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Data-driven campaigning in the 2015 UK general election

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Data-Driven Campaigning in the 2015 UK General Election

Abstract

While we know something of data-driven campaigning practices in the US, we know much less about the role of data in other national contexts. The 2015 UK General Election offers an important case study of how such practices are evolving and being deployed in a different setting. This article draws on 31 in-depth interviews with political practitioners involved in the use of data for six major UK parties and electoral regulators. These interviews are employed to explore the perceived importance of data in contemporary British campaigns, to understand the data-based campaign techniques being used by UK parties, and to assess how data-driven practices are interacting with the pre-existing institutional context of British politics. Going beyond the specifics of the UK case, this study raises questions about the comparative, theoretical, and normative dimensions of data-driven politics.

Keywords

Election Campaign, Political Parties, Western Europe

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the role played by data in election campaigns. Both academic research and popular commentary have focused mainly on the United States (see, for example, Grassegger and Krogerus 2017; Hersh 2015; Howard 2006; Issenberg 2012; Kreiss 2012, 2016; Nickerson and Rogers 2014; Nielsen 2012; Tufekci 2014). While some researchers and journalists have now started to consider the role played by data in other countries (on the UK, see Cowley and Kavanagh 2015; Crabtree 2010; Ross 2015b; on Germany, see Jungherr 2016; on India, see Safi 2017), our understanding of non-US contexts remains patchy.

This study focuses on the 2015 United Kingdom General Election. This case is interesting as a specific example of data-driven politics, and also for building theory that can be applied in other countries. In the British context, the election saw an increased role for data-driven targeting, which some accounts even argued was decisive to the election result (Ross 2015a, 2015b). Perhaps more importantly, however, from the perspective of comparative theory-building, the UK example provides a rich resource for those wishing to study data-driven politics beyond our knowledge of the US.

Institutionally, British parties are more like their Western European counterparts, which have much higher levels of formal institutionalization than looser, stratarchical US parties (Epstein 1980; Ware 1996). UK parties also now exist in a multiparty rather than a two-party system (McKibben, 2016). The level of resource expended on UK electoral politics is rather more typical of the global norm than the largesse of the US system (Falguera et al. 2014; Thompson 2012). In short, the UK political system shares several features with other non-US political systems. Studying it is an important starting point in generating theory to be applied in other countries.

The institutional backdrop to data-driven politics matters because data-driven politics and how it is deployed is about more than technology. Specifically, there is a tendency to mistake technologically intensive practices (which data-driven campaigning certainly is) for technologically defined practices (which, this article will argue, data-driven campaigning is not). Rather, data-driven campaigning, the form it takes, the uses it is put to, and the way it is understood is shaped by political context.

To better understand the role played by data in the 2015 UK election, this article proceeds as follows. First, existing literature relevant to data-driven campaigning is examined. This is followed by a discussion of the research methods employed, drawing on 31 semi-structured elite interviews with individuals involved in the data-driven campaign in 2015. The transcripts generated by these interviews are then analyzed to address the article's research questions. Finally, a concluding section examines the comparative, theoretical and normative ramifications of this article's findings.

Existing Literature

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the role of data in election campaigns. Tufekci talks about computational politics, defined as “applying computational methods to large datasets derived from online and off-line data-sources for conducting outreach, persuasion and mobilization” (Tufekci 2014, p. 2). Kreiss argues that “contemporary campaigning has entered a new technology intensive era... technology-intensive campaigning has reoriented parties and campaigns to the backstage infrastructural technology, data and analytics work” (Kreiss 2016, pp. 3–4). Nielsen describes the role played by databases in contemporary “personalized political communication,” where activists directly contact targeted voters (Nielsen 2012, p. 7). What unites these various authors is a belief that data is now shaping the

way campaigners communicate with voters. Such practices are important to political campaigns because they facilitate the efficient allocation of scarce resources.

There is also agreement (at least among those studying the US) that data-driven campaigning practices have evolved significantly in recent years. In part, this is due to increased computing power (Nickerson and Rogers 2014; Tufekci 2014). Perhaps more significantly, though, there has also been a methodological change, with a move away from area-based targeting to individual-based targeting. Nickerson and Rogers note this shift, arguing, “Technology allows campaigns to target their outreach tactically at particular individuals and then also to aggregate these predictive estimates up to the jurisdiction level to inform large-scale strategic decision” (2014. p. 53; see also Nielsen 2012).

