added)

Whilst the participation of the public might be “free,” producing and maintaining online spaces is not free for the parties, and as Lilleker notes, “UK parties have been very tentative in the adoption of web tools” (2015: 118), leaving the “digital campaign” slow to emerge in the UK. Initially, the problem was of the “pull” nature of Web 1.0 outlets, such as party websites needing voters to be already interested and engaged with to seek out information online, leading to such material tending to preach to the converted (Norris 2003). Of course, part of campaigning involves “galvanising the internal market so they can convey the political brand to voters is a crucial component of electoral strategy” (Pich et al. 2014: 4), but

the value of online materials for less engaged voters—the kinds of voters branding serves particularly well—has been rather minimal, especially when compared to the more traditional avenues such as party election broadcasts (PEBs) and billboards, which at least offered the potential for accidental exposure to political messages. The rise of social media networks like Facebook in the Web 2.0 era, however, has seen opportunities for serendipity online increase significantly (Chadwick 2009; Kim et al. 2013; Tang and Lee 2013), providing the potential for party communication to address existing, prospective and even unwitting supporters—who may support a viewpoint that they might not have been aware was shared by a party. As Lilleker and Jackson recognise:

[...] from a branding perspective, if the political organization can build relationships with prospective supporters, and convert them into activists, there are two potential new routes to increasing partisan attachments: a direct route through interaction with the organization as well as an indirect route with activists recruiting further supporters through their social networks. (2014: 167)

Applied effectively, parties can use online channels to move people up the so-called “political loyalty ladder” from a prospective supporter at the bottom all the way up to party activist at the top (ibid: 170). Numbers of followers of parties’ Facebook pages in the UK were exceeding numbers of party members and reaching into the hundreds of thousands for some parties by the 2015 General Election (Wilkinson 2015), so the potential reach of OPP branding amongst supporters was significant, even if the relative weight and utility of numbers of Facebook followers is not a particularly strong measure of wider party support.

To illustrate these issues this chapter concentrates on OPPs as one specific form of party political campaign content disseminated via social media where issues of branding are at the forefront. Amongst the plethora of online content parties produce, OPPs have quietly become a routine part of party communication online, attracting only occasional mainstream media attention¹ but combining the functions of traditional

¹In March 2014, Conservative Chairman Grant Shapps placed an OPP on Twitter attempting to trumpet the impact of the recent Budget on the price of beer and bingo. Described variously as an advert or infographic, it generated a ‘Twitter Storm’ as users saw it as revealing Conservative Party’s stereotypical views of working class interests (*Guardian* 2014).

posters in enabling accidental exposure for low engagement voters with the potential capabilities of social media dissemination by party supporters enabling potential two-step flow persuasion and influence.

The data utilised here comes from a longitudinal content analysis of the use of OPPs on the party Facebook pages of seven British political parties covering the period between September 2013 and May 2015. Whilst the data presented here is only that from the official campaign period of the General Election, it is important to note that, aside from a few days across the Christmas holiday periods of 2013 and 2014, the parties produced a continual background trickle of OPPs long before the start of the official campaign, supporting the notion of the permanent campaign (Scammell 2014: 82). A total of 1285 OPPs were produced from the start of the long campaign (December 19, 2014 to May 8, 2015), with 837 of these produced from the start of the short campaign (March 30 to May 8), showing how that trickle became a flood by the time of the General Election campaign.² Whilst the handful of PEBs and billboard posters might reach bigger audiences on a per PEB/poster basis, the routine production of such large numbers of OPPs suggests these are potentially an ever more important tool in party branding strategies. The results presented here concentrate on the significance of OPPs as a tool for disseminating brand messages to citizens with low interest in politics.

2 FINDINGS

The first table presents the number and distribution of OPPs produced by the political parties during the election campaign (see Table 4.1). Initially, the distribution suggests a more transactional than relational approach, with increasing OPPs as polling day approached.

By far the biggest producer of OPPs was the Labour Party, multiple times the number produced by either of the Coalition partners, particularly the Liberal Democrats who had the smallest number of OPPs of any party. The smallest party in terms of party membership, Plaid Cymru, was the second highest producer of OPPs (albeit concentrated into a few days of releases of multiple batches of OPPs), and the other “minor” parties all produced significant numbers, well ahead of the Liberal Democrats, and

²The campaign periods were defined by the Electoral Commission: http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/173074/UKPGE-Part-3-Spending-and-donations.pdf.

Table 4.1 Parties' online political poster production over time (no. and row %)

	<i>December</i>		<i>January</i>		<i>February</i>		<i>March</i>		<i>April</i>		<i>May</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>(%)^a</i>		<i>(%)</i>		<i>(%)</i>		<i>(%)</i>		<i>(%)</i>		<i>(%)^b</i>		
Conservative	0	0.0	5	3.6	10	7.2	27	19.6	61	44.2	35	25.4	138
Labour	9	1.7	40	7.6	53	10.1	105	20.1	251	48.0	65	12.4	523
Liberal Democrat	1	1.6	7	10.9	11	17.2	8	12.5	9	14.1	28	43.8	64
UKIP	0	0.0	5	5.6	11	12.2	20	22.2	30	33.3	24	26.7	90
Green	0	0.0	7	6.5	11	10.2	28	25.9	46	42.6	16	14.8	108
SNP	0	0.0	16	18.0	17	19.1	15	16.9	35	39.3	6	6.7	89
Plaid Cymru	1	0.4	38	13.	16	5.9	16	5.9	172	63.0	30	11.0	273
Total	11	0.9	118	9.2	129	10.0	219	17.0	604	47.0	204	15.9	1285

^aDecember 19, 2014–December 31, 2014

^bMay 1, 2015–May 8, 2015

not far behind the Conservatives in total numbers, and able to produce OPPs at least daily during the peak weeks just before polling.

OPPs took a variety of forms across the campaign. At one end of the spectrum were reproductions of party billboard posters, such as a Conservative poster depicting Ed Miliband in Alex Salmond's pocket (March 9). Variations in historical billboards were used by many parties, including the image of a queue of people from the 1979 "Labour isn't working" Conservative campaign, being appropriated by Labour to reference waiting lists with the slogan "The doctor can't see you now" (April 7) and by the Greens under the slogan "Austerity isn't working" (April 22). Another old Conservative image, "Labour's tax bombshell" slogan from the 1992 campaign, was reworked as an "establishment tax bombshell" relating to spending on Trident by the Greens (April 9), and by the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) to comment on "Cameron's immigration bombshell" (April 11).

At the other end of the spectrum were OPPs that consisted of a purely textual message. Text-only OPPs were particularly used by Labour (accounting for 40.4% of all their OPPs, compared to 26.1% across all OPPs), and some of these followed a pattern stretching back well before the campaign started, featuring quotations from party supporters explaining "Why I'm Labour" (e.g. May 6)—an apparent instance of attempts to integrate the more typical transactional nature of political posters with the relationship-building potential of social media by making OPPs out of party supporters' statements.

Just under three-quarters (73.9%) of all OPPs featured a combination of text and images, however, with just under half (48.0%) featuring a photograph alongside some text. Quite a variation in styles and formats was used, but a particularly common approach was to include an image of a prominent party figure (often the party leader, see section below), alongside a simple statement or quotation. Just over two-thirds of OPPs (69.2%) were factual statements relating to policy positions, although these varied a lot in terms of their specificity. Statements such as “Building a Britain where everyone who works hard can own a home of their own” (Conservative Party, March 3), “Help young people with eating disorders” (Lib Dem, May 5) and “We offer a real alternative to the drab Tory-Labour cuts consensus in Westminster” (Scottish National Party (SNP), April 2) illustrate how OPPs tended to have messages broadly focused on policy themes. Sometimes OPPs presented lists of multiple policy areas (e.g. UKIP, May 3), however, or used infographic-style charts and tables, such as economic performance indicators (e.g. Conservative Party, March 6). Just under a quarter (23.8%) focused more on wider party values like the “Why I’m Labour” OPPs, and the remainder (6.9%) focused on specific events like party conferences, rallies and media appearances. Overall though, the predominant designs and focus of OPPs are suggestive of a more transactional role, providing simple heuristic guides for potential voters.

The OPPs were coded for the explicit presence or absence of party brand identifiers, identified in simple terms as the presence of the party logo, party name or recognisable party figure (like the party leader). In combination with coding for the orientation of OPP messages, the data on branding is shown in Table 4.2.

Overall, over four in five OPPs contained party branding identifiers. The emphasis on producing clearly branded images, combined with a predominance of positively oriented messages in over two-thirds of OPPs, is evidence that party messages tend to be more positive the more control a party has over them (Vliegenthart 2012), and perhaps relating to efforts at awareness raising for less engaged voters. The table reveals a particularly interesting finding where the negative orientation of OPPs increased in five of the seven parties when their OPPs were unbranded, and in four cases negatively oriented unbranded OPPs were in the majority. Attacking opponents through unbranded OPPs might have been thought to have potentially enhanced the chances of them to be more widely liked and shared by low engagement voters less aware of the original source of the attack. The two main parties, Labour and the

Table 4.2 Branding and orientation of online political posters by party (row %)

<i>Party</i>	<i>Branding</i>		<i>Orientation^a</i>					
	<i>% of OPPs</i>		<i>% of Branded OPPs</i>		<i>% of Unbranded OPPs</i>		<i>% of all OPPs</i>	
	<i>Branded</i>	<i>Unbranded</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Conservative	77.5	22.5	75.7	11.2	9.7	83.9	60.9	27.5
Labour	73.6	26.4	75.5	15.9	35.5	55.1	64.9	26.2
Liberal Democrat	93.8	6.3	81.7	11.7	25	75	78.1	15.6
UKIP	92.2	7.8	69.9	18.1	57.1	28.6	68.9	18.9
Green	88.9	11.1	68.8	16.7	50	0	66.7	14.8
SNP	92.1	7.9	80.5	12.2	28.6	57.1	76.4	15.7
Plaid Cymru	97	3	74.1	11.4	100	0	74.9	11.1
Total	83.9	16.1	74.9	14	35.3	53.6	68.5	20.4

^aExcluding OPPs coded as not having either positive or negative orientation = 11.1% of all OPPs

Conservatives, in particular, used a noticeable proportion of unbranded and negatively oriented ads, and when they did this not only were brand identifiers often left off, but the colour schemes of their OPPs shifted to match their targets, so Conservative OPPs attacking Labour were often coloured red (e.g. March 25) and Labour OPPs attacking the Conservatives were coloured blue (e.g. March 28). Unbranded attacks might also allow something of a separation between the typically more aggressive and confrontational transactional appeals from the more positive, and relationship-oriented, branded OPPs that dominated overall.

More generally, all parties offered at least some negatively oriented OPPs, sometimes focused on opposition to policies, sometimes parties, sometimes specific rival politicians. The Green Party's PEB presented the major parties (and UKIP) as a kind of boyband, literally singing "the same old tune," which had generated some commentary and 775,000 online views by the end of April (Wilkinson 2015). The related #changethe-tune hashtag featured in their OPPs as well, so an apparent absence of unbranded negative OPPs from the Greens wasn't an indication of a lack of negative attacks on their part, it's just that they were, like UKIP similarly, more willing to make openly branded attacks than the other parties.

A final feature to mention in relation to aspects of branding and orientation is the frequency of appearances by prominent party figures in OPPs.

The value of focusing on particular political figures, especially the party leaders, within the top-level “house” brand (Cosgrove 2012: 108) of the party was evident in their prominence in party OPPs despite many candidates and party leaders having their own social media pages. Just over one in three of all OPPs featured a prominent political figure of some kind (34.5%). For UKIP (54.4%) and the SNP (53.9%), using political personalities was a dominant strategy, and made sense given the recognition factor for their leaders (Nigel Farage and Nicola Sturgeon, respectively). By comparison, Plaid Cymru featured political figures less frequently, in exactly a third of their OPPs (33.3%), however, given the significant number of OPPs produced by the party, the presence of party leader Leanne Wood was pretty much a routine, daily occurrence, trying to build on a level of exposure Wood and Plaid had not experienced before by being included in the main televised debates, even producing OPP illustrations of Wood akin to the famous Obama “Hope” poster (e.g. April 30). The Greens, on the other hand, featured political figures comparatively infrequently in 24.1% of their OPPs split mainly between leader Natalie Bennett and the party’s only incumbent MP Caroline Lucas. Of the big three parties, the recognition factor of leaders and senior party figures was something of a double-edged sword—none of the leaders having gone into the election with positive public opinion ratings. Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats in particular, having been such a key figure in the party’s success in the 2010 election campaign, was perhaps much more a liability this time around after broken election pledges made as part of the Coalition government, and Clegg as well as other senior party figures were predominantly absent, featuring in only around one-seventh (14.1%) of their OPPs. Like Plaid Cymru, although Labour politicians featured in under a third of their OPPs (29.8%), the sheer volume of OPPs produced ensured that large numbers featuring politicians did appear. Mostly they focused on leader Ed Miliband, though of all the parties there was a bit more of a presence of some of the other senior figures (like Ed Balls). Similarly, though proportionately more so in just under half of their OPPs (46.4%), the Conservatives also featured a few senior figures on occasion alongside leader David Cameron, such as Chancellor George Osborne. Both Labour and the Conservatives were predominantly focused on opposition personalities when their OPPs went on the attack, such that figures like Cameron, Osborne, Miliband and Balls were often regularly depicted in opposition party OPPs.

A distinctive feature of OPPs was the range of appeals they made. Unlike traditional posters, limited to explicit or implicit transactional appeals to

vote for the party, OPPs contained an intriguing variety of appeals, as revealed by the data in Table 4.3.

The principle transactional appeal—to vote for the party—featured in just over a quarter of all OPPs, though this ranged between the parties from barely a tenth of Plaid Cymru OPPs to almost two-thirds of SNP OPPs, and was not the most prominent type of appeal. Appeals ranged across a variety of relationship activities, varying from relatively low engagement activities such as sharing OPPs, visiting other online resources (like party websites) and being directed to watch/listen to party media appearances (such as the televised debates or radio interviews). Higher engagement activities such as attending public events (such as rallies), donating to and joining (and/or volunteering for) a party, featured but only marginally. In terms of the idea of the “political loyalty ladder” it seems that many OPPs for those parties where sharing was the most prominent type of appeal (the Labour Party, the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the Greens) were arguably aimed at quite a range of audiences, from low engagement unwitting/accidental supporters through to more aware party “evangelists.” UKIP focused more clearly on “information seekers” in routinely directing users to their website in almost half of their OPPs, perhaps appropriate as a relatively new party. Only the Greens offered a notable proportion of appeals to join the party, reflective of their recruitment success that became a news event during the campaign itself (linked to their initial exclusion from the televised debates). In general though, the appeals in OPPs during the election campaign were predominantly focused on low engagement, low mobilisation activities that would seem to support ideas of some forms of political branding in social media being used for long-term relationship marketing strategies, to try to enhance the loyalty of latent supporters found in online environments.

Tracking the success or otherwise of this range of appeals is beyond the scope of this study but some indicators of the success or failure of the low mobilisation online engagement activities are available through tracking the “likes” and “shares” OPPs received. When a user “shared” an OPP, it would appear on the pages of the people the user selected to share the image with, whilst “liking” an OPP would signal interest to a user’s friends (depending on their profile settings and Facebook’s internal algorithms). In both senses these acts mobilise users to act as online evangelists, sharing information with their friend networks, hopefully reaching beyond party supporters with serendipitous reach to the wider electorate, and potentially then having images repeatedly shared and passed on from one group

Table 4.3 Mobilising appeals in online political posters by party (no. and column %)

	Con (%)	Lab (%)	LD (%)	UKIP (%)	Green (%)	SNP (%)	PC (%)	Total (%)								
Share	22	12.2	58.7	19	29.7	24	26.7	50	46.3	67	75.3	191	70.0	680	52.9	
Vote	51	37.0	24.9	24	37.5	20	22.2	42	38.9	57	64.0	33	12.1	357	27.8	
Online	0	11.2	66	12.6	1	1.6	44	48.9	17	15.7	3	3.4	4	1.5	135	10.5
Join	0	0.0	18	3.4	1	1.6	0	0.0	11	10.2	3	3.4	3	1.1	36	2.8
Media	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.8	9	10.0	1	0.9	6	6.7	9	3.3	25	1.9
Event	0	0.0	3	0.6	0	0.0	1	1.1	8	7.4	1	1.1	11	4.0	24	1.9
Donate	0	0.0	3	0.6	0	0.5	0	0.0	9	8.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	12	0.9

to another. Our data indicates, however, that OPPs in the vast majority of cases failed to achieve much evangelism, as shown in Table 4.4.³ Across the campaign as a whole OPPs were liked a total of 2,924,362 times and shared 1,108,791 times, suggesting that they were *collectively* seen by significant numbers of people. However, our data suggests that in terms of *individual* OPPs' reach, this was far more modest.

