

Brexit and election advertising: an asset for some, a liability for others

Brexit was key to the 2019 general election campaign – but it wasn't all that voters heard about. Tristan Hotham analyses Facebook advertising in the run-up to the vote and finds that while the issue proved an asset to the Conservatives and a liability to the Lib Dems, Labour tried to ignore it.



Examples of Conservative Facebook adverts, general election 2019

On the night of 12 December, we saw Labour's share of seats in Parliament fall to the lowest level since 1935, and the largest Conservative majority since 1987. The polling was correct. Labour had fallen back, the 'red wall' was smashed, Corbynmania was absent. The Liberal Democrats had failed to make an impact, piling up worthless votes in Remain seats while losing their leader. The Conservatives' polling, meanwhile, remained steady, boosted by the Brexit Party's decision to stand down in Tory seats.

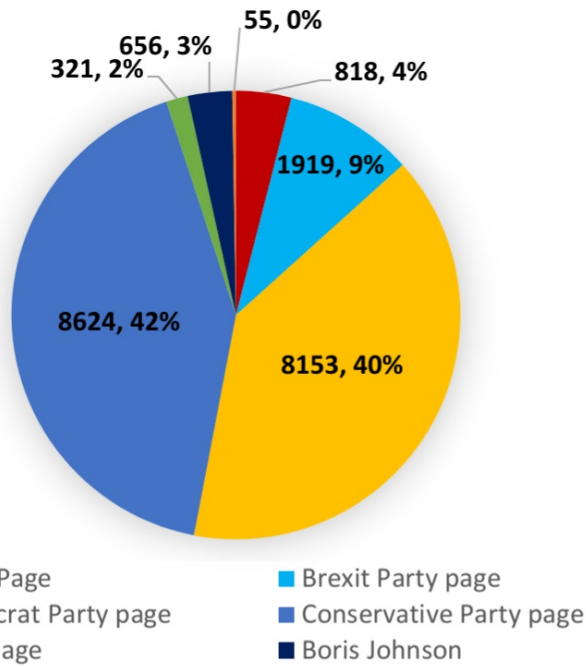
Brexit was clearly key to this election. But what does the parties' Facebook advertising tell us about the part it played in the contest?

A whole lot of content

20,546 adverts (Figure 1) were sent by the major parties' pages (Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats and Green Party) alongside Jeremy Corbyn's and Boris Johnson's pages, between 1 November and 9 December. In other words, just six political pages sent a colossal amount of political content covering many areas from healthcare to the economy (see here for an [early analysis](#)). The number of adverts sent does not represent the spend: as such, Figure 2 outlines how much the parties spent on Facebook in this period.

The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats sent by far the most adverts across the month, with Labour trailing far behind. The latter stuck with content for long periods, while the other pages generally shifted approach more often through A/B testing.

Figure 1: Number of adverts sent by page



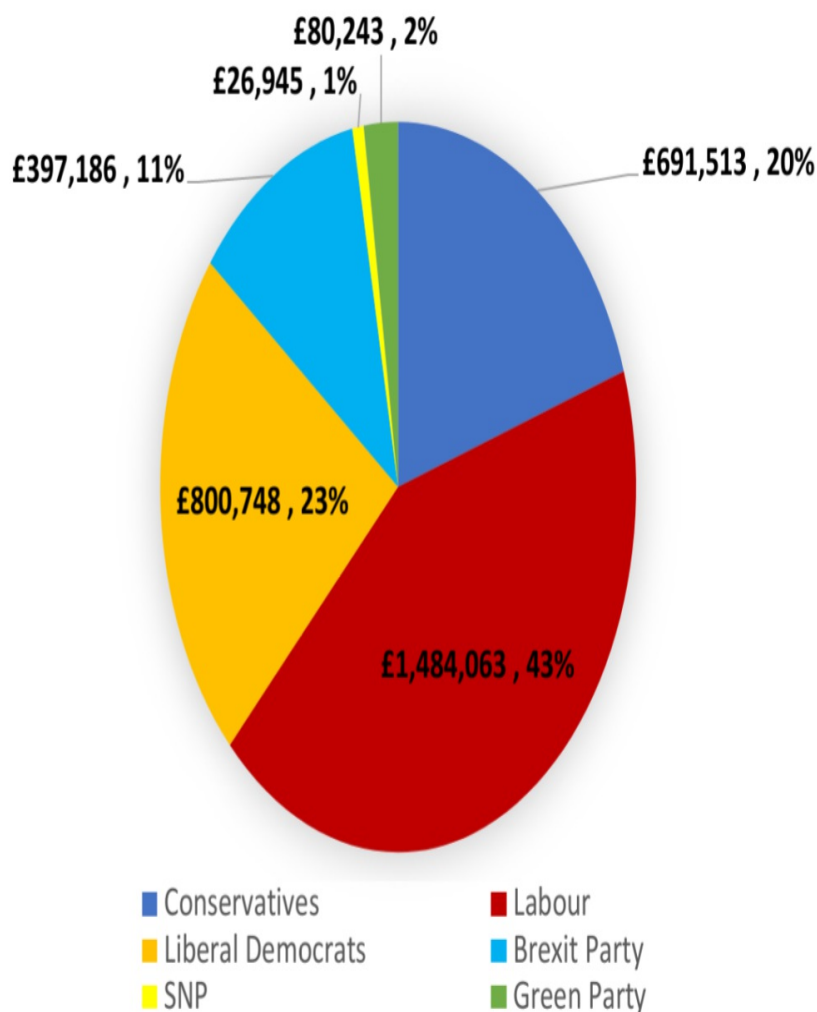
It is important to note that Labour was spending by far the most on a far smaller selection of adverts. The Conservatives, meanwhile, were consistently churning out fresh Brexit-related advertising (Table 1).