Much of the literature in this area also notes the continuity between emerging data-driven campaigning and older forms of electoral political communication. Kreiss neatly encapsulates this point in his discussion of what he terms the digital opportunity structure, which “are features of the political environment and candidates and campaigns’ symbolic material... which shape the possibilities for using digital media for a strategic ends” (Kreiss 2016, p. 109). For example, previous election campaigns and how their outcome is understood can play a significant role in the decisions a party takes in the run-up to the next election. Kreiss deploys this idea in his comparison of the Democratic and Republican parties in the US, and uses it to explain their different experience of developing data-driven campaigning.

This idea is important not only because it explains the US experience of data-driven campaigning, but also because it opens avenues for going beyond that example. There are a number of conditional reasons why the US has proved a fertile incubation space for such techniques, including the early development of computer-based direct mail methods in response to campaign finance regulations, less institutionalized political parties, a vibrant

consultancy sector and the sheer quantities of money available (for a discussion of these, see Anstead and Chadwick 2008).

The existence of these conditional factors points towards the complexity of trying to understand the export of data-driven campaign practices into other national and party contexts. Political communication scholars have written a great deal about the spread of US-developed campaign practices around the world. While some see this as a simple process of exportation—what is termed “Americanization” (Mergel 2009; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos 1996)—alternative views acknowledge that local political institutions and cultures play a huge role in shaping exactly how new practices will be understood and deployed (Anstead 2016; Esser et al. 2001; Plasser and Plasser 2002). On this basis, we would not expect to see US data-driven campaign practices replicated when they are exported, but instead to take a different form, based on local conditions.

Three additional points about the emerging literature on data-driven campaigning need to be made. First, this literature did not emerge out of nowhere. While it has become commonplace to claim that locally based campaigning is now secondary to mediated political communication (see, for example, Norris 2000), recent decades have seen a revisionist claim on both sides of the Atlantic, asserting that local campaigning is influential (for example Denver et al. 2004; Gerber and Green 2000; Whiteley and Seyd 2003). Interest in data-driven campaigning needs to be understood in this context.

Second, academic research on data-driven campaigning has provided an important corrective to hyperbolic popular discussion (for a critique of this type of account, see Hersh 2015). It is hardly surprising that a discourse of electoral omnipotence has developed around data-driven campaigning, not least because the discourse is recognizable from a discussion of earlier political communication practices. For example, similar arguments were made about

billboard poster advertising, qualitative research and “spin doctors” (Delaney 2015; Gould 2011; Price 2005).

Third, discussions of data-driven politics inevitably contain a normative dimension. At the more optimistic end of the spectrum, Nielsen (2012) compares data-driven campaigning favorably to mass media and postal campaigning, while Nickerson and Rogers (2014) argue that targeting may lead to higher quality interactions between activists and voters. Others are far more skeptical. Tufekci (2014) worries that campaigns will emphasize divisive issues that resonate with their supporters, while Kreiss and Howard (2010) voice concerns over privacy. These arguments are not mutually exclusive. It is entirely conceivable that all these hopes and concerns could be realized simultaneously. Taken in unison, these arguments speak to the need to include normative concerns in any discussion of data-driven politics.

With these issues in mind, this article addresses three research questions:

- **What importance do political actors attribute to data-driven targeting in contemporary campaigning?** What significance do those involved in the 2015 election campaign attribute to these techniques?
- **What is the state of data-driven campaigning in the UK?** What data is being gathered and how is it being used? Does the application of these techniques vary across political parties?

Finally, a third research question requires situating data-driven campaigning in a broader institutional context:

- **How does data-driven campaigning build on and relate to pre-existing campaign practices?** What shapes the use of such techniques in UK political parties?

Collectively, these research questions will provide insights into the evolution of data-driven campaigning in the UK, and also generate more general hypotheses useful for other national contexts.

The Methodological Challenge of Researching Data-Driven Politics

Scholars have used several methods to understand data-driven politics. In an innovative study, Hersh (2015) purchased datasets from a supplier that serviced Democratic candidates in the US to conduct experiments. This study is unusual in having access to actual datasets. More traditionally, Nielson (2012) employed an ethnographic approach to study US congressional campaigns, while Kreiss (2012, 2016) used interviews to document the evolution of data-driven campaigning. With these kinds of qualitative methods, it is important to note that even the best access cannot quantify the effects of data-driven campaigning. Rather, it allows researchers to address questions related to how important actors *think* these technologies are.

This study employs in-depth interviews. It is worth considering the strengths and weaknesses of interviews, especially in comparison with ethnography. Interviews can provide rich data, but can also be criticized because they require the interviewee to provide this information in an artificial setting (specifically, a one-to-one conversation with a researcher who prompts with various questions) (Brinkmann 2013, Chapter 5). Ethnography, with its focus on observing actors, clearly avoids some of these problems. However, the nature of ethnography, which involves spending significant amounts of time in the environment being studied, makes it hard to undertake comparative analysis across a range of institutions (multiple political parties, for example). For this reason, interviews are the best method for tackling this project.

