

Party Membership and Campaign Activity in Britain: The Impact of Electoral Performance

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This article examines the impact of electoral results on party membership and activity. Previous studies have focussed on the long-term effects of electoral success or failure, suggesting that they may produce a spiral of demobilisation or mobilisation. This article shows that the dramatic change of electoral fortunes experienced by British parties at the 1997 general election broke this spiral. The outcome of this election has led to significant changes in the health and activity of local parties and concludes that dramatic election results can have significant implications for party organisation.

Key words: party members; party activity; elections; political participation; Britain

Introduction

A substantial body of literature has demonstrated that effective constituency election campaigns can have significant electoral payoffs for political parties (Denver and Hands, 1997, 1998; Denver *et al.*, 2001; Whiteley and Seyd 1994, 2003; Pattie *et al.* 1995). In part, this has been due to greater involvement by the parties' central headquarters in planning and managing constituency campaigns (Fisher *et al.*, 2004) but it remains clear, nonetheless, that parties need active members on the ground and good local organisation if they are to mount effective campaigns at the constituency level. But what determines levels of local membership and activity? A number of recent studies have suggested that these themselves may be significantly affected by previous electoral success or failure in the constituency concerned.

Fisher (2000) showed that variations in the size of constituency party membership in 1997 could be explained in part by the socio-economic characteristics of the constituency and the amount of disruption caused by recent boundary revisions, but that the degree of electoral success previously enjoyed by the party in the constituency also had a significant impact. He concluded that success can, in effect, breed success. Parties perform well where they have more members and this in turn makes it more likely that they will retain or increase their membership and hence perform well in the future. Whiteley and Seyd (1998) focus on general levels of party activity, and argue that electoral success or failure is likely to have an impact in this area as well. Activists' sense of individual and group efficacy will be strengthened when their party does well, and weakened when it does badly. This, they suggest, may lead either to a 'spiral of mobilisation' as these effects become reinforced over time or to a corresponding 'spiral of demobilisation'.

Fisher's analysis concentrates mainly on long-term electoral performance. However, when election results produce dramatic changes in the electoral status of constituencies, it seems likely that there will also be short-term effects. The 1997 election is a case in point – no fewer than 184 seats changed hands, the Conservative vote declined sharply and the number of seats won by the Liberal Democrats more than doubled. Such a marked change in party fortunes may well have an impact on both constituency party size and future levels of campaign activity – defeat is likely to depress membership and make those who remain less keen to participate actively, while winning (or coming close to it) may enhance both membership and activity.

In this article, we use data derived from postal surveys of constituency election agents/organisers conducted immediately after the general elections of 1992, 1997 and 2001 to examine the impact of both short-term and long-term electoral performance on party membership and campaign activity.¹ The surveys covered the three major British parties – the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats – on which, for the most part, we concentrate here, as well as the SNP in Scotland and Plaid Cymru in Wales. Response rates were notably high and the resulting samples representative of all constituencies.²

We focus on responses to two survey questions. The first asked respondents to give an estimate of the number of party members in their constituency; the second asked what proportion of the electorate was covered by an active local campaign organisation during the election. Election agents are in a good position to know the size of their local party and comparison with figures derived from other sources suggests that the data derived from the surveys are reliable (Fisher, 2000). We are thus able to analyse variations in constituency membership across parties and over time. Responses to the second question are inevitably less precise and may be subject to wider margins of error. Nonetheless, they provide a reasonable basis on which to explore variations in the extent of party campaign activity at local level.

Party membership and the extent of election organisation within constituencies 1992-2001

Table 1 shows the mean number of party members per constituency at the time of each of the three elections. It is clear, first, that there has been a steady decline in membership of local Conservative associations, with average membership being more than halved between 1992 and 2001. Various explanations for this decline have been suggested. First, as Whiteley, Seyd and Richardson (1994) point out, Conservative decline has been an ongoing process for some time, exacerbated by the high mean age of members, estimated to be 62 in 1994. Secondly, the political circumstances of the last decade are likely to have been important. Not only has the party been badly divided, it has also suffered repeated election defeats. Having won the 1992 general election, the Conservatives then experienced a series of disastrous defeats - in local and European Parliament elections and in parliamentary by-elections. After 1997, of course, the picture was even starker. Although there was something of a 'bottoming out' of Conservative fortunes at local and European levels, the party did not win a single by-election seat from Labour and made virtually no progress in the 2001 general election. It would be surprising if this continued electoral unpopularity did not contribute to membership decline. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that throughout the period the Conservatives had a larger mean membership per constituency than any other party.