Of only 16 OPPs achieving more than 20,000 likes, 11 were from UKIP, 3 from the Greens and 2 Conservative. Nine were produced on either polling day or May 8, including the most liked OPP of all, produced on polling day featuring an image of the Union flag with the Conservative logo and the slogan "thanks for voting Conservative" on it. In terms of shares, only 6 OPPs received more than 10,000 shares, 3 from UKIP, 2 from the Greens, and the most shared image being from Labour, again on polling day, featuring a simple ballot box image with the slogan "Today's the day I'm voting Labour." Seven of the top 10 most liked OPPs and four of the top 10 most shared OPPs were also distributed on either May 7 or 8. Although the two main parties achieved the most liked and most shared individual OPPs, smaller parties appeared to compete far more effectively in these regards, particularly UKIP with significantly higher means for both likes and shares than the other parties. Apart from two Conservative OPPs that weren't shared at all, only Plaid Cymru had OPPs that weren't liked (67 without likes) or shared (130 without shares) even once. Even for the parties achieving likes and shares, the comparative lack of larger scale dissemination of OPPs suggest that relational efforts to get Facebook followers to evangelise and spread the brand were not particularly successful, occurring mostly as a statement to show that they had voted for their preferred party, or expressed a response to the result. Likes and shares remained consistent regardless of variations in aspects such as focus, orientation, design, personality and branding, showing no clear patterns of OPP content impacting on like-ability or share-ability (although the handful of OPPs liked more than 20,000 times or shared more than 10,000 times were all branded). The presence of appeals to share also seemed unrelated to the proportions of likes or shares as well, with no pattern of greater shares or likes occurring where such appeals

³ Likes and Shares were measured after 3 days per OPP, following research which suggests that social media posts typically have a 'half-life' around three days with likes and shares rarely exceeding numbers achieved in the first 3 days: <http://blog.bitly.com/post/9887686919/you-just-shared-a-link-how-long-will-people-pay>.

Table 4.4 OPP likes and shares by party

<i>Party</i>		<i>Range (row %)</i>					<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>
		<i>0–100</i>	<i>101–1000</i>	<i>1001–5000</i>	<i>5001–10,000</i>	<i>10,001+</i>		
Conservative	Likes	7.2	5.8	66.7	15.9	4.3	57,491	3925
	Shares	11.6	40.6	44.2	3.6	0	8853	1267
Labour	Likes	1.5	42.1	53.1	2.5	0.8	14,292	1574
	Shares	6.3	67.2	23.9	2.3	0.2	18,503	916
Liberal Democrat	Likes	17.2	78.1	4.7	0	0	2200	338
	Shares	54.7	45.3	0	0	0	908	124
UKIP	Likes	0	5.6	26.7	32.2	35.6	46,880	9696
	Shares	3.3	25.6	58.9	8.9	3.3	14,479	2451
Green	Likes	0	20.4	63	10.2	6.5	36,169	3700
	Shares	7.4	49.1	38	3.7	1.9	14,771	1425
SNP	Likes	5.6	5.6	74.2	14.6	0	9117	2832
	Shares	6.7	62.9	30.3	0	0	2695	780
Plaid Cymru	Likes	83.9	15.8	0.4	0	0	692	55
	Shares	97.4	2.6	0	0	0	384	14
All	Likes	20.5	27.5	41.4	6.9	3.8	57,491	2278
	Shares	28.6	44.8	23.9	2.3	0.5	18,503	864

were present (and no apparent evidence of any outlier like/share figures that might signal effective party efforts at boosting these through marketing spend).

3 CONCLUSION

Our preliminary analysis of OPP production in the 2015 British General Election reveals some interesting issues for questions of political brand management online. Parties clearly have significantly occupied social media spaces with content like OPPs, but in terms of their role in party campaign communication, the consequences of that virtual presence are difficult to evaluate. The saturation strategies of Labour and Plaid Cymru—producing lots of OPPs almost every day of the campaign, and sometimes one every few hours—may have compromised the potential for individual OPPs to be distributed widely, as the screen life of each OPP was relatively short, though it might have maximised the potential for accidental exposure to OPPs overall through ensuring a continual presence towards the top of users' newsfeeds (as Facebook's newsfeed algorithms preference newer content). UKIP and the Greens with an approach of rarely more than a

couple of images per campaign day on average seemed to be more successful in gaining traction with their OPPs. This may suggest that there is a fine balance between attempting to occupy a social media space to signal party strength through virtual presence of the party brand online (akin to the presence evident through local community posters) and not maximising the potential reach and visibility of images so that they become like the memorable billboards of old. On the other hand, the extent to which OPPs are geared towards internal brand management, being directed at party supporters as well as to a wider audience of potential supporters, might suggest that the extent of liking and sharing of OPPs is not the only measure of relative success as, in the acts of liking and sharing themselves, party supporters arguably position themselves a little closer to the party, and move a little further up the loyalty ladder. Even when only a few hundred or few thousand people liked or shared OPPs, these low engagement acts may signal to a party people with potential to become more fully active in future (as well as providing parties with useful data on those users). After May 8, several parties experienced significant membership increases; within a week, for instance, the Liberal Democrats had gained around 10,000 new members, and Labour almost 30,000 (Perraudin 2015). The handful of OPPs produced in the week after the election tended to make appeals to join the party, and whilst there's unlikely to be any clear causal relationship between such OPPs and people joining parties, the increasing familiarity with political messages and political appeals within social media, as well as means of engaging in party political activities via social media as well, may be indicative of a genuine shift in the relationship between British political parties and the electorate. OPPs are clearly now both an alternative channel for the kinds of transactional marketing directed at low engagement voters like their print-based antecedents and also a channel for a more relational form of party branding through supporter-initiated two-step flow persuasion and influence, warranting further study.

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Political Party Advertising and Marketing Strategies in the 2015 UK Election

Janine Dermody

1 CORE CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON THE CAMPAIGN MESSAGES

Each election has its unique circumstances that influence the design and execution of each party's campaign strategy. The introduction to this book presents this electoral landscape. However, there are two issues noteworthy of consideration here because they significantly influenced the advertising campaigns. These are technology integration and the mood of the nation.

For the first time strategically integrated and digitally advanced messages were proffered by the major political parties across media channels, particularly from the Conservatives. However, this digital innovation was compromised by the narrow targeting of messages to marginal seats that rendered the parties election ad messages invisible for a significant proportion of the electorate (Dermody 2015).

The nation's mood was extensively influenced by the size of the country's debt, the fragility of Britain's economic recovery and job opportunities and austerity measures resulting in major cuts to public services. Tension and fear were evident among the less economically advantaged,

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with a greater gap between rich and poor during the lifetime of the previous parliament. Immigration, whilst being highly politically sensitive, did not dominate public consciousness so strongly. Where an anti-immigration sentiment did exist, this correlated with perceived limited job opportunities and inadequate and/or unequal access to public services. The economy therefore had to be central to the major parties' election communication.

Within this landscape, the parties needed to gauge how best to strategically present their messages—using positivity to build hope or negativity to engender fear. Before presenting the campaigns, a synopsis of research on positive and negative attack advertising is given to inform analysis of the parties advertising messages.

2 A CRITICAL SYNOPSIS OF THE PERSUASIVENESS OF NEGATIVE ATTACK VERSUS POSITIVE ELECTION ADVERTISING MESSAGES

2.1 *The Persuasiveness of Negative Attack Ad Messages*

There is an evidence-rich case for the persuasive power of negative attack political ads (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 2011; Franz and Ridout 2007, 2010; Ruiter et al. 2014). This originates from research signalling that disliking a party influences voting decision-making attitudes and voter behaviour more strongly than liking (Dermody and Scullion 2001), particularly for individual impression formation and evaluative decision-making. Thus negative messages, particularly personality attack ads, influence the electorate to judge attacked candidates to be less well-qualified, successful, honest, serious, sincere and more financially irresponsible. Accordingly attack ads are deemed to be more persuasive than positive ad messages, and win elections.

Using attack rhetoric illuminates and strengthens the 'cognitive footprint' of these ad messages because it increases their visibility and accessibility to become more memorable and comprehensible. Consequently the informative and motivating characteristics of attack messages engage the electorate, expanding voter turnout (Brader 2005; Carraro et al. 2010; Finkel and Geer 1998; Geer and Geer 2003; Martin 2004). However, these cognitively engaging effects are statistically weak and require circumspection. Additionally attack ads are powerful in arousing emotions

(Brader 2006; Westen 2007), thereby motivating voting intention, particularly when emotions are positive; for example, partisans' happiness that the negative ads have highlighted 'lies' from opposing leaders or parties; and non-partisans satisfaction that the negative ads have identified weaknesses with a party's policies or character of a leader. For non-partisans, attack ads can justify and facilitate their choice of alternative party or leader, thereby easing their voting decision-making (Dermody et al. 2014). Attack ads must be 'evidence-based', however, or risk a backlash effect entailing voting for the opposition because of anger towards the sponsor's unsubstantiated and personal attacks on leaders or candidates.

In contrast, alternative studies on attack advertising indicate it increases political negativity, voter alienation and the ignominy of political argument, triggering a democratic deficit—a significant decline in participation and democratic accountability (Ansolabehere et al. 1999; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Kahn and Kenney 1999; Kaid and Johnston 2001; Schenck-Hamlin et al. 2000; Stevens 2009). This is because attack advertising contributes to increasing political cynicism, declining political trust and reduced personal political efficacy and a lack of hope for the future (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 2011; Dermody et al. 2014; Schenck-Hamlin et al. 2000). These effects are further exacerbated by the permanent campaign. Overall an avoidance mindset is created where candidates are perceived to be undeserving of office, and the political system is rejected because it contains unworthy and untrustworthy leaders. While this evidence has been accused of being overly dramatic, the demobilising effects of attack ads and the mobilising effects of positive election ads are confirmed.

2.2 *The Influence of Positive Election Ad Messages*

Research on the positive effects of political advertising advances understanding in two areas: candidate evaluation and political motivation (Brader 2006; Carraro et al. 2010; Matthews and Dietz-Uhler 1998; Westen 2007).

The findings on candidate evaluation focus on candidate likeability and competence. With respect to likeability of candidates, individuals have been found to feel closer to politicians utilising positive self-promotion messages not negative ones aiming to undermine opponents. Regarding competence, candidates who employ negative advertising campaigns and not positive ones are judged to have higher competence, but are less likeable. As a consequence, these candidates are perceived to be more powerful and agentic,

but unfriendly compared with candidates articulating positive messages. Interestingly studies show explicit dislike of politicians who extensively use negative messages; however, such candidates would still receive voting support. This is not a contradiction; voters are implicitly evaluating candidates' aptitude to govern versus their positive human characteristics. Essentially political leaders must be politically competent, but it is not critical for them to be liked; a combination of the two, however, is compelling.

Studies on political motivation show that individuals' political enthusiasm can be stimulated by the neuropsychological effect of exposure to positive ads portraying success. This can increase eagerness to vote and enhance interest in the election campaign. Furthermore, these ads not only motivate those already interested and involved in politics, but also facilitate some degree of universal mobilisation. Accordingly researchers conclude that positive ads are influential in stimulating political involvement because they connect with the electorates' and politicians' hopes and ambitions for the future of their country and the stewardship of leaders who are competent (and liked). Overall then, the strength of positive election advertising is its capacity to create a sense of optimism and trust and stimulate electoral participation.

3 THE CONSERVATIVE 2015 ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

The Conservatives proved themselves to be the masters of election marketing in 2015. Their campaign was described as one of the most *'disciplined, focused and ruthless campaign in the history of British politics'* (Swinford 2015). The Conservatives built their election strategy on five critical issues: the threat to Britain and the economy with a Scottish National Party (SNP) Labour 'alliance'; the merits of the Conservative long-term economic plan; utilising the positive persona of their leader David Cameron; ruthlessly attacking the Liberal Democrats; and relentlessly sticking to their strategic election marketing plan. Hence, for M&C Saatchi, the Conservative's ad agency, the strategic role of the advertising was to energise Conservative voters to vote Conservative and persuade floating voters that voting for any other party was an unacceptable risk. To this end, the targeted advertising audience was voters in marginal seats and the media (influencing a largely partisan press and the more independent broadcasters to set the terms of the debate) (Sinclair 2015). The agency used data from YouGov and Ipsos MORI between 2014 and 2015 to inform their advertising messages and base them on 'fact'. This factual

evidence reported who the public trusted the most with the economy and who would be the most capable Prime Minister; on both questions, David Cameron was the outright winner (Sinclair 2015). Combining this evidence with the five critical issues of the overarching communication strategy, the foundations of the advertising campaign were established.

Accordingly, the Conservative advertising focused on conveying the threat of Labour sneaking to power with the support of the SNP. Labour would then become a puppet government as the SNP extracted ‘payback’ in advancing the interests of Scotland (embedding the suggestion this would be at the expense of the needs of England). This message was constantly and ruthlessly repeated across all their campaigning platforms as they effectively established this media agenda in-line with their ad strategy and motivated Conservative partisans and swing voters that this risk was too great and thus actively voting Conservative was critical. M&C Saatchi believe posters are an effective platform for negative attacks against the opposition (Sinclair 2015) and the perceived SNP threat enabled them to generate a series of attack ads designed to persuade their audience of the reality of this danger by manipulating their latent fears. Hence, in personality attacks on Labour leader Ed Miliband, a succession of Conservative poster and digital ads featured Miliband trapped in the pocket of the SNP—waiting to do their bidding and as a puppet dancing to the tune of Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon. The argument that this message generated was widely considered to be a decisive factor in Ed Miliband’s declining popularity and Labour losing the election.

The Conservative’s record on the economy was fundamental to their communication strategy. On the advice of political advisor—Jim Messina—they daily asserted that they were the party with the long-term plan for effective economic recovery; stating Labour did wreck the economy and would crash it again. Thus their digital ads proclaimed: *‘A recovering economy: don’t let Labour wreck it’*, with Labour personified by demolition machines. These policy-attack ads featured no voiceover, simply the message and the crash of the demolition ball. The credibility of the Conservatives message was underpinned by stronger economic growth compared with other G7 nations. In an earlier related economy ad that focused on the Conservatives, Cameron declared the country needed to stay on the road to stronger economic growth. *‘Let’s stay on the road to a stronger economy’* featured the greatness of Britain (symbolised by the Union Jack flag) on a gently undulating road back to prosperity (symbolised by a lush green landscape personifying England, albeit the road was

in Germany). All the economy advertising rhetoric featured an upbeat David Cameron displaying his energy and belief in himself and his party to succeed in making Britain's economy strong again. Hence this advertising entailed a mix of message styles: negative messages that attacked Miliband and Labour and positive messages praising themselves for their ongoing economic successes and their fortitude in seeing a difficult job done. As discussed within the Labour campaign below, both the economy and the SNP were major failures of Labour's election marketing campaign.

Unlike Labour, who were essentially unable to use their leader to front their communication in this election and the two previous general elections (2005 and 2010), the Conservatives had a very valuable asset in David Cameron. They realised he was far more popular with the electorate than the party itself, hence he featured across the entirety of their election marketing campaign. Compounding this strength, the message he continually gave was that he, as the leader of the Conservatives, could be trusted with economic recovery and easing the burden on families (thus also stealing ground from Labour). Hence, even within an inherently attacking message, David Cameron provided the positive element of the message that said 'You can trust ME'. This combination of positivity and negativity throughout the advertising and wider communication messages was a highly potent strategy. Furthermore, because they used digital technology so effectively, for example, the symbiotic interaction of their ad messages in election campaign films, across social media, interactive websites, etc, the power of the Conservatives messages was enhanced considerably. The flexibility provided by digital technology also meant that the Cameron asset remained strong. For example, when opinion polls showed he was less 'emotional' compared with Ed Miliband, his message style was rapidly revised to portray his political passion, which increased positive public opinion. This is supported by neurological research from Neuro-Insight on the first Conservative and Labour PEBs (Andrew 2015). The Conservatives' first party election broadcast (PEB)—*'securing a better future for you, your future and Britain'*—featured positive messages on Conservative policy to decrease the deficit and invest in jobs, the National Health Service (NHS), education, the state pension and homebuilding. Including David Cameron near the end of the broadcast to confirm the centrality of these policies to HIMSELF and HIS Conservative party's aspirations enabled the electorate to see David Cameron as the principled man and natural leader, not just as the politician. Viewers' subconscious responses in the Neuro-Insight study signalled that the Cameron content

of the PEB was an emotional highpoint and highly memorable, as well as affirming his leadership qualities; whilst party-policy messages in the broadcast held less conviction for viewers (Andrew 2015).

With such a powerful advantage, it is not surprising that this production format continued into their second and third PEBs, with Cameron presenting HIS positive messages about security under HIS Conservatives. However, in the third PEB, a more negative message nuance was introduced to alert audiences to the risk to economic security if Labour was elected. While the fourth and final PEB, broadcast 2 days before the election day still featured a sincere and confident David Cameron, his message had become much more negative in highlighting the severe risk to the economy and thus jobs, the NHS and security if any other party was elected. It was only then other parties were considered alongside Labour. However, the main focus remained the threat of an SNP-backed Ed Miliband and Labour wrecking the economy, which was personified by the smashing of the economic clock of debt elimination and recovery. Thus this PEB also connected with their digital ads: *'a recovering economy—don't let Labour wreck it'*; *'staying on the road to a stronger economy'* and Ed Miliband as a puppet of the SNP. The final seconds of this PEB showed a wistfully smiling Cameron quietly reasoning with audiences to vote Conservative at the election to enable HIM to secure THEIR future.

