CONSTITUENCY CAMPAIGNING IN BRITAIN 1992-2001: CENTRALISATION AND MODERNISATION

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ABSTRACT

Constituency (local) campaigning in British general elections has been transformed over the last ten years or so.   Firstly, national party headquarters have taken an increasingly large role in planning and managing constituency campaigns. Although the pace of change has varied across the major parties, all are heading down the same road. Secondly, campaigning on the ground has also changed. Technological and other changes have led to a decline in the use of traditional campaign techniques and increased use of new methods, especially in 'key' seats. These developments are charted using data derived from a unique set of nation-wide surveys of election agents at the last three general elections.   Finally, the paper returns (briefly) to the debate about the electoral effects of constituency campaigning, presenting data relating to its impact in each of the three elections concerned.

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For most of the period after 1945, electioneering in Britain was dominated by the national campaign. Constituency campaigning continued, of course, focusing in particular on polling day mobilisation, but it was widely regarded as little more than a side-show and left to local enthusiasts to organise and run. The increasing importance of television led the parties and the national media (and academics) to direct their attention almost entirely to the national campaign and appeared to sound the death-knell for local campaigning. In the 1990s, however, there was a marked change. Technological developments significantly improved the tools available for fighting local campaigns and central party staff – partly influenced by their observation and experience of campaigning in the USA – began to take constituency campaigning much more seriously. In parallel, a significant academic literature began to emerge, tracing the changes that were taking place and re-assessing the impact of constituency campaigns on election outcomes (see, for example, Denver and Hands, 1997; Pattie *et al*., 1995; Whiteley and Seyd, 1994).

In this article, using the results of surveys of election agents undertaken immediately following the general elections of 1992, 1997 and 2001, we explore these developments in constituency-level election campaigning.[1] First, we consider the changing role of the parties' headquarters and national officials in local campaigning; second, we present evidence about the changing nature of these campaigns; and finally, we briefly summarise our evidence relating to the electoral impact of constituency campaigning.

The Role of the Centre in Constituency Campaigning

Before the 1990s, the contribution of party headquarters to constituency campaigns was mainly confined to offering training and advice to party workers and providing routine 'servicing'. Nonetheless, party organisers never entirely subscribed to the view that local campaigns were irrelevant. They were aware that winning marginal seats was crucial to their chances of winning elections and some attempts were made to improve campaigns in these seats by providing help with election literature, financial assistance, and so on. What has

emerged over the past ten years, however, is a new relationship between the national and local campaigns. National party professionals now seek to exercise much greater control over local campaigning by managing key constituency campaigns in crucial respects and integrating them much more closely into the national effort. This change began first, and has gone furthest, in the Labour party.

Labour

By the early 1990s, having decisively lost three elections in a row, the Labour party was desperate to win power and this, no doubt, helps to explain why Labour was at the forefront of new developments in respect of constituency campaigning. For the 1992 election, party headquarters put greater thought and effort into planning and organising the campaigns in the constituencies than ever before. This also reflected a more professional approach associated with the more general modernisation of the party. Two years before the election, about 150 'key' seats were identified and a 'Key Seats Unit' established at headquarters, with a team of around 40 people. From then until the election efforts were concentrated on these constituencies. Each was visited by a member of the Key Seats Unit to ensure that a campaign team was in place and to map out a campaign strategy. In addition, 20 special organisers were appointed by headquarters a year or more in advance of the election to look after groups of key seats on the ground. They worked full-time in the constituencies concerned galvanising the local organisation, bringing professional expertise to their campaigns, monitoring progress and reporting to the centre.

These changes marked a new departure, but they were surpassed in 1997 by an even more sophisticated and ambitious central strategy, code-named 'Operation Victory', which was launched in the autumn of 1995. A Key Seats Unit was again established and a list of 90 key seats drawn up. Labour's campaigns in these seats then provided the focus of the party's efforts at all levels. All other seats were designated 'majority seats' and in these campaigns were to be low-cost and low-energy, so that resources - especially volunteer workers - could be released to the campaigns in key seats. All constituencies were expected to fall in with the overall strategy. As in 1992, temporary special organisers recruited, trained and paid for by the centre were placed in key constituencies, but now there was one for almost every key seat. Trade union assistance was also organised much more effectively than before, with a union co-ordinator being appointed in each key seat.

