Constituency Campaigning at the 2015 General Election

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The context of the 2015 general election suggested that the electoral impact of parties' constituency campaigns could vary as a consequence in particular of the relative unpopularity of the Liberal Democrats. Using data from a survey of election agents, this paper analyses how the main GB level political parties adapted the intensity of their constituency level campaign's to ensure that to varying degrees they produced positive electoral payoffs. It further analyses the electoral effects of face-to-face campaigning and e-campaigning at constituency level and shows that while e-campaigning has grown in importance, face-to-face campaigning continues to deliver stronger electoral benefits. Overall, the 2015 election illustrated that intense constituency level campaigning continues to be electorally beneficial for all the parties, but that this was the election when the Conservative Party became genuinely effective in terms of the delivery of electoral payoffs.

The results in this paper are preliminary

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Abstract

The context of the 2015 general election suggested that the electoral impact of parties' constituency campaigns could vary as a consequence in particular of the relative unpopularity of the Liberal Democrats. Using data from a survey of election agents, this paper analyses how the main GB level political parties adapted the intensity of their constituency level campaign's to ensure that to varying degrees they produced positive electoral payoffs. It further analyses the electoral effects of face-to-face campaigning and e-campaigning at constituency level and shows that while e-campaigning has grown in importance, face-to-face campaigning continues to deliver stronger electoral benefits. Overall, the 2015 election illustrated that intense constituency level campaigning continues to be electorally beneficial for all the parties, but that this was the election when the Conservative Party became genuinely effective in terms of the delivery of electoral payoffs.

Introduction

Constituency level campaigning has become crucial to the electoral strategies of all the principal parties in Britain, and a significant academic literature has demonstrated that if effectively deployed, more intense campaigning at the constituency level can deliver electoral payoffs (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart & Whiteley, 2004, 2009; Whiteley & Seyd, 1994; Whiteley, Clarke, Sanders & Stewart, 2013; Johnston, 1987; Pattie, Johnston & Fieldhouse, 1995; Denver & Hands, 1997; Denver, Hands, Fisher & McAllister, 2003; Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2009; Fisher, Cutts & Fieldhouse, 2011a; Johnston and Pattie, 2014). Comparative studies, using a variety of approaches, tend to show similar patterns (Gerber & Green, 2000; Karp, Banducci & Bowler, 2007; Hillygus, 2005; Marsh, 2004, Carty & Eagles, 1999).

Although all elections differ to an extent, the 2015 general election was a potentially fascinating one in respect of measuring the impact of campaigns. First, unlike previous elections in the post-war era, there was no single incumbent – the 2010 general election produced a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. As a result, any effects of punishment and reward would be less clear cut – both where the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were the principal parties in constituency contests and in places

where the anti-Conservative vote was split between the Liberal Democrats and other parties. In addition, these circumstances raised the spectre of how candidates from parties that had been in coalition in government, would compete against each other.

Second, in the period between the 2010 and 2015 elections, UKIP looked to be becoming a more significant electoral force. While it fielded 558 candidates in the 2010 election, it only averaged 3.5% of the vote in the seats where it stood (which still represented a record for a minor party). After 2010, the party secured its first two parliamentary seats in by-elections and secured the highest share of the vote (27.5%) and largest number of seats in the 2014 European Elections. It also regularly outpolled the Liberal Democrats after early 2013. In 2015, UKIP stood in 624 of the 632 constituencies in Britain. As a consequence, the main GB parties were likely to find themselves fighting constituencies on more than one front in a number of constituencies – the party's principal opponent together with UKIP. Up to a point, the same was true in respect of the Greens, who won a seat in 2010 and stood in 573 seats compared with 335 in 2010. However, unlike UKIP, the party did not experience the same level of momentum either in terms of opinion poll ratings or election successes.

Third, the 2014 independence referendum in Scotland had a clear effect on the electoral landscape, there. Although the pro-independence side lost the referendum, the positive impact of SNP poll ratings was very significant, thus potentially inhibiting the effectiveness of the pro-union parties' campaigns. Again, while the SNP's strong electoral activity previously focussed on a minority of seats (the six the party held being the principal ones), the post referendum surge in support meant that the party was a serious electoral threat in most, if not all of the 59 seats in Scotland. As a consequence the pro-unionist parties found themselves with an additional political foe in many more constituencies.

Conditions such as these would suggest that the effects of campaigning may not necessarily be consistent over time in respect of the delivery of electoral

payoffs. Campaigns do not occur in a vacuum and contextual factors such as those described above may have a significant impact on the level of their electoral success. Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts (2011a), drawing of analyses of the effects of constituency campaigning over the course of five British general elections, illustrate that the level of electoral benefits are broadly a function of a series of conditions, exogenous to the campaign activity itself. The first is the closeness of the election. Campaigning in general will tend to be more electorally effective when elections are more marginal. But these effects are mediated depending on levels of party popularity. Campaigns will tend to deliver more in the way of electoral benefits where parties are not unusually popular or unpopular. If parties are unusually unpopular, the impact of campaigns will be lessened for unpopular parties (since voters will be less receptive) and also possibly for the more popular ones, since the campaign is less likely to impact on voters' decisions. Certainly, research using experimental methods has shown that campaign interventions are affected by the level of popularity of the party (Niven, 2001; Hillygus, 2005; Arceneaux and Nickerson, 2009).

The second condition is the likelihood of change. Where significant change is likely as a result of the election, this is likely to enhance the effectiveness of challengers' campaigns and reduce that of incumbents, since there is an anticipation of a change of government. The third condition relates to the logic of first-past-the post, which incentivises parties to focus attention on target seats (both those they are trying to gain and those they are trying to hold). Targeting is a function of focussing limited resource, so it matters not only that parties target resource but also how many seats constitute targets. Thus, under normal conditions, parties that targeted a high number of seats would tend to deliver fewer electoral payoffs as resources would be too stretched. Conversely, targeting fewer seats should produce greater electoral payoffs. However, under circumstances where some parties may be particularly unpopular, the impact of targeting larger numbers of seats on the electoral payoffs for the more popular parties should be lessened (and therefore more beneficial) as despite their resources being more stretched, voters will be less receptive to the unpopular parties' campaigning.

