

Snap election surprises - a quantitative analysis of Facebook use by political actors in the 2017 UK General Election

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**9/1/2017**

Abstract: Political actors are increasingly curating their own audiences via social media, communicating directly with their supporters and bypassing political reporters and commentators. From Donald Trump to Jeremy Corbyn, politicians are finding that they can rouse supporters without recourse to a traditional media that tries to balance or mediate their message through its own filters. This paper will analyse the use of Facebook by political actors to communicate with voters during the UK's snap election of 2017. Taking a quantitative approach, it will identify the key strategic themes and tactical approaches taken by the major parties and the party leaders over the course of the short campaign. It will consider to what extent the unexpected election and its surprising result were as a result of the motivation of voters through Facebook communities of interest.

## Introduction

When Prime Minister Theresa May stepped into Downing Street on the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 2017, few people knew she was about to announce a snap General Election.

Even The Times's well-connected political columnist and Conservative member of the House of Lords, Daniel Finkelstein, a man so close to her predecessor that he used to contribute to drafts of David Cameron's conference speeches, tweeted:



Followed shortly afterwards by a rueful admission that predicting things is hard:



Having returned from a walking holiday in Snowdonia convinced that she had an opportunity to secure her own mandate as Prime Minister, Theresa May caught not only her rivals on the hop but also her allies (Rayner, 2017). Conservative Campaign Headquarters was unprepared for the election, talented staff had been allowed to drift away, data allowed to atrophy and the

consultants who had successfully run previous campaigns had quickly to be rehired (Wallace, 2017). Expecting the Labour party under Jeremy Corbyn to try to block the election, Mrs May gave herself time to achieve the two thirds Parliamentary majority required by the Fixed Term Parliaments Act, 2011. However, and to the surprise of some of his own MPs (Mason & Elgot, 2017 ), Mr Corbyn welcomed the election. Parliament voted to dissolve itself and for an election to be held on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, 2017.

This decision had the effect of creating an unusually long short campaign. When Parliament was dissolved on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May, in many parts of the UK the political parties were already campaigning for local council elections that were due to be held on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May. The snap election announcement effectively triggered a national short campaign of more than seven weeks, the longest campaign, as measured by days between the election date being announced and the election taking place, since at least 1979 (Jones, 2015).

It also increased the pressure on the air-war and the digital campaigns. As supporters were mobilised, campaign messages tested and advertising bought, all the parties had to place greater reliance on digital and broadcast media to deliver key messages. The parties all used Facebook as a battleground for communicating directly with voters. As in 2015, Twitter was viewed by party headquarters as an important tool for influencing journalists covering political issues but of less value in motivating voters. The Conservatives, in particular, viewed it as an elite, left-leaning platform (Ross, 2015).

With more than two billion monthly users worldwide and around 32 million accounts (Emarketer) in the UK, Facebook's size makes it an attractive target for political actors to communicate with voters. As the former Executive Director of the *Stronger In* campaign, Will Straw, pointed out in the Financial Times the social network is: "on a par with the BBC for getting your message out there ....The difference is with the BBC you don't have control

of the end product.” (Bond, 2017). The ability to disintermediate political journalists and deliver your message untainted and direct to voters provides a strong motivating factor for campaigns to engage with the network. It is also clear, from figures published by Enders Analysis, that demographic groups who are more likely to vote are less likely to use Facebook. Despite the high level of usage of Facebook among UK voters, it is more prevalent among the under-40s.

### Measuring the campaign

The growth in the number of followers of parties and party leaders on Facebook during the course of the campaign gives an indication of the impact and engagement with the digital campaigns. To measure this I recorded the number of people who had liked the Facebook pages for the main political parties and their leaders at the start of the campaign and again at 10pm on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June. I defined main parties as those contesting seats in Great Britain but not Northern Ireland; that is the Conservatives, Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party, the Green Party, UKIP, and Plaid Cymru. This matched the parties invited to take part in televised debates through the campaign. It should be noted in the below table that The Green Party has two leaders, Caroline Lucas and Jonathan Bartley.

Name	Likes on 19/4/17	Likes on 08/06/17	Change +	Change % +
Caroline Lucas	72,907	81,347	8,440	11.58%
Conservatives	565,915	629,277	63,362	11.20%
Green Party	278,732	303,168	24,436	8.77%
Jeremy Corbyn	839,332	1,138,239	298,907	35.61%
Jonathan Bartley	7,661	9,082	1,421	18.55%
Labour Party	543,241	956,915	413,674	76.15%
Leanne Wood	31,071	32,447	1,376	4.43%

## ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK USE IN UK GENERAL ELECTION 2017

Liberal Democrats	161,513	185,049	23,536	14.57%
Nicola Sturgeon	293,704	299,346	5,642	1.92%
Paul Nuttall	46,802	49,389	2,587	5.53%
Plaid Cymru	26,426	28,912	2,486	9.41%
Scottish National Party	276,253	286,798	10,545	3.82%
Theresa May	343,562	419,094	75,532	21.98%
Tim Farron	30,823	37,458	6,635	21.53%
UKIP	582,364	596,109	13,745	2.36%

Figure 1 - Change in Facebook likes during the campaign

From this table it is possible to see the dramatic growth in likes for Jeremy Corbyn, up by more than 35%, and the Labour Party, up 71%. This is despite a strong starting position.