No other party used digital marketing as strategically or successfully as the Conservatives did (Elder and Edmonds 2015). Alongside this, it also appeared that Conservative strategists and activists used a 'branded content' approach to de-market Labour leader Ed Miliband to the electorate, with unflattering and embarrassing 'incidents' posted across all Tory partisan channels. Their extensive marketing budget meant they could use multiple channels, and particularly digital platforms, to strategically pitch their messages and respond immediately to election issues as they unfolded. This gave them a strategic advantage in conveying their leader and policies, because of the simplicity of messages facilitated by advertising, in contrast to the 'clutter' of TV interviews, debates and newspaper coverage that can detract from message processing and adoption.

Overall, under the direction of their chief strategist, Lynton Crosby, the Conservatives stuck to their election campaign strategy, using minor adjustments to enhance their impact and used the full extent of media communication power to discredit Labour and Ed Miliband, who they saw as their strongest opponent. They largely ignored the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and saw the Liberal Democrats as a minor player—successfully

‘stealing’ seats from them via their wider marketing campaign. Interestingly then, as the election drew close and commentators and opposing party leaders spoke of panic within the Conservative election strategy team, insiders maintained there was no panic, the Conservative team remained very confident that they were going to win the election (Sinclair 2015).

4 THE LABOUR 2015 ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

Labour’s election strategy rotated around five primary issues: the deficit, reducing immigration, safeguarding the future of the NHS, increasing living standards and improving the future for young people. Within this, Labour positioned itself as representing the needs and aspirations of hard-working British families hit by the austerity measures implemented by the coalition government. Thus their messages focused on boosting the economy, reducing economic cuts and protecting public services, for example, the NHS. This message emphasis was evident in both their poster and PEB advertising as well as in other elements of their marketing campaign. In January 2015 Douglas Alexander stated the ad posters would focus on ‘positive messages of hope’, rather than the typically negative messages epitomised in most posters. However, their first official election ad poster—*‘Next time they’ll cut to the bone’*—created by their agency Beattie, McGuinness and Bungay (famous for their controversial campaigns), was a policy attack ad against the Conservatives. Designed to personify that Conservative cuts to public services would be extremely severe, the bones imagery symbolised the NHS was at utmost risk from Conservative ‘bone deep’ spending cuts. Similar ads were designed to convey the threat to public services and the NHS under a Conservative-led government, for example their ad *‘The doctor can’t see you now’*, which was a parody of the 1979 Conservative ad *‘Labour isn’t working’*. Additionally, Labour’s digital ad *‘Are you watching closely’* was a personal attack on David Cameron. This ad accused Cameron of his intention to hide behind the other leaders in the debate because *‘his government’s record is not very good’*. Set against the background of Westminster, the bullet-style presentation of this message in the ad using bold-style red text, rather than vocalisation, and a fast-paced music and drum beat, gave their message the interactivity badly missing in their poster advertising. The ad ends with Labour’s unifying proposition of *‘a better plan’* embedded in their advertising: *‘Labour has a better plan. We don’t need to hide it.’* While this ad enabled this message to be presented in a brutally simple

way, as commentators and digital strategists observed, Labour's strategy in ensuring their digital messages reached key audiences was limited (Elder and Edmonds 2015; posted YouTube comments on the ad 2015). This is likely to be partially the result of their very limited marketing budget (compared with the Conservatives), and thus the courting of TV and press media to deliver their negative election messages. However, Labour also appeared to misunderstand the targeting opportunities that social media offers, and thus they underplayed their strategic use of it in focusing their election ad messages (Elder and Edmonds 2015).

A Conservative policy-attack approach was also taken in four out of the Labour's five PEBs, with the overarching message *'this is a choice between the Conservatives failing plan and Labour's better plan. A better future'*. With three of them featuring celebrities and one historical-current day reminiscences, these PEBs focused on Labour protecting the NHS, raising living standards and giving a better future for youth. No mention was made of Ed Miliband; these were party not leader-centric. The Neuro-Insight research on the first Labour PEB, featuring Martin Freeman, revealed that the absence of Ed Miliband was a problem because in viewers' minds it undermined Labour's credentials for leadership, whilst strengthening this for the Conservatives. Inevitably this was compounded in their three PEBs that adopted this message style approach. However, the face-to-camera style of Freeman talking about the values and morality of Labour resonated as more personally relevant than the family-orientated message in the Conservative PEB (discussed above) (Andrew 2015). Utilised in two further celebrity PEBs featuring Labour advocates, perhaps this went some way to mitigate the leadership credibility issue created by Miliband's absence. This is, however, unlikely, because advancing strong leadership is fundamental to any election victory.

As the Conservatives ad posters depicting the threat of Labour leader Ed Miliband as a puppet of the SNP were released and intensified by the media, it became evident that Ed Miliband needed to effectively establish his leadership qualities to govern and the party needed to robustly deny it would be a puppet of the SNP (which it did far too late in the last week of the campaign). While Ed Miliband was doing well in the opinion polls when the election was called, there were no posters featuring him or his credentials to lead the next British government. Within the advertising, this responsibility was left to one out of the Labour's five PEBs, leaving other platforms to present their leader, for example, the leader debates. The fourth PEB—*'Ed Miliband: A Portrait'*²—was aired on 28 April 2015, 8 days before the date of the election, at a point when the tide of public opinion was beginning to

swing back to Conservative leader David Cameron. This broadcast strongly featured discussions about Miliband's values and why he was ready to offer himself as Prime Minister to enable better lives for hard-working people struggling to live and prosper in Britain. In common with the other Labour PEBs, he emphasised the need to protect public services, and principally to rescue the NHS from Conservative cuts. Overall Miliband presented himself in a somewhat evangelical style as the saviour of Britain who would fight to restore hope to struggling hard-working families and young adults and safeguard the future efficacy of the NHS. While the allocation of one PEB and no posters was undoubtedly partially a strategic decision, similar to 2005 and 2010, Labour strategists presented very little of the qualities of their leader to the electorate through the lucidity that the lens of advertising accords. Furthermore, they did not respond to the SNP taunts through their advertising, and neither did they generate responsive digital ads or use the wider media to effectively respond. This created an opportunity for Conservative strategists, who appeared to trap Miliband in the glare of their relentless messages portraying his weaknesses and secret willingness to sell Westminster to Scotland in order to win the election. Alongside this fear, Miliband also had to battle against increasing public fears that Labour was against reducing the deficit (again fuelled by the Conservatives and media). Notably, while this reduction might have been implied in their PEBs, Labour never directly mentioned it in their advertising rhetoric, an omission that did not bode well in the latter days of the election contest. Accordingly, as the election date drew closer and his popularity began to recede, his election messages now appeared to lack conviction. However, the Labour election campaign team were still very confident that they would achieve enough votes to form the next British government, and this overconfidence was probably detrimental to the receptivity of their messages in the latter phase of the election contest.

5 ANALYSIS OF THE CONSERVATIVE AND LABOUR 2015 ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS

5.1 *The Conservative Advertising Campaign*

The Conservatives election victory was attributable, in part, to their marketing strategy and their discipline in staying 'on message' in their advertising. Using research evidence, they understood the electorate's mindset well. Their policy and leader-attack ad messages on the economy and the threat of Miliband selling-out to the SNP resonated with Conservative partisans

and active voting segments, namely older, more affluent, employed and those residing in business-rich constituencies. This was in stark contrast to Labour voter demographics. Furthermore, importantly they gained the votes of the undecided, which their opponents had hoped to win.

Consequently, for those who voted Conservative, the attack messages aided their emotional and cognitive impression formation and evaluative decision-making in affirming the credibility and their liking of David Cameron and his Conservatives and confirming their dislike of Labour and Miliband. Furthermore, the persuasiveness of the advertising was compounded considerably by Conservative positive ad messages entailing the positive self-promotion of David Cameron to draw voters closer to him and his party and motivate them to vote for HIM. Therefore inherent within their advertising messages, voters were invited to join WITH Cameron to become part of HIS team to secure the future of OUR Britain. This is in stark contrast to being governed under a political party and reflects the integration of value co-creation and customer experiences inherent within much contemporary commercial marketing. Accordingly the objectives of the advertising campaign were met.

Overall the use of positive and negative message strategies was skilfully played; using negative attack messages to reinforce the competencies of David Cameron to govern, and positive messages to create liking of him and motivate turnout; thereby stimulating trust. This was magnified by the extensive strategic use of digital technology. Overall the charisma of David Cameron, and thus his capacity to connect with voters' intelligence and emotions, was the most valuable strategic asset the Conservatives possessed—and this potency was distilled throughout the advertising and wider marketing strategy in advancing trustworthiness and proficiency. Hence while some of their advertising was criticised for being too overcrowded to process, for example, the PEBs and *the road to recovery* poster, and too narrowly targeted, this was mitigated by the overarching Cameron persuasive effect in winning over voters to Cameron's Conservative party. Therefore, from a strategic marketing perspective, the Conservative campaign was far more advanced than Labours.

5.2 *Labour's Advertising Campaign*

Critics accused the Labour campaign of being out of touch with the fears, aspirations and reality of normal working people. It failed to address their concerns on immigration, welfare and job creation and instead presented

itself as the party for the “needy and greedy” (cited in Wintour 2015). Labour was perceived to be demonising the private sector and favouring those deliberately choosing not to work, at the expense of ‘hard-working families’. Compounding this, critics maintained that the campaign messages failed to address austerity and the deficit and immigration was taboo (Keeble and Straw 2015). Furthermore, Labour’s values were undermined by personifying voters as calculative consumers not citizens—the selfish-voter (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 2004). Yet these issues lay at the heart of Labour’s campaign, so how valid are these criticisms?

The advertising campaign focused on the threat to public services, a ‘hiding’ David Cameron and the values of Labour and their leader Ed Miliband. This was wrapped within a negative policy-attack message style, with elements of personality attack on Cameron, alongside some positive voicing on values. The deficit and austerity were not made explicit in any ad messages (albeit they were embedded in some campaign rhetoric), and neither was immigration. This suggests key messages advanced by Labour did not connect with the publics’ hopes and fears. This was a lost opportunity to use advertising to inform and build confidence to grow public trust in Labour. Particularly so because the simplicity in Labour’s stripped-back PEB ads had greater capacity to effectively gain attention and avoid misunderstanding than the more crowded Conservative ad messages. Their persuasiveness might also have increased had these messages contained more positive content to facilitate better candidate evaluation and liking of Miliband. Labour’s messages did get through to some voter segments however—younger, unemployed, low-earners and ethnic minorities (Rudgard 2015), negating some of the criticism of the campaign. Problematically, though, turnout amongst them is historically lower than their affluent older peers and Labour failed to attract the ‘undecided’ who determined the election outcome.

Miliband’s absence from most of Labour’s advertising (except one PEB) was damaging, particularly contrasted with a charismatic Cameron who dominated the Conservative campaign. For example, he could have featured in digital ads rising above the Tory SNP jibes and asserting positive messages about a ‘Labour future’, using social media more strategically in targeting dissemination of core messages like this.

Consequently there were three primary weaknesses in the Labour advertising and wider marketing campaign. Firstly, failing to communicate convincing and trustworthy messages reflexive of the policies and values of the Labour party that would alleviate the ‘risk-taking fears’ of pro-Labour

and non-Conservative voting segments who turn out. Secondly, failing to portray Ed Miliband's leadership competence and trustworthiness to convince voters and media of his Prime Ministerial qualities. Thirdly, failing to revise their marketing strategy in light of the Conservative marketing machine. They were never going to gain voters by arguing directly with David Cameron. Instead they should have been focusing on constructing policy attack and positive messages to win votes from the LibDems and UKIP, with messages emphasising belonging with Miliband's Labour, not being 'under' its governance. This missed opportunity to provide a viable alternative choice facilitated a big swing of LibDem/UKIP voters to the Conservatives; they had nowhere else to go. This signalled an arrogance within Labour's strategic campaign team and hence a profound failure to understand the nation they wanted to govern. It is therefore not surprising they lost the election, but more fundamentally why they imploded.

6 CONCLUSION

Ultimately this election was not a choice between parties. It was a contest between the credibility of leaders in almost presidential style—an emotive–cognitive appraisal of the battle between David Cameron and Ed Miliband. It showcased how positive election messages, combined with personalised positive rhetoric and evidence-based policy-attacks, can be highly persuasive in engaging and motivating the electorate to vote and in decreasing a cynical mindset. Thus it sets further precedent for positive advertising message strategies in future election campaigns, thereby addressing some ethical concerns surrounding attack advertising. David Cameron's ownership of the Conservative party showed genius (as did Tony Blair's ownership of New Labour). It gave strength and intelligence to the campaign advertising and marketing by illuminating the party as an extension of the leaders self-identity, and thus their values and ambitions, and it was this Cameron identity that voters wanted to belong to—to be part of Cameron's in-group.

This appraisal reaffirms the importance of advertising in election marketing, and digital technology enhances its persuasive power. Accordingly, while election advertising is likely to metamorphose before the next election, it remains an integral part of strategic election marketing, most notably because of its capacity to meaningfully connect voters with political leaders across multiple platforms and give them a sense of belonging and empowerment.

So what kind of election advertising will emerge from this metamorphosis? Specifics of this evolving species remain fuzzy; however, its evolution will be driven by digital technology and science.

Digital technology and social media will facilitate an exponential increase in the positive and negative ‘political stories’ told about human interactions with members of parliament, parties and their policies. Consequently, advertising could hybridise into a mixture of marketing messages, entertainment and education. This future is already here via branded content.

Building on this, advances in neuroscience increase comprehension of the neurological impact of political messages on the human brain, and thus how to ‘switch it on and off’ and to activate it at a higher level. Currently much of the neuromarketing focuses on the basic human reptilian brain (amygdala), which entails instant gratification of consumers’ primeval human instincts, for example, attack ads declaring ‘*don’t vote for them, you will pay more tax*’. However, neuroscience offers more than this; it enables a greater understanding of how the superior human brain (the cortex) functions to enable our empathic-thinking-mindful selves. Hence, this new election advertising will have evolved to interact with this deeper human self, thereby helping to advance democratic engagement. This is in-line with experiential, relational and co-creation developments within marketing and it may well negate the use of personalised attack ad messages and much greater use of positive messages.

In the future it will be voters and *their* stakeholders who will be the change agents—the storytellers—not politicians and their strategy and media agents. These tales will embrace advertisements narrative roots to stimulate cognitive and emotional connectivity among electoral stakeholders. Thus, the technological–scientific metamorphosis of advertising will enable it to do what it does best—give humans the stories that enable them to make connections with what is good for themselves, society and democracy.

Links to a Selection of Conservative and Labour Election Advertising

All 2015 party election broadcasts can be found online. They are currently accessible on BBCiplayer until summer 2016: www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer

Conservative

The road to a stronger economy: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jan/02/tories-go-for-country-road-to-take-the-economic-message-home#img-2>

A recovering economy: www.youtube.com/watch?v=seYDn3L2UKc

Alex Salmond: ready to “call the tune”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JeYlBRvUeE&feature=youtu.be>

Ed Miliband as SNP puppet: <https://twitter.com/Conservatives/status/589703032427978752/photo/1>

Labour

Next time they’ll cut to the bone:

<http://labourlist.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/unnamed4-440x220.jpg>

Are you watching closely: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wgf_Sj5f_AE

The doctor can’t see you now: <http://labourlist.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/04/unnamed.png>

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Strategic Media Management

Darren G. Lilleker

Elections are a media spectacle (Kellner 2009). Political parties, leaders and key figures can reach a broad mass of voters via television and newspapers and so design communication to appeal to media organisations' logic, producing media-friendly images and text and performing for the cameras through a series of pseudo-events (Strömbäck and Nord 2006). The numerous policy launches, battle bus tours and visits to hospitals are all designed to capture evening television news headlines and the front pages of the next day's newspapers. However, while media have a mass audience they do not offer a direct channel from campaign to citizen. The accompanying editorial text is beyond the control of the spin doctors who may help writing the words spoken by the politician, but ensuring these are disseminated unchallenged is impossible, and for some parties it proves a greater challenge than for others. Hence media management is an important campaigning function, although one largely ignored within political marketing literature (for an exception, see Savigny and Temple 2010). This omission is somewhat bizarre given that in a political context the brand image, values and messages tend to mostly be translated to the wider audience via television and the press (Shehata and Strömbäck 2014).

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This chapter focuses on the relative importance of the leader debates and interviews, the impartial television news and the partisan print media, and explores the role mass media played in shaping and translating the marketing strategies of the parties and their leaders into news items for public consumption. The data presented allows us to draw some conclusions as to the relative successes of the various parties' media management strategies.

I THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

Media management, often referred to as spinning, has evolved significantly from being the relatively simple task of ensuring that the organisation gains public recognition through appearing in media (Botan and Trowbridge 2015: 357–377). Political parties cannot simply rely on a reactive strategy, assuming their innate newsworthiness. Rather they have to be proactive and strategic (Negrine and Lilleker 2002). Thus, a twenty-first-century media management strategy involves crafting text for press releases, speeches and comments, and events at which speeches or more often sound bites and photo opportunities are delivered in order to ensure these appear in the headlines. Party campaigns must also recognise the various ways in which media publish news, via online and 24/7 channels, via bulletins and updates, and when content is determined for the main news bulletins and front pages. Social media has also brought new ways of interacting with journalists, allowing for public complaints, praise and reactions to the work of journalists alongside the traditionally private phone calls and emails. The challenges posed by the hypermedia age (Howard 2006) are manifold, and for campaign media managers to ensure that media coverage conveys positive brand information, painting the party and key individuals in the most positive light, is extremely difficult.