Finally, and related to the third condition, parties campaigns are more effective when there is strong central coordination of constituency efforts. However, this condition will be mediated by whether the central party has clear objectives or not. If parties' have clear objectives (such as winning a small majority or denying another party a majority, rather than just trying to win as many seats as possible), the electoral benefits are likely to be greater. The exogenous conditions are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Exogenous factors influencing likely effectiveness of constituency campaigns

	More Effective		Less Effective
Closeness of Election	Popularity Equilibrium	←——→	Unpopular party(ies)
Significant change likely	Challenger(s)	←——→	Incumbent
High No's of Target seats	Unpopular party(ies)	←——→	Popularity Equilibrium
Central Management	Clear objectives	←——→	Unclear objectives

The Context in 2015
Closeness of Election

It is well established that the final opinion polls under-estimated the extent of the Conservative lead prior to the 2015 election. However, while that aspect was clearly an error, other aspects of the opinion polls were accurate. The polls correctly predicted the level of support for the Liberal Democrats and for the SNP. Moreover, regardless of the accuracy of the polls in respect of the final result, the polls did create an environment around the election where the outcome was assumed by most to be close in terms of Labour and the Conservatives, thus creating stronger conditions for more effective electoral payoffs. As Figure 1 shows, for the Conservative and Labour parties, there was popularity equilibrium – neither was especially unpopular (nor indeed, especially popular) – suggesting better conditions for both parties' effective campaigns.

For the Liberal Democrats, however, the story of much of the electoral cycle was one of unpopularity. From soon after the 2010 election, Liberal Democrat

poll ratings fell dramatically and never recovered, the party even falling behind UKIP after early 2013. Under these conditions, the effectiveness of Liberal Democrat campaigning was likely to be diminished. UKIP, on the other hand, grew markedly in popularity after 2012, and following the party's success in the 2014 European elections, enjoyed conditions that could improve the electoral effectiveness of its campaigns and potentially diminish those of the parties against which it was standing.

The Likelihood of Significant Change

The nature of the Coalition, together with the opinion polls (see Figure 1) suggested that significant change was simultaneously both likely and unlikely. Thus, poll ratings could have suggested a Conservative minority (seen as the most likely outcome by 45% of electors[1]), with the Liberal Democrats continuing to offer support either formally in a coalition or more informally (Significant Change Unlikely); or they could have suggested in a Labour minority (seen as the most likely outcome by 25% of electors), with the Liberal Democrats offering support, again either formally or informally (Significant Change More Likely). Or finally, they could have suggested a Labour minority with support coming from the SNP (Significant Change Likely). No poll ratings indicated a Conservative majority (though 11% of voters thought it the most likely outcome), or indeed, a Labour one (6% of voters seeing that outcome as being likely). Under these conditions, the Conservatives, Labour and indeed the Liberal Democrats and SNP could have benefited, suggesting that this condition was not especially significant in 2015.

That said, one potential outcome (a Labour minority supported by the SNP) had the potential to help Conservative campaigns, such was the apparent opposition to this outcome. A YouGov poll in late-April 2015 suggested that 61% of voters viewed a Labour-SNP government as being bad for the UK, compared with 54% saying the same of a Labour-Liberal Democrat Government – not an overwhelming difference, but significant when compared with the 49% who thought that Labour governing alone would be bad for the

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[1] All references to voter election outcome expectations are derived from an Ipsos-MORI poll in April 2015. https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2565/Expected-general-election-outcome-19792005.aspx. Accessed 11/8/15

UK.[2] Were these circumstances to be borne out, our model would require revision. In other words, some forms of significant change may be more important than others, and in cases such as a potential Labour-SNP partnership, could damage the challenger rather than the incumbent.