While there was growth for all the parties and leaders across the campaign it is notable that the performance of Labour and Corbyn considerably outstripped their rivals; The Conservatives, for example, rose 11%, Theresa May gained almost 22%.

The table also shows that UKIP's digital penetration had stalled. Despite starting as the most popular party account, by the end of the campaign both Labour and the Conservative accounts had surpassed it.

During the seven week short campaign I recorded all the posts by the seven main parties. The below figure shows total Facebook posts between the announcement of the election and closing of polls at 10pm on 8<sup>th</sup> of June, it includes reposts and shared posts.

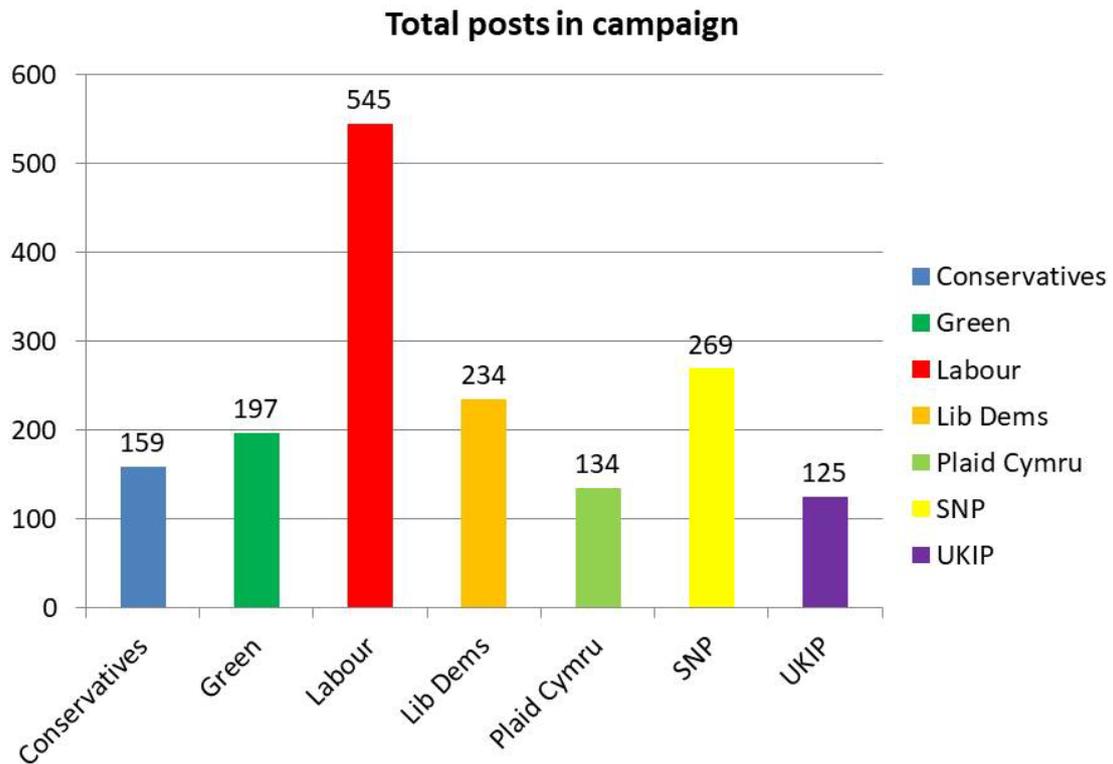


Figure 2 - Total Facebook posts during short campaign

This figure clearly demonstrates the considerable lead in Facebook page activity shown by the Labour Party over its competitors.

This trend is also replicated in the number of posts made by party leaders, with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn far exceeding his competitors. Although Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood uses Facebook far more consistently than her party's main account.