Table 1. Mean number of party members per constituency, 1992-2001

	1992	1997	2001
Conservative	1,542	732	646
Labour	444	592	475
Liberal Democrats	166	162	130
Plaid Cymru	226	230	328
SNP	166	198	204

Note: Ns are as in footnote 2 with slight variations due to missing data.

For Labour, the picture has been more mixed. Mean constituency membership was higher in 2001 than it was in 1992 but the 2001 figure represents a significant drop from the high point recorded in 1997. Again this might be at least partially explained by political circumstances. Prior to 1997, the party and its new leader were both very popular and there was a widespread expectation that Labour could unseat the then unpopular Conservative government. The decline in membership following the 1997 election may partly be explained by disillusion with the government (justified or otherwise) and by the fact that the new members recruited in the run-up to 1997 were less committed to the party than those who were long-term members. Seyd and Whiteley (2002) show that ‘post-Blair’ party members were less likely to be trade unionists, had weaker partisan identification and were less active and than long-standing members.

Liberal Democrat membership continued to be relatively small over the period and declined somewhat after 1997. In some ways this is a surprise, given the party’s success in that election and its improved standing not only at Westminster, but also in Scotland and Wales – in both cases they became part of the governing coalition following the first elections to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. One possible explanation

is that members may have been uncomfortable with the apparent closeness of the party to Labour for much of the 1990s and this may explain why Charles Kennedy, after he became leader, began to articulate a desire for greater distance between his party and Labour (Denver, 2002).

By way of contrast, both the SNP and Plaid Cymru have experienced a steady growth in membership. It seems likely that this is to be explained by the prominence of devolution on the political agenda during this period, the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly and the enhanced status of both parties resulting from their success in elections to the respective institutions.

Table 2 shows how extensively local parties were organized within their constituencies at each election. It can be seen, firstly, that the extent of campaign activity declined for all parties between 1992 and 2001, with the biggest declines being suffered by Labour and the Conservatives. Disillusion may have played some part in Labour's sharp decline between 1997 and 2001, but a more likely explanation is the widely-held expectation that there would be another Labour landslide, since the figures for both the SNP and Plaid Cymru also declined, even though they had increased memberships. Secondly, while the Conservatives had the most extensive organisation in 1992, Labour outperformed them in both 1997 (clearly) and 2001 (slightly), while in all three elections the Liberal Democrats lagged some way behind the Conservatives and Labour in terms of organisational reach. Finally, the figures suggest that the SNP has been successful at maintaining extensive campaign organisations within constituencies. Indeed, within Scotland (although the details are not shown) the SNP was second only to Labour in terms of the extent of

election organisation in constituencies, outperforming the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in all three elections.

Table 2. Mean per cent of electorate covered by active campaign organisation, 1992-2001

	1992	1997	2001
Conservative	62	49	51
Labour	59	61	52
Liberal Democrats	34	34	30
Plaid Cymru	36	38	32
SNP	57	56	53

Note: Ns are as in footnote 2 with slight variations due to missing data.

One might expect that there would be a significant association between size of party membership and level of local activity and Table 3 shows that this is indeed the case for the major parties – the coefficients measuring the strength of the association between the two are all positive and statistically significant, with particularly strong associations for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. This suggests that the general decline in party membership may have contributed to the decline in activity. Nonetheless, the relationship between the two variables is far from perfect, so it is clear that they are measuring distinct features of local parties. Indeed, the figures reinforce the results of other analyses (Fisher *et al.*, 2004), which show that a large membership is not a necessary prerequisite of intense party activity. In what follows, therefore, we analyse variations in membership and activity levels separately.