Figure 1.
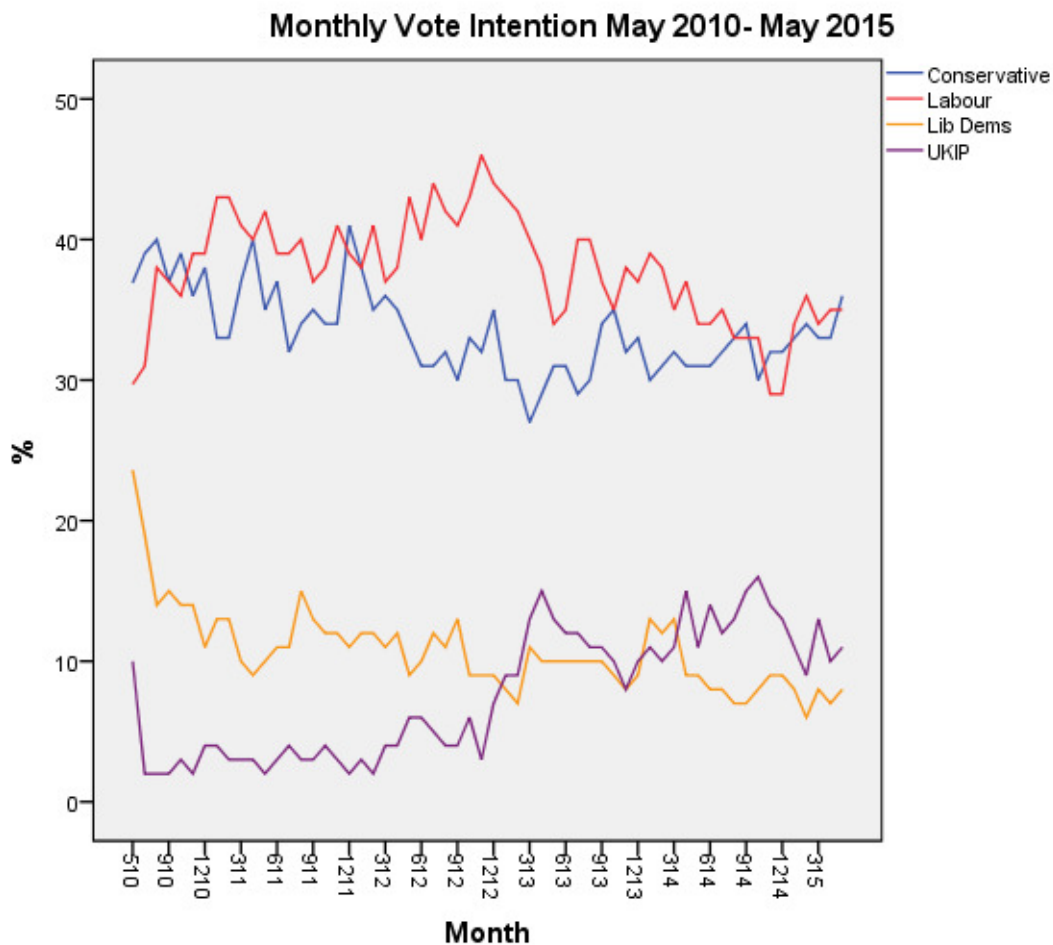
Source: Ipsos-MORI

High Numbers of Target Seats

In previous elections, one of the factors influencing the electoral success of constituency campaigns has not only been the ability to target resources, but also the numbers of seats targeted. In 2001, for example, both Labour and the Conservatives targeted very high numbers of seats, which would tend to lead to campaigns being less effective, with finite resources being too stretched

(Denver *et al*, 2002). Similarly, the Liberal Democrats arguably targeted too many seats in 2010 (Fisher, Cutts & Fieldhouse, 2011a). The 2001 example is a strong one, as it shows that the impact of targeting large numbers can be mediated by party popularity – Labour's campaigning was more effective than expected as the Conservatives were unpopular at the time. In 2015, none of the main GB parties targeted an excessive number. The Conservatives initially pursued a 40/40 strategy, targeting 40 gains and 40 holds. Initially announced in 2012, the basis of selection was not only electoral status, but also seat demographics, the state of the local party's organisation and levels of local activity. This list was reviewed at the beginning of 2014 and a series of additional offensive targets held by the Liberal Democrats was added.

Labour initially announced a list of 86 target seats in January 2013, with various scenarios designed to deliver a Labour majority of 20, 30 or 40. The party decided to publish the list of seats. However, the list was deemed to be insufficiently 'one nation' and so a further 20 seats were added in the South and in the Midlands, even though the party thought these additional seats to be unwinnable. In reality, the party came to the view that only 61 were potentially winnable, and within those 61, there were clear categories of likely success. 32 were deemed much more likely with a further 23 were identified as very significant battleground seats. A further 6 seats were tough targets. In addition, a few seats that Labour held were identified as being ones that would warrant target status.

Soon after the 2010 election, the Liberal Democrats identified around 70 targets consisting both of some seats that party already held and some 'offensive seats' – ones the party thought it could gain. The basis of selection was both electoral status and also local party performance. But, as Liberal Democrat electoral performance started to decline, the list was progressively reviewed with fewer seats remaining as targets. A critical point was reached in the summer on 2014 following another bad set of election results in both local and European elections, and throughout the final year of the Parliament, the list of targets was progressively cut, reflecting both the results of internal polling and the level of activity in local parties. By January 2015, the number

of Liberal Democrat targets was 'considerably down' on the figure with which the party had begun the electoral cycle. For all three GB parties, then, the high numbers of targets seats seen in previous elections did not apply, suggesting conditions more conducive to constituency campaigns delivering electoral payoffs.

Central Management

In the case of all three GB parties, there was, as in previous elections, a strong level of central direction of constituency level campaigns, which tends to produce positive electoral benefits (Fisher, Denver & Hands, 2006). However, the 2010 election showed clearly that central management only achieves so much – what is also required is for the central party to have clear objectives. In 2010, the effectiveness of the Liberal Democrat's campaigns was lessened as a result of the party's strategy being simultaneously too offensive and too defensively minded. Conversely, Labour's central management objectives were clear – to deny the Conservatives a majority – and this clear strategy yielded payoffs (Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2011). As is clear from the discussion in respect of target seats, all three main GB parties had clear strategies: the Conservatives' 40/40 strategy was designed to deliver a modest majority and was only enhanced when it became clear that the Liberal Democrats were very vulnerable. Labour had on paper a slightly less clear strategy, publically targeting around 20 seats that were unwinnable. In reality, however, the parties' focus was on rather fewer; again, with the prospect of securing a modest majority. The Liberal Democrat's strategy also became increasingly clear over the cycle, the party moving from a position of trying to gain seats to being clear that they could only hold a fraction of those the party had won in 2010. Under these conditions, we would expect the central management of each party to enhance the level of electoral payoffs as a result of their campaigning.

In sum, then, the exogenous factors pointed to the likely effectiveness of Conservative and Labour campaigns. The contest was deemed to be close and neither party was especially unpopular. In terms of significant change, only one circumstance suggested the potential to lessen the impact of

campaigns – a Labour-SNP partnership in government. All other circumstances did not appear to so relevant in terms of the impact on campaigns in 2015. In terms of targeting, both parties appeared to be focussing on a manageable number of seats, though the Labour target list was unusually high. And in terms of central management objectives, a modest majority was sought by both. For the Liberal Democrats, the picture was less clear. Clearly, the party's unpopularity was likely to lessen its campaign effectiveness, even in a tight contest. On the other hand, the party had an evolving target seats strategy reflecting this and the central management indicated that the effects of unpopularity might be offset but the party's retrenchment in terms of the seats it could reasonably expect to hold. We test these propositions in the next section of the paper.

The Intensity of the Constituency Campaigns

The first step to evaluating the parties' success in respect of their constituency level campaigns is to create a measurable index of campaign intensity. We do this by using data from a survey of the election agents of Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid Cymru and UKIP candidates who stood for 629 of the 632 constituencies in Great Britain – a total of 2,592[3]. The data reported here are based on 1,120 valid responses received as of August 7th 2015. These comprise of 229 Conservative, 327 Labour, 316 Liberal Democrat, 28 SNP, 21 Plaid Cymru and 199 UKIP agents.