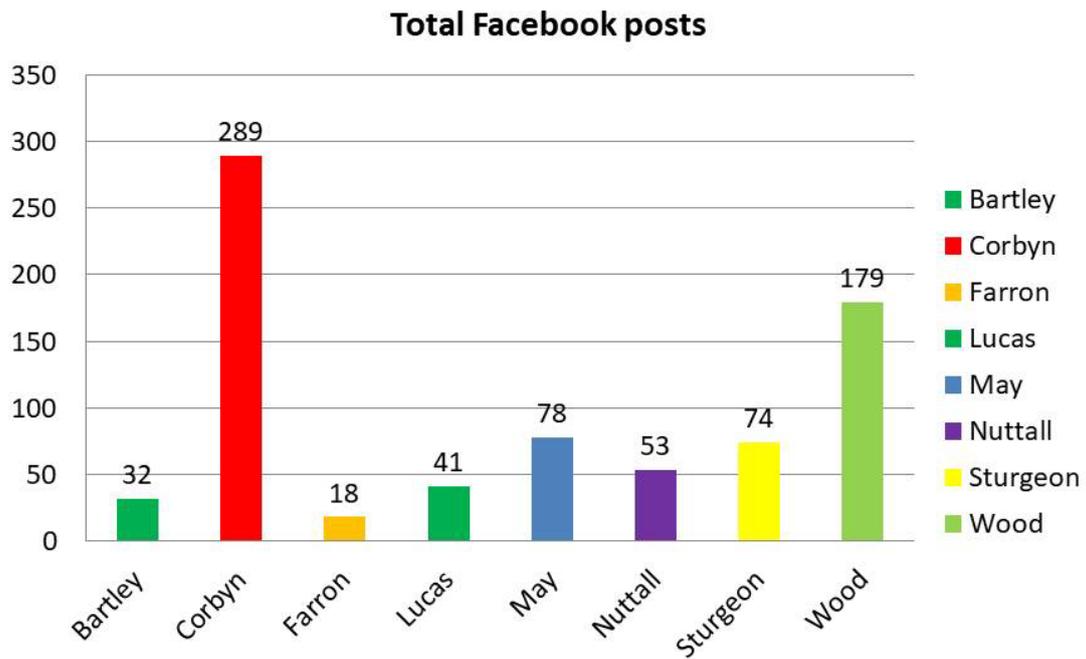


Figure 3 - Total Facebook posts by party leader

The pattern of activity can also be seen by examining the number of posts by day across the course of the campaign. The below figure is the number of posts per day made by the Conservative Party's main Facebook page.

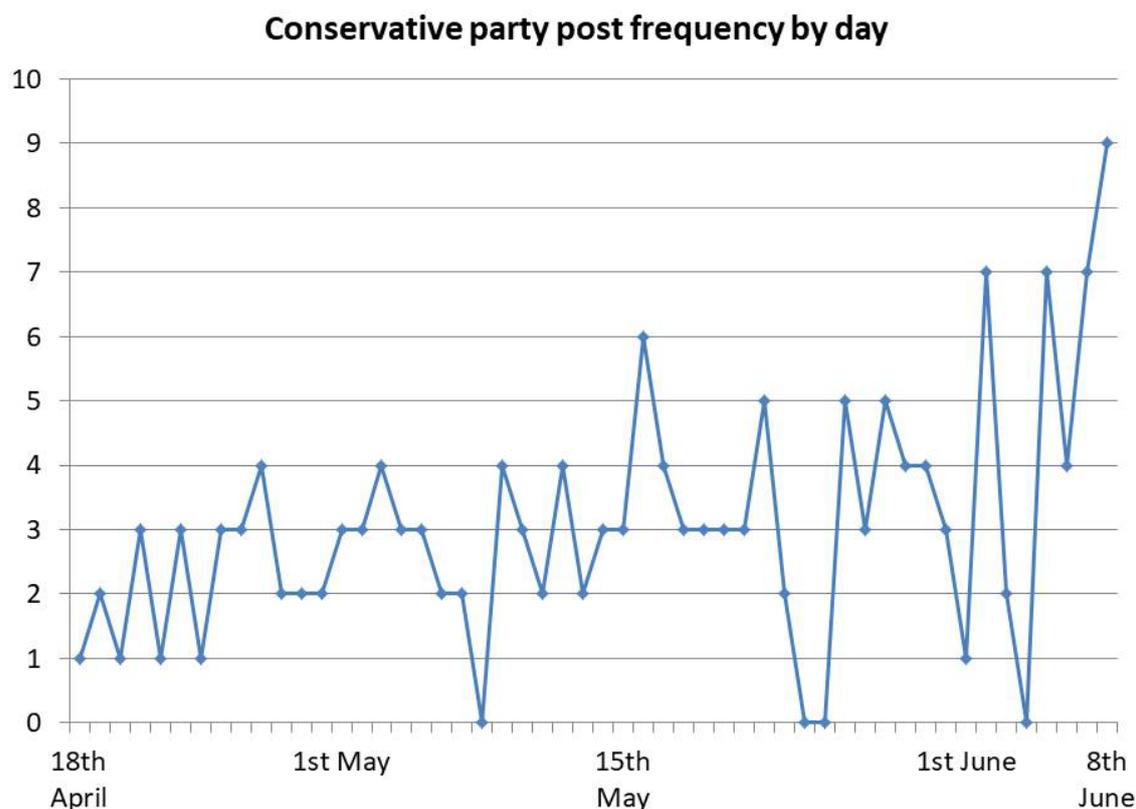


Figure 4 - Conservative post frequency by day

The broad trend of this activity is reflected in many of the accounts activity by day. The trend was to increase the activity across the course of the campaign, with the most intensive activity in the final week. Most party accounts had their most active day on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, when followers were exhorted to vote and also encourage others to do the same by sharing supportive messages.

