

Campaigning online and offline: the significance of local and national contexts



[Paul Webb](#) addresses the question of what members do for their parties during campaigns, and explains why there is value in considering the impact of national and local contexts. He writes that whereas the former enhances online participation by members, the latter considerably improves the model of offline participation.

When it comes to election campaigning, boots on the ground can sometimes beat – or at least, mitigate the effect of – cash in the bank. It is very likely that Labour’s huge advantage over the Tories in terms of membership would have counted for something in close constituency races in the general election of 2017 – as long as a decent proportion of those members are actually active. These are the sort of people who will volunteer for phone banks, deliver leaflets, and canvass door-to-door in the run-up to the election, and then remind people to vote and help them get to the polling stations on polling day itself. But in this day and age, it isn’t just a matter of these perennial methods of campaigning, but increasingly too about exploiting the potential of social media to spread party and candidate messages. With evidence that [Labour enjoyed a particular advantage](#) over their main rivals in terms of social media strategy in 2107, it is important to know what drives online campaigning by activists, and whether the answer differs from that for offline campaigning.

We can shed light on this, thanks to the detailed surveys of the members of six British parties we have conducted since 2015 as part of [the ESRC-funded Party Membership Project](#) run out of Queen Mary University of London and Sussex University. Table 1 reports the range and scale of activities of our respondents during the election campaign. In terms of inter-party differences, this shows that SNP members were the most active overall, while Conservative members trailed behind the others. Social media acts (posting on Facebook or tweeting) feature among the most prominent forms of campaign activity, while things that generally require more effort or time, like running party committees and getting the vote out on polling day, attracted far few participants – unsurprisingly. But do the same factors drive members to participate online and offline? Not exactly.

Table 1: Which of the following things did you do for the party during the 2015 election campaign?

Activity	Con	Lab	LD	UKIP	Green	SNP	Total
‘Liked’ something by party/candidate on FB	39.6	51.1	47.4	44.2	67.6	72.7	53.4
Tweeted/re-tweeted party/candidate messages	26.0	36.9	31.1	22.9	45.7	48.6	35.2
Displayed election poster in window	29.6	51.2	37.8	42.9	45.1	67.7	45.7
Delivered leaflets	43.5	42.5	45.9	38.3	28.8	35.4	39.4
Attended public meeting or hustings	31.3	31.4	28.2	40.5	27.3	49.0	34.6
Canvassed face to face or by phone	36.5	35.7	32.6	26.1	19.1	28.2	30.4
Helped run party committee room	12.5	8.4	13.0	5.7	2.4	5.3	8.1
Drove voters to polling stations	6.4	7.2	4.9	5.7	2.6	7.5	5.9
Stood as candidate (councillor/MP)	9.1	7.0	15.1	13.0	10.2	0.2	8.6
Other	16.3	14.2	20.8	14.1	12.8	16.6	15.7
None	23.0	12.9	18.4	20.8	15.3	7.8	16.3
<i>Campaign Activism Index – Mean</i>	2.35	2.71	2.56	2.39	2.49	3.15	2.61
N	1193	1180	730	785	845	963	5696

Note: All activities figures are percentages, except the Campaign Activism Index, which is based on an additive scale that runs from 0 (no activity during the election campaign) to 9 (maximal activity during the campaign, excluding “other”). All relationships between party and type of campaign activity reported in this table are significant at $p < .001$.

Our results suggest some significant differences between offline and online campaign participation. The details of our statistical modelling can be found [in this article](#), but the major findings are fairly easy to summarize. We found that factors relating to the local party and constituency context are especially helpful in understanding the drivers of traditional offline activism, but are less pertinent to online activity. If an individual is recruited by his or her local party, becomes embedded within its social network, forms a positive impression of the way it conducts its business and feels comfortable with its general ideological outlook, he or she will be significantly more likely to campaign for it at election time than if one or more of these conditions do not apply – all the more so if this all happens to occur in a marginal constituency, and if he or she is a member of one of the major two parties. However, these local contextual factors do not carry the same significance for online participation, which is driven more exclusively by factors associated with the national party and its leadership (i.e. its general policy positions and leader images).

A point of particular interest is that members who are recruited via the local rather than the national party are more likely to participate in traditional offline forms of campaign activity, but less likely to engage in social media ‘clicktivism’. While online activism is undeniably significant now, offline campaigning is by no means a thing of the past – and our research suggests that if parties want members to get involved in such activities, then they need to think very carefully before rushing into making recruitment and participation more national and more digital. At the heart of this is the process of welcoming and inducting new recruits without intimidating them or turning them off: it is vital that members feel that they are part of a sympathetic social network of like-minded people whose company they enjoy if they are to commit themselves to a party’s cause in a national election campaign. In this regard, for instance, anecdotal reports that Constituency Labour Party meetings are becoming increasingly fraught (and sometimes downright bloody) affairs should therefore be a cause for concern.

Note: the above draws on the [author’s paper](#) (with Tim Bale and Monica Poletti) in *Political Studies*.

About the Author



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