Table 3. Correlations between size of membership and extent of local activity, 1992-2001

	1992	1997	2001
Conservative	0.44	0.43	0.52
Labour	0.38	0.22	0.26
Liberal Democrats	0.58	0.73	0.65

Note: All coefficients are significant at $p < 0.01$. Ns for the respective elections are 242, 404 and 346 for the Conservatives, 338, 440 and 421 for Labour, 376, 396 and 415 for the Liberal Democrats.

Variations in party membership and activity

While these descriptive data give an overall picture of membership and levels of activity, there are, of course, substantial variations across constituencies. In 2001, for example, reported Conservative membership varied from 10 to 3,900, Labour membership from 30 to 5,000 and Liberal Democrat membership from 3 to 800. For all three parties, the proportion of the electorate covered by an active campaign organisation ranged from 0 to 100. In the remainder of this article, we explore possible reasons for these variations, focusing upon the three major British parties. As we have seen, in his earlier article examining levels of party membership in 1997, Fisher (2000) showed that a combination of structural, socio-economic and political factors helped to explain variations in the size of constituency parties and associations. For both the Conservatives and Labour, changes resulting from the review of the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies prior to the 1997 election tended to depress membership and, for all parties, the social characteristics of constituencies were significant – in particular, more middle-class constituencies had larger local memberships. It was also clear, however, that larger party memberships were associated with long-term electoral success.

In addition, Whiteley and Seyd (1998) argue that electoral success or failure (at the national level) can affect levels of individual activity. As previously noted, they suggest that a ‘spiral of mobilisation’ may occur ‘in which electoral success stimulates campaign activity, which in turn produces further electoral success’ (p. 135). On the other hand, a ‘spiral of demobilization’ may result from electoral failure as party members become demoralised by defeat. First, defeat will lead to a fall in group efficacy – if one’s party fails to be elected, it will be unable to implement a policy programme of which members approve. Secondly, personal efficacy will also decline. Those members hoping to pursue a political career will be less likely to be able to do so if their party is out of office. Whiteley and Seyd show that, overall, participation incentives declined significantly for Labour members following the 1992 election defeat – the party’s fourth in a row.

Whiteley and Seyd note, however, that there may also be some contrary effects – in some cases defeat may lead to an increase in activity and victory may depress it. For example, they show that although the 1992 election result had favoured the Conservatives, the strength of partisanship subsequently declined more among Conservative members than among Labour members. This may be because members respond to defeat by ‘rallying round’ the party. Moreover, members who have fought hard campaigns to win marginal seats may suffer from campaign ‘burn out’ and subsequently be less active.

This earlier work was based on research carried out before the 1997 election. Given the very substantial changes in the fortunes of the parties that occurred in 1997, however, it is clearly appropriate to re-consider the impact of electoral outcomes on party membership

and activity. It is likely, of course, that socio-economic factors will continue to have significant effects on membership and activity levels and so we begin our analysis with these, using in this case data from the 2001 census.

Socio-economic characteristics of constituencies, size of party membership and extent of campaign activity

Fisher's earlier analysis of membership levels in 1997 showed that different social characteristics were significant for each party. At the bivariate level, Conservative membership was greater in constituencies which were more middle class and more rural and which had more owner-occupiers, fewer young people and fewer members of ethnic minorities. The socio-economic correlates of Liberal Democrat membership were similar to those for the Conservatives, but larger Labour memberships were found where there were more young people and non-whites, and in more urban areas. The evidence with regard to class and Labour membership was mixed: relationships with traditional measures of occupational class were not statistically significant but membership was greater where car ownership and the proportion of owner-occupiers were lower.

Table 4. Correlations between party membership, campaign activity and the socio-economic characteristics of constituencies, 2001

	Membership			Campaign Activity		
	Con	Lab	LDem	Con	Lab	LDem
% Aged 18-24	-0.236	0.259	-	-0.145	0.174	-
% Households with Car	0.558	-0.277	0.367	0.465	-0.526	0.257
% Owner Occupier	0.398	-0.279	0.217	0.406	-0.568	0.173
% Council/HA	-0.528	0.184	-0.369	-0.514	0.374	-0.246
% Private rent	0.162	0.321	0.175	0.143	0.557	-
% Prof. and Managerial	0.580	0.196	0.382	0.474	0.134	0.234
% Manual	-0.446	-0.227	-0.274	-0.400	-	-0.167
% Agriculture	0.285	-0.271	0.290	0.143	-0.256	0.200
Persons Per hectare	-0.276	0.375	-0.153	-0.177	0.130	-0.163
% Degree	0.428	0.328	0.300	0.338	-	0.165
% No qualifications	-0.613	-0.135	-0.469	-0.521	0.194	-0.296
% Non-white	-0.171	0.440	-0.153	-	0.121	-0.176
N	346	421	415	375	443	432

Note: All correlations are significant at the .05 level or better. Non-significant coefficients are not shown.

