

What effect do leader visits to constituencies have on a party's vote?

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David Cameron spoke recently about the possibility of holding the debates before the campaign period because 'the election campaign should be about travelling around the country, listening and talking to people'. Ed Miliband wants Labour to talk to 4 million people . But do leader visits have an impact? Alia Middleton examines the evidence from 2010 and finds that visits made to constituencies by party leaders can have an impact on local results.



It is a common sight during election campaigns to see the leaders of political parties touring the country, often on buses emblazoned with their faces. They take care to be photographed visiting local businesses, meeting their party's local candidate and shaking hands with voters. Such visits have the potential to be memorable aspects of the campaign – certainly in the case of Gordon Brown's visits to Rochdale in 2010, where he encountered Gillian Duffy. This post explores the strategy behind leader visits, the effect they have on a party's vote in those constituencies, and the importance of leaders visiting seats not currently held by their party.

Visits are strategic

Only a minority of constituencies are visited during election campaigns, which makes the reasons behind their selection interesting. During the 2010 election campaign, Gordon Brown visited the most constituencies, managing to fit in 62 – three of which he visited twice. David Cameron visited 55 constituencies in total, visiting five of them twice. Nick Clegg visited the fewest constituencies (just 46) and made just two repeat visits.

Leader visits are not occasional occurrences in election campaigns. In 2010, David Cameron and Gordon Brown visited at least one constituency on every day of the campaign, while Nick Clegg made visits on all but four days (three of which were at weekends). There was a dramatic increase in the number of visits made as election day approached: in the final three days of campaigning, the leaders made 27 visits, with David Cameron making visits to six constituencies the day prior to polling day alone.

There were two key instances restricting the visits that party leaders could make during the 2010 campaign. Firstly, the introduction of the leader debates limited the distance the leaders were able to travel on the days the debates were held. Secondly, the Sunday prior to election day also restricted visit locations due to media commitments in and around London. Despite this, each party leader made at least one visit to nearby constituencies on these days (Gordon Brown made nine visits to London constituencies on the Sunday prior to polling day). This indicates careful targeting and maximisation of geographical restrictions.

It is possible to identify defensive and expansionist visit strategies by the party leaders, with the former being to constituencies already held by their party, and the latter as those not held.

Table 1: Percentage of constituencies visited according to incumbency status, absolute number in parantheses

	Constituency held by own party	Constituency not held by own party	Total number of constituencies visited
David Cameron	7.3% (4)	92.70% (51)	55

Gordon Brown	87.10% (54)	12.90% (8)	62
Nick Clegg	23.90% (11)	76.10% (35)	46

Note: N=628, N in parentheses. Constituencies excluded from analysis are those in Northern Ireland, the Speaker's constituency (Buckingham) and the leader's home constituencies.

As seen in table 1, David Cameron operated an expansionist visit strategy, with visits to constituencies held by other parties comprising 92.7% of his total visits. A less intense expansionist strategy is also evident for the Liberal Democrats, with 76.1% of Nick Clegg's visits to constituencies held by other parties. A striking contrast to this can be seen in the 87.1% Gordon Brown made to Labour-held seats, indicating a more defensive strategy. Clearly an expansionist strategy is less possible for the leader of a party defending a large majority.

Visits boost vote share but not turnout in constituencies

Taking into account other explanations for voter turnout, leader visits do not boost turnout in constituencies visited. In contrast, a visit by a party leader increases that party's vote share in the constituency – in the case of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, this increase is a (statistically) significant one.

In 2010, if a constituency was visited by David Cameron, Conservative vote share increased 1.2 percentage points. Where Nick Clegg visited, the Liberal Democrats received a boost in their vote share of 1.5 percentage points. Despite Gordon Brown's visits having a positive impact on Labour vote share, this was insignificant. It would appear from these results that leader visits increased party vote share in 2010 – as long as you were not Gordon Brown.

Visiting constituencies held by other parties has the greatest impact

The question is whether the impact on vote share holds in different types of constituencies. Further analysis demonstrates that the impact on vote share was greatest in constituencies not held by the party that the leader represented. For example, David Cameron's visits made a significant difference to Conservative vote share in Labour-held constituencies, with a visit earning a 1.4 percentage point increase over Labour-held constituencies not visited. Gordon Brown's visits made no significant difference to Labour vote share in constituencies held by any of the parties. It is difficult to say without further analysis, but it is possible that the Labour visit strategy minimised the loss of Labour party vote share.

Nick Clegg visited the fewest seats of the three leaders, yet in two of the three local incumbency situations he had a positive impact on his party's vote share. Visits he made to Labour-held constituencies significantly boosted Liberal Democrat vote share by 2.2 percentage points – which could make a considerable difference to the local results, particularly in marginal seats. Interestingly, Nick Clegg's visits to constituencies held by his own party actually reduced the party's vote share, although not significantly.

The 'false dawn' of the Liberal Democrat campaign in 2010 is perhaps echoed here in the analysis of Nick Clegg's visits. The indications here are that expansionist visit strategies reap the greatest rewards for parties by increasing their vote share. Yet Nick Clegg's visit strategy is neither convincingly expansionist nor defensive. A more focused expansionist visit campaign capitalising on Nick Clegg's popularity may potentially have increased Liberal Democrat vote share elsewhere.

Conclusion

Leaders are an important element of election campaigns in the UK, perhaps increasingly so with the adoption of leader debates. These visits do not increase constituency turnout, but visits by David Cameron and Nick Clegg in 2010 significantly boosted their respective local party vote shares. Gordon Brown adopted a defensive pattern of visits, while David Cameron and Nick Clegg made most of their visits to constituencies held by other parties.

Expansionist visits were more effective than Labour's defensive strategy, but it should be taken into account that even if Labour had adopted an expansionist pattern of leader visits, it is questionable whether they would have reaped the same rewards.

Looking ahead to this year's election, the visit strategies employed by the leaders are likely to be less clear. On the surface the roles are reversed – as the national incumbents, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats need to defend their constituencies. Yet, expansionist visit strategies appear to work best. Will visits by both David Cameron and Nick Clegg still continue to have a positive effect at the local level, or will they find, as Gordon Brown did in 2010, that no matter how carefully the incumbent leader (and his deputy) chooses the constituencies to visit, they do not make an impact? With Ed Miliband as the leader of the opposition party, the adoption of an expansionist visit strategy has the potential to boost Labour's local vote share – a factor that may be key in marginal constituencies.

About the Author

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