The radically new element in Labour's strategy in 1997, however, was a mass telephone 'voter identification' campaign in the 18 months before the election. Telephone banks were established in party offices across the country and were used by volunteers to contact voters in the key seats. Using a centrally-designed script-cum-questionnaire, callers identified target groups of voters and subsequently these were re-contacted by telephone, sent appropriate direct mail communications at regular intervals and visited in person by local campaign workers. Thus, Operation Victory involved not only targeting key constituencies but also, for the first time, identifying key groups of voters on whom constituency campaigns were to focus attention.

Central preparations for the 2001 election began in 1999 with the establishment of a task force to plan and organise constituency campaigns. Labour now had a huge majority in the House of Commons and was riding high in the opinion polls but there were fears of a poor turnout among Labour supporters. The new strategy, known as 'Operation Turnout', was intended to prevent this happening. Any constituency could 'opt in' to the programme of activity defined by Operation Turnout but in practice attention was focused on 148 'priority' seats, as the key seats were now called. Although the large number of seats involved meant that there had to be some doubling up, every one had a centrally-appointed organiser attached to it.

There were three phases of Operation Turnout in the period before the general election. The first was concerned with identifying target voters - partly by traditional doorstep canvassing but mostly by telephone. Constituencies were encouraged and given help to set up their own telephone banks in the constituency and there were banks in all eleven regions, staffed by volunteers. In addition, in a new departure, from January 2001 onwards around 200 people were employed at a national call centre. The second phase was about 'building relationships and delivering the message' and concentrated on 'weak' Labour supporters and first-time voters – groups in which the problem of low turnout was likely to be worst – who were re-contacted by telephone and on the doorstep (including by the MP) as well as by direct mail. In addition, staff at Labour headquarters used demographic analysis to identify specific post-code areas within constituencies as worthy of special attention and communicated this information to local campaigns, along with suggestions as to campaign themes that should be stressed in these areas. In the third phase of Operation Turnout, constituencies were expected

to continue to develop relationships with target voters and to make detailed preparations for the election campaign and the polling day operation.

All of this suggests a strategy for constituency campaigning in 2001 which was carefully planned and co-ordinated from the centre. Three specific examples further illustrate the leading role played by Labour headquarters. Firstly, in the Spring of 2001 there was a special leaflet delivery, briefly explaining the new rules that had been introduced relating to postal voting and including an application form, which could be returned free of charge to the party's central postal votes unit. These were then despatched to town halls across the country and the relevant constituency parties informed. Around 70,000 applications were processed centrally. Secondly, Labour headquarters prepared 300,000 videos, tailored for the constituency concerned, which were sent to 60 of the priority seats to be distributed over the last weekend of the campaign. Finally, on polling day itself, for the first time, Labour's national call centre and regional telephone banks were used to contact and encourage tardy voters.

Already in 1992, then, Labour's central headquarters was playing a significant role in directing constituency campaigns. By 1997 and 2001, however, central management assumed such proportions that, to a large extent, the initiative in constituency campaigning, certainly in the key seats, had ceased to lie with the local candidate or election agent. All constituencies were expected to follow the centrally-determined strategy. The effort and attention lavished on local campaigning by Labour suggest that there has been a significant shift in the centre of gravity of campaigning from the national level to the constituencies. Arguably, the local campaign has ceased to be really local and has become part of the larger national and nationally-directed campaign.

The Conservatives
The Conservatives were slower than Labour to see, and take advantage of, the new possibilities in constituency campaigning. The need to do so was less urgent as they were electorally dominant during the 1980s and were widely believed to have a formidable election machine at constituency level. In addition, the organisational structure of the party inhibited the role that Conservative Central Office (CCO) could play since Constituency Associations were autonomous and not amenable to central direction or control. At best, the professionals at party headquarters could coax and encourage people on the ground, but the

notion of having a central strategy with which the constituencies were expected to comply would have gone against the party's traditions. An important consequence of this was that the strongest Conservative campaigns were typically mounted in their safest seats since these had more members, more volunteers and greater financial resources than more marginal seats and were also more likely to employ a full-time professional agent.

In the 1992 election, Central Office's role with respect to constituency campaigning was still fairly traditional. Headquarters staff serviced campaigns as they had always done. Key seats were identified and key officials in these seats given extra training and guidance; constituency visits by leading party figures were focused on them. The long-standing policy of encouraging 'mutual aid' - the twinning of safe seats with nearby marginals to give assistance on a long-term basis - was continued but not to any great effect. The Conservatives did introduce one major innovation at this election - long-distance telephone canvassing on a significant scale but this was not a Central Office initiative, being developed and organised by influential figures at constituency level. Overall, then, in 1992 Conservative headquarters approached the campaigns in the constituencies with a 'light touch'. In part this was because of the party's perceived organisational strength. At this stage there were still some 300 full-time professional constituency agents in place and, along with Area Agents, they were trusted to do an effective job. Headquarters staff conceived of their role as being one of facilitating, rather than managing, constituency campaigns.