Data-Gathering

This study draws on a dataset of 31 semi-structured interviews with political actors involved in the 2015 UK General Election campaign. Semi-structured discussions involved the interviewer working through a list of discussion points. This gave both the interviewer and the interviewee some latitude to guide the interview (Bryman 2012). Semi-structured interviews are particularly useful for elite interviews, where “elite” is defined as a group with exclusive access to information not in the public domain (Dexter 2006).

This interview sample was gathered through contacting officials in political parties and prominent figures in the 2015 campaign. This study did encounter some of the classic problems associated with this type of research. Some individuals contacted were unwilling to talk, so a “snowball” technique was employed to augment the sample. The virtue of such an approach is that an existing interviewee provides the introduction to other possible subjects, increasing the likelihood of acceptance (Bryman 2012).

The sample generated gave us access to several distinctive spaces in UK electoral politics (Appendix 1 provides an anonymized list of interviewees). Interviewees spanned the six major UK political parties (Conservative Party, Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party [SNP], Green Party and United Kingdom Independence Party [UKIP]). Between them, these parties range across the political spectrum, have different levels of support and resources, and diverse strategic objectives. In addition, interviewees included individuals who had worked nationally at senior levels on campaigns, as well as those who had worked locally in constituency campaigns. The constituency campaigners had worked in a range of constituency types, including a large city in the North of England containing both marginal and safe constituencies, both marginal and safe rural seats in Wales, and seats with significant Green and UKIP support. While clearly too small a sample to be statistically

representative, the range of seats included certainly provides insights into different types of constituencies. Talking to both national and local campaigners highlights their different experience of the campaign, potentially revealing any of the conflicts that occurred between them. Regulators were also interviewed, as the rapidly evolving data-driven campaign environment poses challenges for their roles.

One final data-gathering method was used. A practitioner seminar was held at [removed for peer review] on September 14, 2015. As well as providing a space for interaction between stakeholders, this allowed for a discussion of preliminary findings from the research. General minutes of this meeting were then created.

Analysis of Transcripts

The transcripts from the interviews and the meeting minutes were then analyzed. This study employed an iterative thematic approach, drawing out the most important themes through repeated readings. This method proceeds through several stages, as shown in Figure 1. The thematic coding frame developed from this process is shown in Figure 2.

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

Thematic analysis is powerful for two reasons. First, the location of recurring themes can highlight areas of both agreement and tension over a particular issue (Wengraf 2001). Second, thematic analysis can be paired up with other data from the interview—notably, who the interviewee is, what organization they work for, and what position they held in that organization’s hierarchy—to find important points of comparison. This process of “constant comparison” between themes and other descriptive data is particularly powerful for seeing difference and deviant cases (Barbour 2014). This mitigates the risk of the researcher producing overly neat findings. One final point needs to be made about the thematic method

and how it is used in this article. The analysis section contains several direct quotes from the interviewees. These were chosen because they provide useful illustrative examples of the points being made. Where possible, additional citations from the interview transcripts are included.¹

Ethical Considerations

The major ethical challenge for studies of this kind relates to the people being interviewed and the information they are divulging. The challenge for researchers is to create an environment where interviewees can talk frankly but protect those interviewees from any negative consequences that their candor might create (Kvale 2008). The best way to do this is by anonymizing interviews. An additional ethical requirement is to ensure that interviewees understand the nature of the project so they can give informed consent. For this project, this was confirmed in person in the interviews, with details of the project being included in the interview script.

Analysis

Assessing the Effectiveness of the Campaign

Our interview data suggested three ways in which effectiveness was defined by campaigners. First, in the heat of the campaign itself, effectiveness was measured by gathering metrics on things such as contact rates, the number of activists working for a party and levels of support expressed through online donations (Conservative Party scholar July 22, 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official August 4, 2015; National Labour Party campaign official August 6, 2015; regional Labour Party campaign official August 17, 2015).

More broadly, after the election, effectiveness was assessed through interpretations of the outcome of the campaign. Here, the comments were predictable. The Conservatives (as well as some non-Conservatives) noted that the Tory campaign had been run very efficiently, and was certainly a highly targeted campaign (constituency Conservative party activist August 2, 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official August 27, 2015; senior campaign official from a political party September 14, 2015; senior Conservative grassroots figure and commentator September 15, 2015). Similar analysis emerged from the SNP (senior SNP campaign figure August 18, 2015). In contrast, Labour supporters were keen to emphasize the danger of post-hoc arguments, constructed with the hindsight of Conservative victory. As one senior Labour Party campaign official (September 16, 2015) noted, “The victor, as they say, gets to write history. And obviously, you know, the Tories now claim this huge degree of sophistication.”