All the party accounts reflected the pauses in campaigning made after the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May suicide bombing at the Ariana Grande concert in Manchester and the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June ISIS inspired attack at London Bridge.

However, when comparing all the parties' Facebook posts by day the trend for Labour to outperform its competitors is clear.

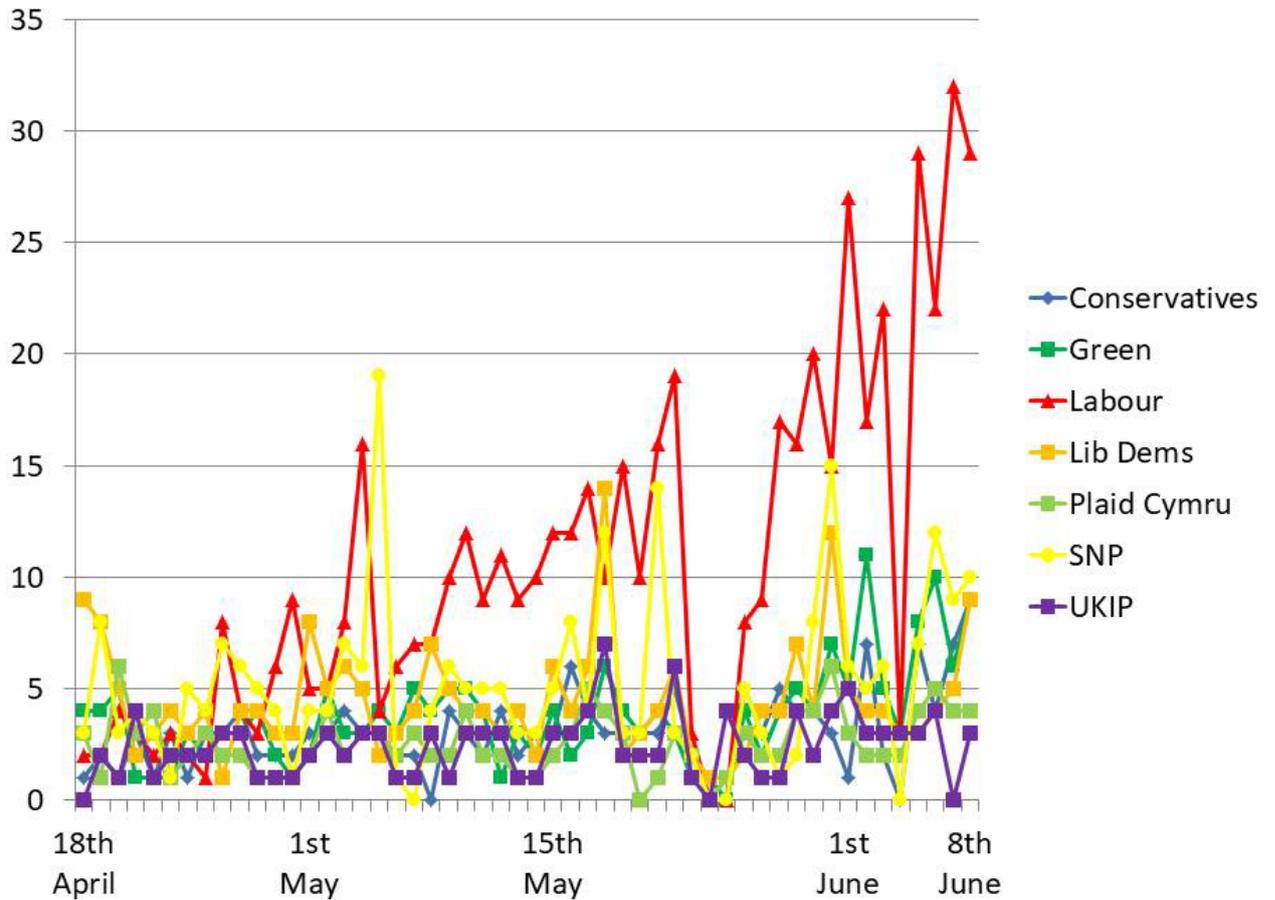


Figure 5 - Party Facebook posts by day

Having recorded the posts by the political parties, I decided to conduct a content analysis of the Facebook activity. Building on my previous work looking at video use by political parties in the 2015 General Election, (Walsh, 2016), I developed a coding mechanism that assigned a number of characteristics to each Facebook post. These can be seen in the below table.