Having only narrowly won the 1992 election, key figures at CCO realised that change was needed. Soon after the election, a list of about 100 'battleground' seats was compiled and these became the focus of the party's preparations over the next five years and of local efforts during the campaign itself. The first priority was to ensure that each had a professional agent in place and, in a very significant development, CCO directly appointed agents in target seats without one, paying half or more of the salary costs. Being on the central payroll, these appointees were more likely to be amenable to accepting a nationally-planned strategy than their predecessors. Further resources were also allocated - each target seat was given a new computer and an economical service for high-quality printing was made available to all constituencies. This substantial commitment of resources by the centre to constituency campaigns was a clear sign that CCO officials were attempting to maximise the efficiency of campaigns in target constituencies.

In addition, like Labour, the Conservatives' central targeting strategy in the lead-up to the 1997 election went beyond a focus on constituencies, for the first time, to target individual voters - indeed, the whole strategy was called 'Battleground Voters'. CCO set out to create a database of two million target voters - 20,000 from each target constituency - utilising the results of traditional doorstep canvassing, telephone canvassing (organised locally, but with Central Office providing financial help for the installation of telephone lines and training in telephone canvassing techniques) and a series of mail surveys organised from headquarters. The database was used in the pre-election period to contact target voters by direct mail from the centre and in late 1996 and early 1997 two million personalised letters were sent to target voters. Candidates and local party workers were also expected to use the information available from the database and make special efforts to visit 'swing' voters personally. In 1997, then, CCO clearly moved from merely facilitating constituency campaigns and began developing, implementing and managing a coherent national strategy from the centre.

Between 1997 and 2001 the Conservative party's organisational structure was extensively overhauled and one (not unintended) effect of the changes was to give CCO more influence over local associations and hence over constituency campaigns. By 2001 the number of full-time Conservative constituency agents was down to around 60 (mostly in safe seats). Central Office had already started to part-fund constituency agents in 1997, as we have seen, and before the 2001 election a further 40 or so were appointed and funded from the centre and placed in target seats. In addition, there was a more radical organisational change: the whole of the party's regional tier of organisation in England was abolished and replaced by 27 Area Campaign Directors (ACDs), who were managed from the centre and whose main task was to assist constituency associations in planning and organising their campaigns. This innovation was intended to bring greater professional expertise to those constituencies where it was most needed, to make campaigning the central concern of local parties and to increase the centre's ability to manage constituency campaigns.

Further evidence of a centralising trend can be found in the efforts made by party headquarters to ensure that constituency associations had appropriate organisational structures in place and were actively planning for the election well in advance. Associations in target seats were expected to set up a campaign team, consisting of ten named officers, which was to meet monthly in the build-up to the election. Agendas for the meetings were

issued by CCO which also expected to receive a report covering each agenda item. ACDs were instructed to ensure that key constituencies adhered to this programme. During the campaign itself, progress was monitored at headquarters on the basis of daily e-mail reports on target seats from the ACDs.

While they were tackling their organisational problems in these ways, the Conservatives continued to extend their use of the latest campaigning techniques. The 2001 election saw a concerted shift towards voter identification by telephone. About a year before the election, in a new departure, the party had a central telephone bank of 60 lines installed at party headquarters. In addition, as in 1997, there was also a direct mail effort from Central Office, although this was not as closely targeted as before. Another innovation at the centre related to the design and production of leaflets and posters. A scheme was initiated whereby local associations could buy this material - with the same broad design and colour scheme and space for local inserts - and around 550 constituency associations signed up to use it. For the first time, Conservative leaflets and posters across the country looked similar. A final and impressive example of central co-ordination of Conservative constituency campaigns in 2001 occurred when the election date was announced. Within a few days, 10,000 leaflets were delivered to selected households in each of the target seats.

The role of central headquarters in Conservative constituency campaigning has, then, changed rapidly from being largely one of guiding and advising to much more active management. Although they were slower off the mark, by 1997 and 2001 the Conservatives were embracing many aspects of the new approach to campaigning wholeheartedly. In part, this was necessitated by a decline in the number of professional agents in the constituencies, but it was also a recognition of the fact that Conservative constituency campaigns needed to be more effectively targeted and co-ordinated if the party was to recover its electoral position.