Finally, on occasions, interviewees attempted to fundamentally redefine the idea of effectiveness. One argument that recurred in the interview data (especially among parties that had less successful election outcomes) was how even a good data-driven campaign could not offset other communication, institutional, and strategic weaknesses (constituency Liberal Democrat activist August 20, 2015; constituency Liberal Democrat campaign organizer August 21, 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official August 27, 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official September 16, 2015). Therefore, it becomes possible to run an effective data-driven campaign within an ineffective election campaign. Other interviewees also spoke about the role of data in activist mobilization, and the legacy effects this might have on a political party in providing a pool of skilled activists that could be called on in the future (senior Labour Party campaign official August 4, 2015).

Data Capabilities of UK Parties

As expected, the data capabilities of UK parties vary widely. Smaller parties have limited capabilities, often simply using MS Excel spreadsheets (Green Party parliamentary candidate August 19, 2015; local Green Party activist September 10, 2015). They are only able to bring resources to bear on a limited number of seats, with choices largely being driven by where prominent leadership figures are running (senior UKIP campaign official August 19, 2015; data specialist who has worked for multiple parties August 26, 2015).

Even among the more established parties there was inequality in terms of access to data. One interviewee summarized the ingredients that went into the databases that the parties were using:

There's the electoral register, there's the Mosaic data, there's the census data which is fairly good. Not too bad, we'd use it for some stuff. More descriptive, not predictive. And we had polling data, and we had a sample of 100,000 and that's pretty good. (Data specialist who has worked for multiple parties August 26, 2015)

The electoral register provided the foundation for party databases (national Liberal Democrat official August 17, 2015; constituency Liberal Democrat campaign organizer August 18 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official August 27, 2015; senior campaign official from a political party September 14, 2015). That said, it was also noted that the UK electoral register is a relatively imprecise document with little standardization (research seminar September 15, 2015). Our interviews suggest that larger UK political parties are developing databases capable of matching multiple years of the electoral register, making for more accurate analysis (senior campaign official from a political party September 14, 2015).

Both census and Mosaic data offer geotagged information that can be used for modeling. The last UK census was conducted in 2011, with data sub-divided into 181,408 output areas in England and Wales (ONS 2012). As this data is freely available, it was unsurprisingly

regarded as important by interviewees (national Liberal Democrat official August 17, 2015; data specialist who has worked for multiple parties August 26, 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official August 27, 2015). Mosaic is a postcode-based database produced by the credit rating company Experian, dividing the population up into 67 types, based on income, values, and levels of cultural capital (Experian 2015). Access to Mosaic is costly, so was only available to larger parties, where it was used for modeling (Conservative Party scholar July 22, 2015; data specialist who has worked for multiple parties August 26, 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official August 27, 2015). The Liberal Democrats tested Mosaic but decided not to use it (national Liberal Democrat official August 17, 2015). Interestingly, the Green Party invested in Mosaic for the proportional European Elections, using it in the simplest way to identify types of voters who might support them and to locate the areas they lived in. They did not use Mosaic for the 2015 General Election (senior national and local Green Party campaign organizer August 26, 2015).

The role of polls in data-gathering is complex, meaning that terminology needs to be clearly demarcated, differentiating public polls, large sample polls, and surveys. For smaller parties, notably UKIP, but also the Liberal Democrats, public polls (especially those conducted at the constituency level) allowed them to decide which constituencies they might be viable in and to target resources accordingly (senior Liberal Democrat activist August 17, 2015; senior national UKIP campaign official August 19, 2015).² Larger parties were able to conduct their own polling, either with large samples or focused on key constituencies (national Liberal Democrat official August 17, 2015; data specialist who has worked for multiple parties August 26, 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official August 27, 2015). Research at this scale is obviously very expensive.

However, interviewees also revealed that parties were conducting surveys (i.e. non-representative questionnaires conducted either face-to-face or online) for a very different reason—to learn about the specific responder (Conservative Party scholar July 22, 2015; senior campaign official from a political party September 14, 2015; senior Liberal Democrat activist August 16, 2015). Parties were not interested in undertaking surveys to understand public opinion, but rather to augment their databases and to make future political communication more effective.