Results of a similar bivariate analysis of membership and also of the extent of campaign activity in 2001 are shown in Table 4. In addition to the variables used in Fisher's analysis, we also include measures of educational attainment. With respect to membership, the patterns found in the earlier study are largely repeated, although the relationships between Labour membership and the class variables are now significant (albeit not very strong). The new educational variables show that, for all parties, membership is higher where there is a larger proportion of graduates and lower where there are more people without formal qualifications. As far as activity is concerned, the patterns of relationships are much as expected. There is greater Conservative activity in more middle-class and more rural seats; Labour activity is generally lower in more affluent areas (although it is positively correlated with percentage professional and

managerial) and greater in more urban areas. The pattern for the Liberal Democrats is a paler reflection of that for the Conservatives.

The impact of election results in the short term

Election results can have both long-term and short-term impacts. As we have seen, previous research has shown that established electoral success boosts party membership. It is not just winning in the most recent election which counts, but success in previous elections and improved performance over time. However, a general election result such as that in 1997 is likely to have had a significant short-term impact: a record number of seats changed hands, Labour made a large number of gains – including many that were unexpected - and the Liberal Democrats gained significant ground while the Conservatives, of course, fared very badly. The effect was an increase in the number of seats in which there would be a significant contest in the subsequent election, with Labour and the Liberal Democrats trying to hold on to their gains and the Conservatives trying to recover at least some ground. As Denver *et al* (2002) show, this new electoral environment was confirmed by the increased number of seats targeted by the parties at the 2001 election.

The first hypothesis we wish to test is that marginality provides a stimulus for increased membership and activity – parties have a greater incentive to recruit in more marginal seats and potential members have more incentive to become involved in closer contests. Given that between 1997 and 2001 the average constituency membership of the three main parties fell, we might expect that membership retention would be greater in more

marginal seats - marginality may be expected not only to boost membership but also to arrest its decline. Even more obviously, it is to be expected that greater campaign efforts will be made in more marginal seats.

As a first step in testing the hypothesis, we examine the relationships between membership and activity levels in 2001 and the percentage majority of the first over second party in 1997, while controlling respectively for membership and activity levels in 1997. This means that, in effect, we are measuring the extent to which changes in membership and activity between the two elections are associated with marginality in 1997. The analysis is confined to constituencies in which the relevant party was placed either first or second in 1997 (since it is in these cases that marginality is likely to have an impact) and the relevant partial correlation coefficients are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Partial correlations: membership and activity levels 2001 and percentage majority in 1997 (controlling for membership and activity in 1997)

	Membership	Campaign Activity
Conservative	-0.16	-0.35
Labour	0.06	0.02
Liberal Democrat	-0.41	0.03

Note: Significant coefficients at $p < 0.05$ or better are printed in bold. Ns for membership are Con 205, Lab 232, Lib Dem 55. Ns for activity are Con 240, Lab 250, Lib Dem 61.

The evidence suggests that for both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats membership fell less between 1997 and 2001 in seats which had smaller majorities in 1997. The relationship is stronger in the case of the Liberal Democrats, although the number of cases is significantly smaller than for the other two parties. For Labour, however, the size of the majority in 1997 does not appear to have had an impact on

membership levels in 2001. Somewhat surprisingly, the size of the 1997 majority does not appear to have affected the extent of Labour or Liberal Democrat campaign activity in 2001, having taken account of activity in 1997, but the expected relationship is found in the case of the Conservatives – the smaller the percentage majority, the more extensive the campaign in 2001.