## ANALYSIS OF FACEBOOK USE IN UK GENERAL ELECTION 2017

Media type	Policy area			Tone	Video style	Video length	Repost?	Shared from other user?
Animation	Business	Fox hunting	Royalty	Positive	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes
Blog	Brexit	Fund raising	Social care	Negative	Attack ad	30 secs or less	No	No
Broadcast clip by party	Campaigning	Gay rights	Spending	Neutral	Campaigning	31 - 60 secs		
Broadcasters content	Child health	Government record	Sport		Celebrity endorsement	61 - 90 secs		
Facebook live	Crime	Horse race	Tax		Endorsement (non-celebrity)	91 - 120 secs		
Newspaper article	Defence	Housing	Terrorism		Interview	121 - 180 secs		
Image	Economy	Immigration	Transport		Leader statement	180 secs or more		
N/A	Education	Leadership	Tuition fees		Other politician statement			
PEB	Energy	Local elections	Welfare		Policy explainer			
Political ad	Environment	Mental health	Various		Voxes			
Online article	Europe	NHS	Voting					
UGC	Devolution	Pensions	Youth issues					
	Foreign Affairs	Religion	Workers rights					

Figure 6 - Content analysis categories for Facebook posts

Column one assigns a media type to the post. Facebook posts are rarely simple text; most social media teams recognise that video and images should be used to increase users' engagement. Facebook's algorithm also assigns greater importance to posts using native video, thus making it more likely that they will be viewed by a greater number of users (Tandoc & Maitra, 2017).

Column two shows the categories used for coding policy area of the post. Again this builds on work I conducted on video use during the 2015 election, but this inductive categorisation was expanded based on the policy areas explored by the Facebook posts. The Brexit categorisation, for example, was of significant importance in 2017 but was not in such common parlance during 2015 (Davies, 2017).

Column three assigns a positive/negative/neutral tone characteristic to the post. In establishing this I looked at the language of the post and the intention demonstrated by it. For example, many posts by opposition parties about Brexit were positive, not because they wanted Brexit to take place, but because they reflected positive party policies in addressing the issue.

Column four was for video posts only and added a layer of characterisation for the video content. Again this is a development of my work on the 2015 election. Column five is also video specific and measures the length of the video.

Column five establishes whether the video has previously been posted by the user and column six whether it has been shared from another Facebook user's account.

Using this coding I was able to analyse the posts of all the parties and create a significant data set that illustrated trends and strategies of the parties during the campaign and allowed me to examine the policy areas the parties viewed as significant.

The diagrams below illustrate the share of media type by the Conservative party and Labour party main Facebook accounts.

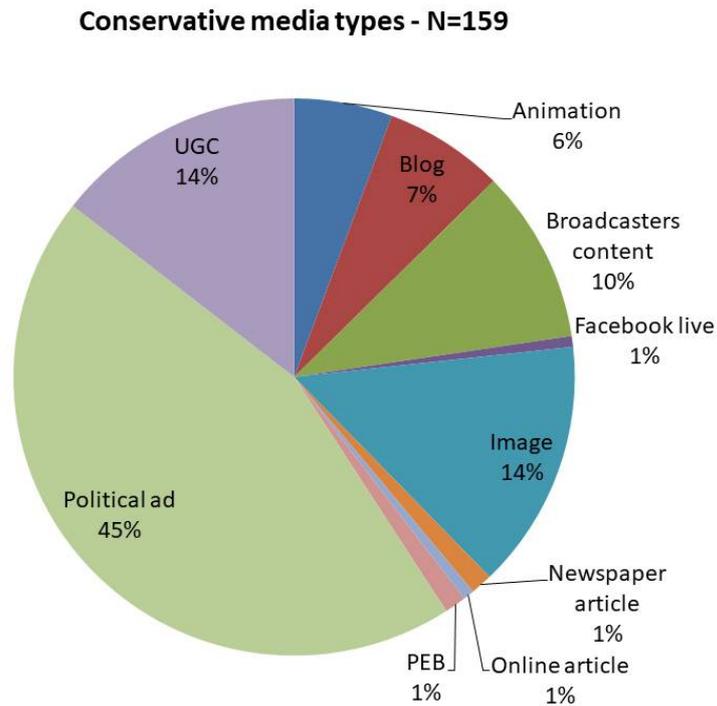


Figure 7 - Conservative Facebook posts by media type

There are a number of trends illustrated here. Firstly, the Conservative party account made heavy use of political advertising, using both graphics and video. This, alongside the relatively sparse number of posts, gave the account a quite static, although polished, tone. Some of these political adverts were attack ads, adverts produced with the sole purpose of attacking the policies or personalities of their opponent, and some were supportive of Conservative party policy.



