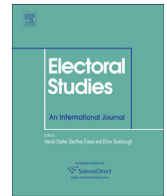




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Constituency campaigning intensity and its impact at first and second-order elections: Wales, 2010 and 2011

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ABSTRACT

Is the local campaign in sub-national elections less intense than national elections? Did campaigning have an impact on those contacted and on party performance; and was campaigning as effective at second as at first-order contests? For the first time, our analysis of local campaigning in the 2010 general election and the 2011 Welsh Assembly election addresses these questions. Our findings suggest that campaign resources, particularly in 2011, were focused on core identifiers plus those respondents who stated prior to the election that they intended to vote for the party. But only Liberal Democrat and Plaid Cymru activism on party contact differed by election, with both parties campaigning having a greater influence on party contact in 2011 than in 2010. Generally speaking, in 2011 - campaign intensity did matter; respondents contacted by the party they favoured made them much more likely to turn out and support it. But, of the four main parties in Wales, only Liberal Democrat campaigning was more effective in mobilising party support in 2011 than in 2010.

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Studies of constituency campaigning at British general elections have established several clear findings. First, parties tend to spend more (a) defending the seats that they won at the previous contest, especially those where their victory was by small margins only and (b) seeking greater support in those seats which they lost at the last election, but by relatively small margins: less is spent on either those that they won by large margins and the chances of defeat are small or, especially, those where they lost by large margins and the prospects of victory are slight. Secondly, they have shown that the more that a party spent in a constituency – as a surrogate variable for the intensity of its candidate's campaigning there – the better its performance. Further, research that has combined study of aggregate spending patterns with survey data showing which voters were contacted by the parties – and how –

during the campaign has shown that: (a) in constituencies where candidates spend more, they tend to contact more voters; and (b) those contacted by a party are more likely to vote for its local candidate.

Apart from one study of spending at the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections (Johnston and Pattie, 2012), and one survey of party organisations examining how Scotland's parties campaigned at three levels – local council, Scottish Parliament constituency and regional list – in 2007 (Clark, 2011), no comparative research has been undertaken to explore whether these findings also apply to elections to the UK's devolved institutions (although see Johnston and Pattie, 2014b, analysis of campaigning for the 2012 Police and Crime Commissioner elections). Elections to all of these bodies are generally known as second-order elections because of the lower priority they receive from the electorate compared to first-order (almost invariably national) elections, and at which the parties currently in the national government usually perform badly, as a protest against their policies, whereas the parties of opposition, plus fringe

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parties, tend to perform well (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Heath et al., 1999: note, however, that Scully, 2013; refers to the contests for the devolved bodies as ‘local first order elections’). Turnout is generally lower at second-order elections reflecting not only less interest among the electorate but also the lower overall intensity of the parties’ local campaigns. Despite that difference, does the pattern of campaigning have the same general parameters at both types of election, and does campaigning have the same impact? Two elections held in adjacent years in the same constituencies – the 2010 UK general election and the 2011 election to the National Assembly of Wales (hereafter referred to as the Welsh National Assembly) – provide an excellent opportunity to address those questions, undertaken here using the published data on candidates’ expenditure plus survey data for both elections.

1. The aggregate picture in Wales: party support and spending in 2010 and 2011

1.1. Party support

Wales elected forty representatives to the Westminster parliament in the 2010 general election. One year later, the 2011 Welsh Assembly election was fought under the semi-proportional Additional Member System, and those candidates elected under the first-past-the-post section represented the same constituencies as those elected to serve as MPs in the general election. As a consequence, it is possible to examine and compare the extent and nature of local activism in the two elections in these forty first-past-the-post seats.¹ But did the two elections differ? Did parties perform differently at the two elections? Figs. 1–4 compare each party’s constituency performance in the 2010 general election with its support in the 2011 contest. For all four, levels varied. Labour, for instance, was on the defensive in 2010 after three successive general election victories, and subsequently lost 6.5 percentage points of its vote share across Wales. (It won 29 seats in 2005, when the election was fought in a different set of constituencies, and 26 in 2010.) But Labour performed much better in 2011 (Fig. 1) especially in South Wales, winning back two seats lost at the previous Assembly election in 2007 and turning several marginal seats they held into safe seats.