A second hypothesis relating to the short-term impact of the 1997 election is that whether a party wins in a constituency affects its subsequent membership and activity. We suggest that there is a hierarchy of election outcomes in terms of the likely effects on party morale. From a party's point of view there are four possible outcomes in a constituency which (in order of presumed effect on morale) are: the seat is gained, the seat is retained, the seat is lost and the seat remains in the hands of another party. For party morale, victory is better than defeat, but a new victory is also better than simply holding on. Similarly, losing a seat but remaining in contention for its re-capture, is better than repeatedly failing to win a seat. In the case of the 1997 election, the Conservatives gained no seats and so there are only three possible outcomes for them: the seat is held, lost or remains in other hands. Equally, Labour lost no seats, so it also has only three possible outcomes: the seat is gained, held or remains in other hands. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, we simply divide seats into victories or defeats, as there are too few cases to disaggregate gains, holds and losses.

In order to test the hypotheses that constituency outcomes affect membership and activity, we use regression models incorporating dummy variables to indicate the

different election outcomes for each party (with ‘seat held by other party’ as the reference category for Labour and the Conservatives, and ‘seat lost’ as the reference for the Liberal Democrats). In addition, we include levels of membership and activity in 1997 as control variables (which effectively controls for the effects of social characteristics). It should be noted that these models are fairly stiff tests of the impact of the election outcome variables since the previous membership and activity level variables are likely to account for much of the variance in membership and activity in 2001.

Table 6. The impact of 1997 election outcomes on party membership and activity 2001

	Membership			Activity		
	Con	Lab	LDem	Con	Lab	LDem
1997 membership	0.642	0.792	0.836	-	-	-
1997 activity	-	-	-	0.263	0.204	0.213
Lab Gain 1997	-	0.089	-	-	0.365	-
LD Win 1997	-	-	0.094	-	-	0.253
Con/Lab Held 1997	0.277	0.075	-	0.426	0.380	-
Con Loss 1997	0.133	-	-	0.266	-	-
Adj. r ²	0.694	0.681	0.792	0.344	0.264	0.459
N	237	306	283	276	327	304

Note: All coefficients are standardized beta weights. All coefficients are significant, $p < 0.05$ or better.

Table 6 shows that the outcomes of the 1997 election did indeed have a significant impact upon membership and activity. For all three parties, greater electoral success boosts membership: Conservative holds, Labour gains and Liberal Democrat wins in 1997 are all associated with higher levels of membership in 2001. It is also true that Conservative defeats and Labour holds are associated with higher memberships (relative to seats

remaining in other hands) but the beta weights show that the impact on membership is greater for Conservative holds and for Labour gains.

The pattern as far as the extent of activity in 2001 is concerned is very similar. For the Conservatives, 2001 activity was significantly greater both in seats that were held and those that were lost in 1997 than in seats that were retained by another party. Labour activity was higher in seats gained and seats held and for the Liberal Democrats local activity was clearly higher in relative terms in seats won in 1997.

Table 7. The impact of 1997 marginality and electoral outcomes on party membership and campaign activity 2001

	Membership			Activity		
	Con	Lab	LD	Con	Lab	LD
1997 membership	0.745	0.804	0.600	-	-	-
1997 activity	-	-	-	0.213	0.198	0.428
Lab Gain 1997	-	0.097	-	-	0.337	-
LD Win 1997	-	-	0.118	-	-	0.372
Con/Lab Held 1997	0.124	0.032	-	0.284	0.448	-
Con Loss 1997	0.038	-	-	0.109	-	-
1997 majority	-0.055	0.061	-0.286	-0.232	-0.170	0.056
Adj. r ²	0.727	0.682	0.709	0.333	0.138	0.376
N	208	235	58	243	253	64

Note : All coefficients are standardized beta weights; statistically significant coefficients (p< 0.05 or better) are printed in bold.

Finally in this section, majority in 1997 is added to the regression models and the results are shown in Table 7. These confirm the impact of the optimal electoral outcome for Labour - membership held up best in seats that had been gained in 1997 – but the coefficient for Conservative holds just fails to achieve statistical significance. In neither

case is 1997 majority significant once electoral outcomes are taken into account. By contrast, the size of majority in 1997 remains a significant predictor of Liberal Democrat membership, being more important than winning the seat in 1997.