The professionalisation of political campaigning has seen political organisations adapting and evolving their communication strategies to maximise impact (Negrine and Lilleker 2002). Communications consultants from advertising, public relations, and journalism have been given senior management functions during elections (Gibson and Römmele 2009) with the function of the spin doctor being crucial for getting the party message to a critical mass of the electorate. The power dynamics between journalist and spin doctor are complicated, with both being the more powerful at different times and in different places (Meyen et al. 2014).

The most sophisticated campaigns will be planned carefully, sound bites will be crafted, and all party representatives will be encouraged to repeat

these on news items, press releases, leaflets, e-newsletters, weblogs and social media posts as well as on the doorsteps they do visit across the UK constituencies. Parties will also have a rapid rebuttal unit to respond instantly to criticisms. The extent to which these elements are evidenced through gaining positive coverage determines the success of a party media management strategy.

2 PARTY MEDIA PRIORITIES

Data from a survey conducted as part of a pan-European study of campaign professionalism (Tenscher et al. 2015), which asked party campaign strategists to rank items one to five on their importance, demonstrates the strategic thinking within the major UK parties. The data is limited as Plaid Cymru did not respond but represents the top three parties, two other national competitors and the Scottish National Party (SNP) that had significant impact upon the campaign and its outcome. Cumulatively, the data shows that media management is a key priority within party campaigning. In terms of central planning, we see a gulf between the three major parliamentary parties and the minor parties, UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Greens. As the SNP campaign only in Scotland and so have a smaller electorate, central planning may be simpler regardless. Aside from the Green Party and the UKIP, parties see external consultants such as spin doctors as having a crucial role in designing the campaign (Table 6.1).

While there are disparities in media analysis, involving measuring coverage and sentiment as well as ensuring rapid rebuttal, all parties agree on the importance of having impact on the media agenda, with five out of the six parties giving it the highest priority. Similarly, appearances on national television are the most important form of media appearance, far outweighing free and paid advertising; differences are likely to reflect the chances of party leaders appearing on television. For example, the Greens rarely gain news coverage, so see their television spots as of great importance. Strategically, however, parties concentrate on being in the news, whether that is in the press or on television, and prize being on television. The universal importance given to influencing the media agenda suggests that during a general election campaign spin doctors will work behind the scenes to get journalists ‘on side’ as well as providing a rich array of imagery and text designed to be instantly usable for news production.

Table 6.1 Importance placed on media strategy by top UK parties

	<i>Cons</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>LibDem</i>	<i>UKIP</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>SNP</i>
Centrally planned campaign	5	5	5	3	3	5
Reliance on external consultants	5	4	5	1	3	5
Systematic media analysis	3	5	5	1	3	4
Impacting the media agenda	5	5	5	5	5	4
Appearances on national TV	4	5	5	3	5	3
Television spots	4	5	2	1	5	1
Radio spots	4	5	2	1	3	1
Paid advertisements in mass media	4	5	3	1	1	3

3 CAREFULLY AND CAUTIOUSLY: PARTY MEDIA MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Key to impacting the media agenda is gaining positive coverage, and for a party's key campaign messages to feature in media coverage, any news is good news and even when challenged or criticised there are opportunities to gain awareness and support. The campaign was essentially one of competing visions; therefore, two opposing sets of messages competed for media attention and reportage. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats focused on their achievements in stabilising the economy; the latter arguing austerity would have proved harsher without the Liberal Democrat presence in government. The Conservatives, steered by Lynton Crosby, played on fears of a further economic collapse if they were ousted from office. In an attempt to counter the Conservative message that they could not be trusted with the economy, Labour attempted to offer austerity-lite, reducing the national debt but without penalising poorer citizens, the accusation levelled at the coalition government, and raising fears over the future of the National Health Services (NHS). To undermine Labour's challenge, the Conservatives emphasised the dangers of a Labour–SNP coalition, demonstrating how parties can change messages in response to feedback on how they are working, and when it is crucial their spin doctors persuade the media to accept the new terms of reference as the way to cover the election. The other parties argued against austerity measures, with UKIP emphasising its anti-European Union, anti-immigration message. While this might appear as two camps, both were extremely divided and each party sought to promote greater differentiation than similarity in their positions.

It perhaps reflects the slightly lower prioritisation by the Conservatives of appearing on the media as well as the general caution evidenced across

the campaign, that setting up the leader debates involved protracted negotiations. In the end there were two debates, the first involving all the main contenders: Conservative Cameron, Labour's Miliband, Liberal Democrat Clegg, UKIP's Farage, Bennett of the Green Party, and Sturgeon and Wood representing the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists respectively; the second debate featured the challengers, excluding David Cameron and Nick Clegg. The build-up was probably hyped more than the events themselves gained coverage. The winners, in terms of gaining popular coverage, were Nicola Sturgeon and Leanne Wood. The debates provided them with a platform to talk to the whole nation. Miliband, arguably, was the loser. As the heir apparent or potential kingmaker given the proximity in opinion polls between Labour and the Conservatives, he faced attacks from the other party leaders particularly as he had rejected discussion of which party he might form a coalition with after outrightly rejecting a Labour-SNP alliance. Following the first debate it appeared the media agreed Sturgeon emerged the winner, although UKIP leader Nigel Farage's controversial statements across the debates would have appealed to his core vote. One subsequent 'debate' involved the main party leaders appearing separately responding to audience questions. Miliband's claim that the 1997–2010 Labour governments did not overspend was responded to with audible disquiet from the audience, countering his better than expected earlier performances and putting Labour's campaign on the back foot.

The rest of the campaign involved party leaders touring the target seats, providing a series of the visual opportunities for the press pack, though it is questionable whether such visits achieve anything beyond generating coverage (Middleton 2015). Carefully planned events were held in empty warehouses and closed car parks where the public were unable to ambush the campaign but the party faithful could be assembled to provide the impression of accessibility (Wring and Ward 2015). Conservative gaffes were minor; Cameron's noteworthy mistake was appearing to forget which football team he supported. Labour tried a variety of stunts, including Miliband appearing with Russell Brand for his *Trems* on YouTube channel and the appearance of his promises carved in stone. Both received much criticism; the latter went from being the 'Edstone' to Miliband's 'Headstone' on Twitter in a matter of hours. These were in many ways the standout events of the campaign reflecting the safety-first approach that Labour only diverted from in the last days.

In order to explore how the media covered the election, we draw on Loughborough University data that count instances where topics and

issues are covered in news. Their data shows that the news agenda focused largely on the differing coalition opportunities both leaders might have to entertain, with television and press devoting 45.9% and 44.5% of election coverage, respectively, to what media scholars refer to as the process of the election (Deacon et al. 2015). The second most prominent topic was the economy (8.1% on television, 10.5% in press). The NHS, Labour's flagship topic, was the sixth most mentioned policy area on television, fifth in the press with an average of 3.6% of coverage. Thus Labour's strategy for influencing the news agenda appeared to have proved an abject failure. Equally, as we shall see, Labour's television appearances and attempts to gain publicity outside of the much hyped debate-style programmes largely led to negative coverage, suggesting the partisan media deliberately controlled the agenda as opinion polls are pointed to a very close election to influence the outcome. For the other parties it was not so much a hostile media as one that exhibited disinterest.

4 A QUESTION OF IMBALANCE

The imbalance in attention and treatment given to the party leaders draws further on data gathered by Loughborough University Communication Research Centre, here focusing on mentions of the parties and their leaders as well as testing for balance in positive and negative coverage across the media. These data show a stark imbalance which consistently favoured Cameron and the Conservatives and, in particular, undermined Miliband and Labour. It would seem fair to suggest that the media, and in particular the press, set out to ensure a majority Conservative government would be elected. The Loughborough researchers analysed all coverage during 30 March–7 May from television news bulletins (Channel 4 News at 7 pm, Channel 5 News at 6.30 pm, BBC1 News at 10, ITV1 News at 10, BBC2 Newsnight, Sky News 8 at 8 pm) and from a spectrum of press outlets (*The Guardian*, *Independent*, *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express*, *Mirror*, *Sun*, *Star* and *Metro*).

In terms of exposure, television news offered reasonable balance in quoting parties and leaders. The Conservatives gained 30.14%, Cameron 10.48%; Labour 27.98%, Miliband 9.85%; and Liberal Democrats 17.22%, Clegg 8.21%, broadly reflecting their standing at the 2010 election; other parties received less coverage with the SNP the next most quoted party and leader Nicola Sturgeon gaining well over half the coverage and 5.74% overall. The imbalance is most visible in the press, with Conservatives

gaining 44.48%, Cameron 21.95%; Labour 29%, Miliband 13.09%; Liberal Democrats 11.89%, Clegg 8.5%; the SNP lost out to UKIP whose leader Nigel Farage gained 8.22% of press quotes almost equalling Clegg. In terms of overall appearances in media however, Labour gained 28.7% appearances on television to the Conservatives 27.9%; the Liberal Democrats lagged on 15.1%, the SNP on 11.1% and UKIP on 9.7%. Press coverage is as imbalanced for mentions as quotations; the Conservatives gained 37.5% of coverage, Labour 31.8%, the Liberal Democrats 10%, SNP 9% and UKIP 8.3%.

The imbalance in press reporting did not simply concern mentions or quotes however. Across the period of the campaign, when assessing coverage for clear bias on the part of the journalist, the Conservatives gained an average 0.15 positivity score. Labour in contrast averaged a 0.20 negative score, and although all other parties gain an overall negative average, the consistent attacks on Labour were rivalled only by those against the SNP. The SNP received more attacks as the campaign progressed, but still only gained a 0.11 negative average for the final week. The anti-SNP narrative originated in Conservative advertisements depicting Labour leader Ed Miliband being the puppet of Alex Salmond, SNP leader in the House of Commons, or in the pocket of Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP leader. The perspective of Miliband as weak meant that this fear may have been seen as a reality by many and also played into a further discourse around who governs and what influence the SNP or indeed Scottish MPs in general should have within Westminster.

Of course there were differences by outlet; the *Daily Mirror*, for example, promoted the Labour line and consistently encouraged their readers to fear a Conservative majority. But the *Mirror* and fellow left-wing newspaper *The Guardian* were minority voices and likely talking to the converted anyway. The bias, however, also reflects Miliband's strategy for reaching out to supportive outlets as opposed to attempting to court Murdoch and the *Sun* as Blair had. Yet we should recognise the difficulties in this. While many media outlets recognised Clegg had won public support following the first leaders' debate in 2010, this was followed by a raft of Conservative-inspired negative stories. Therefore Miliband's vacillation in dealing with the hostile press may be understandable. Regardless of potential Labour strategic failures, for the majority who read newspapers, and in particular the three million regular readers of the *Sun* or *Mail*, there was a consistent diet of pro-Conservative and anti-Labour propaganda which led veteran leftist journalist Roy Greenslade to tell readers of his *Guardian*

editorial ‘the relentless ridicule over the 6-week campaign may have played some part in the voting decisions of floating voters’ (Greenslade 2015).

The imbalance in the press was countered by balance across the broadcasters; however Miliband’s failure to emerge triumphant from any of the debates maintained a perspective of Labour and Miliband as unfit to govern. Miliband’s average performances were compounded when he made the news for leaving his crib sheet for the first debate in the dressing room revealing his strategy to appear as a ‘happy warrior’. While having a strategic persona schematic is not surprising, revealing the details gives the impression of fakery. Arguably, Miliband also emerged undermined from the solo interview with the BBC’s veteran antagonist Jeremy Paxman. While Miliband’s ‘Hell Yes!’ response to Paxman’s question of are you ready to lead the country was intended to give the impression of credibility, Paxman audibly asking Miliband, ‘Are you alright?’ after the 30-min grilling may have given the audience the impression Paxman saw him as unable to take the pressure.

Therefore, overall we find a media interested in their own agenda, which parties might form a coalition being a dominant theme, driven by polls that showed no difference between the parties, and so obsessing with predictions and speculation. Beneath the narrative was that Miliband and Labour were not up to the job of governance; this emerged fleetingly on television broadcasts but was the core message disseminated by those newspapers which might be termed once again the ‘Tory Press’. Essentially the Conservatives and David Cameron were triumphant in marketing themselves via the media, Labour in contrast abjectly failed in this respect. If we accept the findings from research that claim the UK electorate are most likely to gain political information from the mainstream media and if we believe that the media is able to influence voter attitudes towards the parties, their leaders, the leaders’ credibility and the likelihood of their policies being implemented or having the suggested impact, it may seem surprising that Labour gained as many seats as they did on 7 May.

5 MARKET FAILURE OR MARKETING FAILURE

The question that must be posed is whether Conservative dominance can be attributed to an effective strategy or latent media bias and, if the answer is equivocal, to what extent the responsibility for Conservative success can be attributed to either. The Conservatives had significant advantages. There was evidence their economic strategy was having a positive impact

and theirs was a relatively gaffe-free campaign performance, so it was an easy and skilfully executed sell. Parties wishing to offer austerity-lite, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, were bound to struggle with message clarity and so required greater resources devoted to media management. The anti-austerity message was clear, though highly contestable and seemingly out of step with a broader majority of ‘average’ voters. The Conservatives therefore appeared to have the right message, one that resonating with journalists and voters and so had an open door via the media.

But, one cannot negate the alternative perspective that independent of the political context the innate Conservative bias would have been visible. Cameron’s links to the Murdoch empire are manifold and personal, so those outlets would be expected to demonstrate a bias. The bias might be even more pronounced following criticisms made publicly of Murdoch by Miliband as well as prominent Liberal Democrats. The anti-Labour narrative was also not simply a feature of the election campaign. Since his election as Labour leader, Ed Miliband allowed himself to be characterised as the man who stabbed his brother in the back to assume the leadership. A long-term more negative association was made with the trade unions, who assured his victory and led Miliband being given the moniker of ‘Red Ed’. Miliband was also depicted as odd looking, with pictures of his contorted expressions while donating to the homeless, eating a bacon sandwich, or listening to a fellow panellist on *Loose Women* circulated via mainstream media and online. These images, and his similarity in looks to Wallace, the plasticine character in Nick Park’s animated films, have been regular fodder for satirical television programmes such as *Have I Got New For You* and cumulatively led to a tarnished brand. The satisfaction rating for Miliband’s performance as leader has always lagged behind that of Cameron; the surprising aspect of the polls is that Miliband’s performance was not mirrored in declared party support. To what extent the media were reflecting the failure of Labour and Miliband to present an alternative image, or their political bias against Miliband’s Labour, is a moot point.

Arguably it would seem to be a combination of anti-Miliband and anti-Labour media bias, compounded by having a leader who provided significant ammunition to his opponents. In contrast, Cameron maintained a steady course to emerge as the better man for the job. Miliband’s core team appeared to be constituted of media consultants with expertise in print media, though there was no attempt to redress the imbalance in the press. However the lack of television expertise was criticised by some

close to the party for not doing more to court television journalists and gain better coverage. Yet, when considering media bias one has to remark that the Liberal Democrats got no easier time and were positioned either as radicals within the coalition or an irrelevance with the issue of broken promises over student tuition fees becoming Clegg's political millstone. The press appeared to be against the idea of a coalition and keen to rid themselves of the junior partner; therefore, perhaps political bias explains as much or more of the coverage than purely Miliband's communication failures.

6 MEDIA EFFECTS

If the media provide all or even a majority of the information stored in the memories of voters which will be accessed when required to make a decision, then it is likely that the majority of associations relating to Ed Miliband and Labour were negative. At least in part, this represents a failure of Labour media management strategy. However, as a counter to this one can also argue that, when recognising Labour were not alone in receiving largely negative coverage, the balance of coverage demonstrates the success of Conservative party spin doctors and the party's relationships with key outlets and their owners, from Cameron becoming party leader over the course of the coalition government. The dominance of the party led to their coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, to fail to be able to move beyond the perception of them as having reneged on their election promises in order to build a coalition agreement, Labour and Miliband to face repeated attacks and to the marginalisation of other parties. The extent to which a party was visible to the audience or not in the media, and whether any positive coverage was received, depended on which specific outlet a citizen relied upon for political news of course. However, for the average person with a low interest in politics who might seek cues as how to cast their vote, the cue provided by the press in particular and also by some key aspects of television news coverage was to vote Conservative. But how do we explain this with reference to media effect theory and media management strategy?

Agenda setting is a key function of any media management strategy and involves being able to influence what topics appear in the headlines (Hopmann et al. 2012). Labour's strategy was to shift focus from the economy onto the NHS, a policy area which is safe Labour territory. However, it was the Conservative agenda that dominated headlines.

Throughout the coalition period, from revealing Labour junior minister Liam Byrne had left a note for his predecessor reading ‘I’m afraid there is no money’ the Conservatives focused on promoting themselves as the party of fiscal responsibility; Labour were dubbed irresponsible and so to blame for the UK’s economic collapse. The note became a feature of the campaign as a reminder of the Conservative’s narrative, juxtaposed with regular reports of positive economic news kept public focus on the economy. Byrne himself admitted that his ‘joke’ had been hugely damaging for Labour’s chances in 2015 (Helm 2015).

The framing of the recession, as Labour’s fault, began prior to the 2010 contest and arguably was already in the public consciousness. Framing refers to the way in which an event or issue is defined; according to linguistic scholars it is a rhetorical construction of reality (Foss and Foss 2011). While there were competing frames, particularly the frame promoted by Labour that it was a global phenomenon and beyond the control of any nation, it would appear the Conservative frame became the most accepted version of events fairly early (Hellwig and Coffey 2011). Labour were unable to contest this frame effectively, or contest the subsequent framing of austerity as necessary. Labour’s failure also hindered the challenge made by other parties to the Conservative position.