There seems little doubt that the Conservatives refined these techniques most, as it was the Conservative campaign that most effectively adopted the recent US innovation of targeting individual voters (Nickerson and Rogers 2014; Nielsen 2012). For instance, one Conservative activist described how letters were tailored to individual voters, containing messages designed to appeal to them:

We were given a couple of hundred letters each to go and deliver to people's doors. They were all hand addressed on the envelope... I opened a few of the letters before delivering them to have a quick look and see what they're about. And actually there were at least half a dozen different messages being delivered based on rich voter ID information. So because these people had had someone knocking on their door, had someone talk to them at least once in some cases several times about what interested them, what concerned them. (Senior Conservative grassroots figure and commentator September 15, 2015; see also senior campaign official from a political party September 14, 2015).

This contrasts with Labour, where targeting was still based on segments. One senior Labour Party campaign official (interviewed August 27, 2015), for example, spoke of targeting

certain demographic groups such as students and pensioners with specific messages (see also constituency Labour Party campaign official August 20, 2015).

The purpose of all this is to increase turnout among would-be supporters. This is an area where newer data-driven tactics are bolted on to more traditional political practices. UK political parties have long run ‘get out the vote’ operations on polling day (termed “knocking up” in British political jargon). This process can now be augmented by months and perhaps years of earlier data-gathering (senior Labour Party campaign official August 27, 2015). This ensures that finite supplies of activists can be used efficiently to maximize vote share. Additionally, data-driven campaigning also has the potential to change the very definition of the political base of a party. While previously this might have been defined through geography, the move to individual targeting means that parties can target would-be voters whose political views are different to most of their neighbors, who previously would have been ignored (senior campaign official from a political party September 14, 2015).

Implementing data-driven campaigning did produce challenges. Our interviewees highlighted two: gathering and entering data at the local level, and managing activists. Data-gathering was challenging for several reasons. In the first instance, members of the public may simply react angrily when approached by canvassers from political parties (Conservative Party scholar July 22, 2015; constituency Conservative Party activist August 1, 2015). Designing suitable data-gathering instruments also proved problematic for parties (research seminar September 15, 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official September 16, 2015. See also Ross 2015b). Traditionally, canvassers were asked to fill in returns on party preference and whether that preference was weak or strong. Labour retained this system in 2015. The Conservatives moved to an alternative system, which used a 1–10 ranking score to indicate strength of preference. While controversial when implemented, this model of data-gathering

arguably allowed for much more granular targeting later. Some local parties also struggled to ensure that data was properly recorded (constituency Labour Party campaign official August 20, 2015). In response to challenges of this kind, some parties experimented with smartphone apps and Palm Pilots where canvassers could upload data in real time. This seems to have been particularly prominent among the Liberal Democrats (senior national Liberal Democrat official August 5, 2015; senior Liberal Democrat activist August 17, 2015; constituency Liberal Democrat activist August 20, 2015).

A second challenge is managing activists. There are two issues here. The first relates to skills. As one senior Labour Party campaign official (interviewed September 16, 2015) noted, it is hard to run a modern data-driven campaign when your activists are “80-year-old, well-meaning... not massively switched on, a bit deaf.” This might be a caricature, but the evidence on political party membership suggests that party members are considerably older than the average citizen (van Biezen et al. 2012).³ To combat this problem, parties had developed systems to train their activists in how to gather and handle data. For example, the Liberal Democrats had a series of online videos on the subject (constituency Liberal Democrat campaign organizer August 21, 2015).

The second issue relates to geography, and especially where activists live and are willing to campaign. At its most extreme, this problem might involve vast numbers of party members wanting to campaign in safe seats. To overcome this, parties tried to persuade activists to be more mobile, setting up traveling campaign groups such as the Conservatives’ Team2015 (senior Conservative grassroots figure and commentator September 15, 2015), or twinning safe and marginal constituencies (regional Labour Party campaign official August 16, 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official August 27, 2015). However, there were limits to what could be achieved, since political parties are voluntary organizations.

Data and the Institutional Context

This discussion provides some insights into the perceived effectiveness and data-driven capabilities of UK political parties. To better understand how these practices have evolved requires us to think about how they have interacted with the UK political system. Broadly, five explanations stand out as having particular significance: the data regulatory framework; the electoral system; the psephology of contemporary elections; the geo-institutional form that campaigns now take; and the underlying cultures of political parties. This list is not exhaustive, and it is certainly possible to identify additional factors. However, taken together, these factors have clearly played an important role in shaping data-driven campaigning practices in the UK.