Questions from the survey are used to created additive scales for the core components of a constituency campaign for all of the six surveyed parties: preparation, organisation, manpower, use of computers, use of telephones, polling day activity, use of direct mail, level of doorstep canvassing, leafleting, and electronic campaigning (see, for example, Denver & Hands, 1997 and Fisher, Cutts & Fieldhouse, 2011a). In this paper, the scale consists of the same components as for the 2010 study (see Fisher, Cutts & Fieldhouse, 2011a) except for the fact that e-campaigning component features additional variables reflecting new developments in that area. The intensity index is

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[3]   No questionnaires were sent to agents in Buckingham (the Speaker's seat), or to Rochdale and Heywood & Middleton. In the case of the latter two constituencies, the local authority (Rochdale) did not publish details of the agents. No electoral agent address details were available for 18 UKIP agents. This was principally the case where the agents were also Parliamentary candidates.

calculated using a Principal Components Analysis (PCA) of all these core indicators of constituency campaigning.[4] Using conventional cut-off criteria, the PCAs suggest one factor is sufficient to represent the variance in the original variables in the index (details of which are shown in the Appendix). The PCA produces factor scores which are then standardised around a mean of 100. This process allows easy comparisons between parties as well as the electoral status of seats.

Table 2 illustrates the mean level of campaign intensity for all six parties. Of the GB parties, as would be expected, the Conservatives and Labour ran the strongest campaigns overall, though unlike previous elections, the overall intensity of Labour campaigns was slightly higher. As usual, the Liberal Democrats ran, on average, less intensive campaigns, while UKIP ran, on average, weaker ones still. This would be expected given UKIP's relatively recent development as a political party. In the case of the national parties, Plaid Cymru campaigns were stronger on average than those of the Liberal Democrats, though of course, the party was only standing in 40 seats. Most noteworthy, however, is the strength of the SNP campaigns, which on average were the most intense of all the parties, and significantly more intense than the main two GB parties. This may be expected up to a point given the limited number of seats fought by the SNP (59) compared with the GB parties. Nonetheless, the high score reflects both the strength of the SNP as a party in 2015 and the fact that it actively targeted around 42 of the 59 seats in Scotland.

Table 2. Overall Campaign Intensity Scores

	Con	**Lab**	**Lib Dem**	**SNP**	**PC**	**UKIP**
Score	113	116	86	137	98	76

In order to corroborate these findings, we examine individual level data from Wave 6 of the British Election Study. Table 3 summarises whether the parties contacted an individual elector over the last four weeks of the campaign and

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[4]   Where there were missing data on individual variables that formed part of these scales, multiple imputation was used, which took account of the individual party and the electoral status of the seat.

in how many ways (Telephone, Letter/Leaflet, Home visit, Contact in the street, Email, Text message, Other). Of course, some of these contacts could include central party campaigning efforts, but the rank order in terms of campaign intensity illustrated in Table 2 is replicated in terms of both the proportions contacted and the number of contacts. Some 53% of Scottish electors were contacted by the SNP and of the GB parties, contact rates were also fairly impressive, Labour contacting 43% of electors and even UKIP managing 22%. The average number of contacts was a little less impressive, but again, the SNP, Labour and the Conservatives made most contacts on average.

Table 3. Individual Level Contacts over Last Four Weeks of Campaign

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	PC	UKIP
% Contacted	38	43	25	53	28	22
Mean No. of Contacts (Max 7)	1.43	1.51	1.30	1.77	1.31	1.13

Source: British Election Study Wave 6: n=30,013 (GB), 2,651 (Scotland), 1,556 (Wales)

Of course, what matters more in terms of campaigning is less the overall level of intensity and more the effectiveness of targeting these resources on the seats in which parties are trying to gain or hold. Generally speaking, we would expect a party to run its most intense campaigns in the most marginal seats it was seeking to gain or hold, and its next most intense campaigns in the seats that it held, but where there was much less chance of losing the seat – so-called 'safe seats'. This is because resources in such seats tend to be greater, both in terms of membership and often wealth (Fisher, 2000; Fisher Denver & Hands, 2006). All parties may seek to divert resources to the most key battleground seats, but resources such as people are often less readily mobile (Fisher & Denver, 2009). Finally, we would expect parties to run their least intense campaigns in those seats where it has little chance of winning. As Karp *et al* (2007: 92) suggest from comparative analyses: 'parties will expend greater effort on mobilizing voters when the expected benefits of turning out voters are greatest, relative to cost.'

We assess this in Table 4, which disaggregates the mean campaign intensity of the three main GB parties by the electoral status of the seat relative to that party. There are four categories: Ultra Marginal, where the majority after 2010 was less than 5%; Marginal, where the majority was between 5% and 10%; Held, where a party held the seats with a majority of more than 10% - so-called 'safe seats'; and Not Held, where a party did not hold a seat and is more than 10% behind the winning party – so-called 'hopeless' seats. For the Conservatives and Labour, the distribution is exactly as predicted – the most intense campaigns took place in the most marginal seats, and campaigns in safe seats were much more intense than in hopeless ones. Not only that, Conservative and Labour campaigning was pretty evenly matched in ultra-marginals and safe seats, while Labour's was more intense in marginals (5-10% majority). All of this suggests strong party management and clear objectives, except in the case of Labour's hopeless seats, where campaigning was surprisingly intense, though still much less intense than the other categories of seat. Of course, strong campaigns in hopeless seats do not damage a party's electoral prospects, but they do suggest that resource could have been transferred to make campaigns in the more marginal seats stronger still.

More noteworthy is the distribution of Liberal Democrat campaign effort. As predicted, campaigns in ultra-marginals were more intense than in marginals and least intense in hopeless seats. However, the Liberal Democrats' strongest campaigns were, on average, in the parties' safe seats, nearly matching the intensity of Conservative and Labour seats in their ultra-marginals. Under conditions of popularity equilibrium this would be a curious finding. But, as we know, the Liberal Democrats were especially unpopular in the years preceding the 2015 election and the party acknowledged this by progressively reducing its number of target seats. Set against that backdrop, the very defensive nature of Liberal Democrat campaigning demonstrated by the high level of intensity in its safer seats appears to represent good resource management by a party with clear objectives – to try and retain as many of its safer seats as is feasible by focussing resources on these and

effectively 'sacrificing' those seats where the party was likely to lose by re-directing resource.