Perhaps the biggest problem that was faced in challenging the Conservative hegemony over the agenda, or the dominance of the Conservatives in controlling the media, was in gaining a positive image for party leaders Miliband and Clegg. While the hypodermic needle effect, where a perception is repeated by media and subconsciously accepted by their audiences, is largely discredited, arguably the media portrayal of groups through negative stereotypes can lead to increased levels of prejudice (Scharrer and Ramasubramanian 2015). Media literacy and education are intervening variables; as many may be media dependent and rely on media for their political knowledge, so picking up simplistic cues to differentiate between parties and their leaders, one might expect to find higher levels of media influence over attitudes among the media dependant. Therefore it may be possible to reconsider the importance of the hypodermic needle media effect in the context of political communication.

The long-term portrayal of Ed Miliband as of the left, under Trade Union control as well as uncharismatic was used to undermine his credibility as a potential prime minister. Similarly the ‘broken promises’ narrative that became associated with Nick Clegg is likely to have been responsible

for the dramatic collapse in Liberal Democrat support. Without rolling panel studies it is impossible to determine whether the drip feed of negative images and stories led to negative public attitudes being developed and maintained. However, the election winners, the Conservatives and leader David Cameron, enjoyed a more positive media spotlight and so negative associations must have been far lower.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The press were largely pro-Conservative and anti-Labour. The BBC were balanced in their overall coverage levels but at points were equally responsible for undermining Miliband if not promoting Cameron or the Conservatives. BBC documentaries also exposed racists within the UKIP and raised questions regarding the SNP's agenda, suggesting at worst a support for a political status quo. While these exposes were outside of mainstream news coverage, one can enquire to what extent BBC News programming also exhibited bias.

The question for media management is: If the media are against you, how can a party counter this and earn more positive coverage? Given that a minority use non-traditional news sources for political information, circumnavigating the media and relying on the Internet and social media is not a logical response. The lack of overt bias in television news provides some scope for attempting to influence the agenda, though that scope is limited when balance is paramount. The press and voters usually have firm attitudes at the start of a campaign, and those tend not to change, therefore any efforts within the specific campaign period might be wasted.

Media management therefore must be a long-term process. Cameron's team set about framing the economic crisis positively for the Conservatives in 2008, and by the 2010 contest there was no need to try to influence the media agenda, the focus was on the economy regardless. Therefore all that was necessary was to ensure the media continued to reinforce the Conservative framing of the crisis and attribution of blame. The extent to which this influenced the outcome of the 2010 election is of course debatable, particularly given that either the Conservatives or Labour could, in theory, have formed a coalition government. Miliband's election as Labour leader saw minor improvements in economic forecasts allowing the Conservatives to position themselves as competent managers. Miliband, in contrast, was positioned as Cameron's non-telegenic,

awkward and ultimately unelectable opponent. The extent to which there were behind-the-scenes briefing to sympathetic journalists by Conservative spin doctors is unknown with any certainty, though this is argued to be common practice (McBride 2014), painted by both Labour and the Liberal Democrats in a negative light over the course of the coalition government. The election involved only reinforcing those negatives, and the negative aspect of the Conservative communication strategy was sufficiently effective to counter any Labour resurgence. Alternative frames of a potential coalition were not considered, only the danger of the SNP controlling Miliband's Labour; alternative perspectives of Miliband were rarely offered; Clegg was largely marginalised. A favourable press gave Cameron's Conservatives a direct link with their audiences, branding his party as competent managers. Perhaps the election result demonstrates the importance of the media, having the media on side, and having a sound and long-term media management strategy. Arguably if the media is against a party, any party-branding strategy is sure to be blown off course; the question is was it just too easy to undermine Labour?

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Digital Political Marketing

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Political campaigning methods are increasingly influenced and mediated by the Internet as its penetration deepens. This fact was reflected during the 2015 General Election campaign. As in 2010, the traditional media outlets of print and television broadcasting still dominated the public debate surrounding the campaign. However, the Internet allows marginalized parties, candidates, and citizens to enter the public debate and have input into mainstream media discourse. Furthermore, the Internet did in some instances facilitate conversations in dynamic and interactive ways, primarily through the use of social media, but its impact remained fairly latent in comparison to its traditional counterparts. It is, therefore, pertinent to examine whether and, if so, how the political parties responded to changes in wider media and Internet user culture. This chapter compares digital marketing in the 2010 and 2015 General Elections, exploring the strategic innovations and approaches of party campaigns with specific focus on parties' engagement with digital technologies like email, social media (namely Facebook and Twitter), online videos, and party websites.

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The 2015 data is sampled from a range of sources using a mixed-methods approach influenced by online and documentary analysis and ethnographic methods. The ethnographic components include some formal and informal interviews with field-based respondents, mainly UK political participants, whose contributions have been anonymized. The analysis of the wider narrative is rooted in the academic perspectives and practitioner experience of both authors. Observational data is not referenced as a rule, but citations of verbatim text, for example, formal interviews and primary and secondary written sources, are referenced accordingly. The chapter is divided into two main substantive sections. The first section focuses on the political context, changes since the 2010 General Election and general digital marketing. It includes an analysis of the main party leaders' use of online video and demonstrates the impact of trends in user culture on political communication. It discusses how party strategy has responded and gives examples of successes and failures. The latter part explores central party websites, email, and data capture. The Conservative Party is largely the source for this data. The second section presents case studies that demonstrate innovation in social media use in 2015, described as 'Britain's hashtag election', and the impact and uses of digital technologies at the grassroots and by central parties are discussed.

Throughout, evidence is presented supporting wider trends in citizen-initiated campaigning (Gibson 2015) and the personalization of politics (Bennett 2012). These concepts are discussed within the political marketing context of 'i-branding' (Simmons 2008), which is constituted of four factors. Firstly, harvesting visitor data to understand target audiences online. Secondly, targeting online audiences with highly personalized messages. Thirdly, two-way and one-way interactions between and with the audience and the brand to build rapport with target cohorts (Simmons 2008). Finally, producing engaging, shareable content to extend brand reach and increase the likelihood of greater virality. Lilleker (2014) using the concept of i-branding argues that candidates who adopt a developed i-brand strategy enhance their political identity as able and personable.

The chapter argues that the Conservatives' online strategies performed highly across the first two pillars of i-branding, harvesting and targeting; and that the party focused its resources in one-way interaction. In contrast, the Scottish National Party (SNP) strategy focused on developing pillars three and four, using two-way interaction and extending reach, which offered greater mutuality. The findings suggest that Labour Party's strategy performed poorly across all four aspects of i-branding; however,

deeper research is required in order to provide a clearer understanding of the party's strategic performance. The chapter suggests that i-branding principles ought to be a central consideration for the parties in the run-up to the 2020 General Election.

1 2010–2015 DIGITAL TRANSITIONS

1.1 Strategic Innovations: WebCameron Versus YouTube

In the run-up to the 2010 General Election, there were both strategic and organic innovations in the Conservatives' use of digital technology (Ridge-Newman 2014). The most salient and symbolic initiative was WebCameron, a web-based vlog of the Conservative leader developed by the central party. In September 2006, WebCameron led in terms of filling a niche at the cutting edge of online political communication. It impacted the way in which politics was being done online in Britain at a time when the proliferation of Internet interfaces was growing and giving rise to user-led trends in political campaigning. WebCameron acted as a catalyst that signalled to a new generation of Tory activists that campaigning online was appropriate and it also set a precedent for other parties, but usage was short-lived and by 2015 the Conservatives had attempted to erase the evidence of its existence. In 2009, Labour attempted a similar, but less successful initiative on YouTube, to promote its leader, Gordon Brown (Klotz 2014).

Comparatively, WebCameron was hailed as a strategic success and Brown's YouTube appearance was largely considered to be a strategic miscalculation. In contrast, Ed Miliband miscalculated the growing importance of the ability of the leader to connect with voters across diverse and converging media channels and technologies (Jenkins 2008). Compared with the telegenic styles of Tony Blair, Cameron, Nick Clegg, Nigel Farage, and Nicola Sturgeon, the Brown and Miliband leadership demonstrated how effective dissemination of party messages is significantly linked to leader image (Heffernan 2013). WebCameron effectively symbolized a change in British political marketing, because its focus and brand were Cameron-centric and highly suited to the use of digital.

By 2015, the Conservatives had abandoned the in-house initiatives WebCameron and MyConservatives, an interactive campaign forum. Furthermore, in an attempt to sanitize the web, the party hid WebCameron archives (Hern 2013). In place of WebCameron's characteristically 'shaky-camera' portrayal of the leader, the party, in 2015, posted

glossier television-style party election broadcasts to its YouTube channel. The impact of these online videos compared to that of televised party election broadcasts remains unclear. However, the Conservatives' channel has over 15,000 subscribers and has received over 6.5 million views since October 2006 (Conservatives 2015a). In contrast, Labour's channel has been active since February 2007 and has fewer subscribers (c. 12,500) and significantly fewer views (c. 4.5 million) than the Conservatives (Labour 2015). It demonstrates a successful Conservative strategy, in keeping with i-branding pillar four, through which party resources were devoted to an engaging and shareable communication format. Despite Labour's brave and innovative step to first broadcast Gordon Brown on YouTube, up to 2015 the party has trailed behind the Conservatives in terms of public interactions with its video content uploaded on YouTube—not including the content uploaded to other platforms like Facebook.

In contrast to WebCameron in 2010, the Tories' 2015 web videos were less about getting to know Cameron the man. After 5 years of Cameron in Number 10, his once new brand and digital style was familiar and he adopted a more traditionally analogue style. Cameron evolved from being an energetic new kid on the block to adopting a more staid statesman-like persona. It raises the question of whether more informal Internet-style communication is suited to the office of the British Prime Minister. The use of YouTube by the Conservatives in 2015 was more about party policy and targeting specific groups of voters, including the elderly and people with young families—channelling central messages like 'Security in retirement' and 'Securing a better future for your family' (Conservatives 2015a). This marks a significant shift in the party's web-based strategy. In 2010, the party was overt in using interactive channels that centred on bridging the gap between party leader and ordinary voters.

In 2015, the strategy had shifted to target voters using subtle geo-targeted adverts that channelled focused messages (Elder and Edmonds 2015). The Tories adopted a geo-targeted marketing approach already well established in the business sector, but a significant innovation given the scale at which the party operated this strategy; and the degree to which it was highly focused and professionally streamlined—especially in terms of reacting to real-time data. Geo-targeting was linked to the party's 40/40 target seat campaign, which suited an older style of national campaigning—using the full mix of contemporary media platforms to echo central party messages (Beckett 2015). These innovations in digital campaigning were deployed to tailor and target national messages at voters in the key (40/40) seats.

In 2010, WebCameron facilitated the dissemination of the party's message, namely brand-Cameron, to the electorate. The Conservative YouTube channel mediated the party in a similar manner in 2015. Therefore, the party's use of YouTube to broadcast the leader cannot be said to be an innovation. In fact, it was Labour that took that innovative step in 2009, albeit earning derision. Brown's awkward appearance on YouTube symbolized how the culture of politics and media had changed in Britain. The glossy personal style of brand-Cameron was well suited to digital. In contrast, Brown's YouTube message about 'MP's Expenses' was lost amid narratives more focused on his appearance as an 'analogue' politician (Kettell and Kerr 2008). Combined with the 'Clegg factor' of the 2010 leaders' debates, such factors would set the tone for political communications from 2010 to 2015. By 2015, there was a wider understanding of these factors across the political parties, media and beyond, which impacted on the strategic communication choices parties made. Internet innovation in the Conservatives was more cautious than the previous election. The use of generally accessible Internet and mobile apps became more standard and normalized at all levels of the party.

1.2 Central Party Websites, Email and Data

The Conservatives' central website (www.conservatives.com) had a significant revamp after 2010. In the run-up to 2015 General Election, the website was used in conjunction with a data-capturing technique consisting of a landing page. The party created multiple dedicated pages amid its websites in order to capture the data from inbound user traffic that was drawn to specific pages, which reflected individual campaigns and, therefore, interested specific voter groups. This allowed greater market segmentation techniques, and the targeting of the specific interests of specific voters via email.

Labour (www.labour.org.uk) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) (www.ukip.org) also captured inbound data on landing pages at their primary websites in the final weeks of the campaign. In contrast, the British National Party (BNP) (www.bnp.org.uk), Green Party (www.greenparty.org.uk), Liberal Democrats (www.libdems.org.uk), Plaid Cymru (www.plaid.cymru), and SNP (www.snp.org) displayed more standard and traditional home pages on the date party websites were sampled, 23 April 2015—a fortnight before the election, 7 May. That said, some of these parties innovated in different ways. For example, the Liberal

Democrats used a geo-targeted home page on their website, which displayed different stories depending on the estimated location of the user.

Utilizing public-facing web pages to attract visitors is phase one. Capturing their data, particularly an email address, is phase two. Phase three involves a back-office human element to use the captured email data for the design of email content. It is good practice to devise this in advance of email campaigns and use insights to learn and adapt as the campaign progresses. Therefore, the parties using such techniques are likely to have intelligently planned and coordinated their email marketing campaigns. Email campaigns enhance brand awareness, because the political marketer can respond to real-time events that might be of interest to specific recipients using targeted email content (Lilleker 2014). However, political emails are likely to be received by only those who are already active and engaged in some way in the political process. Therefore, in terms of the voter consumption of political information, there is potential for a digital divide (Howard 2006) between the haves and have nots.

The Conservatives' 2015 email marketing was particularly advanced in comparison to 2010. In the party's 40/40 target seats, there was an intensive direct marketing both on- and offline. Lilleker (2015a) notes that this created an informed elite serviced with targeted political information. In the run-up to 2015 General Election, many of the voters that engaged in some form of e-politics in the marginal battlegrounds would have fallen into this category. Lilleker refers to a 'reductionist strategy' (2015a: 24) that some warn could lead to a thinning of democracy (Howard 2006). However, the advantage at a time of growing diversity of party representation in parliament is that the party which employs it most successfully can potentially channel a reductionist strategy to maximize their vote share.

Tory emails were coordinated with events occurring in the wider public sphere. The emails, often sent from a party bigwig like Boris Johnson or Cameron, were usually personalized with recipients' names. Punchy and intriguing subject headings were used, for example '...pass it on!' (Johnson 2015) and 'The SNP would hold him to ransom' (Conservatives 2015b). These optimized the likelihood of the email being opened. Backend data, like the number of clicks and emails opened, provided strategic insights, for example, indicating which phrases trigger the greatest degree of recipient interaction. The party was then able to adapt its strategies accordingly on real-time basis. These techniques were utilized by the Obama presidential campaigns 2008/2012 (Gibson 2009). Until 2015, British political parties in general had given relatively less consideration to data capture

and email campaign strategies. Such practices have been more associated with commercial businesses in the UK.

Therefore, these developments indicate parties were attempting to catch up with wider marketing practices in business and emulate established political marketing approaches from the USA, such as the strategic use of social media, well documented in US elections (Effing et al. 2011; Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011; Hong and Nadler 2012; Groshek and Al-Rawi 2013). By 2015, the practices of British political parties appear to have aligned themselves more closely with commercial marketing techniques and, moreover, with more democratized uses of social media. The following section and subsequent cases explore this further.

2 SOCIAL MEDIA AND #GE2015

In 2010, Labour discourse stressed the importance of winning the online battle, so counteracting Tory media advantages. In 2015, Labour stood to gain significantly from the use of digital marketing in their election campaign due to a younger supporter base, a smaller overall marketing budget than the Conservatives and the challenge of circumventing a perceived Tory bias in traditional media (Freedman 2015). However, despite Labour's large-scale engagement in social media, victories on the digital battlefield were not carried through into a victory via the polling booth. Digital approaches in both 2010 and 2015 elections do not appear to have made any significant impacts on voters, despite research into Twitter activity showing that during the election campaign Labour garnered the highest 'interactivity score' for follower interaction, reaching 443,841, compared to UKIP, Labour's nearest competitor, at 354,653, and the Conservatives with 282,335 (Lilleker 2015b). This low figure for the Conservatives may be in part due to increased caution since 2010 about their candidates' use of social media—especially in hard-fought by-elections like Corby, 2012, and Eastleigh, 2013, and in their 40/40 target seats in the run-up to 2015. Many Conservative candidates sanitized their profiles and friend lists, some placing their Facebook profiles on complete lockdown from public access and, instead, strategically used Facebook pages as generic transmission-based communication media.

2.1 *'Britain's #hashtag Election'*

In 2010, the use of social media by parties was relatively new. Between 2008 and 2010, a latent phenomenon was evolving at the grassroots of

the Conservative Party through the cultural integration of political communication, organization, and mobilization. This phenomenon was facilitated by the use of social media, particularly, Facebook, within the party's younger cohorts. Ridge-Newman (2014) names this phenomenon 'Cyber Toryism'. Wider Conservative strategic objectives were evident in Cyber Toryism, even though the central party played a relatively insignificant role in disseminating collective best practice for social media e-campaigns and political organization. It was the initiatives and innovations by individual members at the grassroots that had the greatest impact in terms of Internet-based campaigning in the Conservative Party. These innovations were generally organic and cannot be said to be strategic. Rachel Gibson (2015) refers to this trend in the democratization of participants at the political grassroots as 'citizen-initiated' campaigning competing with the professionalized and centralized approaches to party organization. In the 2015 campaign, this type of activity was observable across all political parties and at all levels, which was an extension of the social media phenomena being witnessed across British society and beyond. Ridge-Newman (2014) suggests Labour lagged behind the Conservatives in 2010 in terms of social media activity. However, Lilleker (2015b) suggests that this was reversed in the case of the two main parties' digital campaign strategies in the 2015 election.