In respect of campaign activity, however, size of majority has a significant impact in the expected direction for both the Conservatives and Labour. In addition, there were greater levels of activity by the Conservatives in seats that they held in 1997 as compared with those that they lost or those retained by another party (the reference category). For Labour both seats held and seats gained had greater activity in 2001 than others. Again the picture is different for the Liberal Democrats. The size of majority is not significant but levels of activity were higher in seats won in 1997 than in those that were not won.

Taking Tables 6 and 7 together, there is some evidence that the 1997 election results had a demobilizing effect on the Conservatives. The results in Table 6 suggest that membership fell more in seats that were lost than in seats held, although neither figure is significant when 1997 majority is introduced. Campaign activity was greater in more marginal seats and in both holds and losses, as compared to the reference category, but the coefficients indicate that the strongest predictor of the level of campaign activity in 2001 was holding the seat in 1997.

For Labour and the Liberal Democrats we would expect to see evidence of ‘mobilisation’ and Labour membership did hold up best in seats gained in 1997. Campaign activity was also greater in these seats than in the reference category, while holding the seat in 1997

and the size of majority are also significant predictors of activity level. In the case of the Liberal Democrats, membership is related to the size of majority in 1997, but whether a seat was won or lost apparently makes no difference. On the other hand, winning in 1997 did make a significant difference to the level of activity in 2001. Overall, then, the 1997 election results clearly affected subsequent membership and activity, with optimal results, for the most part, generating higher levels than non-optimal ones. On the other hand, there is no evidence to support the suggestion of campaign ‘burn out’: in seats gained by Labour, held by the Conservatives and won by the Liberal Democrats the coefficients for campaign activity in 2001 are positive and significant. Moreover, the coefficients for 1997 majority – where they are significant – indicate that activity and membership were greater in more marginal seats.

The impact of long-term electoral performance

The evidence thus far appears to suggest that the results of the 1997 election had a significant impact on both party membership and local party activity. While levels of both generally fell for all three parties, the declines were usually greater where there was least electoral success and smaller where the 1997 electoral outcome was more favourable. In the short-term, then, the outcome of the 1997 election had clear effects on local parties. However, in his analysis of party membership in 1997 Fisher (2000:140) argues that we should consider the impact of election outcomes in the longer term, since institutional inertia may mean that change is more gradual. To explore this question, what is required is a measure of electoral success in the longer-term. For this purpose, Fisher used what he called an ‘Index of Hope’, based upon a party’s position in elections from

1979 onwards, and found that it was a significant predictor of party membership. In this analysis, therefore, in order to test the impact of long-term electoral performance we include this Index of Hope, along with measures of success in 1997, in appropriate regression models.

The index is calculated for each party in each constituency and covers elections from 1979 to 1992; a larger score is assigned for coming first than for being second (others scoring zero) and the scores diminish as elections go back in time. Thus, a winning party in 1992 scores 5 and a second party 3; in 1987 a winning party scores 4 and a second party 2; and so on.³ The index captures relative party success in the past, the assumption being that previous success will have affected membership and activity and, due to inertia, will continue to have an effect, although a gradually diminishing one, over time. The fact that there was a change in constituency boundaries between 1979 and 1983 causes a slight problem, however. To cope with this, the constituencies used for the 1979 scores were those that were the largest single component of the new seats created for the 1983 election and after. This is not wholly satisfactory but it seems likely that, while boundaries may change, local party organization will change less rapidly and thus the political history of an area will continue to have some impact on parties, even if the actual constituency boundary has changed.

An initial bivariate correlation analysis shows that the Index of Hope is strongly associated with levels of membership and activity in 2001. For membership, the relevant coefficients are 0.60 for the Conservatives, 0.27 for Labour and 0.62 for the Liberal

Democrats. The respective coefficients for activity are 0.59, 0.38 and 0.51. All coefficients are statistically significant.⁴

Turning now to multivariate analysis, Table 8 reports the results of regressions with membership and campaign activity in 2001 as dependent variables. Since long-term success or failure would, presumably, have affected membership and campaign activity in 1997 we do not include these as controls here but rather use the socio-economic characteristics of constituencies previously listed in Table 4 (although the details are not shown in Table 8). As before, electoral success in 1997 is indicated both by dummy variables showing whether the seat was won, lost or held and 1997 majority, while the Index of Hope is used to measure long-term success.