This is reminiscent of Labour's management of its 2010 campaign. The party knew it would lose its majority and largest party status and focussed instead on seeking to deny the Conservatives a majority by effectively running stronger campaigns in less marginal seats – a strategy that was effective (Fisher, Cutts & Fieldhouse, 2011a). In some ways, then, the puzzle may be less why the intensity was so high in Liberal Democrat safe seats and more why it was not lower in the party's ultra-marginals. The relatively high scores here suggest some lack of clarity in the party's objectives, or at least an inability to divert more resources from ultra-marginals to the nominally safer seats.

Table 4. Distribution of Campaign Intensity by Electoral Status

	Ultra Marginal	**Marginal**	**Held**	**Not Held**
	<5%	**5-10%**	**10%+**	**10%+**
Con	148	133	126	84
Lab	146	141	128	100
Lib Dem	130	125	144	77

The Ns for each category are as follows: Conservative - Ultra-Marginal (17), Marginal (29), Held (98), Not Held (85); Labour - Ultra-Marginal (33), Marginal (38), Held (75), Not Held (181); Liberal Democrats - Ultra-Marginal (15), Marginal (20), Held (18), Not Held (263)

Four Million Conversations

In January 2015, then Labour leader Ed Miliband declared that Labour would seek to have four million face-to face conversations with voters in advance of the elections, no doubt reflecting the evidence in a path-breaking article showing how the efforts of volunteer labour could offset those of candidate spending (Fisher *et al*, 2014). There is certainly empirical support for such a strategy and we assess here where Labour was more successful in this respect than other parties. We do this in two ways. First we use a scale of items capturing face-to face contact from our survey of electoral agents. As with the index of overall campaign intensity, scores are standardised around a

mean of 100.[5] We then utilise the British Election Study Wave 6 to establish the proportion of voters contacted in person (at home or in the street) and the mean number of personal contacts. As a comparison, we create similar measures for E-Campaigning. The 2010 election campaign was regularly described as an important one in terms of e-campaigning, though empirical testing indicated that it was actually far less significant (Fisher, Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2011b). Since 2010 there have been further developments in social media and so we create a scale of E-Campaigning in the same way, standardised around a mean of 100.[6] We also utilize Wave 6 of the British Election Study to establish the proportion of voters contacted by email or text message and the mean number of e-contacts. The results are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5 shows that of the GB parties, Labour did indeed have the most intense face-to-face activity, though the difference between theirs and that of the Conservatives is not huge. However, it was the SNP that on average had the highest level of face-to-face contact. These findings are corroborated by those from individual level data in Table 6. Labour contacted 11% of electors face-to face (compared with the Conservatives' 8%) and the mean number of face-to-face contacts was similarly higher. Once again, however, the SNP's contact rate was higher (an impressive 21% of electors in Scotland). Notwithstanding, the 11% contact rate by Labour suggest that the four million conversations did take place (in fact, the figure equates to nearly five million).

The level of e-campaigning varied a little more. Once again, the Conservatives and Labour had the most intense of the GB parties, and again, the SNP had the most intense overall. Of note, here, is the level of UKIP e-campaign intensity, which, while below average was nevertheless higher than that of the Liberal Democrats (Table 5). However, when we look at the individual level data in Table 6, the differentiation between the three main GB parties and the SNP is much less marked. Although the SNP had the highest mean number of contacts, they were nowhere as numerous as face-to-face

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[5]   Details of the variables used and the PCA solution are shown in the Appendix
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contacts. This may be a function of at least two factors. First, it is likely that parties still regard face-to-face contacts as the best means to reaching out to voters. Second, there may be an issue with voter recall: being more likely to remember personal contact than e-contact. Certainly the proportion of electors recalling a UKIP e-contact compared with the intensity of UKIP e-campaigning may suggest this.

Table 5. Distribution of Face-to-Face and E-Campaigning

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	PC	UKIP
Face-to-Face	113	118	85	137	106	74
E-Campaigning	109	107	88	120	94	95

Table 6. Individual Level Personal Contact and E-Contact over Last Four Weeks of Campaign

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	SNP	PC	UKIP
% Personal Contacted	8	11	4	21	5	2
Mean Personal (Max 2)	.21	.30	.15	.48	.22	.09
% E-Contacted	9	9	4	11	3	1
Mean E-Contact (Max 2)	.25	.23	.17	.26	.19	.07
n	30,013	30,013	30,013	2,651	1,556	30,013

Source: British Election Study Wave 6

However, just as overall campaign effort should be disaggregated by the electoral status of the seat, so should face-to face and e-campaigning. We do this in Table 7 using the same electoral status categories used in Table 4. In terms of face-to-face campaigning, both Labour and the Conservatives distributed resources as we might predict. Face-to-face campaigning was most intense in the parties' most marginal seats, and least intense in their hopeless seats, safe seats falling in between as predicted. Labour's level of face-to face campaign intensity in its most marginal seats was particularly strong. But once again, there was a surprisingly high level of activity in the party's hopeless seats, again suggesting that resource could have been more efficiently distributed. For the Liberal Democrats, there is further evidence of the party's defensive campaign strategy, with face-to-face contacts being most intense in the party's safest seats.

With e-campaigning, we find similar patterns, with the Conservative level of e-campaigning in its most marginal seats being impressively high and clearly differentiated across the different electoral categories. The differences between the categories of seats were less marked for Labour. Once again, we see the most intense Liberal Democrat campaigning in the party's safest seats, but a higher level than Labour's in the party's most marginal ones, suggesting a misplacement of effort – in this case, effort that is more easily moved between seats than in the case of human participants. All in all, while e-campaigning was certainly more important in 2015 than in 2010 (Fisher, 2015), the evidence here would suggest that all parties were of the view that face-to-face campaigning was still more effective, a proposition we test in the next part of this paper.