Examples of Labour adverts

The image shows two side-by-side screenshots of Facebook advertisements. The left advertisement is for 'The Labour Party' and is dated '6 Dec 2019-12 Dec 2019'. It features the Labour Party logo, a red rose icon, and the text 'Sponsored - Paid for by The Labour Party'. The main text reads: 'Thursday 12 December is our chance for real change. Only Labour will give you the Final Say on Brexit. Vote Labour.' Below this is a video thumbnail showing a large crowd of people at a protest, with a play button in the center. Some people are holding signs, one of which says 'THERE IS NO PLAN B'. At the bottom of the ad, it says 'Vote Labour Thursday 12 December' and 'ACTION.LABOUR.ORG.UK' with a 'Learn More' button.

The right advertisement is also for 'The Labour Party' and is dated '28 Nov 2019'. It features the Labour Party logo and the text 'Sponsored'. The main text reads: 'Only Labour' and 'With us? Ad'. Below this is a red graphic with a white play button, which is partially cut off on the right side of the image. At the bottom of the ad, it says 'Labour will give' and 'It's time to let the' with a link to 'ACTION.LABOUR.ORG.UK'.

Figure 2: Spending by party



Ignoring the issue?

I searched the body text of all 20,546 ads for the use of the terms European Union, EU, Europe, Remain, Leaver, Remainer, Leaver and Brexit. Was this a Brexit election? The answer is yes. Nearly half (48%) of all the ads sent by these seven pages referred to Brexit, indicating how central the issue was to the election. However, the percentage of Brexit-related ads varied considerably by party. Some parties avoided the subject (Labour), while for others it was their sole focus (Brexit Party).

Table 1: Use of the term 'Brexit' in parties' adverts, 1 November–9 December

	Use of 'Brexit' across all ads
Labour Party page	15%
Brexit Party page	96%
Liberal Democrat page	43%
Conservative Party page	23%
Green Party page	29%
Boris Johnson	94%
Jeremy Corbyn	0%

The Conservatives were surprisingly nuanced in their approach, with the party page not mentioning Brexit as much as one would expect. Instead, the party pushed Brexit content via Boris Johnson's page. Nevertheless, the Conservatives still sent 2017 Brexit-related adverts over the one-month period. This was less than the Liberal Democrats (3525) but more than the Brexit Party (1846). The party was talking about other things – the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, but also the NHS and policing – and grasped that while Brexit was central to this general election, it was not the only issue going. The Lib Dems failed to appreciate this. The Conservatives also grasped that the best tool they had at their disposal to reach Labour Leavers was the former face of Vote Leave, Boris Johnson. Equally, his 'Marmite' character was a turnoff for Remain-voting areas.

Examples of Conservative ads from the campaign



About social issues, elections or politics

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Conservatives

Sponsored - Paid for by The Conservative Party

Your vote has never been more important. Vote Conservative in Westmorland & Lonsdale to end the gridlock and get Parliament working for you again.

A vote for anyone else risks a hung Parliament - with more chaos, more indecision, and more delay - or Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister, which would be a disaster for Britain.



About social issues, elections or politics



Conservatives

Sponsored - Paid for by The Conservative Party

Your vote has never been more important. Only Conservatives in Rother Valley will allow us to get Brexit done once and for all.

A vote for anyone else, including the Brexit Party risks a hung Parliament with more delay, confusion, and chaos.



Vote Conservative to get Parliament working for you
Make your vote count in Westmorland & Lonsdale
VOTE.CONSERVATIVES.COM

[Learn More](#)



Vote Conservative to deliver Brexit
Make your vote count in Rother Valley
VOTE.CONSERVATIVES.COM

● Inactive
 Started running on 1 Dec 2019
 ID: 552292662285557

ⓘ About social issues, elections or politics

Conservatives
 Sponsored • Paid for by The Conservative Party

GB Get Brexit Done
 ✓ Respect the result
 🇬🇧 Vote Conservative



✓ Use your vote to get Brexit done
 Only the Conservatives can deliver Brexit
 VOTE.CONSERVATIVES.COM


Learn More

● Inactive
 10 Dec 2019-12 Dec 2019
 ID: 2463428173917662

ⓘ About social issues, elections or politics

Conservatives
 Sponsored • Paid for by The Conservative Party

Julie Elliott voted against Brexit & wants a
 Only the Conservatives can beat her. 🇬🇧
 Brexit Done.



In contrast, Labour avoided the subject. Only 15% (122) of their party page adverts covered Brexit, and Corbyn avoided it completely. This repeated their approach in 2017, but this time it failed as they had since pivoted to support a second referendum. The limited content about Brexit was stagnant and unchanging, and it was clear the party would have preferred to avoid the issue altogether.

The Labour party was trying to walk a very difficult tightrope between covering and discussing their Brexit position, and ignoring it completely. Labour was split between an electorate who wanted Brexit and those who saw it as an anathema, and its attempts to walk a tightrope between the two failed abjectly. The Conservatives, on the other hand, managed to weaponise Brexit alongside other topics, through a strategy that appreciated nuance, colourful and changing content and a determination not to get bogged down in a single issue.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It was first published on the [LSE Brexit blog](#).

About the author



Tristan Hotham is a PhD researcher at the University of Bath. His thesis is entitled “Examining the impact and effectiveness of Facebook on party campaigns”.

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