Labour's advertising campaign on Facebook (or "Don't Mention the War")

Britain's decision to leave the European Union is the most important event in the recent political history of the UK. However, days before election day, Labour's campaign on Facebook seems to be ignoring the Brexit issue, an analysis by LSE researchers Damian Tambini, Nick Anstead and João Carlos Magalhães indicates. This post is the second in a series that is examining data collected as part of a joint project recently launched by the LSE Media Policy Project and the "Who Targets Me" initiative. In the first post, we considered the Liberal Democrat campaign. The project is studying political micro-targeting on the social media platform during the 2017 UK general election.

To grasp how Labour is using Facebook as an advertising platform, we looked at a sample of 2,314 instances of exposure to ads from the party. They were extracted in the past month by a browser extension from the Facebook news feeds of thousands of participants of the "Who Targets Me" initiative. The data give an insight into pieces of political advertising which were originally designed to be viewed by individual users. These messages are not systematically disclosed by political parties on their websites or on their Facebook pages.

As explained in the first post, two important caveats must be taken into consideration before exploring what our data suggest. First, it is probable that our sample is not representative of all Labour ads circulating on Facebook. Second, the electoral process is still unfolding – thus any pattern identified here might well be temporary.

That said, given the historical importance of Brexit and the role it played in the very decision to call a snap election, it is remarkable to notice how poorly represented the topic is in our sample of exposure to Labour ads. True, it does appear Brexit does make a fleeting appearance in the second most common video of the sample (which appears 150 times or 6.5% of the total instances). It is however one of the last items of a lengthy explanation of Labour's position on the NHS, education, housing, security and taxes.

In total, only 1.7 % (or 39 of the 2,314 analysed items) of ad instances feature Brexit as the main topic. Almost all of these (38) refer to the same piece, a 2:49 minute-long video. In it, two men and one women (apparently playing "ordinary voters"), take turns to attack how a future new Conservative government would negotiate the terms of UK's departure from the European block. According to them, it would be a "Brexit that benefits the rich and big business", "geared to the interests of the City". Labour, in contrast, would aim for a deal which puts "jobs first"

Our Brexit Deal will put jobs first

In other words, on the rare occasions that it is mentioned, Labour appear to be framing Brexit with the same left-wing populism that inspired the party's slogan ("for the many, not the few") and which has been so prominent throughout their whole campaign.

It is interesting to note that while, according to our data, the party doesn't seem to be interested in spending much money to advertise its position on Brexit, the post's social metrics suggest a strong interest. By 2 June, the video had more than 6,200 reactions (overwhelmingly positive ones), 4,400 shares and almost half a million views.

How much is that? Contrast these numbers with those of the most prevalent piece in our sample, a 2:16 minute-long video from 11 May about the launch of Labour's campaign, in which the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, presents the party's slogan and offers an overview of several policies.

By 2 June, this post had been viewed around 1 million times, had 13,000 reactions (also mostly positive) and 4,400 shares. Given the fact that there are 210 instances of exposure to this ad in our sample (or 9% of the total), the Brexit piece (with just 38) seems disproportionally popular.

It goes without saying that, by themselves, the ads offer little, if any, ideas on the reasons behind Labour's apparent strategy. At any rate, it coheres with previous statements by Corbyn about this election not being about Brexit. There are might be political reasons for Labour downplaying Brexit in its Facebook advertising campaign, related to both the party's leader and its would-be voters. A long-time Eurosceptic, Corbyn's accepted the party's position in the referendum campaign and supported the Remain vote. Electorally, Chris Hanretty's modelled data of constituency referendum results suggests that Labour has a Brexit problem, with some of its MPs coming from constituencies that were strongly remain and some of its MPs coming from constituencies that voted strongly for leave. Certainly, by not focusing on Brexit, Labour is dodging the Conservative narrative on the snap election, which Prime Minister May claimed was necessary to prevent opposition parties undermining Brexit negoitations.

Labour's apparent decision to refrain from discussing Brexit more widely can be tactically effective. From an ethical perspective, though, with the country about to embark on one of the most complex peacetime undertakings in recent history, it raises important questions about how informed the electorate are going to be the party's position on such a crucial point.

More of the same?

In our first post on the Liberal Democrats Facebook presence, we explored whether that party was targeting users from pro-Brexit constituencies. In the case of Labour, given the tiny number of ads about Brexit, we decided to test another, more general hypothesis – is Labour focusing their Facebook ads on constituencies they already dominate? The evidence indicates that this seems to be the case.

We tabulated the number of exposures to Labour ads per constituency and compared with the 2015 elections results of the two major parties.

- Out of 2,314 items, 1,318 (57%) were collected from users who were accessing the Internet from 159 of the 232 constituencies in which Labour won the 2015 elections.
- Up to 40% (or 542) of these 1,318 exposures occurred in only 18 constituencies – nine of which the party got more than 60% of the votes in 2015.
- Ads collected from users in constituencies won by Conservative MPs in 2015, on the other hand, represent only 860 (37%) of those 2,314 items.
- Interestingly, within this sub-sample of 860, Labour's advertising seems to be more fragmented. Rather than concentrating of lot of resources in a few Tory-held constituencies, they spread them more evenly to 218 of the 330 constituencies the Tories won in 2015.

Here an additional proviso is needed: these results might be masking the impact of other variables that are being employed for targeting. For example, targeting might be based on the attributes of individual Facebook users, rather than the constituency in which they live. This would be impossible to distinguish from the data in our sample.

Attacks on other parties

A final notable characteristic of our sample is the use of adverts to attack Labour's opponents. In total, 1,376 ads (or almost 60% of the sample) convey some form of criticism.

The major target is, naturally, the Conservatives – they are mentioned in 904 items. On almost all them, the Labour tactic involves using the Tories as a platform to talk about their own proposals. The most common topic is the NHS, which is depicted as being dilapidated by Conservative governments. The second most common issue is education, employed as a way to discuss Labour's pledge to abolish higher education tuition fees.

The Liberal Democrats are criticized in 472 items in our sample. Unlike its approach to the Tories however, Labour doesn't talk so much about policies when attacking them: Lib Dems are basically described as unfaithful to their voters.

To sum up, Labour's Facebook advertising so far seems to have deepened some of the party's broader campaign directions – avoiding discussion of Brexit, left-wing populism, and attempting to attack the Conservative record on public services – and reflected a risk-avert use of resources in their targeting strategy. It will be interesting to see if these patterns continue as we go into the last days and hours of the campaign.

This post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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