

'Conceived in Harlesden': When do candidates emphasise their local connections in UK general elections?

The personal characteristics of election candidates matter to voters. With election leaflets representing the most common form of contact voters have with Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs), when do leaflets emphasise a candidate's personal traits and/or local connections? **Caitlin Milazzo** and **Joshua Townsley** use a dataset of more than 3,700 leaflets distributed during the 2015 and 2017 general elections to explore the conditions under which the personal characteristics of candidates appear in election communications.



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Despite the increasing focus on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, leaflets remain the most common form of contact that voters have with politicians during an election campaign. Parties also spend substantial sums on leaflets and direct mail. According to the Electoral Commission, prior to the 2015 and 2017 general elections political parties spent more than £15 million and £13 million respectively on communications sent to voters via post. While there is evidence that [leaflets can increase turnout](#), less attention has been paid to the messages they contain.

Leaflets frequently talk about various local and national policy issues – everything from potholes to defence and the economy. But there are also strong incentives for candidates to talk about themselves. We know that voters value certain traits in their prospective representatives – studies consistently show that localness is a vote-winner. If candidates can talk up their personal story, there could be votes in it for them. So what factors explain whether a leaflet is likely to emphasise a candidate's personal characteristics?

To find out, we manually coded thousands of leaflets that were uploaded to the crowdsourced archive of political leaflets [ElectionLeaflets.org](#). The site is run by the non-partisan Democracy Club, and encourages users to photograph leaflets they receive during election campaigns and upload them to their archive. We studied general election leaflets delivered by candidates from Britain's six largest parties: the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the Green Party and the Scottish National Party (SNP).

Our aim was to identify two types of candidate-centred messaging. First, we look at whether a leaflet mentions any connections the candidate has to the local area – that is, their ‘local ties’. This could include, for example, mentions that they live in the constituency or that their kids go to local schools. The 2017 Green candidate in Brent Central, for instance, went as far as to mention that she was ‘conceived in Harlesden’. Second, we identify whether the leaflet mentions any of the candidate’s traits or characteristics (for example, their occupation or education). UKIP’s 2017 candidate in South Thanet, for example, mentioned his years of service with the army, his experience in marketing, as well as the fact that he is an ordained minister.

Vote

Shaka Lish
For BRENT CENTRAL

I am a life long Brent resident, conceived in Harlesden, born in Kilburn, grew up in Queens Park and now reside in Willesden. I wasn't always political but like many, after the Iraq war I was left with so many questions about politics in the UK. Questions like, what makes democracy work for the people, not just the powerful?

I am passionate about community, the environment, equality, the NHS, animals and education. I often feel so inspired by what could be possible, how the country can be transformed for the good of all, not just the few. I see a country where we have clean air, renewable energy, we look after our environment, we care for the vulnerable, have meaningful and secure work and where everyone gets the opportunity to thrive and fulfil their potential. I know this is possible but I also know it can only be achieved together.

"I always wondered why somebody doesn't do something about that. Then I realised, I am somebody"

Peace Ecology Social Justice Democracy Green Party

Source: Green Party, via [Electionleaflets.org](https://electionleaflets.org)

In some cases, leaflets mentioned both local connections and traits. For example, a 2017 Lib Dem leaflet in Erewash noted that ‘Martin is the Chair of Governors at Friesland School in Sandiacre where he has served as governor since 2002’. In this case, the candidate is emphasising both his occupation and his local connections, as the school in question is located within the constituency.

Having coded our leaflets, we used logistic regression models to determine the effect of a series of factors on whether or not a leaflet contained at least one reference to the candidate’s local connections (model 1), the candidate’s traits (model 2), or both (model 3). The results of these models are below.

We find systematic variation in leaflet personalisation across political parties. In 2015, for instance, Labour leaflets were less likely to mention candidates’ local connections, traits or both than those from all other major parties. However, in 2017, leaflets from Labour candidates were more likely to contain candidate-centred messages than those from Conservative candidates. This echoes what we know about the Conservative campaign in 2017, which focused far more on Theresa May and national issues such as Brexit.

	2015			2017		
	Local ties	Traits	Ties and Traits	Local ties	Traits	Ties and Traits
Party (ref=Labour)						
Conservative	+0.19	+0.30	+0.25	—	—	-0.08
Lib Dem	+0.10	+0.14	+0.11	—	—	—
SNP	+0.22	+0.15	+0.20	—	—	—
Green	+0.14	+0.20	+0.19	—	—	—
UKIP	+0.17	+0.12	+0.12	—	—	—
Unpopular leader	+0.07	+0.09	+0.04	—	—	—
Margin of victory (t - 1)	+0.10	+0.21	+0.09	+0.19	—	+0.24
County seat	—	+0.06	+0.04	—	+0.07	—
Incumbent MP	-0.10	-0.15	-0.10	-0.12	-0.14	-0.10
Prominent office holder	—	-0.18	-0.10	-0.21	—	-0.22
Female candidate	—	—	-0.03	-0.11	—	-0.08

Notes: Figures represent the effect of a minimum/maximum shift on the probability that a leaflet includes a personalised messaging of the given type. Predicted effects for coefficients that were not statistically significant have been omitted.

Beyond party differences, contextual factors also matter. Leaflets distributed in 'safe' seats were more likely to contain personal messaging than those distributed in 'marginal' seats. Leaflets were also more likely to include personal messages if the candidate's party leader is unpopular with their constituents. Leaflets delivered in rural constituencies were also more likely to contain mentions of a candidate's personal background.

Finally, leaflets from certain types of candidates were more likely to contain personal messages. Leaflets from incumbent MPs were less likely to contain such messages than those from 'challengers' – perhaps because sitting MPs are more well-known than challengers, who need to make greater efforts to get 'their story' across. Similarly, leaflets from candidates who hold prominent political office (such as members of the cabinet or shadow cabinet) were less likely to include personalised messages. Interestingly, we also find evidence of a gender effect. Leaflets from female candidates were less likely to talk about the candidate's personal story.

Overall, we find that whether or not a leaflet contains personal information about a candidate (beyond just their name) is largely a function of party differences. In 2015, we find evidence that leaflets from Labour were less likely to contain messages about a candidate's local ties and/or traits than those from the Conservatives. By 2017, however, we find the reverse. This gives rise to the question: was the Conservatives' decision to run a more leader-focused campaign in 2017 (and focus less on their candidates' characteristics) related to their surprising underperformance?

But beyond party differences, we also find that contextual and candidate-level factors also have an effect. Taken together, our findings suggest that voters in certain types of seats are more likely to receive personal information about their candidates. This is important, as such voters could be 'primed' to think about personal characteristics when deciding how to vote.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit.

*This article is based on the authors' paper, ['Conceived in Harlesden: Candidate-Centred Campaigning in British General Elections'](#), forthcoming in the journal *Parliamentary Affairs*.*

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