Table 7. Distribution of Face-to-Face and E-Campaigning by Electoral Status

	Ultra Marg. <5%	Marg. 5-10%	Held 10%+	Not Held 10%+	Ultra Marg. <5%	Marg. 5-10%	Held 10%+	Not Held 10%+
	Face-to-Face				E-Campaigning			
Con	145	133	122	89	143	121	113	94
Lab	150	141	133	101	120	117	104	104
Lib Dem	117	119	135	77	125	116	134	80

The Electoral Impact

We turn finally to the electoral impact of each of the parties' campaigns. This is estimated using ordinary least squares regression (OLS), with share of the electorate in 2015 as the dependent variable. Share of the electorate is a better indicator of campaign effects than share of the vote, since it captures both vote share and capacity to mobilize the electorate to turn out. The model we employ is straightforward. Each party's share of the electorate in 2015 is regressed on the campaign intensity index, controlling for the share of the electorate in 2010 and personal incumbency (Tables, 8, 9 and 10). The use of the share of the electorate in 2010 as a control makes the model a dynamic test and also ensures that other variables that are correlated with previous

vote, such as demographics, are effectively controlled. In addition, previous electorate share will also capture previous campaign efforts. Thus, insofar as campaign efforts are correlated over time, the true extent of campaign effects may actually be under-estimated. The test is a stiff one – not surprisingly, previous share of the electorate captures a great deal of the variance, so the model provides a robust test of whether or not constituency campaigning made a positive and significant contribution to electoral performance.

The results are very clear: for all three GB parties, constituency campaigning yielded electoral payoffs. Even when controlling for previous share of the electorate and the often very significant effects of personal incumbency, more intense constituency campaigns delivered positive electoral benefits for the respective parties. For ease of interpretation and to illustrate the practical significance and substantive impact of the findings, we report the partial or marginal effects.[7] For example, the model suggests that a Conservative candidate (non-incumbent) whose campaign reached the average intensity of a Conservative marginal[8] seat (139) could expect to win 25.42% of the electorate compared to a similar candidate with a campaign intensity of a hopeless (Not Held) seat (84) who would win 23.85% of the electorate. The difference of around 1.6% suggests a fairly solid increase in support for Conservative candidates where they ran an intensive local campaign. The corresponding figures for Labour are 19.71% (campaign intensity 144) and 17.62% (campaign intensity 100) which is a difference of just over 2%, while the difference for the Liberal Democrats is around 1.7%.

In the case of the Liberal Democrats, the party targeted markedly fewer seats on account of the party's poor electoral position and expended most effort and resources in its safest seats. So if there is a significant campaign boost for the Liberal Democrats, we would most likely find it in those seats the party was

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[7] A marginal effect generally measures the effect on the conditional mean of y of a change in one of the regressors. In OLS regression models, as we run here, the marginal effect equals the relevant slope coefficient. To calculate the marginal effects we fix the incumbency value at 1 or 0 (where we compare incumbency status) and the party campaign intensity index at the mean value by electoral status (for example Labour mean campaign intensity in those seats where the margin was 10% or less) and with all other variables at their mean values.

[8] For the purposes of these illustrations, for all parties we combine the two categories of marginal seats: ultra-marginal and marginal

trying to hold. This is largely borne out by our findings. Our model suggests a difference of 2.3% of the electorate where a candidate reached an average campaign intensity of a Liberal Democrat held seat (144) compared to a similar candidate where the average campaign intensity mirrored that found in hopeless (Not Held) seats (77). With the Liberal Democrats focusing resources principally in those safest seats it felt it could realistically hold, the results suggest that local campaign intensity did provide a boost in support. However, given the scale of the party's electoral collapse it wasn't enough to save the majority of Liberal Democrat seats, albeit the party may have lost further seats (such as Southport and Carshalton and Wallington) without this campaign boost.

Table 8. The Electoral Impact of Conservative Constituency Campaigning

Dependent Variable: Share of the Electorate 2015	b	Std. Error	Sig.
Constant	-2.472	(.547)	**
Share of the Electorate 2010	.972	(.019)	**
Personal Incumbent	1.554	(.432)	**
Campaign Intensity	.029	(.005)	**
Adj. R^2			.971
n			229

Table 9. The Electoral Impact of Labour Constituency Campaigning

Dependent Variable: Share of the Electorate 2015	b	Std. Error	Sig.
Constant	.205	(.892)	n.s.
Share of the Electorate 2010	.705	(.040)	**
Personal Incumbent	3.673	(.677)	**
Campaign Intensity	.047	(.009)	**
Adj. R^2			.828
n			327

Table 10. The Electoral Impact of Liberal Democrat Constituency Campaigning

Dependent Variable: Share of the Electorate 2015	b	Std. Error	Sig.
Constant	-3.902	(.388)	**
Share of the Electorate 2010	.365	(.023)	**
Personal Incumbent	9.513	(.514)	**
Campaign Intensity	.034	(.006)	**
Adj. R^2			.895
n			316

However, for all three parties, the 'elephant in the room' was Scotland, where of course, the electoral conditions were very different on account of the spectacular rise of the SNP. We therefore re-run the models, confining our analyses to England and Wales only (Table 11). Again, the campaigns of all three parties delivered electoral payoffs. And, by computing the marginal effects in the same way as above, we find the estimated advantage in terms of share of the electorate to be 1.7% for the Conservatives, 1.3% for Labour and 1.3% for the Liberal Democrats. For both Labour and the Liberal Democrats, the local campaign boost was marginally stronger in Great Britain overall than in England and Wales alone, actually suggesting some additional positive impact of those campaigns in Scotland. However, welcome though those benefits were, they were nowhere nearly enough to stem the SNP tide.

Table 11. The Electoral Impact of Constituency Campaigning (England and Wales Only).