The Liberal Democrats

There is little to be said about the central management of constituency campaigns as far as the Liberal Democrats are concerned. They have a very small central organisation and its role in constituency campaigning has not extended very far beyond providing training for campaigners and trying to encourage stronger efforts in targeted seats. It is largely a matter of encouragement because the centre simply lacks the resources to do much more and the

organisation of constituency campaigns remains largely devolved to the constituencies themselves.

Nonetheless, even the Liberal Democrats have not been entirely immune to the centralising trend seen in the other parties. They now routinely devise a central targeting strategy and in 2001 provided some limited financial help to key seats so that paid agents or part-time organisers could be employed by the constituencies concerned. About 100 seats had some form of paid assistance but in many cases this involved sharing an organiser with other constituencies. In addition, two Assistant Campaign Directors to assist and encourage the development of effective constituency campaign organisations. Even so, the 2001 election confirmed that the Liberal Democrats have barely started on the road to the central management of constituency campaigns. Their campaigns can be very impressive in target seats but this is largely due to local experience and enthusiasm. Insofar as there is an input from the centre, it is usually informal.

The conclusion to be drawn from this discussion is that, over the last three general elections, to varying degrees, the national headquarters of all three parties have come to play a larger role in constituency campaigning. All three, as a matter of course, now target what they regard as key seats and attempt to direct resources into them. The Liberal Democrats do not go much beyond this, but the Conservatives have clearly strengthened their central management of constituency campaigns and attempted to target the party's local campaigning effort more effectively. Labour has clearly gone furthest, however, now having a highly co-ordinated constituency campaigning operation that is devised and directed from the centre, and planned as an integral element in the party's overall campaign strategy. We now consider how this increased central management has affected constituency campaigns on the ground.

Developments in campaign techniques

The increased efforts by the centre to manage constituency campaigns are aimed both at concentrating resources in key or target seats and encouraging local parties to take advantage of new and more effective campaigning techniques. In this section we use the evidence from our surveys of election agents to examine recent developments in the ways that campaigns

are actually fought in the constituencies. We begin by considering the extent to which constituency campaigns have moved away from more traditional campaigning techniques and started to embrace new ones. For this purpose we consider the campaigns of all three major parties together.

Table 1. Aspects of traditional campaigning - all parties

	1992	*1997*	*2001*
Mean number of campaign workers	54	49	37
Mean number of polling day workers	138	109	73
Mean number of public meetings	2.5	1.2	0.6
% undertook doorstep canvassing	84	78	71
Mean % of electorate canvassed on doorstep	28	22	17
% issued traditional election address	-	97	97

Note: The Ns here and in Table 2 vary slightly for particular questions but are always close to 1003 (1992), 1298 (1997) and 1250 (2001). The question about election addresses was not asked in 1992

Table 1 presents data relating to six aspects of traditional campaigning in the last three elections. In all but one case traditional activities appear to have declined. The fall in the numbers of volunteer workers, both during the campaign and on polling day, may in part result from the development of new, less labour-intensive, campaigning techniques but may also reflect a more general disengagement from, or disenchantment with, politics. The widespread view in 2001 that the outcome was inevitable also seems likely to have been a contributory factor. Public campaign meetings have been declining for many years and this has continued in the past few elections. Traditionally, doorstep canvassing has been the key feature of a well-organised constituency campaign. Its purpose was to identify and prepare lists of likely supporters who could then be mobilised by the 'knocking up' effort on election day and, before the advent of telephone canvassing, it was difficult to conceive of an alternative way in which this could be done. The figures in the table show the percentages of responding constituency campaigns which undertook at least some doorstep canvassing and the mean percentage of the electorate canvassed in this way. In 2001 a substantial majority of campaigns still did some doorstep canvassing but both sets of figures suggest that there has been a steady decline in this activity since 1992. The only exception to the pattern of decline

concerns the issuing of a traditional election address. There have been suggestions that candidates have been turning away from distributing a traditional address, with a photograph and message from the candidate, preferring instead to distribute jazzy leaflets, tabloid-style newspapers and the like (Butler and Kavanagh, 1992, pp. 233-4). We asked about this in 1997 and again in 2001 and, as can be seen, almost all campaign organisers report that they continue to produce an address. Unlike public meetings, the traditional election address is far from dead.