Compared with 2010, social media use in the 2015 campaign was more normalized in terms of intra-party communication and political marketing, and as part of general daily activity. 'Britain's #hashtag election' (Habel et al. 2015; Chang 2015) saw media cross-fertilization spanning diverse media types including online, the press, and television. There was also an integration of the personal and political at both the grassroots and elite levels of discourse, leading to a more intensive culture of political engagement and celebrity politics, facilitated by Twitter. The following case studies explore the ways in which the parties engaged supporters on sites like Twitter and Facebook through inviting user-generated content via listening and contributing to conversation. The cases highlight innovations in digital communication in the context of British political campaigning.

2.2 *#JeSuisEd and #Millifandom: Grassroots Engagement*

Labour was the focus of two notable grassroots-initiated Twitter campaigns during the election campaign, #JeSuisEd and #Millifandom. These

demonstrate the importance of grassroots-driven social campaigns as expressions of collective political agency and resistance against mainstream traditional media messages. In these instances, virality within networked environments was used for collective action, but without any direct involvement or engagement from the party's official Labour social media account administrators. Ridge-Newman (2014) found similar activity evident in the Conservatives in 2010.

In 2015, the #JeSuisEd campaign took off when a Twitter user tweeted a photo of himself eating a chocolate biscuit using the hashtag #JeSuisEd (Swattermain 2015). Photos of people eating badly soon swept over Twitter with people using the meme as a protest against *The Sun's* front page coverage of Ed Milliband as unfit to lead the country based on his perceived inability to eat a bacon sandwich (Kahn-Harris 2015). The second social trend noted here was #Millifandom, which grew from support for Labour's leader among teenage girls. The #Millifandom campaign, led by 17-year-old Abby Tomlinson (@twcuddleston), featured a unique mix of irony, teenage fandom, and political activism. Tomlinson claims an anti-Miliband portrayal of the Labour leader dominated press coverage; #Millifandom was a grassroots-driven social media campaign to counter it (Jewell 2015).

These campaigns can be seen as an expression of an increasing trend towards a personalization of politics (Bennett 2012), with personal action frames, like #JeSuisEd, low barriers to identification, and participation channelled through social networks enabling individuals to become catalysts of collective action (Ridge-Newman 2014). In both cases, social media was used to circumvent and protest against a perceived anti-Labour media bias, where individuals protested without support from the party. Although these campaigns were created and shared on social media, traditional media swiftly followed them. This reporting likely served to widen engagement with the general public.

#JeSuisEd's initiator tweeted @UKLabour to ask why it took a 17-year-old and non-Labour voter to instigate these campaigns, rather than the party itself. However, the more significant question is why, once it started, Labour made little attempt to engage with this campaign and others through the party's central social media profiles. Although some senior frontbenchers like Sadiq Khan, who tweeted the hashtag, and Ed Miliband, who tweeted a message to Tomlinson, did engage to some degree, it seems central Labour strategy was to avoid integrating citizen-initiated campaigns. Consistent with Stromer-Galley's analysis of campaigns in the

USA during 1996–1998, the Internet was used to broadcast rather than to engage in deliberation with citizens. Taking the latter approach could:

Open up the possibility for ... losing control over the communication environment and losing the ability to remain ambiguous in policy positions. (Stromer-Galley 2000: 112)

This would appear to be the position Labour took, in contrast to the many corporations and non-governmental organizations who encourage participatory cultures, seek interactions, listen to online audiences, and join in repurposing content created by the public (Jenkins et al. 2013).

2.3 Broadcast Versus Listening and Engagement

Listening is an under-researched and often neglected aspect of social media marketing (Crawford 2009), which involves being attentive to what an audience is saying and responding accordingly. It is striking that these flash protests were divorced from Labour's Facebook and Twitter pages, with no Retweets or mentions of either campaign by @UKLabour, and no reference to them on Facebook—the primary social network among the UK's voters (Mander 2015: 5). In contrast, 51 of 53 posts shared on the timeline of Labour's Facebook page between 7 April and 7 May 2015 were videos, the vast majority of which were shared or repurposed content from traditional broadcast media. It suggests Labour's social media strategy was embedded in a relationship with traditional media and was unable to adapt to the dynamics of grassroots social media campaigning. Arguably the two most popular social media trends in the run-up to the election were both supportive of Labour, yet the party missed the opportunity for direct engagement. Labour strategy prioritized offline content by simply migrating it to the online environment, rather than utilizing the unique interactive features of the new medium, a common trait among parties that are adjusting to newer media environments (Gibson and Ward 2009).

On Facebook, the Conservatives also demonstrated a lack of engagement with supporters and shared few posts from supporters. Therefore, whether through deliberate strategy or lack of it, both the main parties used their social media platforms for top-down messaging, rather than to represent a plurality of voices. This raises some pertinent ques-

tions for further study: How can these personalized forms of collective political action be successfully encouraged by parties? To what extent are parties locked into a broadcast paradigm due to an emphasis on control and being the sole articulators of citizen interests? (Gibson and Ward 2009: 9). Consideration should be given to the strategic direction the parties take to direct social media engagement in subsequent national elections.

2.4 *Conversation, Broadcast, and Engagement*

Perhaps one of the most historic developments of the 2015 General Election was the SNP's unprecedented UK electoral success in Scotland, increasing their number of seats in the UK Parliament from 6 to 56. A retrospective analysis of the SNP's social media campaign strategy reveals several unique features to suggest these might have in part contributed to their election successes. Bright et al. (2015) argue that the SNP's social media presence has been built up over several years and is rooted in strong online relationships insofar that most, if not all, SNP candidates started the campaign with a Twitter account. According to research by Bright et al., in the 650 constituency campaigns fought across the UK, the SNP were the most productive with 100 tweets from SNP constituency candidates generating 10 times more mentions (1000) than 100 tweets from the Liberal Democrats. This demonstrates that the SNP's strategy of building relationships was successful in 2015, when compared with another UK minor party. An SNP new media strategist responding to this research describes the party's emphasis on conversation and relationship:

Strategically...we have been focused on building meaningful and relevant relationships with constituents (at every level of the party) for years now. As the technological approaches change and evolve—the focus on creating and nourishing these connections on the doorstep, over the phone and at the keyboard has always been consistent to the SNP approach... Everything is about relationships. In a sense, it's the personification of the SNP... trustworthy, conscientious, open and friendly. (SNP 2015)

This personification of the SNP brand character is an element of the i-branding utilized by the party, whereby brand personality can act as a

shortcut for a more complex decision-making process regarding key policy issues (Lilleker 2014).

As per the above SNP testimony, in creating a ‘trustworthy, conscientious, open, and friendly’ brand through the content, style, and accessibility of their online communication, they were able to repeatedly enhance brand value in a way that is difficult to find in the i-branding of other parties in the run-up to 2015 election. There was evidence of this in the Conservatives’ use of i-branding in WebCameron in 2010. Analysing Web 2.0 i-branding, Lilleker suggests, ‘parties have not yet fully adapted their mindset to i-branding, quite probably because for most people the party brand is established via the media and not directly with the party online...’ and ‘...for the parties, as a branding tool, the internet essentially provided nothing more than a means of expression or support beyond the garden sign or window poster’ (Lilleker 2015a: 123).

2.5 Creating Activists Through Participation

The emergence of Web 2.0 has led to a shift in the way that media content is produced and circulated:

This shift from distribution to circulation signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of pre-constructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined. (Jenkins 2008: 2)

Of the political parties investigated, the SNP most strategically utilized the potential of Web 2.0, moving beyond a broadcast model towards seeing the voting public as participants in content creation.

On 29 April, the SNP launched the #SNPbecause campaign, utilizing the user agency within social media, seeking:

to empower people to share their own reasons for voting SNP and publish them in such a way that their friends, families and colleagues would see. This created essential social proof that the tide was indeed with the SNP and acted as further encouragement to those still on the fence. (SNP 2015)

The campaign provided downloadable resources including posters, desktop wallpapers, and logos for Facebook and Twitter which gave support-

ers the opportunity to customize their profiles and public identity with the SNP. UKIP, another minor, but prominent, UK party, took a similar approach, supplying their activists and supporters with a wide range of digitized shareable visuals. The success of this is indicated by SNP and UKIP supporters in particular, prominently displaying their support on social media.

The SNP also created videos of people stating their reasons for voting SNP, which were circulated on social media. This campaign trended on Twitter in the UK on launch day. Perhaps because of the SNP's Scottish Independence agenda, and the accompanying referendum, the party's strategic approach in the run-up to 2015 election had its roots in the political market orientation model whereby the party orients its product towards its main stakeholders (Ormrod et al. 2013). In this case, the SNP was effective in its approach to utilizing social media with innovative strategies and messages that caught activists' imaginations and segments of the Scottish electorate. This emphasis on participation shows the increasing importance for practitioners in political marketing to strategically engage with citizen-initiated aspects of participatory culture in politics.

2.6 *Sturgeon and Twitter Engagement*

The SNP's focus on conversation can also be seen in the ways in which Nicola Sturgeon, the party leader, chose to use social media. Sturgeon's use of social media displays a relational, down-to-earth, and conversational strategy at the heart of the SNP. When #dollgate broke, a story with Sturgeon's childhood cruelty towards her sister's Barbie doll, Sturgeon chose to engage. She tweeted: 'For the record, I think my sister is misremembering. I'm sure it was a Sindy doll. #DollGate'. When criticism continued, she replied, '@LindaFSemple I'm not proud of it, Linda, but I've changed. My niece's dolls have never come to any harm. #DollGate'. This humorous engagement with a potentially damaging issue may be partly why Sturgeon was widely reported to be the most popular party leader on Twitter during the campaign (Herald Scotland 2015). Sturgeon's relaxed leadership style combined with innovative uses of digital media is reminiscent of Cameron's approach to WebCameron and #AskDavid in 2010 (Ridge-Newman 2014). The SNP's engagement with social media during the 2015 election was distinctive in its conversational and sometimes humorous tone. Its strategy of seeking user-generated content, and building relationships through conversation, reflects an observable shift across

many sectors where technology facilitates conversations in many-to-many networked environments (Clark and Aufderheide 2009).

3 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has explored several innovations in digital marketing strategy in the UK 2015 election and placed these approaches in context, using comparisons with the election of 2010. The more salient strategic and organizational developments of the Conservative and Labour parties have been contextualized and compared against the less salient, but highly effective, strategies of the SNP. The central Conservative and Labour parties took fairly established approaches to emulating some tried and tested business practices. These included the use of data capture techniques, personalized emailing, and a broadcast model of social media use. The Conservatives' overall digital strategy was especially innovative in comparison to earlier elections and other parties, because they performed a large national-scale coordination of personalized marketing that was segmented into narrow targeted localities, on- and offline. This can be said to be significant in terms of strategy and innovation because of its ambitious scale. This strategically uneven approach to campaigning in their key 40/40 seats assisted the Tories in achieving that unpredicted majority in Parliament.

The SNP took innovative strategies that appear to have contributed to their historic electoral advances. Their conversational approach is in stark contrast to the strategies taken by the two main parties, which opted for the more traditional broadcast style of digital campaigning. Despite the emergence of pro-Miliband campaigns on social media, unlike the SNP, the Labour largely resisted grassroots-led social media engagement. Therefore, when placing these findings in the Simmons (2008) theoretical context, the Tories' digital strategy significantly embodied the first two pillars of i-branding through their well-coordinated centralized harvesting of data for highly focused and targeted campaigns. This led to significant one-way online interaction, for example, via email and geo-targeted video, but two-way interaction was low. This is especially highlighted when compared with the SNP, which demonstrated significant two-way online interactivity and transmission of shareable party messages, which satisfies well the third and fourth pillars of i-branding. Furthermore, the SNP's approach to this appears to have built significant online trust and rap-

port, which was the most notable example of a party satisfying mutuality (Simmons 2008).

It would appear that in comparison to the Conservatives and SNP, the Labour's central strategies were less effective in all four factors of i-branding. Like the Conservatives, Labour did attempt to utilize pillars one and two through harvesting data via their website and using digital targeting tools. However, Labour's strategic innovations were not matched to the extent of those observed in the Tory campaign. The Labour grassroots' online interactivity and transmission, pillars three and four respectively, were indeed notable. However, through low engagement, Labour's central strategy missed opportunities for building greater trust and mutuality with its wider online support base. In terms of achieving electoral successes in 2020, these findings suggest that i-branding principles ought to be a central consideration for developments in parties' digital strategies in the run-up to the next general election.

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The Battle for Brighton: The View from Cyberspace

Ivor Gaber and Coral James O'Connor

In studying political marketing tactics and strategies in closely fought seats, the three seats in the City of Brighton and Hove make for a fascinating case study. As Mullen (Chap. 2) notes a key aspect of elections in the UK is the targeted campaign within the marginal constituencies, the seats most likely to change hands and so determine the election outcome. Parallel to this, however, is the campaign locally by candidates. Each of which should, theoretically, be marketing themselves as representatives of their party as well as effective representatives for the constituency within parliament. Local political marketing involves translating party policy into locally relevant messages while simultaneously promoting the individual (Lilleker 2005). The tactics involve not only a nationally co-ordinated hypermedia-based advertising and direct mail campaign, but also a more personalised communication campaign orchestrated around the candidate. The dearth of resources given to a candidate drives innovation and a focus on local media management and talking to voters on the doorsteps where practical as well as the use of social media (Fisher et al. 2011). This chapter focuses on the most visible aspect, the use of Twitter, Facebook and the local media, to assess the marketing strategies of the respective candidates

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within three neighbouring seats that became key three-way battlegrounds involving multiple parties.

The Conservatives were hugely successful in the 2015 General Election in the south of England, except for Brighton and Hove where Labour and the Greens resisted the blue surge. Brighton is well known as a popular seaside resort on England's south coast; but it is also a city of great contrasts. It has thriving IT, media, arts and entertainment sectors alongside real pockets of poverty. One in ten of the City's population is on the housing waiting list; it has one of the highest rates of people without formal educational qualifications in the country and, in terms of unemployment, is ranked 52 out of 327 local authorities.¹ In 2010, of its three seats, two—Hove and Brighton Kemptown—were held by the Conservatives whilst Brighton Pavilion had been won by Caroline Lucas for the Green Party, their first ever parliamentary seat. All three seats had winning margins in 2010 of less than 2000 and all were on Labour's list of top 30 targets.

Brighton is politically diverse, both compared to its immediate surrounds and even nationally. It is politically volatile, as the constant changes of control, both at council and Westminster level, testify. There is also a very high level of local political activism, in terms of parties and campaigning groups and so the national parties' campaigning templates tended to be sublimated to initiatives relevant to specific local circumstances. Levels of street canvassing, and other public campaigning activities, played a larger role here than in most other places. There were numerous public hustings during the campaign run by a number of groups, all of which were well attended. There was, for example, a sell-out crowd of several hundred for a hustings meeting devoted solely to discuss the candidates' attitude to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). And where else would a candidate—Caroline Lucas in this case—tell a hustings audience that she was suffering 'cognitive dissonance' after hearing a local UK Independent Party (UKIP) candidate make an impassioned plea on behalf Brighton's growing band of rough sleepers? This vibrant environment offers a perfect opportunity for the study of local political marketing.

¹ All figures taken from the English Indices of Deprivation.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015> accessed 9 October 2015.

1 THE CONTEXT

Election campaigning has become exponentially more intense in recent years, especially in those seats regarded as marginal—seats where the winning candidate at the previous election enjoyed a majority of 10% or less over the second-place candidate. Nationally partisan attachments have been in decline over the past three decades, with the British Election Study² of 2010 showing fewer than 20% of their respondents claiming to possess very strong partisan attachments, while over 35% said they finalised their voter decision during the course of the campaign.

Contemporaneously to each election, the British Election Study has been investigating ‘campaign intensity’. A review of the findings over time (Fisher et al. 2011) has established that the level of campaign intensity in seats parties look certain to win is higher than in their non-target seats but significantly less intense than it is in their targets. Campaigning is measured across a range of factors involving levels of preparation, the creation and composition of a campaign structure, the use of technology for organisation and communication, the use of telephone and face-to-face canvassing, house-to-house leafleting, direct mail, election day ‘knocking-up’ (in order to get out the vote) and, increasingly, e-campaigning. Largely these studies demonstrate that parties that campaign most intensively do gain a vote dividend (Denver et al. 2003; Fisher et al. 2011). Furthermore, voters who are contacted by a party or a candidate show a slighter higher propensity to vote for that party than those who have not been contacted (Lilleker 2005; Fisher et al. 2011: 824).