	Conservative			Labour			Liberal Democrats		
	b	Std. Error	Sig.	b	Std. Error	Sig.	b	Std. Error	Sig.
Constant	-2.699	(.608)	**	.387	(.642)	n.s.	-3.910	(.336)	**
Share of the Elect. 2010	.970	(.021)	**	.853	(.030)	**	.402	(.021)	**
Personal Incumbent	1.438	(.440)	**	3.256	(.497)	**	8.631	(.466)	**
Campaign Intensity	.032	(.006)	**	.031	(.007)	**	.026	(.005)	**
Adj. R^2			.966			.917			.915
n			206			304			289

Dependent Variable: Share of the Electorate 2015

We turn finally to comparing the effects of face-to-face and e-campaigning. To begin with, we test the impact of these approaches using the same model as for overall impact, but substituting the scale of face-to-face campaigning for the overall index of campaign intensity and then doing the same for e-campaigning. In isolation, both aspects deliver positive electoral payoffs for all

three GB parties (though in the case of Labour, the effects of e-campaigning are on the cusp of statistical significance). However, a better test is to run the model with both indexes included and compare the relative effects. The results are shown in Table 12.[9]

What is clear for all parties is that face-to-face campaigning delivers positive electoral benefits. And, for the Liberal Democrats, so does e-campaigning albeit at a lower level (the difference being statistically significant). However, in the case of both the Conservative and Labour parties, when both indexes are included in the model, only face-to-face campaigning continues to deliver positive benefits. In other words, e-campaigning has become more important, but the effects of the human touch are still significantly greater.

Table 12. The Electoral Impact of Face-to-Face and E-Campaigning

| | Conservative | | | Labour | | | Liberal Democrats | | |
	b	Std. Error	Sig.	b	Std. Error	Sig.	b	Std. Error	Sig.
Constant	-2.585	(.621)	**	.632	(1.011)	n.s.	-4.205	(.416)	**
Share of the Elect. 2010	.982	(.019)	**	.721	(.698)	**	.370	(.022)	**
Personal Incumbent	1.696	(.436)	**	3.538	(.685)	**	9.692	(.506)	**
Face-to-Face	.021	(.006)	**	.040	(.010)	**	.026	(.006)	**
E-Campaigning	.005	(.005)	n.s.	.001	(.008)	n.s.	.010	(.004)	*
Adj. R^2			.970			.824			.895
n			229			327			316

Dependent Variable: Share of the Electorate 2015

Conclusions

These preliminary analyses suggest a number of things. First, it is absolutely clear that constituency campaigns matter to the parties and impact upon electoral outcomes. It is very apparent that both a great deal of effort was made in terms of campaigning at the constituency level and that parties also were acutely aware that effective targeting was the best strategy for delivering electoral payoffs. Secondly, it's very clear that face-face-face campaigning is regarded by parties as being of particular importance. Regardless of technological developments, the human touch still matters and seemingly has more impact on voters.

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[9]   When including both indexes, we ran full tests to detect any multi-collinearity. There was no evidence of these for any of the three parties

Third, however, while 2010 was a damp squib in respect of e-campaigning, the evidence thus far from 2015 is that it has become a more significant component of parties' constituency efforts. The Conservatives in particular made extensive use of e-campaigning in ultra-marginal seats, on a par with their level of face-to–face effort, while the Liberal Democrats did the same in their area of principal focus – the parties' hitherto safe seats. And, there is some evidence of positive electoral effects of e-campaigning, though for all three main GB parties, the effects of face-to-face campaigning are stronger.

Fourth, it's clear that more intense constituency campaigning continues to deliver electoral payoffs. What is notable for this election, however, is that the Conservatives appear to have caught up with Labour. Hitherto, the electoral impact of Conservative campaigning varied in large part because the party struggled to target resources effectively. The evidence from 2015 is that that lesson has been well and truly learned. In short, 2015 was the election when the Conservatives appeared to have cracked the effective management and operation of constituency level campaigning.

So how do these results fit our model for understanding the likely impact of campaigns? In terms of the closeness of the election, the popularity equilibrium in respect of the Conservatives and Labour helped their campaigns to be more effective. For the Liberal Democrats, the apparent success of the party's campaigns would appear to run counter to this particular condition in isolation.

In respect of the likelihood of significant change, our initial analysis suggested that this condition would be unlikely to affect the three GB parties to any great extent, unless opposition to a Labour-SNP government was paramount in voters' thoughts. Such a circumstance should have enhanced the effectiveness of the Conservative campaigns and damaged those of Labour (running counter to our model's prediction in respect of the impact on challengers and incumbents). Yet while Conservative campaigning was effective, so was Labour's. Given the very effective targeting by the Conservatives in this election, it seems probable that the notion of significant

change did not impact significantly on the electoral effects of the constituency campaigns. That said, the estimated impact of Labour's campaigns in England and Wales was lower than in Great Britain as a whole, which may indicate a negative effect in respect of voter fears of a Labour-SNP government at Westminster. Equally, however, the Liberal Democrats similarly experienced a stronger estimated campaign impact in Great Britain as a whole compared with just England and Wales.

Thirdly, the results of the 2010 election which meant that the Conservatives and Labour needed to target more modest numbers to secure a small majority, coupled with the Liberal Democrats reducing their numbers of targets on account of the party's declining popularity meant that excessive numbers of target seats were not a key negative influence on the impact of campaigns, thereby suggesting conditions conducive to delivering electoral impact, which indeed occurred. Fourthly, and most critically, it was quite clear that all three GB parties had clear central objectives in the campaign, thereby enhancing the electoral effectiveness of their efforts. This is most clearly illustrated in the case of the Liberal Democrats, who in the face of a series of poor election results and poll ratings ran a very defensive campaign, with more activity taking place in the parties' hitherto safe seats. In effect, the parties' clear central management objectives helped offset the lack of equilibrium in the parties' popularity.

In sum, 2015 was the election when Conservative constituency campaigns 'clicked'. But, Labour and Liberal Democrat campaigns also delivered positive electoral gains, suggesting, if nothing else, that the results could have been even worse for those two parties had their campaigns not been so well-managed. Of course, while the Labour and Liberal Democrat campaigns delivered improvements in vote share, the improvements were insufficiently large to win more seats. Campaigning alone will not do that – it is contingent on contextual factors.

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Appendix

Calculation of Campaign Intensity Index

Responses to the questions below are grouped through additive scales into the following core components of constituency campaigning: Preparation, Organisation, Manpower, Computers, Polling Day Activity, Telephones, Direct Mail, Canvassing, Leaflets and E-Campaigning. These groups are then entered into a PCA, which produced the solution overleaf.