Table 2 presents comparable evidence on newer campaigning techniques which have been made possible by technological developments - in particular, the availability of relatively cheap and powerful PCs and the now nearly universal ownership of telephones. The figures show that use of computers has steadily increased. As early as 1992 a majority of campaigns used computers in one way or another, but the proportion increased in 1997 and again in 2001, to the point where only a small minority of campaigns (almost all of them in hopeless seats) did not use computers. Making serious use of computers for electioneering involves using a computerised version of the electoral register, which all three party headquarters can supply to their constituency organisations. The data show a steady upward trend in the proportions of campaigns having a computerised register and also in those using specialised election software developed and made available from the centre. The last stage of mobilisation in a campaign is the knocking-up of 'promises' or 'pledges' on polling day. This is a fairly sophisticated operation: at various times during the day, lists of people previously identified as supporters and who have not yet voted are prepared, so that volunteers can attempt to contact them. In 1992 only minorities of campaigns used computers for this task, but the figures show that here again the proportion has steadily risen.

Direct mail - the mailing of personalised letters to individual voters made possible by the advent of computers - was virtually unknown in 1992 but in 1997 and 2001 we asked respondents whether they used 'direct mail to target individual voters previously identified as supporters or potential supporters'. The results show only about 20 per cent of all campaigns using this technique but, as we shall see below, the figures for target constituencies are much more impressive.

The 1992 election was the first in which telephone canvassing was used to any extent as an electioneering technique in Britain, but there were doubts about whether or not it might

infringe the tight laws on campaign spending. By the following election the parties had resolved the legal question, at least to their own satisfaction, and contacting voters by telephone was being embraced as an essential campaign technique. In 1992 we simply asked respondents whether they had undertaken any telephone canvassing during the campaign but additional questions were introduced in 1997 and 2001. The data suggest that after a sharp rise in campaign telephone canvassing by constituencies in 1997 there was a slight falling back in 2001. On the other hand there was an increase in the use of the telephone for knocking up. However, our questions on telephone canvassing specifically concerned its use at constituency level and the bulk telephone canvassing is now organised centrally.   It seems likely, then, that the overall contribution made by telephone canvassing has increased even though there was a slight decline in its use at constituency level in 2001.

Table 2. Aspects of modern campaigning - all parties

	1992	*1997*	*2001*
% used computers	74	85	89
% had computerised electoral register	45	65	71
% used party software	35	56	61
% used computers for knocking up lists	29	38	43
% sent 'substantial amount' of direct mail	-	23	20
% some telephone canvassing in year before election	-	49	46
% some telephone canvassing during campaign	32	52	50
% 'knocked up' by telephone	-	38	45

Note: For Ns see note to Table 1.

Our evidence suggests, then, that constituency campaigns across the country are being modernised - more traditional methods of campaigning are in decline, and constituency organisations are increasingly adopting new techniques. However, an important aspect of the central management of constituency campaigns is that central party officials want to focus resources and effort on key seats and, presumably, also want to encourage modernisation most strongly in these seats as well. In the remainder of this section, therefore, we consider the parties separately and in each case compare their target and non-target seats.

Even given recent technological innovations, constituency campaigning remains a labour-intensive business and Table 3 gives details of the number of volunteer workers that the parties had in their target and non-target constituencies in 1992, 1997 and 2001.[2]   Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have consistently had more workers in their target seats than in non-targets (although it should be remembered throughout this section that the Liberal Democrats always have a relatively small number of targets and concentrating efforts in them is easier than it is for the other parties). The figures for the Conservatives reflect their poor targeting at the beginning of the period - in 1992 they had substantially more workers in their non-target seats than in targets - but in 1997 and 2001 they too had more workers in target seats. The long-term decline in numbers of volunteers noted above is reflected in the table, of course, but it is striking that in 2001 Labour - by then thought to have the strongest and most effective organisation - had fewer workers in their target seats than either the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats had in theirs.

Table 3. Mean number of campaign/polling day workers per constituency

	1992		1997		2001	
	Targets	*Non-targets*	*Targets*	*Non-targets*	*Targets*	*Non-targets*
Campaign Workers						
Conservative	72	96	75	54	74	56
Labour	84	38	81	51	49	28
Lib Dem	98	24	200	20	97	13
Polling Day Workers						
Conservative	227	270	164	129	149	111
Labour	210	92	251	106	126	55
Lib Dem	193	52	260	47	151	23

Note: For the number of cases on which tables 3 to 5 are based see footnote 2.

Table 4 summarises further evidence about traditional aspects of campaigning in target and non-target constituencies. In general, many fewer public meetings are organised in target seats - it has been recognised for some time that this is not an efficient way to communicate with the voters. Interestingly, however, in both 1992 and 1997 the Liberal Democrats held large numbers of public meetings in their target seats. This is probably because many of their

targets in these elections were in rural areas where there is a stronger tradition of holding election meetings. In 2001, the number of meetings was much closer to the average since, following their success in 1997, relatively fewer Liberal Democrat targets were rural constituencies (some of these having become safe). Doorstep canvassing, on the other hand, remains more common and more extensive in target than in non-target seats. While this is still a key activity, however, the proportions of the electorate reached in this way were clearly smaller in 2001 that they had been in 1992.