Fig. 2 suggests that Conservative constituency support was the most consistent across both elections in Wales.² It was up almost 5 percentage points from 2005 in 2010, falling back by only 1.1 points in 2011 when the party achieved its best ever result since creation of the National

Assembly, performing particularly well in North, Mid and rural Wales. For both the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru, Figs. 3–4 show that the pattern of support across the forty constituencies was generally consistent in 2010 and 2011, but not at the same levels. Liberal Democrat support was generally much higher in 2010 than 2011; having joined the UK coalition government in 2010, in 2011 it was the recipient, for the first time, of the anti-government protest voting typical of second-order elections. Conversely, despite their relatively poor performance in 2011 compared to four years previously, Plaid Cymru received much higher constituency vote shares in the 2011 Assembly election than in the 2010 general election (Fig. 4).³

1.2. Party spending

Although, unsurprisingly, each party’s relative electoral strengths were in the same constituencies in both 2010 and 2011, there were clear differences between the two contests in terms of which seats were safe for any one party, which it was almost certain to lose, and which was relatively marginal and could be either won or lost. Were these differences reflected in the intensity of their candidates’ campaigns at the two contests, as indexed by the amount that they reported spending? Since the national party organisations provide very little support for the candidates’ campaigns (Johnston and Pattie, 2014a), especially in second-order elections for which financial support is virtually zero, the amount spent depends on fund-raising by local party organisations: where the stakes are higher, therefore, we anticipate greater effort at raising funds, reflected in the amounts spent.

The amount candidates can spend on their election campaigns is regulated: for each constituency there is a specified maximum during the weeks of the ‘official campaign’ between prorogation of the preceding Parliament/Assembly and election-day.⁴ Candidates’ agents must report the amounts spent to the local Returning Officer, under specified headings⁵: these returns are forwarded to the Electoral Commission, which publishes them on its website.⁶ The legally specified maximum combines a fixed sum with a varying amount based on the number of registered electors in the constituency and whether it is classified as a borough or county seat (Johnston et al., 2012b). In both the 2010 general election and the 2011

¹ The National Assembly of Wales is a 60-seat chamber. In 2011, 40 of the 60 seats came from the constituency vote under first-past-the-post while the remaining 20 were regional top-up seats voted for using a closed-list voting system and allocated using the d’Hondt formula. This comparative analysis considers the constituency vote in the first-past-the-post seats only. During our analysis we did examine whether the regional dimension led parties to campaign in hopeless seats. We found little evidence of this. And it had no effect on vote choice when it was added as a control in the models.

² The Conservatives obtained 26.1% of the vote in constituencies across Wales in 2010. At the 2011 Assembly election it secured 25% of the vote in the constituency seats.

³ The Liberal Democrats achieved 20.1% of the vote in Wales in 2010 (losing one seat: Montgomeryshire) compared to 10.6% in 2011. Plaid Cymru obtained 11.3% in 2010 (gaining one seat: Arfon) compared to 19.3% in 2011. Both parties lost two seats in 2011.

⁴ For the 2010 general election, spending during the preceding four months was also regulated (Johnston and Pattie, 2014a), but this did not also apply to the 2011 Welsh Assembly election – although it did to the parallel Scottish Parliament election (Johnston and Pattie, 2012).

⁵ The categories for spending allocation are advertising (posters, advertisements in newspapers etc.), unsolicited material to electors (leaflets etc.), transport costs, public meetings, agent and other staff costs and accommodation and administration).

⁶ See the Electoral Commission’s report on party finance (http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/109388/2010-UKPGE-Campaign-expenditure-report.pdf).

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