Table 8. Short- and long-term electoral impacts on membership and campaign activity 2001

	Membership			Activity		
	Con	Lab	LDem	Con	Lab	LDem
Lab Gain 1997	-	0.204	-	-	0.430	-
LD Win 1997	-	-	0.435	-	-	0.378
Con/Lab Held 1997	0.341	0.225	-	0.047	0.493	-
Con Loss 1997	0.132	-	-	-0.042	-	-
1997 majority	0.095	0.219	-0.485	-0.091	-0.107	-0.300
Index of Hope	0.102	0.108	-0.143	0.216	-0.040	0.132
Adj. r ²	0.543	0.286	0.500	0.373	0.110	0.245
N	301	333	93	328	346	98

Note : All coefficients are standardized beta weights; statistically significant coefficients (p, 0.05 or better) are printed in bold. Coefficients for socio-economic variables are not shown.

As far as membership is concerned, the data confirm the importance of short-term success for all three parties. Conservative membership held up best in seats held in 1997, Labour membership in seats gained and Liberal Democrat membership in seats won. In addition, 1997 majority affected Liberal Democrat membership in the expected direction although Labour membership was smaller in more marginal seats. Perhaps the most striking aspect of these results, however, is that, contrary to Fisher's results for membership in 1997; long-term success (or lack of it) as measured by the Index of Hope has no significant impact on the size of party membership in 2001.

Outcomes in 1997 also influenced the extent of Labour and Liberal Democrat campaign activity in 2001, but 1997 majority had no significant impact. As with membership, however, the Index of Hope is not significant for any of the parties, suggesting that longer-term electoral performance in a constituency had no effect on the level of campaign activity in 2001.

These results for 2001, as we have indicated, run counter to those reported by Fisher for party membership in 1997. How is this to be explained? We suggest that the answer lies in the nature of the 1997 general election. The previous four elections from 1979 to 1992 had been won by the Conservatives and during that period the electoral status of constituencies was relatively stable. A local party's long-term performance was a very good guide to its prospects in any forthcoming election. In 1997, however, things were turned upside down. The electoral status of many constituencies was dramatically changed. The effects of that change on local parties were powerful – as we have seen – and effectively over-rode any

long-term effects. In a sense a party's performance between 1979 and 1992 now belonged to a different era and became irrelevant to success at retaining members or levels of campaign activity.

Conclusion

Earlier work on the effects of electoral performance on party membership and activity has largely focussed on long-term electoral success or failure. Thus, Fisher's earlier work was consistent with the view put forward by Whiteley and Seyd (1998) that a 'spiral of demobilisation' may arise from electoral failure and a 'spiral of mobilisation' from success.

What we have shown here is that any such spiral can be broken by a single election in which there is a sharp reversal of previous results. The performance of parties in constituencies during the years of Conservative dominance between 1979 and 1992 appears to have had no impact on their membership and activity in 2001. In contrast, the constituency outcomes of the 1997 election generally had clear and significant short-term effects. If Whiteley and Seyd are correct, then, the 1997 election may have started a new spiral. We may expect the changes to constituency status consequent upon the 1997 election to have a long-term impact on the health and activity of local parties – at least until another election sees a sharp reversal of the parties' fortunes.

Notes

1. The surveys referred to in the paper 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 number of survey respondents from each party in each of the elections was as follows:

	1992	1997	2001
Conservative	265	434	375
Labour	356	455	443
Liberal Democrats	383	411	432
Plaid Cymru	21	24	27
SNP	26	44	52

The overall response rates were 53.0%, 68.1% and 65.5% respectively. For evidence of the representativeness of responding constituencies see Denver *et al* (2004, p. 305).

3. A party winning a constituency scores 5 for 1992, 4 for 1987, 3 for 1983 and 2 for 1979. Respective scores for a party in second place are 3, 2, 1 and 0.5. A party outside the top two places scores zero.

4. The numbers of cases on which these calculations are based are, for membership: Conservative 347, Labour 421, Liberal Democrat 415 and for activity: Conservative 375, Labour 443, Liberal Democrat 508.

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