As we have already seen, another very traditional aspect of campaigning - the printed election address - shows no sign of disappearing. There are some signs that Labour and Liberal Democrat campaign organisers in target seats were turning to alternatives in 1997, but for Labour at least 2001 seems to have marked a return to normality.

Table 4. Traditional aspects of constituency campaigning

	1992		1997		2001	
	Targets	Non-targets	Targets	Non-targets	Targets	Non-targets
Mean number of public meetings						
Conservative	3.2	3.9	3.5	1.6	0.5	1.4
Labour	1.1	1.9	0.4	0.9	0.3	0.4
Lib Dem	10.4	1.6	5.1	0.5	0.7	0.3
% undertook doorstep canvassing						
Conservative	96	93	98	85	94	76
Labour	97	84	86	82	94	71
Lib Dem	91	72	100	60	94	54
Mean % of electorate canvassed on doorstep						
Conservative	48	41	30	27	35	23
Labour	53	27	29	26	29	15
Lib Dem	29	11	33	10	19	7
% issued traditional election address						
Conservative	-	-	95	98	99	97
Labour	-	-	89	99	97	99
Lib Dem	-	-	86	95	85	96

Note: The question on the election address was not asked in 1992. For the number of cases on which the table is based see footnote 2.

Table 5. Innovations in constituency campaigning: computers, direct mail and telephone canvassing

	1992		1997		2001	
	Targets	*Non-targets*	*Targets*	*Non-targets*	*Targets*	*Non-targets*
% used computers						
Conservative	93	76	100	86	99	87
Labour	96	70	100	88	100	91
Lib Dem	82	67	100	75	100	81
% had computerised electoral register						
Conservative	93	56	100	70	89	73
Labour	88	37	100	65	93	67
Lib Dem	64	24	100	46	100	60
% used computers for knocking up lists						
Conservative	69	38	75	44	84	43
Labour	66	20	63	41	74	42
Lib Dem	39	12	69	18	91	23
% sent 'substantial amount' of direct mail						
Conservative	-	-	52	24	47	17
Labour	-	-	79	21	67	16
Lib Dem	-	-	35	8	42	6
% 'substantial amount' tele-canvassing during campaign						
Conservative	29	12	42	22	35	14
Labour	18	4	80	17	59	16
Lib Dem	3	1	7	1	24	2
% 'knocked up' by telephone						
Conservative	-	-	88	61	96	59
Labour	-	-	82	23	87	34
Lib Dem	-	-	62	11	85	19

Note: For the number of cases on which the table is based see footnote 2.

In Table 5 we show more detailed information about innovative aspects of campaigning - the use of computers, direct mail and telephones. If the parties' efforts at central management are being successful, we would expect to find greater use of these techniques in target seats and that is, indeed, what the table shows in every instance, with very striking differences between targets and non-targets in some cases. The figures for use of direct mail and telephone canvassing by Labour in 1997 and 2001 are particularly impressive in this respect. More generally, however, it is clear that there was a good deal of innovation between 1992

and 1997 and that target seats were at the forefront of this. We might have expected further increases in 2001 but here the evidence is more mixed. On the one hand, Labour and Conservative campaigns in targets show decreases in the use of computerised registers, direct mail and telephone canvassing. On the other, modernised polling day activities - using computers to produce knocking-up lists and doing knocking up by telephone - increased in all three parties.

Finally in this section, we can summarise trends in constituency campaigning by referring to two overall indexes of campaign strength which allow us to compare the strength of constituency campaigns both within and between parties. The first can be described as an index of traditional campaigning. This was originally devised in our study of the 1992 election (Denver and Hands, 1997) and incorporates, among other things, the traditional aspects of campaigning we have discussed above.[3] For present purposes we have recalculated the index using responses from all three elections (rather than each individually) and can thus also make comparisons across elections. The relevant figures are shown in the first part of Table 6. A campaign of average strength scores 100 while stronger campaigns score higher and weaker campaigns lower. In this table we have also divided the non-target seats into those held and those not held by the party in question.[4]

These data show that traditional campaigning has always been weakest in seats not held and not targeted by the party concerned. Labour and Liberal Democrat campaigns are always strongest in their targets while the Conservatives are always at least as strong in safer seats as in targets. Finally, with the exception of Liberal Democrats, the intensity of traditional constituency campaigning has generally declined.