Figure 8 - Conservative "garden tax" political ad



Figure 1 - Conservative security attack ad video

There was also a significant concentration on the figure of the leader of the party, Theresa May, during the campaign. In the run up to the short campaign Mrs May had outperformed her chief rival, Jeremy Corbyn, on measures connected to leadership (Helm, 2017). As such the party chose to concentrate on her in both native campaign videos and in videos lifted from broadcast television.

The Labour party's posts reveal a different set of trends.

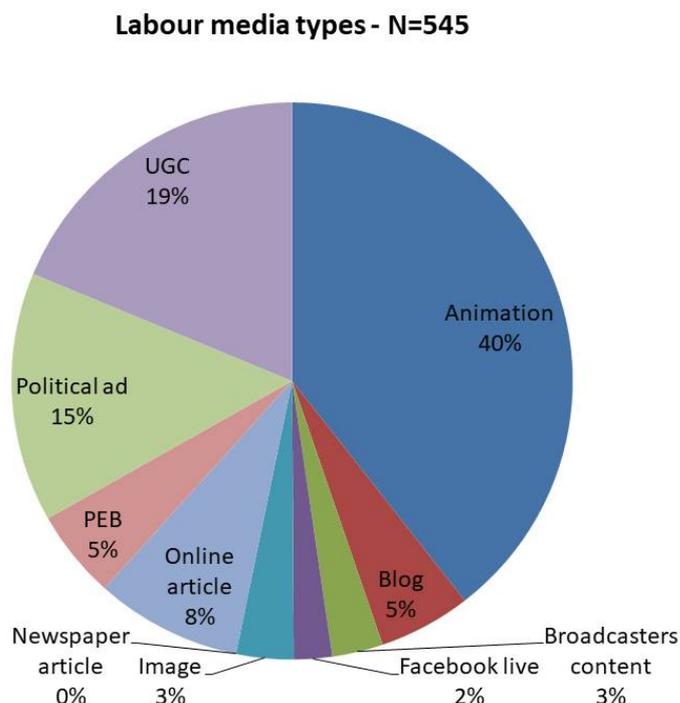


Figure 11 - Labour party Facebook posts by media type

Labour party election strategists had two clear drivers for digital media strategy. Firstly, they believed that when voters saw Jeremy Corbyn during the short campaign, unfiltered by the perceived biases of the media, that the electorate would find him an engaging and sympathetic figure (Stewart, 2017). To that end much of the focus during the campaign posts was on Corbyn as a leader and personality. The second strategic driver was to counter negative reporting of Labour’s policy positions. Labour communications team took the view that they had to aggressively counter the media’s framing of their policies. As such, a significant proportion of the Labour party posts were animations that explained policy positions on topics such as student tuition fees or the NHS.

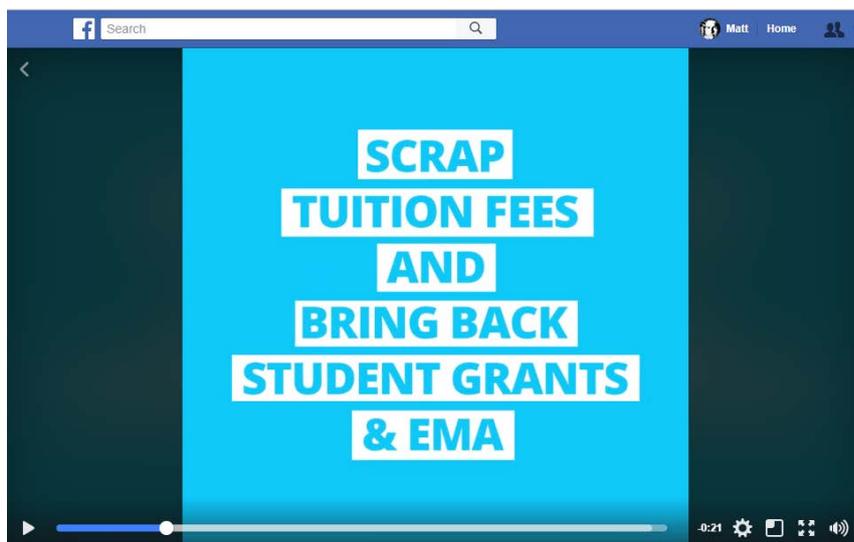


Figure 12 - Labour party policy explainer

There was also a significant policy difference between the Conservatives and Labour in the areas highlighted by Facebook posts. The Conservative leader, Theresa May, made it clear in her Downing Street speech that she viewed Brexit as the clear motivating factor for the election saying “Division in Westminster will risk our ability to make a success of Brexit and it will cause damaging uncertainty and instability to the country. So we need a general election and we need one now, because we have at this moment a one-off chance to get this done while the European Union agrees its negotiating position and before the detailed talks begin.”