In comparison with the US, UK political parties have far less access to the types of data required to target voters. The most obvious omission is the lack of an electoral register that identifies voters by partisan preference, as exists in many US states (Hersh 2015). It is also important to note that the UK has much stronger data protection laws. Among those involved in data-driven campaigning in the UK, data protection requirements divided opinion. Some did not see them as onerous (senior Labour Party campaign official August 4, 2015; national Labour Party campaign official August 5, 2015), while others found them a major impingement (constituency Liberal Democrat activist August 20, 2015; constituency Labour Party campaign official August 20, 2015). There was also some awareness that parties in the US could access data more easily than their UK counterparts (senior Labour Party campaign official August 27, 2015). To some degree at least, parties ensured that they had the necessary expertise and training in data protection regulation, and that data resources were kept secure (for example, constituency Liberal Democrat campaign organizer August 18, 2015; constituency Labour Party campaign official August 20, 2015; constituency Liberal Democrat campaign organizer August 21, 2015). The Information Commissioner's Office

(interviewed September 11, 2015) also offered training to political parties before the election to ensure compliance with data protection legislation.

While the lack of available data may make data-driven campaigning harder in the UK, it is arguable that other elements of the British political system incentivize targeted campaigns. Perhaps the most significant among these reasons is the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system, which can generate massively disproportionate results (Gallagher 2015).⁴ The ramification of this is that some voters, depending on where they live, will wield relatively greater influence than voters who live elsewhere (Petts 2015). A political system where this is the case incentivizes parties to use their resources to target voters who are most vital to their success. In the interviews conducted for this project, this was evident first in the decisions made by the larger political parties (especially the Conservatives) about which seats to target, and then which voters to target within those seats. The Conservatives developed what they termed a 40–40 strategy (based on defending 40 tight seats and winning an additional 40 for a majority) (Cowley and Kavanagh 2015). What was most striking about this list of seats is that it was not constructed based on their marginality. Rather, they were defined by what the party knew about the types of voters living in them, their propensity to swing to and away from the Conservatives, their reactions to certain messages, and other seat-specific factors, such as whether an incumbent was standing down (Conservative Party scholar July 22, 2015). These seats were lavished with resources, and the national party closely monitored campaigns being conducted there (senior Conservative grassroots figure and commentator September 16, 2015).

These tendencies are exacerbated by the UK party system and the psephology of contemporary elections. In terms of overall vote share, the two major British political parties have been in decline for several decades, and are now having to exist in a more complex,

multi-party system (McKibbin 2016). The last two majority governments in the UK have been achieved with the lowest vote share in modern history—Labour in 2005 with 35.2 percent and the Conservatives in 2015 with 36.9 percent (Audickas et al. 2016). While it did not come up explicitly in our interviews, it is not hard to see how this new political environment would encourage data-driven campaigning. Parties now need to navigate a more complex topography, where constructing a majority becomes a matter of what might be referred to as the aggregation of marginal gains.

Data-driven targeting techniques are also changing the geo-institutional form of UK election campaigns, especially how we define national and local campaigning efforts. The interviews provided some evidence of growing central control over the periphery of campaigns, matching predictions made by political scientists (Norris 2000). This process was not uniform or one-sided, however. There was also some conflict between the national and local parties, with the latter often critiquing the actions of the former (Conservative Party scholar July 22, 2015; constituency Conservative activist August 2, 2015). Additionally, as has been noted elsewhere (Barwell 2016), some non-target seats ran vigorous, locally based campaigns. Nevertheless, national control of local campaigns was clearly occurring, especially in marginal seats targeted by political parties (senior Conservative grassroots figure and commentator September 16, 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official September 16, 2015).

Significantly, these developments provide a fundamental challenge to the way UK campaign finance law works. This is because the system is based on two sets of spending limits, one national and one local (Anstead 2008). The logic behind this system assumes a neat institutional separation between the two. Our interviews uncovered a great deal of anger about how parties, especially the Conservatives, had used this system to distribute national

resources in local contexts. The Liberal Democrats were particularly angry about this, as they clearly felt they had been targeted with these techniques (senior Liberal Democrat activist August 17, 2015; constituency Liberal Democrat activist August 20, 2015; research seminar September 15, 2015). Additionally, representatives of the Electoral Commission (interviewed September 23, 2015) noted that they had received several requests for definitions on local and national spending, both from parties keen to ensure their own practice was appropriate and from parties worried about the activities of their opponents. In the months following our interviews, several high-profile investigations were launched into spending practices during the election, focusing on exactly these questions (Belam 2016). The rights and wrongs of the issue are beyond the scope of this article, but what is clear is that there is ambiguity in how to regulate these newly emerging, centrally dictated, local campaigns.