To take account of recent developments, we devised a new index of campaign intensity in the 2001 election which can also be calculated retrospectively for 1997 and which can be described as an index of modern campaigning.[5] The second part of Table 6 shows scores obtained when we use responses for both 1997 and 2001 as the basis of calculation. Scores on this index show that all three parties clearly fought their strongest campaigns in their target seats and their weakest in constituencies where they stood little chance of winning, indicating that the parties have been successful in focusing their constituency campaigning efforts where they really matter. Labour campaigning in 2001 was distinctly less impressive than it had been in 1997 – perhaps because an easy victory was expected – but, even so,

Labour still had slightly stronger campaigns in their targets than the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats had in theirs.

Table 6. Mean Campaign Intensity Index Scores 1992-2001

		Held Not Targets	Targets	Not Held Not targets	All
Traditional Index					
Conservative	1992	139	134	94	124
	1997	127	127	91	110
	2001	128	127	83	110
Labour	1992	114	143	93	112
	1997	114	141	107	115
	2001	105	126	83	106
Lib Dem	1992	-	123	79	82
	1997	-	146	78	83
	2001	113	133	76	81
Modern Index					
Conservative	1997	126	133	94	112
	2001	127	134	87	113
Labour	1997	110	152	105	113
	2001	106	137	86	105
Lib Dem	1997	-	140	76	81
	2001	112	132	71	78

Note: For the numbers of cases on which the table is based see footnote 4.

Nonetheless, while the strength of Conservative 'modern' campaigning was similar in 1997 and 2001, both Labour and Liberal Democrats fell back quite sharply. How is this to be explained? In Labour's case it may be a sign that the modernising drive had begun to run out of steam. As we have argued elsewhere, however, a more likely explanation might be found in the political context of the 2001 election (Denver *et al.*, 2002). Labour and the Liberal Democrats had more seats to defend and the Conservatives needed to win more than usual. As a result, a significantly greater number of seats were targeted than in 1997. Labour, for example, had 148 targets as compared with 90 in 1997, while the Conservatives had 180 compared with 100 in 1997. It is almost inevitable in these circumstances that centrally managed targeting of resources will be less effective.

The Impact of Local Campaigning

Recent research has persuaded many that, contrary to the previous orthodoxy, local campaigning can make a significant difference to election outcomes at constituency level. We have provided detailed analyses on this question, using our data on campaign intensity, elsewhere (Denver and Hands, 1997, 1998; Denver *et al.*, 2002) and so include only a brief summary of our evidence on this point here.

Various measures of electoral change have been used to analyse the impact of campaigning. Our preferred measure of party performance is change in the share of the electorate won between two elections since this is arguably the best indicator of the success or otherwise of campaigning.[6] Unfortunately, major changes in constituency boundaries between 1992 and 1997 mean that for 1997 we are forced to use change in vote share. In practice, we have operationalised change in party performance by incorporating electorate or vote share in the preceding election into regression models predicting share in the election being analysed.

Table 7. Constituency campaign intensity and party performance 1992-2001

		Con Campaign Intensity	Lab Campaign Intensity	LD Campaign Intensity
1992	(dependent variable = share of electorate)			
	Conservative	-0.11	**-0.39**	-0.00
	Labour	**0.95**	**1.80**	**-1.20**
	Lib Dem	0.59	**-1.90**	**2.68**
	(N)	(265)	(356)	(383)
1997	(dependent variable = share of vote)			
	Conservative	0.22	-0.53	0.01
	Labour	0.01	**1.92**	**-2.33**
	Lib Dem	**0.65**	**-1.12**	**3.07**
	(N)	(434)	(455)	(410)
2001	(dependent variable = share of electorate)			
	Conservative	**0.35**	**-0.24**	-0.04
	Labour	0.06	**0.86**	**-1.01**
	Lib Dem	0.14	-0.20	**1.49**
	(N)	(374)	(442)	(431)

Note: The 'traditional' index of campaign intensity is used for 1992; the 'modern' index for 1997 and 2001.   Statistically significant coefficients ($p < 0.05$) are shown in bold. Coefficients for performance in previous election, region and incumbency are not shown.

Table 7 shows unstandardised regression coefficients for the campaign intensity variables deriving from a series of regression analyses with, in each case, the relevant party performance as the dependent variable, and each party's campaign intensity index entered separately as a predictor variable. In all cases, party performance in the previous election, incumbency and region were also included in the model as controls but, for the sake of clarity, the relevant coefficients are not reported.