While sceptics may have felt that there was a significant element of calculation involved in kicking what appeared to be a weak opponent while they were down, the posts in the short campaign were clearly dominated by Brexit. When the campaign was rattled by the misfiring of the manifesto and the backlash over social care policy, it was to Brexit that it returned after the pause in campaigning triggered by the Manchester bombing.

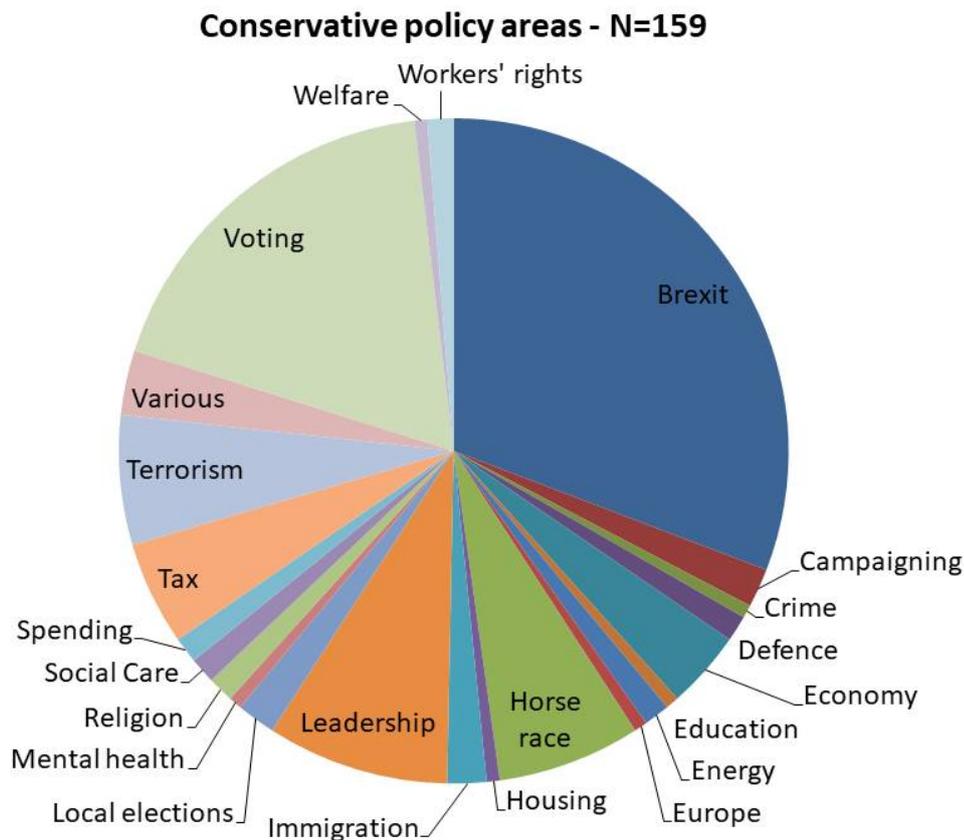


Figure 13 - Conservative Facebook posts by policy area

Other election themes became objects of ridicule given the oft-repeated formulations of “strong and stable” leadership, often contrasted with the “coalition of chaos” (Tapsfield, 2017) that Jeremy Corbyn would seek to lead. This was reflected in the significant number of Facebook posts that focussed on leadership and the horse race, the jockeying for position and coalition deal-making the Conservatives predicted would happen if there was a hung Parliament or narrow Labour victory.

What is also noticeable is the lack of focus by the Conservatives on areas the party had previously identified as election winning themes, in particular tax, the economy and business. During the 2015 General Election campaign, the Conservatives concentrated on a few key themes. Of the 65 videos the party posted, 19 were about the economy and another 17 were

about the horse race. This reflected two of the big campaign themes for the Tories – that they had a long-term economic plan and could be trusted over Labour to deliver on it; and that Labour would bring parties such as the SNP into government in order to form a coalition. Labour too concentrated on its key messages 18 of the 84 videos it posted were about the NHS (Walsh, 2016). In 2017, the Conservative campaign tried not to pin down policy specifics, partly as a result of feeling hemmed in by the policy commitments of David Cameron and George Osborne in the run up to the 2015 election (Mason, 2017). The desire for flexibility combined with a sense hubris about their inevitable victory, led to a lack of clarity around the detail of policies and a defensive approach to a policy agenda at a time when voters were growing weary of austerity policies and more receptive to a change narrative (Rayner, 2017).

This was perhaps most clearly illustrated by the reaction to a change in social care policy, quickly branded the dementia tax, which would see voters pay for care using money defrayed against the value of their home, which would then be sold upon their death. This key policy was briefed to the press the night before the manifesto launch and the furious reaction to it dominated the coverage, eventually prompting an apparent volte face just four days later in a press conference where Theresa May repeatedly claimed that “nothing has changed” (Ross & McTague, 2017)

The Labour party, on the other hand, tackled a range of policy areas, notably leading with a hardy perennial, the National Health Service. The NHS usually features highly in Labour campaigns, either trumpeted as the recipient of extra investment under a Labour government or with voters being warned of the dangers of privatisation or collapse under a Conservative one. This campaign was no different.