Studies have shown that independent of party, there is minimal deviation across most elements of what we might term the ‘ground war’. The campaign in the target seats is conducted more or less along similar lines, with one exception, the e-campaign. However, this e-campaigning space could be where candidates can gain a marketing edge, with some studies showing candidates, even in proportional representation systems, earning a vote dividend by proactive e-campaigning (Koc-Michalska et al. 2014). This finding has not been, to date, substantiated in the UK but this current study is suggestive of the possibility of such an effect being observable in terms of candidates’ responsiveness online. The Internet generally, and social media specifically, offers candidates a way to disseminate political and personalised messages, as well as respond to potential

²<http://bes2009-10.org/>

voters, which may prove as effective as the more traditional campaigning and marketing methods. Unlike the commercial marketplace, general political e-marketing is found to have had relatively limited impact (e.g. Coleman (2001), and Lilleker and Jackson (2010)). Yet this may depend on the extent of the use of interactive tools. Evidence from the UK suggests that the Twitter use of 19% of British candidates at the 2010 General Election involved at least an element of voter interaction (Graham et al. 2013: 710).

The general—that is, non-academic—view of Twitter, in particular and social media in general, is that it is little more than an ‘echo chamber’ (Lewis 2015 and Lynton Crosby, quoted later in this chapter). In general, users tend to participate in very limited conversations because, in the main, they only speak to, and hear from, those they are in broad agreement with (not dissimilar to the long-observed phenomenon that people tend to read the newspapers they most agree with). As a result, social media’s potential to act as a genuine space for political interaction—as an electronic public sphere—seems severely limited. Intriguingly, some recent US research appears to suggest that this ‘echo chamber’ effect only applies when users are engaged in discussions that are specifically ‘political’ and that when the interactions cover other issues users will interact with a wider range of people, with little or no attention paid to the perceived ideological leanings of their interlocutors (Barberá et al. 2015).

One context in which Twitter might be a tool that could make a key difference is election campaigning, in that party supporters can, if they wish, become ‘co-producers’ of the campaign, or at least of its messaging (Jensen 2015)—although, as indicated later, this can be a double-edged sword. The national election campaigns are top-down affairs dominated by notions of ‘command and control’ in which party supporters are required to follow a set of centrally determined activities: party followers may be asked to like and share content to extend the reach of campaign communication (Norris and Curtice 2008), but are seldom encouraged to co-create campaign material (Lilleker 2013). Hence, parties at a national level continue to fail to exploit the sender/receiver duality that Castells (2009) identified as the crucial nexus of the ‘networked society’. Yet, within marginal constituencies, the interactive affordances of social media may provide opportunities for candidates seeking to market themselves.

A candidate can adapt communication to sell party messages, tailor party communication to resonate locally and generally demonstrate the impression of being an effective representative and establish their own

‘authenticity’ (Enli 2015). Enli characterises politicians as attempting to establish their own ‘ordinariness’ by allowing voters glimpses from the private sphere (Enli 2015). Politicians tend to believe that it is these glimpses that appeal to those voters who are not particularly interested in politics, those who might be crucial targets for communication in the marginal seats. One candidate in Brighton and Hove commented: ‘Tweeting about “normal” things like baking, music or running tended to be more likely to get engagement from non-politicos.’³

Hence, running alongside the more traditional aspects of local campaigning, we would expect local candidates to exploit as many of the affordances of social media as possible in order to gain an edge over their competitors and, in theory and applying the *ceteris paribus* principle, for the candidate with the best overall campaign to win the contest (Denver and Hands 1992; Fisher et al. 2011).

2 THE CONSTITUENCIES

The Brighton Pavilion seat contains many of Brighton’s attractions, and in 2010 elected Britain’s first and only Green Member of Parliament, Caroline Lucas. Her fight to retain her seat, unsurprisingly, attracted much national media attention. Nonetheless, she fought a resolutely local campaign; indeed, she stepped down from the leadership of her party after being elected precisely to undertake this task, and throughout the 5 years of her first-term incumbency maintained a very active local profile.

Her campaign should have been given a major boost in 2011 when Brighton elected Britain’s first-ever Green-led council. But the Greens did not win an overall majority on the Council and thus had a difficult time in power, culminating in a prolonged dispute with the city’s refuse workers whose strikes and work-to-rules left residents angry at the overflowing bins and rubbish in the streets. The Green Council was not helped when it was revealed that the city had one of the UK’s worst local government re-cycling records. Lucas, thus, trod a careful path. She never spoke out against the Council, but rarely spoke loudly in their defence. Her supporters distanced themselves from the Council by campaigning under the banner ‘Team Caroline’. Inevitably, given Lucas’s national profile, the Pavilion seat had disproportionate share of media coverage compared to the other seats in Brighton. Opposing Lucas for Labour was Purna Sen.

³ Post-election email communication.

The Greens claimed Labour were so anxious to take the seat that they had activists ‘bussed in’ en masse from outside the area—ignoring the potentially more winnable neighbouring seats of Kemptown and Hove. This claim was subsequently denied by a senior Labour source in Brighton who said that the majority of their campaigning effort had been devoted to winning Kemptown and Hove.⁴

However, Labour did focus much of its campaign on the alleged deficiencies of the Green-controlled council, rather than Lucas herself, recognising her personal standing in the constituency. The Conservatives also fielded a relatively high-profile candidate in Pavilion, in the form of former British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) TV reporter Clarence Mitchell who had been a spokesman for the parents of the abducted 4-year-old Madeleine McCann. Although they had come within 4000 votes of Lucas in 2010, they were rarely in the 2015 race. In the event Lucas won the seat with an impressive 10.5% swing and 8000 majority, making it a relatively safe seat next time round.

Kemptown is well known for its large gay and bohemian community but the majority of the constituency consists of its wealthier East Sussex hinterland; the constituency also takes in two large council-owned housing estates and, with one in six of its constituents of pensionable age, it belies the youthful image associated with its name. In 2010, it was won for the Conservatives by local businessman Simon Kirby with a majority over Labour of just 1300. In 2015, this was—more or less—a straight fight between Labour and the Conservatives.

Kirby, who had been an active MP, ignored Twitter in his campaign but used his Facebook site to focus on local issues and on his record, devoting very little attention to the Conservative’s national campaign. Kirby’s challenger was Nancy Platts, a well-known local Labour activist having fought the Brighton Pavilion seat in 2010. Platts had a professional background in campaigning and community activism and with the Brighton Labour party numerically strong and well-organised Labour, needing just a 3.1% swing to take the seat, thought it was well-placed to win. In the event they didn’t, achieving a swing of just 1.5% reducing Kirby’s majority to 690. The campaign itself never really caught fire and turnout was down 5% from the previous election—the lowest turnout of the three constituencies.

The Hove constituency is seen as the classic bell-weather—‘If you can win in Hove, on the evidence of every election since 1979, Downing

⁴ Post-election private conversation.

Street is very likely to be yours’, a Guardian journalist (wrongly) observed. However, despite its genteel reputation, Hove takes in the less affluent areas around the town and neighbouring Portslade. It had been Labour between 1997 and 2005 but was won for the Conservatives in 2010 by Mike Weatherley with a majority of 1868. However, owing to ill-health he did not contest the seat in 2010 and in his place the Tories fielded recently retired police officer, Graham Cox. Labour’s candidate Peter Kyle—a charity worker and former Labour Special Adviser—ran an energetic and well-organised campaign with a clear strategic plan. He, more than most, engaged with social media users. He won by just over a thousand votes on a 9.3% swing with a majority of more than 1200, Labour’s best result across the South.

UKIP was not a significant player in Brighton and Hove and although it did improve its share of the vote—up 6.6% in Brighton Kemptown, 3.2% in Brighton Pavilion and 3.8% in Hove—in national terms this was a disappointing performance. The Liberal Democrats have never had a strong presence and the election saw a further weakening in their position, losing vote share by 11% in Kemptown and Pavilion and 19% in Hove.

3 THE CAMPAIGN ON TWITTER

During the course of the campaign all the Twitter feeds emanating from the five main parties—Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, UKIP and the Greens—were followed from 31 March to 7 May. We monitored the overall number of tweets from each candidate and their local parties (Table 8.1). (Based on pre-campaign research we decided that no meaningful distinction could be drawn between the two.) It shows that Labour and the Greens were the most prolific users of Twitter (particularly in the case of the Green candidate in Hove—Chris Hawtree—who whilst standing no chance of winning was a prolific tweeter) and with UKIP and the Liberal Democrats tweeting the least.

Table 8.1 Total number of tweets sent 31 March–7 May

	<i>Con</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Lib Dem</i>	<i>Green</i>	<i>UKIP</i>
Pavilion	419	336	32	678	54
Kemptown	1	490	29	452	–
Hove	191	153	–	773	–

Table 8.2 Twitter reply rates of candidates tweeting at least 100 times

	<i>Con (%)</i>	<i>Lab (%)</i>	<i>Green (%)</i>
Pavilion	30	40	28
Kempton	–	30	42
Hove	44	69	60

The most obvious question to address is whether any relationship could be observed between tweets sent and electoral success. During the 2012 mid-term elections in the USA, researchers Di Grazia et al. (2013) found a direct correlation (but not necessarily direct causation) between Twitter activity and electoral performance: Republican candidate name-mentions correlated with the Republican vote margin, a finding that persisted even when accounting for all relevant variables, including incumbency, district partisanship, media coverage, time and demographic variables. The Brighton and Hove results indicate no similar correlation. Indeed, the Conservative candidate who sent the most tweets (Clarence Mitchell in Pavilion) was their least electorally successful candidate and the one who sent just one, achieved their best result (Simon Kirby in Kempton). Similarly, Labour's only winning candidate (Peter Kyle in Hove) was the least frequent communicator (not that we are suggesting an inverse relationship between tweets and electoral performance).

However, on closer inspection a more nuanced picture emerges. One of the key aspects of Twitter is its interactivity and one simple measure of this is to look at the candidates 'reply rate'; that is, what percentage of their outgoing tweets were replies to specific tweeters. Table 8.2 shows reply rates for those that tweeted at least 100 times during the campaign.

Using this measure we see Peter Kyle, whilst not being among the most prolific tweeters, did have the highest reply rate. Interestingly, the three parties' rates of reply to incoming tweets were approximately the same, ranging between the Conservatives on 37%, the Greens on 43% and Labour on 46%. This provides some support for the view that activity by one candidate in a campaign often stimulates similar levels of activity by the others.⁵

We also looked at the specific campaign topics that candidates were tweeting about (Table 8.3). UKIP and the Liberal Democrats were excluded from this analysis because none of their candidates reached our 100 tweet

⁵ For a fuller discussion of this finding, see Gaber (2015).

Table 8.3 Issue agendas of the three parties making most use of Twitter

<i>Con</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Green</i>
Education	Health	Economy
Economy	Economy	Health
Crime	Education	Environment
Health	Housing	Education
Housing	Crime	Transport

Table 8.4 The issue agendas on Twitter and the media locally and national public opinion

<i>Brighton twitter</i>	<i>Brighton media</i>	<i>Public opinion (national)</i>
Economy	Environment	Economy
Health	Housing	EU/immigration
Education=	Local government	Health
Environment=	Transport	Welfare
Crime	Health	Housing

threshold. We found that both Labour and the Greens focused on health and the economy, reflecting the marketing strategy of their parties nationally. The Conservatives' most tweeted topic was education, probably reflecting the fact that elections to Brighton and Hove City Council were taking place at the same time. This also probably accounts for the presence of housing in the top five for Labour and the Conservatives. Perhaps it is surprising that the environment, as a subject, was only the third-most-tweeted topic by the Greens and attracted virtually no attention from the other two parties.

We also looked at how the overall Twitter conversation—that is all Twitter traffic, not just outgoing from the parties—compared to those of the local media and public opinion (as measured nationally by YouGov). As Table 8.4 illustrates the topic that attracted the most attention was the economy, which was also the public's top issue. But in the local media, the environment—probably reflecting the newsworthiness of Caroline Lucas and her success at setting the local news agenda—was the most talked about topic, despite the relative lack of interest demonstrated by the parties. This was followed by two local government issues—housing and local government itself. The economy was probably absent from the local media's top five items because, in general terms, economic issues tend to be related to the national debate whilst the local media placed more emphasis on local politics. Conversely, we find economy the top topic on

Twitter, suggesting that on this issue the national, rather than local, marketing strategy predominated.

4 THE CAMPAIGN ON FACEBOOK

Of all the party's public Facebook pages, it was a particular Conservative site that had the most local content. City-wide the Tories neglected their Facebook site—the last recorded post being May 2014—but Simon Kirby in Kempton was, digitally, the local candidate par excellence. On his own site, Brighton Kempton Conservatives, he promoted himself and his candidature, trading heavily on his past 5 years as the incumbent. His posts fell broadly into two categories. First those highlighting Kirby the campaigner, for example: 'The fourth of my proudest achievements during my 5 years as the Member of Parliament for Brighton Kempton and Peacehaven has been my work to help save, and ongoing work to see the restoration of the Saltdean Lido.' The other category was his pledges for the future:

The third of my pledges to the people of Brighton Kempton and Peacehaven is to continue to fight against unauthorised traveller encampments. Each summer we see a continual game of "cat-and-mouse" as the Council and Police move along unauthorised traveller encampments, with the Council Tax-paying residents picking up the bill.

Kirby's campaign was notable for its almost total dearth of national messages. There were just two 'national' posts, both about ministerial visits. In a marginal constituency, facing a strong Labour opposition, this was a clearly well-designed marketing strategy which, when combined with his regular monthly news updates delivered to local residents, effectively asked voters to support Simon Kirby personally, rather than the Conservatives nationally. The Conservative candidates in Hove and Brighton Pavilion made no personal use of their public Facebook pages.

Labour used Facebook to broadcast the party's national and local messages. Peter Kyle, the Hove candidate, and Nancy Platts, in Kempton, were both visibly active on Facebook but under the umbrella of the Brighton and Hove Labour Party pages. For example, a member of the public raised the following with Platts:

people on low income like my family can't get a private rented property without a guarantor. Basically all people on any sort of benefit seem to get

tarred with that old brush that the rent won't get paid etc. I ask is there any way for the Labour party to address this situation?

The Party, replying on Platts's behalf, posted: 'That's a really good point... we will take it up with our Housing team and get back to you.'

The Greens tended to use their site more for broadcasting than for conversation. They posted a great deal of material, mainly relating to the national campaign featuring Caroline Lucas and, to a lesser extent, party leader Natalie Bennett. Their candidates in Kemptown and Hove, like their local government candidates, received no mentions. Their site used video, posters, articles and comments, in equal measure. Their video content tended to be more unusual than the other parties—including their much-viewed election broadcast featuring a boy-band looking remarkably like the other party leaders—but basically reinforced the national marketing. The emphasis on 'celebrity' was very visible on their Facebook pages, although not always with as much success as they might have wished, as this exchange demonstrates: Comedian, actor and writer Robin Ince would like to see more Greens in politics:

because I think we will see a return to the idea of the importance of things like community and perhaps less importance for a minority of people having large individual profits. Agree with Robin? Pledge your vote to the Green Party here:

To which one resident (presumably) replied:

If you knew how badly this Party has ruined Brighton you would think twice Robin Ince. The Housing for homeless people in Brighton is worse now than it has ever been.

UKIP's Facebook approach was the most 'scattergun', posting a slew of national messages, presumably in the hope that something might impact locally. They 'scatter' posted videos, podcasts, posters, linked articles and comments, all of which gave it a sense of being active and up-to-date. Their video content consisted almost exclusively of clips from TV appearances of party leader, Nigel Farage and, on occasion, other UKIP national figures. They also uploaded election broadcasts and video or audio messages from Farage. The only times they appeared to respond was when asked directly about where UKIP window posters

could be obtained. In the main, their postings were simply descriptive such as:

Excellent and positive Action Day in Central Hove Ward today. Well attended, good reception from the public, signed up several new members and supporters, and great response to our planned final Action Day next week before the Elections

or 'Thank you to everyone who came and supported us in George Street and on Church Road today'. Their followers rarely asked questions, just posted support and 'likes'. They also received more abusive posts than other parties which they did not respond to. UKIP was the only party to go negative in its use of Facebook during the short campaign. Their strategy was to post news items that questioned the government's record and Labour's alternative policies. UKIP clearly lacked a coherent, localised political marketing strategy. As for the Liberal Democrats they appeared to show little interest in Facebook, their 'latest' posts being made on 15 March with no updates throughout the whole campaign.

For all parties Facebook was mainly used as follows (in order of popularity):

- To highlight the virtues of the candidates standing, frequently in the form of posters and photos.
- To speak positively about their own campaign and themselves, very rarely speaking of the other parties (except in the case of UKIP)
- To get the vote out, with a good deal of focus on registering voters particularly by the Greens and Labour.
- For UKIP and the Greens to post videos of party leaders, manifestoes and party political broadcasts. No such videos were posted on the Labour and the Conservative sites.
- To respond to questions—mainly done by Labour and the Greens (there were no questions posted to Simon Kirby, the lone Tory active on Facebook and most questions were ignored by UKIP)
- To set the record straight, mainly in the case of the Green's, with regard to the record of the local council.

Contextualising these within local political marketing, we find some candidate-centred marketing, though with some focused on amplifying

national messages rather than making them locally salient. Although some candidates used the affordances effectively to market their record, to distance themselves from negative local or national party associations and, as Lilleker (2005) found with local Labour candidates in 2005, to promote themselves as responsive, local representatives.

