



With a little help from my neighbours: A spatial analysis of the impact of local campaigns at the 2010 British general election



David Cutts^{a,*}, Donald Webber^b, Paul Widdop^c, Ron Johnston^d, Charles Pattie^e

^a Department of Politics, Languages and International Relations, University of Bath, 1 West North, Bath BA2 7AY, UK

^b Department of Accounting, Economics and Finance, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK

^c Institute for Social Change, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, UK

^d School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 1SS, UK

^e Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 November 2012

Received in revised form 1 December 2013

Accepted 2 December 2013

Keywords:

Local campaigning
Spillover effects
General elections
Spatial modelling

ABSTRACT

This article examines the electoral impact of spillover effects in local campaigns in Britain. For the first time, this is applied to the long as well as the short campaign. Using spatial econometric modelling on constituency data from the 2010 general election, there is clear empirical evidence that, in both campaign periods, the more a party spends on campaigning in constituencies adjacent to constituency *i*, the more votes it gets in constituency *i*. Of the three major political parties, the Liberal Democrats obtained the greatest electoral payoff. Future empirical analyses of voting at the constituency scale must, therefore, explicitly take account of spatial heterogeneity in order to correctly gauge the magnitude and significance of factors that affect parties' parliamentary performance.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

There is growing empirical evidence that there are spatial patterns of voting in Britain over and above those that reflect compositional effects – similar people do not necessarily vote in the same way wherever they live (Cutts and Webber, 2010; Johnston and Pattie, 2006). Voting is a learned activity which takes place in a variety of contexts and through a range of mechanisms at several spatial scales (Taylor and Johnston, 1979; Agnew, 1987; Cox, 1969). Voters are influenced within their local milieu, and these contextual effects complement the compositional effects representing individual characteristics such as social class; the contextual influences include individuals interacting with their material environment, with their social networks, and with political parties' place-specific campaigning.

The nature and impact of constituency party campaigning in British general elections has been the subject of much recent research. Studies using data derived from candidates' agents, for example, show that intensive local campaigning effort yields significant electoral payoffs (Denver and Hands, 1997), as does research using the amounts that candidates reported spending on their constituency campaigns as a measure of their intensity (Pattie and Johnston, 2009; Johnston and Pattie, 1995). Such spending does not win votes directly, but it facilitates the canvassing, mobilisation and follow-up targeting of identified supporters as well as meeting the costs of leaflets, posters and other campaign literature used in those efforts.

British elections are won or lost in the marginal seats, where party activity seeking additional votes is at its most intense. Reflecting this, not only have local campaigns become more professional and centralised (Fisher et al., 2006), but circumstantial evidence suggests that candidates

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: D.J.Cutts@bath.ac.uk (D. Cutts).

are active in canvassing support and building up their local profiles well before the election campaign begins, especially in specifically targeted seats (Cutts et al., 2012; Johnston and Pattie, 2010; Cutts, 2006a,b). Such local campaigning is often highly visible through the increasing use of posters displaying the local candidate's name, street stalls in town centres and local shopping precincts, as well as party workers out 'flying the flag' – wearing party badges and other merchandise – while canvassing or leafleting. This enhanced public profile of campaigns in target seats led Cutts and Webber (2010) to speculate that there may be positive spillover effects from intensive party activity from one constituency to its neighbours (Johnston and Pattie, 2008); they identified evidence that the more a party spends on campaigning in constituencies adjacent to another, the better its performance in the latter. A drawback of almost all these studies of constituency electioneering, however, especially those using the returns of reported spending, has been that their attention has been restricted to the short period between the date when an election is called and polling day – which in the British case is usually between three and six weeks only. Much local campaigning begins long before then, however, especially in the target seats where opposition parties seek to enhance their candidates' profiles with the electorate, against those of incumbent MPs. Both the direct effect of those earlier campaigns and the possible spillover effects into neighbouring constituencies have not been incorporated into the analyses, which can only capture the impacts of efforts to win support in the last few hectic weeks of a campaign. For the 2010 general election, however, new legislation on the regulation of campaign spending had extended the period for which returns have to be made – and for which there is a maximum that can be spent – to the three-month period immediately preceding that which was previously regulated. Thus for every candidate we now have data on how much they spent during both what the Electoral Commission, which collects and publishes the returns, calls the 'long campaign' – which for the 2010 general election began in 1 January and continued to 15 April, the beginning of what it termed the 'short campaign'.