Group	Question
Preparation	HOW PREPARED - JOBS
Preparation	HOW PREPARED - CAMPAIGN FUNDS
Preparation	HOW PREPARED - MAIN COMMITTEE ROOMS
Preparation	HOW PREPARED - LOCAL COMMITTEE ROOMS
Preparation	HOW PREPARED - ELECTORAL REGISTER
Preparation	HOW PREPARED - ELECTION ADDRESS
Preparation	HOW PREPARED - PRINTING
Preparation	HOW PREPARED - IDENTIFYING SUPPORTERS
Preparation	STARTED SERIOUS PLANNING
Preparation	USE OF PREVIOUS CANVASS RECORDS
Organization	% OF CONST COVERED BY ACTIVE LOCAL ORGS
Organization	HOW LONG AGO KNEW RESPONSIBLE
Organization	DELEGATED DUTIES - CANVASSING ORGANISER
Organization	DELEGATED DUTIES - POSTAL VOTES
Organization	DELEGATED DUTIES - CANDIDATE AIDE
Organization	DELEGATED DUTIES - COMPUTER OFFICER
Organization	LOCAL ORGAINSERS OR SUB-AGENTS
Manpower	NUMBER OF CAMPAIGN WORKERS
Manpower	NUMBER OF CAMPAIGN HELPERS ON POLLING DAY
Computers	DELEGATED DUTIES - COMPUTER OFFICER
Computers	USE OF COMPUTERS - DIRECT MAIL
Computers	USE OF COMPUTERS - CANVASS RETURNS
Computers	USE COMPUTERISED ELECTORAL REGISTER
Computers	COMPUTERS USED TO COMPILE KNOCK-UP LISTS
Computers	ELECTION SOFTWARE PROVIDED BY PARTY HQ
Polling Day Activity	GOOD MORNING LEAFLETS DELIVERED
Polling Day Activity	VOTERS KNOCKED UP ON POLLING DAY
Polling Day Activity	% OF CONSTITUENCY COVERED
Polling Day Activity	NUMBER OF CAMPAIGN HELPERS ON POLLING DAY
Polling Day Activity	VOLUNTEERS SENT INTO YOUR CONSTITUENCY
Telephones	USE TELEPHONE CANVASSING IN CONSTITUENCY
Telephones	OUTSIDE CANVASSING
Telephones	USE TELEPHONE CANVASSING
Telephones	TELEPHONE CANVASSING ORGANISED FROM OUTSIDE CONSTITUENCY
Telephones	VOTERS CONTACTED BY TELEPHONE ON POLLING DAY
Direct Mail	LEAFLETS TARGETED AT PARTICULAR GROUPS
Direct Mail	DIRECT MAIL USED TO TARGET INDIVIDUAL VOTERS
Canvassing	% OF ELECTORATE CANVASSED
Canvassing	% OF ELECTORATE TELEPHONE CANVASSED?
Leaflets	HOW MANY REGIONALLY/NATIONALLY PRODUCED LEAFLETS DISTRIBUTED
Leaflets	TOTAL NUMBER OF LOCALLY PRODUCED LEAFLETS
E-Campaigning	PRE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN - OPERATING AND MAINTAINING A WEBSITE
E-Campaigning	PRE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN - USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES
E-Campaigning	CONTACT VOTERS IN THE CONSTITUENCY BY TEXT MESSAGE
E-Campaigning	MAKE USE OF TWITTER TO COMMUNICATE WITH VOTERS
E-Campaigning	USE OF COMPUTERS - EMAILING VOTERS
E-Campaigning	LOCAL PARTY & CANDIDATE WEBSITE
E-Campaigning	CAMPAIGN EFFORT - MAINTAINING WEBSITE
E-Campaigning	CAMPAIGN EFFORT - EMAILING VOTERS
E-Campaigning	CAMPAIGN EFFORT - SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES
E-Campaigning	CAMPAIGN EFFORT - VIDEO/IMAGE SHARING SITES
E-Campaigning	VOTERS CONTACTED BY TEXT ON POLLING DAY
E-Campaigning	VOTERS CONTACTED BY EMAIL ON POLLING DAY
E-Campaigning	CANDIDATE HAD CAMAPIGN TWITTER ACCOUNT
E-Campaigning	CANDIDATE HAD CAMAPIGN FACEBOOK ACCOUNT
E-Campaigning	PAID ADVERTS TAKEN OUT ON FACEBOOK AND/OR TWITTER

Principal Components Analysis of Campaign Components

Component Matrix^a

	Component
	1
PREPARATION	.844
ORGANISATION	.795
MANPOWER	.660
COMPUTERS	.798
CANVASSING	.732
LEAFLETS	.532
POLLINGDAY	.865
TELEPHONE	.559
ECAMPAIGNING	.614

Extraction Method: Principal
Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.

Calculation of the Face-to-Face Index

Component Matrix^a

	Component
	1
PRE-ELECTION DOORSTEP CANVASSING	.821
PRE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN - STREET STALLS	.301
PRE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN - RESIDENT SURVEYS	.652
% OF ELECTORATE CANVASSED	.753
NUMBER OF CAMPAIGN WORKERS	.466
CAMPAIGN EFFORT - CANVASSING TO IDENTIFY SUPPORTERS	.892
CAMPAIGN EFFORT - CANVASSING TO INTRODUCE CANDIDATE	.766
VOTERS KNOCKED UP ON POLLING DAY	.806
NUMBER OF CAMPAIGN HELPERS ON POLLING DAY	.795

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.

Calculation of the E-Campaigning Index

The variables are as per those listed under E-Campaigning in the calculation of the overall Campaign Index

Component Matrix[a]

	Component
	1
PRE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN - OPERATING AND MAINTAINING A WEBSITE	.715
PRE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN - USING SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES	.762
CONTACT VOTERS IN THE CONSTITUENCY BY TEXT MESSAGE	.364
MAKE USE OF TWITTER TO COMMUNICATE WITH VOTERS	.520
CAMPAIGN EFFORT - MAINTAINING WEBSITE	.748
CAMPAIGN EFFORT - EMAILING VOTERS	.617
CAMPAIGN EFFORT - SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (FACEBOOK)	.800
CAMPAIGN EFFORT - VIDEO/IMAGE SHARING SITES (YOUTUBE/FLICKR)	.559
MEANECAMP	.660

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 1 components extracted.