Finally, longstanding cultures within political parties played a significant role in shaping their use of data and local campaigns. Prior to the election, Labour was very confident in its ability to mobilize its support base. This seems to have been because of a belief that the party had fought a strong election campaign in this regard in 2010, avoiding a much more damaging defeat (senior Labour Party campaign official August 27, 2015; senior Labour Party campaign official September 16, 2015). This reading of the events of 2010 may well be true. Certainly, some of Labour's opponents believed it (for example, senior campaign official from a political party September 14, 2015). However, it is also important to note that this reading of events is also a comforting one for a party founded as the political wing of the trade union movement and which lauds community-based activism (McKenzie 1963). It is therefore not surprising that a narrative focused on grassroots communication became central to Labour's election campaign, when the party heavily publicized its idea of having 4 (later 5) million conversations with members of the British electorate (senior Labour Party campaign official August 4, 2015; see also Hope 2015).

This approach was not universally popular with Labour's election team. Some argued that it prioritized quantity of interaction over quality (regional Labour Party campaign official August 17, 2015), while others saw it as an attempt to paper over the party's lack of a compelling overarching policy narrative (senior Labour Party campaign official September 16, 2015). It also contrasts sharply with the Conservatives. The Tories spent the years before the election constructing powerful political messages, especially on the economy and Labour's lack of fiscal rectitude (Clarke et al. 2015). To this, in the weeks before the election, was added the message of the potential dangers of a Labour/SNP coalition, targeted at the voters who were most likely to be responsive (Conservative Party scholar July 22, 2015; senior national Liberal Democrat official, August 5, 2015). This is a precise inversion of Labour's approach—for Labour, the campaign was the narrative; for the Conservatives, the campaign was a mechanism to distribute their narrative.

Conclusions

While post-election discussion in the UK has focused heavily on the role of data in the unexpected Conservative victory, this article offers a more nuanced analysis. Data capabilities are distributed very unevenly among UK political parties. It is only the Conservatives who seem to have adopted the US model of individual-level targeting. Labour does engage in data-driven campaigning and can call on a formidable number of activists, but still uses segment-based targeting, making its efforts less targeted. The capabilities of smaller parties lag far behind, although there are examples of innovation, such as the Liberal Democrats' use of smartphone applications and Palm Pilots.

Going beyond the specifics of the British case, the arguments made in this article lead to a variety of conclusions. Broadly, these can be divided into three areas: comparative, theoretical and normative.

In comparative terms, the arguments made in this article lead to several hypotheses that could be examined in other countries. This is because certain elements of the UK political system seem to hamper data-driven campaigning, while other elements seem to enhance it. A relative lack of access to data is clearly a problem for UK parties, but it should be remembered that it is the US—with its very lax data regime—that is the outlier in comparative terms. Of the incentives to employ data-driven campaigning in the UK, the election system is surely preeminent, as it necessarily forces parties to focus their energies on certain would-be voters in a narrow number of seats. This raises the possibility of a more general hypothesis about the relationship between data-driven targeting and election system disproportionality—in short, other things being equal, do parties develop data-driven capabilities more rapidly in electoral systems with a tendency towards disproportionate outcomes? Similarly, the experiences of the Labour Party in 2015 raise the question of whether parties with strong traditions of activism find it harder to implement data-driven campaigning techniques. They may have the supporters needed for door-to-door campaigning, but might struggle to integrate the types of professional expertise and control mechanisms needed for effective targeting.

Theoretically, the development of data-driven campaigning problematizes the boundaries that have traditionally been used to study election campaigns. When national parties are managing constituency campaigns, where does that leave the distinction between national and local campaigning? This is not just a problem for political scientists seeking to study the effects of various parts of the campaign, but also for any election regulators who must apply the law in specific contexts. The line between the so-called “air war” of mediated communication and the “ground war” of face-to-face contact is also increasingly blurred. This is most evident in the Conservatives’ careful construction of political narratives in the years before the election, which were then deployed to target certain voters who were likely to be responsive. It is also important to think about the development of data-driven campaigning and how it relates to

political institutions. On some occasions it seems that institutions shape the way parties deploy these techniques. Think, for example, of the Conservative Party targeting certain constituencies within the UK's first-past-the-post election system or the Green Party's decision to purchase Mosaic for the European Elections, conducted under proportional representation. At the same time, data-driven campaigning is reshaping institutions, altering the way in which parties spend money, potentially undermining the UK's campaign finance laws.

No discussion of data-driven campaigning would be complete without considering its normative dimension. The experience of the UK in 2015 points to two significant concerns. The first relates to the unequal resources wielded by political parties, with larger parties able to invest more heavily. Data-driven campaigning might even be a form of cartelization (Katz and Mair 1995), where large parties erect barriers to protect their dominance from new entrants. Certainly, the high expense of new campaigning techniques seriously disadvantages smaller and newer parties. Second, data-driven campaigning may change how voters interact with parties. Data-driven politics is about communicating efficiently, talking to voters who are most useful to a campaign. However, inefficient targeting might lead to better democratic outcomes, as it could include more people in the electoral conversation. As systems become more efficient, that externality might be lost.

