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Learning on the job? Adapting party campaign strategy to changing information on the local political context[☆]

Todd K. Hartman^{a, *}, Charles Pattie^a, Ron Johnston^b

^a The University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

^b University of Bristol, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

An extensive literature demonstrates that local campaign efforts in the UK generally pay electoral dividends for parties. As a result, rational parties focus campaign efforts most in seats where the electoral outcome is not pre-determined and where a few more votes either way could change the result. An important indicator of where such constituencies can be found is provided by prior election results, and research has shown that rational parties tend to focus their campaigns most heavily on those seats where the previous election was close and less in seats where in the past they either lost badly or won comfortably. However, much less attention has been given to how local parties react to new information showing how the competitive situation in their area is changing as a general election approaches. We use data from a rare set of local opinion polls conducted by Lord Ashcroft in British constituencies in the run-up to the 2015 UK General Election. Although hampered by their generally small size, limited fundraising capacity, and reliance on volunteers, local parties do appear to respond to new information. Our results indicate that parties tend to put more effort into local campaigns in seats where an opinion poll had been carried out than in otherwise similar seats where one had not. And, the more competitive the poll suggested their race was, the more resources they devoted to it.

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Election campaigns are fast-moving and unpredictable. For instance, the collapse of Lehman Brothers on the eve of the 2008 US Presidential election was a dramatic signal of worsening economic conditions, shifting the campaign focus on the economy (Scott et al., 2010). In 2010 UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown made unguarded comments about a Labour voter he met when out canvassing support throwing his campaign into turmoil (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010, 173ff). New opinion polls may suggest a dramatic shift in the public mood, as in the last days of the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum. Parties, though they go into elections with carefully crafted campaign strategies, cannot ignore such new developments. They must adapt and react.

Analyses of election campaigns often devote much attention to how well (or badly) national party organisations perform (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016; Heilemann and Halperin, 2010; Halperin and Heilemann, 2013). But elections are not just fought through

the ‘air war’ of the national campaign. They also – and increasingly – take place through the ‘ground war’ of competition between candidates in local electoral districts and constituencies.

These local competitions have measurable electoral impacts. The harder parties campaign locally, the better they do – especially when they are the local challenger rather than the incumbent (Jacobson, 1978, 2006; Johnston, 1987; Denver and Hands, 1997; Pattie et al., 1995; Fisher et al., 2011, 2014). Face-to-face appeals often carry more weight than more impersonal forms of contact (Barton et al., 2013; Green et al., 2016). Yet – unlike national campaigns – we know remarkably little (anecdotal evidence aside) about how (or even if) parties adapt their grassroots election campaigns to take account of changing local circumstances.

The UK’s 2015 General Election provides a rare opportunity to analyse how local party organisations reacted to short-term political change in their areas when resourcing their campaigns. In the run-up to and during that election, political commentator Lord Ashcroft commissioned polls in a large number of constituencies throughout the country. Before 2015, constituency polls were rare in the UK (and often confined to by-elections rather than to General Elections) because of both the high costs of such an exercise and

[☆] All of the datasets and R scripts used for the analyses are available at the lead author’s website.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: t.k.hartman@sheffield.ac.uk (T.K. Hartman).

media concentration on the national race. Lord Ashcroft's initiative therefore gives an unusual level of insight into how opinion was shifting in a large group of constituencies prior to the election, and hence provides an opportunity to see how local parties react when new information about their constituencies becomes available. The paper exploits this opportunity by comparing parties' local spending patterns in seats where Lord Ashcroft polled and where he did not. We find consistent evidence that British parties did adapt their local campaigns in the light of such new information.

We begin by briefly reviewing what we already know about parties' campaign resource allocation decisions in UK parliamentary elections. We then discuss the Ashcroft polls and our analytical strategy, before presenting our key results.

1. Learning during campaigns

Participants in election campaigns are bombarded with information regarding key campaign issues, the political context, and so on. Researchers have examined what voters learn during and from campaigns (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006; Hansen and Pedersen, 2014; Henderson, 2014). Particularly relevant for what follows, recent work has shown that voters can be influenced by what they learn from opinion polls, in terms of both how they seek out information and how they might vote (Roy et al., 2015; van der Meer et al., 2016). Part of that learning process concerns the local political context within which voters live. Constituency turnout, for instance, often increases as seats become more marginal (Denver and Hands, 1985; Johnston and Pattie, 2006). What is more, some voters take the local tactical situation into account when deciding whom to vote for (Tsebelis, 1986; Fieldhouse et al., 1996; Johnston and Pattie, 2011).