These coefficients give an indication of the impact of each party's campaigning both on its own performance and on those of the other two and, overall, Labour campaigning appears to have been the most effective. In all three elections more intense Labour campaigning in the constituencies was associated with a better Labour performance and poorer results for the other parties, and all but two of the coefficients are statistically significant. Strong Liberal Democrat campaigning was also consistently associated with significantly better results for the party and with poorer results for Labour but the data suggest that it had no impact on Conservative performance. The coefficients for Conservative campaigning are especially interesting. In 1992 stronger Conservative campaigning was significantly associated with better *Labour* performances and in 1997 with better *Liberal Democrat* performances but in neither case was their a significant impact on the performance of the Conservatives themselves. We have discussed these apparently counter-intuitive effects of Conservative campaigning elsewhere (Denver and Hands, 1996). In 2001, however, while Conservative campaigning had no significant effects on how the other parties performed, the party, for the first time, did significantly better where its campaigns were stronger. This may be due to the different context of the 2001 election - unlike in 1992 and 1997 the Conservatives were now attacking their opponents rather than defending their position. But it may also reflect increased efforts at party headquarters to modernise constituency campaigning and more effective targeting than in the past. On the other hand, comparing the size of the coefficients for Labour and the Liberal Democrats in 1992 and 2001 suggests a decline in the impact of constituency campaigns on their own performances. This may again reflect the changed circumstances in 2001, although it may also indicate that voters are becoming more impervious to the increasingly sophisticated campaign techniques and appeals used by the parties.

Conclusion

Prior to the 1990s, the parties operated a sort of *de facto* division of labour with respect to campaigning. Central headquarters largely concentrated on the *persuasive* elements of campaigning and communicated with the electorate via the national campaign and the mass media. *Mobilisation* - actually getting supporters to the polls - was the task of activists in the constituencies. As we have seen, party headquarters have now come to play a much larger part in the mobilisation process and in doing so have introduced new strategies and techniques to constituency campaigning. Moreover, the distinction between persuasion and mobilisation has become even more blurred than it used to be. Campaign efforts in the constituencies now involve much more than simply identifying supporters during the short campaign and getting them out to vote on polling day. Rather, the long-term constituency campaign aims to 'build relationships' with voters, identifying their concerns, tailoring messages to their needs and keeping them supplied with relevant information. The electoral pay-off from all of this activity is not huge but it is nonetheless significant and could be vital in a close race. Constituency campaigns - at least in seats targeted by the parties - are no longer the 'Cinderellas' of general election campaigns and that is a change that is unlikely to be reversed in the near future.

Notes

1   The surveys were conducted in connection with ESRC-supported studies of constituency campaigning (grant reference numbers Y304 25 3004 (1992); R000222027 (1997) and R000239396 (2001)).

2   The numbers of cases on which Tables 3 to 5 are based are as follows:

	1992		*1997*		*2001*	
	Targets	*Non-targets*	*Targets*	*Non-targets*	*Targets*	*Non-targets*
Conservative	45	220	64	370	103	272
Labour	94	261	65	390	96	347
Lib Dem	33	350	30	379	33	399

3   This index was constructed by first using survey responses to create new variables measuring activity on seven dimensions of campaigning - preparation, organisation, manpower, canvassing, leafleting, use of computers and the polling day operation. A principal components analysis of these seven variables then generated one factor and the factor scores for each case constitute a standardized campaign strength score (for details see Denver and Hands, 1997, pp. 246-55).

4   The numbers of cases on which Table 6 is based are as follows:

		Held		Not Held	
		Not Target	*Target*	*Not Target*	*Total*
Con	1992	136	45	84	265
	1997	166	64	204	434
	2001	122	103	150	375
Lab	1992	98	94	163	355
	1997	168	65	222	455
	2001	183	96	164	443
Lib Dem	1992	-	33	350	383
	1997	-	30	379	410
	2001	10	33	389	432

5   This index modifies the first by adding two new campaign dimensions - one relating to targeting of leaflets and use of direct mail and the other concerning the use of telephones for canvassing (both before and during the campaign) and knocking up. In addition, new questions were incorporated into the original *preparation*, *canvassing*, *computers* and *polling day* dimensions (see Denver *et al*., 2002).

6   Change in the share of votes received - which is perhaps a more obvious measure - is actually an indirect consequence of the primary aim of campaigning, which is to maximise the number of votes received by the party concerned. This is more appropriately measured by change in the share of the electorate.

References

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