Data-driven politics is likely to be much talked about in the coming years by academics, journalists, and political practitioners. While it might play a role in reshaping political parties, campaigning practices, election outcomes, and how voters relate to politics, it will also be grounded in pre-existing political practices in specific contexts. This makes for a complicated picture, although this complexity makes the need to understand data-driven campaigning no less pressing. On the contrary, that is precisely why we must understand it.

Figures

Figure 1: Analytical Process Employed in this Study

Stage	Element of the process
1	Examine dataset in totality
2	Re-read dataset in depth, iteratively coding to build thematic coding frame
3	Re-read dataset, refining and cleaning coding frame
4	Engage in comparison across dataset (points of agreement, disagreement; compare different political parties; local and national campaign etc.)
5	Write up findings, including quotes useful for illustration

Figure 2: Iteratively Derived Qualitative Coding Frame

Theme	Sub-topic
Communication channels	Door-to-door
	Email
	Leaflets
	Letters
	New media
	Telephone
Communication contents	Messaging
Data	Databases
	Data-gathering
	Data integration
	Data protection
	Demographics
	Polling
Examples of practice from other sectors	Commercial sector
	International examples
Ideas and institutions	Conservatives
	Democracy
	Electoral system
	Future
	Labour
	Predictions
	Regulations
	Strategy
	Objectives and outcomes
Fundraising	
Negative response from public	
Turnout	
Party and campaign	Activists
	Skills
	Disorganization
	Local campaign
	Local-national conflict
	Local-national cooperation
	National campaign
	Party institution
	Resources
Targeting	Individual targeting
	Seat targeting

Appendix 1: Anonymized List of Interviewees and Interviewers

Interviewee known as:	Method	Date
Conservative Party scholar	Skype	July 22, 2015
Constituency Conservative Party activist	Skype	August 2, 2015
Senior Labour Party campaign official	Skype	August 4, 2015
Senior national Liberal Democrat official	In person	August 5, 2015
National Labour Party data specialist	In person	August 6, 2015
National Labour Party activist	Skype	August 14, 2015
Senior Liberal Democrat activist	In person	August 17, 2015
Regional Labour Party campaign director	Telephone	August 17, 2015
National Liberal Democrat official	In person	August 17, 2015
Constituency Liberal Democrat campaign organizer	Telephone	August 18,

		2015
Senior Scottish National Party (SNP) campaign figure	FaceTime	August 18, 2015
Senior Liberal Democrat campaign official	In person	August 18, 2015
Green Party parliamentary candidate	Skype	August 19, 2015
Senior United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) campaign official	In person	August 19, 2015
Constituency Liberal Democrat activist	Skype	August 20, 2015
Constituency Labour Party activist	In person	August 20, 2015
Constituency Labour Party campaign official	In person	August 20, 2015
Constituency Liberal Democrat campaign organizer	Skype	August 21, 2015
Data specialist who has worked for multiple parties	Telephone	August 26, 2015
Senior national and local Green Party campaign	Telephone	August 26,

official		2015
Senior Labour Party campaign official	Telephone	August 27, 2015
Local Green Party activist	In person	September 10, 2015
Constituency Green Party data specialist	In person	September 10, 2015
Senior Information Commissioner's Office official	Telephone	September 11, 2015
Senior Information Commissioner's Office official	Telephone	September 11, 2015
Senior campaign official from a political party	In person	September 14, 2015
Conservative Party MP	In person	September 15, 2015
Senior Conservative Party grassroots figure and commentator	Telephone	September 15, 2015
Senior Labour Party campaign official	In person	September 16, 2015
Electoral Commission official	In person	September 23,

2015

Electoral Commission official

In person

September 23,

2015

Notes

1. Anonymized interview transcripts are available in an online repository. Please contact the author for access.
2. The largest number of constituency polls ever carried out in a UK general election was in 2015. Like national polls, they proved to be inaccurate (Cowley and Kavanagh 2015). While the interviews for this project do not provide any direct insights on the topic, it will be interesting to see if smaller parties rely so heavily on similar polls in future election cycles. Given their relatively scarce resources, it seems likely that they will have little choice.
3. It remains to be seen if the new wave of party membership surrounding Jeremy Corbyn changes the demographics of party activism. The ongoing ERSC-funded project on party membership should offer some insights into this in the future (Bale et al. 2016).
4. In this context, disproportionately refers to the discrepancy between the total vote share achieved by a political party and the number of seats won.

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