Using those data, this paper reports on a pioneering study of the nature and extent of spillover effects at the 2010 general election in Great Britain, exploring whether the intensity of a party's campaigning in one constituency during each of the long and short campaigns had an impact on its support in adjacent constituencies. The study of such spillover effects involves addressing the concept of spatial autocorrelation – both substantively and statistically. Spatial autocorrelation occurs when the observations on a variable in a regression analysis are non-independent – the value of x at one place is in part a function of x at neighbouring places. Where this occurs, the standard errors of the regression coefficients tend to be under-estimated, which can lead to over-interpretation of their importance and commission of a Type II error – failing to reject a false hypothesis. To remove such possibilities, bespoke modelling programs have been developed, one of which is deployed here because – as maps of British election results show – spatial autocorrelation is a clear feature of voting patterns there, with clustering of the constituencies where each party is strong.

Alongside those technical issues associated with spatially autocorrelated data are substantive issues, because clustering can provide strong evidence of the spillover effects that we are hypothesising here. For example, a party's performance in constituency i may be a function of not only the intensity of (how much it spent on) its campaigning there but also a function of the intensity of its campaigning in adjacent constituencies j , k and l . In turn, the intensity of its campaigning in i could also influence its performance in those other constituencies. Spatial autocorrelation modelling incorporates those two-way interactions and allows estimation of the extent and impact of spillover effects.

Much research has established the importance of geography in British voting behaviour, therefore, but almost all of it has taken each constituency out of its context – just as other research takes individual voters out of their local contexts (their households, streets, neighbourhoods etc.). But each constituency is not an island: it has links with its neighbours. Its residents pass through them as they journey to work, to leisure and to other activities, and in doing so may be aware of the political campaigning going on there. Many neighbouring constituencies share the same media, through which residents in one may be alerted to campaigns in other seats. Their own voting behaviour – whether they abstain, for example, or which party they choose to support – may be influenced by those contacts, some of which enhance the flow of partisan information within their own constituency whereas others may counter it. To inquire whether this was the case at the 2010 British general election, this paper uses spatial econometric modelling to identify the extent (if any) and impact of spatial spillover effects: did a party's success in one constituency depend, in part, on how intensively it campaigned not only there – during both the long and the short campaign periods – but also of how intensively it campaigned in neighbouring constituencies too, and could its opponents' campaigns in those places have an impact there too? Our findings suggest that an increase in campaign spending of 10 percentage points increases the vote shares of the Liberal Democrats, Labour and Conservatives by 3, 2 and 1 percentage points, respectively. While in relative terms, the effects on constituency i 's vote share of long campaign spending in neighbouring constituencies are far more important for the Liberal Democrats than Labour or the Conservatives. By contrast, the joint effects of short campaign spending patterns in 2010 (direct effect of spending plus the indirect impact of spending in adjacent constituencies) are similar across the three parties.

1. The 2010 general election: the changing electoral context

Labour was widely expected to lose the 2010 general election. Following the 2005 general election, the party fell behind the Conservatives in the opinion polls and experienced heavy losses in both local government elections and the 2009 European election. While Labour adopted an almost entirely defensive electoral strategy at the constituency level (Fisher et al., 2011; Johnston et al., 2012), the Conservatives targeted a substantial number of key seats where they lost in 2005, campaigning there up to three years in advance of the expected contest in 2010 (Ashcroft, 2010). Although they

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7464492>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7464492>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)