But can local political parties and candidates also learn about and respond to changing local circumstances? They face several challenges in doing so. One relates to their capacities. Although constituency campaigns are increasingly wrapped into parties' national strategies (Norris, 2000; Fisher and Denver, 2008), there is a clear asymmetry between constituency and national party organisations. Constituency campaigns do not enjoy anything like the same levels of expertise, market research capacity or resourcing as their national counterparts. Rather, they are heavily reliant on local volunteers (few of whom are political professionals) for much of their grassroots organisation and campaigning (Fisher et al., 2013, 2014).

Part of the challenge faced by local campaigners (and academics studying local campaigning) is finding out how the political situation might be changing in each constituency. Few local parties can afford regular – or even occasional – opinion polling within their constituencies. Further, given the rules on candidate expenses (Johnston and Pattie, 2014; Fisher, 2015), they would struggle to conduct such polls even if they could afford them during the five months immediately prior to the election – when expenditure is limited to a maximum of around £40,000 (the actual amount is determined by constituency type – urban or rural – and size of the electorate).

Some information on local political context is readily available to local party organisations and is used in deciding on campaign strategies. Past general election results give an indication of how competitive the party is in each seat. It is in the most marginal constituencies, those where a few votes either way can affect the outcome, that local parties raise most money and campaign hardest (Pattie and Johnston, 2003; Johnston and Pattie, 2006).

But such information is not always terribly up to date and much can happen between elections. The results of the previous general election in a seat are a good first approximation of the state of political opinion there (the correlation between a party's

constituency vote at one election and its share at the next is generally very strong). But first approximations can be misleading. What is more, the results of the previous election give little or no information about how party support might have changed within the constituency since then, and hence cannot help parties finesse their local campaigns.

Local parties have other means to assess public opinion. Council elections provide regular information on levels of party support at the sub-constituency scale of local government wards. But local issues matter in such contests even if some voters use them to express their opinion (usually negative) on the national government's performance. And turnout tends to be lower than in national elections. Parties which rely on local election results to guide their planning for national contests might be misled if they are not careful (Rallings and Thrasher, 1997).

Party members and volunteers contact voters within the constituency (often by knocking on their doors) and try to ascertain which party they support. From this information they can gain some sense of local opinion and can begin to target campaign efforts. For most local parties, these canvassing returns are a valuable resource. However, the data they provide is imperfect. Canvassing rarely achieves 100% coverage of a constituency electorate. Nor is it systematic or scientific. The information is gathered by volunteers, who may mis-record or misinterpret what they are told (on which see Barwell, 2016). Voters on the doorstep may not always give an accurate account of their political leanings to canvassers. And canvassing is very labour-intensive: parties find it hard to update their canvassing databases frequently. What is more, there are significant variations from constituency to constituency, even within the same party, in how well (or badly) local activists canvass. Both the quantity and quality of the information produced can be highly variable.

Compared to their national party organisations, therefore, local parties face substantial uncertainty regarding changing local opinion, especially as an election nears. Even so, there is some evidence, from individual constituency campaigns, that local parties do try to react to what is happening in their area in the run-up to and during an election, and do adapt their campaigning accordingly (Cutts, 2006; Smith, 2011; Barwell, 2016). But these are isolated case studies of individual constituency campaigns by particular parties. While they offer insights into the detail of local campaigning, it is hard to know whether the degree of flexibility in local campaign activity they reveal can be generalised to other seats. To find out, we need more systematic evidence across many seats and parties.

But here we face a problem. How can we know – across a range of constituencies – just what sorts of changing local conditions the various campaigns face? We could, like the parties, fall back on past general or local election results. But the same issues would confront us in using such information that confronts the parties themselves.

Nor can we fall back on evidence from parties' own local opinion polling (where such polls are conducted) and canvassing records. These data are politically sensitive and confidential. We need some other means of assessing the local climate of opinion in a range of constituencies as an election approaches. In the remainder of this paper, we therefore turn to data from a rare series of constituency opinion polls, which were conducted and released publicly in the months before the UK's 2015 General Election (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016, 234).

2. Lord Ashcroft's constituency polls

The constituency polls were commissioned by Lord Michael Ashcroft, a multi-millionaire businessman and former Deputy Chair

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