5 NON-PARTY CAMPAIGNERS

During the campaign the party faithfully canvassed, leafleted and turned up dutifully whenever a party ‘star’ made an appearance; but for the rest of the population, despite Brighton’s high levels of activism, the campaign never really caught fire. We monitored the Facebook pages of 35 local campaigning groups. Of these, 15 made no mention of the election at all, 13 mentioned the campaign five times or less, leaving just seven that engaged relatively consistently with the election. One of these (Frack Free Sussex) posted late and was only engaged around a specific event.

The active seven, after a slow start, began to show more interest towards the second half of the campaign. By the last ten days, activists who had not previously commented on the election were beginning to post. Most campaign activity came from groups on the left of the political spectrum. Local groups and community associations displayed little interest in the campaign.

Across Facebook the National Health Service (NHS) and austerity were among the most discussed items, generally couched in national rather than in local terms. There were very few mentions of local candidates (Lucas being the exception). However, the single biggest issue in terms of general posts was housing, a particular issue in Brighton. These posts were one of three main types. Firstly, more direct action-orientated groups such as ‘Love Activists’ who were looking for sleeping equipment to distribute to the homeless in Brighton and the ‘Junk Food Project’ who sought unwanted food supplies for distribution. Secondly, non-party political activists such as ‘Living Rent’ organised attendance at hustings, responded in detail to the housing plans laid out in the Conservative manifesto and shared links to other sources of information. Finally, following the release of the Tory manifesto, other groups, such as the ‘Free University Brighton’, shared the housing-related posts of other groups. Group pages were not joined or interacted with by any of the candidates.

6 THE SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN: THE VIEW FROM THE CANDIDATES AND JOURNALISTS

We surveyed local candidates across the city. None saw social media as the most important element of their campaigning, and all said Facebook, was the most useful platform. They reported that receiving reactions on the doorstep to Facebook postings was far more common than receiving reactions to postings on Twitter. But some did find Twitter was a better way of gaining attention from the traditional media compared to sending out press releases: ‘... it helped me get the odd quote into articles that might not otherwise have happened’⁶ said one, whilst another said Twitter had been a useful campaigning tool:

it showed we were ‘on the ball’ on topical issues as they broke and had something to say—it also led to many “re-tweets” showing the level of support for our policies.

Candidates from Labour and Conservatives saw only marginal benefits in using Twitter; one describing it as ‘moderately important ... it was useful for rebutting inaccurate accusations by opposition candidates.’ But Twitter could also cause candidates problems since it gave grounds for their opponents to attack them, based on ‘unauthorised’ tweets by supporters who had, perhaps inaccurately, sought to represent their views.

All the local journalists we spoke to said they treated Twitter posts with some caution. It was useful for alerting them to breaking news but, as one put it: ‘We do not simply want to become a Twitter conduit. However sometimes needs must.’⁷ Journalists who did make more extensive use of it tended to rely on Twitter accounts they were familiar with, rather than just picking up stories from random tweets. One editor told us:

Twitter has a place in the long list of useful news sources but my diary, my phone and my inbox remain much more useful. I tend to use Twitter and Facebook for supporting information and as channels to transmit headlines, links and other information about stories on our website.

Another local journalist said that whilst they kept social media under constant review, in his opinion it had little impact on the mainstream local

⁶All quotes from email communications with candidates.

⁷All quotes from email communications with local journalists and editors.

media, an observation borne out as we identified just three stories in the mainstream media, across the 6 weeks of the campaign that mentioned social media in the context of the election. The journalist went on to suggest that if there was any cross-fertilisation between the mainstream and social media, most of the traffic went in the other direction, that is, social media was dependent on the local media for much of its news content.

Another journalist downplayed the potential for social media to engage the wider public:

Candidates took great delight in saying they were followed by x thousand number of people. But those were often largely made up of supporters and advocates, in addition to a few opponents... In short, social media has become little bit like a glorified hustings but on a mass scale where those who are involved in it are those who are already engaged.

This supports the longstanding hypothesis that social media usage by political parties tends to preach more to the converted than being a tool for persuasion.

The journalists we spoke to thought that the local candidates, in general, made good use of social media. One added, ‘Social media had made politicians more accessible not just to themselves but also to local campaigning group as well as to journalists.’ Summing up a journalist said:

Social media was a bit of a blur with lots of noise but not much of it having any form of coherence or structure... I would say that it’s journalists who add colour to these situations—picking out what’s important and presenting it in a consumable form to viewers/readers.

7 CONCLUSION

Overall, the national election campaign had relatively little impact on the campaigns in Brighton and Hove. For example, the Conservatives made little attempt to focus on Miliband and the threat of him leading a coalition government dominated by the Scottish National Party. None of the national posters that focused on this issue were seen around Brighton and Hove, either on poster sites or on Facebook pages. Similarly Labour’s campaign in the three seats tended to be very locally focused with emphasis on issues such as the local hospitals, rather than the NHS generally,

dominating. And the Greens made sure that people knew they were voting for Caroline Lucas, not necessarily the Green Party. So in sum, as this chapter suggested at the outset, the Battle for Brighton was a unique one, fought differently from the national campaigns and with very different outcomes. Hence it would appear that local political marketing strategies were successful, in particular for candidates with a clearly localised platform and who made themselves accessible; although the margins here are narrow.

The highly personalised strategy of Lucas and Kirby, in particular, focused on their record and themselves as the product; in comparison, many of the losing candidates saw the local campaign as an appropriate platform to reinforce national messages. Social media was mainly employed to preach directly to the converted, to recruit them as activists and to promote their locally relevant messages. While these messages may have largely circulated around an echo chamber, this tactic may have played a part in firming up support. In the marginal seats every vote counts, any piece of communication can win over a single voter and hence for Lucas and Kirby e-marketing may have helped them overcome local and national party image problems. It is a picture that is likely to have been replicated in other constituencies, with candidates utilising the full multi-media environment to chase down every vote. And it is possible, those candidates whose campaigns were highly personalised, locally focused and interactive may have won a vote share slightly over and above that which national and regional swings might have suggested. Winning those few crucial extra votes could well have made all the difference between electoral success and failure. Election outcomes are often determined by the narrowest of factors and that might well have been the case in the Brighton and Hove seats in 2015.

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Lessons for Political Marketing from 2015

Darren G. Lilleker and Mark Pack

Usually, the talk after an election is of winners and losers. Unusually, however, the UK general election of May 2015 offers up three categories of political parties: the winners, the losers and those who missed out.

Most obviously, the Conservatives won. Yet their shock victory, and the return to single-party government, produced a sliver of a majority of just 12. A combination of by-election defeats, defections and malcontents need adds up to only half a dozen in order to wipe it out. The very fragility of the majority, even in the face of a 6.5% lead in the popular vote, shows how the return to single-party government may well be an aberration and the predictions of this being the age of hung parliaments proven correct.

The warning in this for those analysing Conservative political marketing is not to assume that the headline surprise victory necessarily means a political marketing operation that was far better than that of its rivals.

The other winners were the Scottish National Party (SNP) which, whether counted in terms of votes or seats, undoubtedly won a massive

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victory in Scotland. The dramatic rise of the SNP suggests that here successful political marketing had a major role, for it happened far too swiftly for wider social, economic or demographic trends to be able to be the full story. But as the SNP's breakthrough in the polls had already taken place before the formal general election campaign started, this points to political marketing's impact having taken place well in advance of the formal campaign—another warning lesson given how often political science research concentrates on the final few weeks.

Turning to the losers, the question of longer-term factors predominates again, the Liberal Democrats starting shedding votes from the moment the party went into coalition in 2010. The party rapidly sank in the polls over the summer of 2010 to a little above one-third of its May 2010 result and stayed roughly there throughout the parliament. Perhaps a better general election campaign would have given the party 20 or 30 seats rather than 8, but the overall story was one of defeat caused by events long before polling day too. The political marketing of the Rose Garden, where Clegg and Cameron presented themselves as a united coalition, is a better place to look than that of the party's general election manifesto, for example.

For Labour, the question of whether its fate was really settled long in advance is more debatable as it had high hopes right up until—and indeed after—10 pm on polling day itself. Yet again the deeper weaknesses that sank Labour look to be further in the past—the marketing (by the Tories in particular) of the previous Labour government's economic record and the failure of Ed Miliband to become a popular leader or credible prime minister.

As for that unusual third group—those who neither won nor lost but rather missed out—the Greens, Plaid and UKIP all at times close to polling day looked to have a strong chance of a political breakthrough, and all ended up surviving the election with their electoral strength little changed from before. Here too it is debatable how far in the past the causes of those failures to take their opportunities lie, though again at least some of their movements in support were too swift to simply be put down to long-term factors.

This mixed picture, with the emphasis on the fate of parties being set well before the election campaign itself, is reflected in Mullen's opening chapter, which rightly demonstrates that it is usually long-term political marketing that wins elections, and not short-term campaign tactics.

The Conservative campaign for the 2015 election started as soon as the 2010 election was over. The mission was simple: lead on economic

credibility, publicise all success stories and attack Labour as having caused the last crisis. As the general election neared, they also lighted on a further message—fear of a hung parliament in which Labour looked to support from Sinn Fein and, especially, the SNP.

David Cameron’s party highly efficiently applied the mantra of its election supremo Lynton Crosby: “At its absolute simplest, a campaign is simply finding out who will decide the outcome ... where are they, what matters to them, and how do you reach them?” By the time of the election campaign, the Conservatives ramped up the transmission of core messages and employed a range of attacks delivered through data-driven targeting, but these were all playing into a long-set political frame: competent Conservatives versus weak and failed Labour.

Hence as we focus on the aspects of the campaign, we find this political frame central to the Conservative political marketing. White shows how the party had the winning manifesto: “brand focused... on its self-proclaimed economic competence. It defined the debate on the deficit early in the 2010–2015 parliament and, as such, all parties to a greater or lesser degree had to discuss this issue on the Conservatives’ terrain. This, in turn, established [or confirmed] economic competence as the most important issue in the election”.

White does raise an important side-point about how voters viewed manifestos. The talk of a coalition being unavoidable, thanks to the opinion polls being so close, may have led to voters voting Conservative with the expectation that, as in 2010, their power would be restrained. He argues, perhaps contentiously, that “many people went to bed on the night of 7 May with the expectation that the manifesto policies that they voted for would be diluted in coalition negotiations”.

A similar logic would also apply to how voters viewed the manifestos of other parties, but in all cases there is a question as to whether voters really get into the details of politics enough to make such subtle judgements on the minutiae of election manifestos. In an era of low political interest and engagement, parties must distil messages to reach and persuade voters who might vote for them if pushed but do not want to think too much about politics or take much time out to learn more about it.

Campbell and Lee’s chapter focuses on online political posters to offer insights into how parties used this particular channel to maximise the potential for accidental exposure to their messages, looking both to harden the resolve of their potential supporters and to convert latent supporters to activists.

The challenge with studying the online campaign is that it is hard to gauge effectiveness for two reasons. First, many of the key metrics which would normally be used to evaluate a marketing campaign are kept secret by political parties. Even basic information such as total marketing spend on individual campaigns is surrounded by fog. Second, some of this marketing is on public display to be analysed by political marketing practitioners, but much is hidden away by segmentation, such as ads only visible to the residents of certain constituencies or emails only sent to voters of a particular gender.

For academia this is a significant challenge as we are able to determine strategy—especially thanks to the willingness of party practitioners to be more frank after an election¹—but remain unable to isolate effects due to the lack of certainty over details. However, what we can conclude from what is known is that parties were keen to start their marketing activities well in advance of the formal election campaign, wisely so given the timing points discussed above, and moreover to exploit new technologies to deliver simple, often negative, messages directly to the computer screens.

The wider communication environment saw, as Dermody states, “a contest between the credibility of leaders in almost presidential style—an emotive-cognitive appraisal of the battle between David Cameron and Ed Miliband”. Dermody shows that advertising tended to offer “instant gratification of consumers’ primeval human instincts, for example, attack ads declaring ‘don’t vote for them, you will pay more tax’”. Her work reinforces the arguments of Campbell and Lee, demonstrating how campaign communication was simplified to appeal to a consumerist way of thinking about elections.

Dermody raises an interesting point that is pertinent to the power of simple message appeals. She argues that in the digital environment, the power of message control is slipping away from parties and it may increasingly be users who define brands and tell the stories that gain traction. Whether this is solely down to the digital environment is a question raised by the experience of the Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems). The popular image of them on social media, featuring tuition fees and broken promises, was

¹ See, for example, “2015 really was the first digital general election: here are 7 lessons you should know” by Craig Elder and Tom Edmonds, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 July 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/11757682/2015-really-was-the-first-digital-general-election-here-are-7-lessons-you-should-know.html>. Elder and Edmonds worked at Conservative Party HQ for the 2015 general election.

very different from the image the party was trying to portray. This in part reinforces Dermody's argument, but only in part because it seems implausible to put this disjunction between message and brand image down solely or even primarily to the digital world.

What the Lib Dem experience does certainly do, however, is illustrate how ineffective marketing that is predicated on logical recitation of facts can be in the face of strong emotional resistance. Listing numerous Lib Dem policy achievements did not cut through.²

Much of the emotive–cognitive battle waged by all parties was fought out through media management. Yet, as Lilleker's chapter shows, there are important constraints on the scope for media management by political parties. These come from the combination of the bias of some newspapers and the rules of balance for television news. In their own contrasting ways, these factors greatly limit the scope for party media management to have an impact. If media management is important, then the implication of his chapter is that it is the media management of newspaper owners and media regulators which matters most. A weak press release will get well covered by a friendly newspaper; a strong press release will get monstered by a hostile newspaper.

However, as Lilleker also shows, that does not mean political party media management is pointless. It is rather a tough, constrained fight. In a close election every effort has the potential to matter and to matter across longer political timescales, media management to influence those constraints is an important area to understand better. Again we return to the importance of the long-term strategy and the courting of print media by David Cameron from his election as party leader is a symptom of that strategy; the coverage during the contest may have shaped the result.

Social media has been argued to have the power to counter bias in mainstream news media, giving the marginalised parties a direct communication route to voters, yet this necessitates an effective digital branding strategy. Although also showing the use of differing approaches pays dividends, Ridge-Newman and Mitchell find the two election winners, the Conservatives and the SNP, as having the more innovative and sophisticated online campaigns. By contrast, "Labour's central strategy missed opportunities for building greater trust and mutuality with its

²Even though, in fact, the hit rate for the policies on the front of the 2010 Liberal Democrat general election manifesto was rather high at 3.5 out of 4: <http://www.markpack.org.uk/130977/how-much-influence-have-the-lib-dems-had-in-the-coalition/>

wider online support-base". Their chapter hints that not only did Labour fail in long-term political marketing but also any innovations pursued during the election campaign itself were ill-equipped to reverse their fortunes.

Locally, in the marginal seats, candidates also attempted to leverage social media but appeared to lack a clear strategy for doing so. Gaber and O'Connor show that here the campaign largely failed to translate national policies into locally salient messages and it became more about visibility than interactivity.

Overall, then while the Conservatives had a textbook political marketing strategy that emerged as Cameron was elected leader and paved the way for the party's partial victory in 2010 and full victory in 2015, we could also argue that the 2015 contest was won more by a failure in marketing than one party excelling. Labour failed to develop an alternative narrative around the recession, instead allowing opponents to place the full blame at the door of Gordon Brown and his ministers. Equally Ed Miliband was quickly branded as extreme, geeky and weird, and it seems there was insufficient effort made in altering these negative perceptions until too late. Whilst Cameron offered up photo opportunities such as 'hugging' huskies early in his leadership, for Ed Miliband the memorable early photograph was of him and his brother, with all the disloyalty subtext that went with the emotional baggage.

Tactical errors in Labour's prominence in the cross-party NO to Scottish independence campaign, which left it associated with the Conservatives and hostage to reforms only the coalition could deliver, led to the party facing an attack on two fronts. In England, they were the party of economic failure and their leader lacked credibility; in Scotland, they had been replaced as the party of the Scottish by the SNP. Labour failed to develop any coherent marketing strategy to shift the parameters of debate, and Conservative problems such as the early 'Omnishambles Budget' seemed to slip from voter consciousness with Labour failing to capitalise in short term or long term.

The Conservatives played a long game and played it safe. Cameron and Osborne established a narrative around economic competence and, despite various re-appraisals of the UK rating, managed to be perceived as more credible than the alternatives. Playing up every success contributed to the sense that the coalition plan was working. The alternative strategy lacked sufficient differentiation, being criticised within the party as Conservative-lite, and so the voters were not given clear reasons to vote for change. The Conservative message was consolidation, asking voters to

let them get on with the job. The Labour message, by contrast, neither fully defended nor repudiated their past record and was continually under tension from those who wished to move further to the centre and those who wished to move to the left.

A key aspect of consolidation that might have been a deciding factor was the fear campaign the Conservatives launched. Arguably this was important for firming up the decisions of voters who were uncertain about the proposed cuts which were part and parcel of austerity measures. Miliband's lack of personal and managerial credibility meant attacks reinforcing his weaknesses resonated with voters. Whether the threat of an SNP takeover of government was real or not, that voters thought it was possible and would destabilise the UK economy might have been crucial. Therefore the long pre-campaign framing of the debate, a safe national campaign, the targeting of voters in the 80 target constituencies to increase uncertainty about voting for alternative parties, and the largely supportive media, gave the Conservatives just the amount of seats required to have a working parliamentary majority.

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