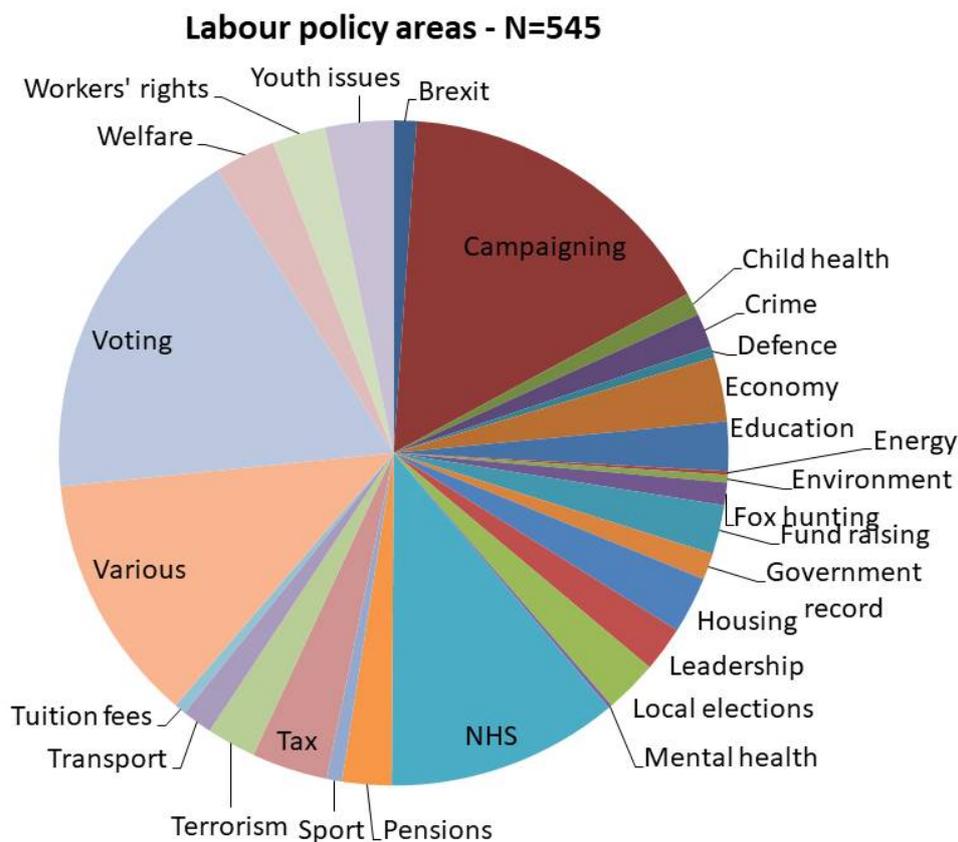


Figure 14 - Labour party Facebook posts by policy area

What is perhaps more significant is the amount of time the Labour party Facebook feed spent on issues connected to its campaign and voting. Labour strategists wanted to energise voters who had drifted away from the party since 1997's New Labour landslide. Either by voting for other left-wing parties such as the Greens, or because they had stopped voting altogether. They were confident the campaign and Jeremy Corbyn could also energise younger voters, whose turnout had steadily declined since the 1990s.

As such, a significant proportion of the Facebook posts were dedicated to encouraging people to register to vote and to getting the vote out, celebrity endorsements of Labour, and campaign activity by Mr Corbyn. Events and speeches were planned in many safe Labour seats and Mr Corbyn was given a hero's welcome at events in places such as Tranmere. Sceptics suggested he was preaching to the converted but videos of these events built into a

powerful narrative of a social movement gaining widespread popular support. A Facebook live video of the 6<sup>th</sup> of June Corbyn election event in Birmingham compered by the comic actor Steve Coogan and featuring a set by the dance act Clean Bandit was watched an astonishing 2.3 million times by the time polls closed.



Figure 15 - Jeremy Corbyn addresses a crowd in Birmingham

The aggressive use of feel-good videos, policy explainers, and shareable media helped drive forward the Labour party's social media strategy. Unlike other parties Labour repeatedly reposted material, rather than merely posting once on a topic and moving on. This meant that in total just 35% of Labour's 545 posts were original, whereas 65% of them were reposts. This strategy of repeatedly reposting content in order to reach the maximum number of users means that Labour content outperformed Conservative party content by a factor of at least two to one. According to social engagement analytics of News Whip in the month leading up

to the vote, the Labour page pulled in 2.56 million engagements on 450 posts, while the Conservative page saw 1.07 million interactions on 116 posts (Concorran, 2017).

Other party Facebook accounts policy areas:

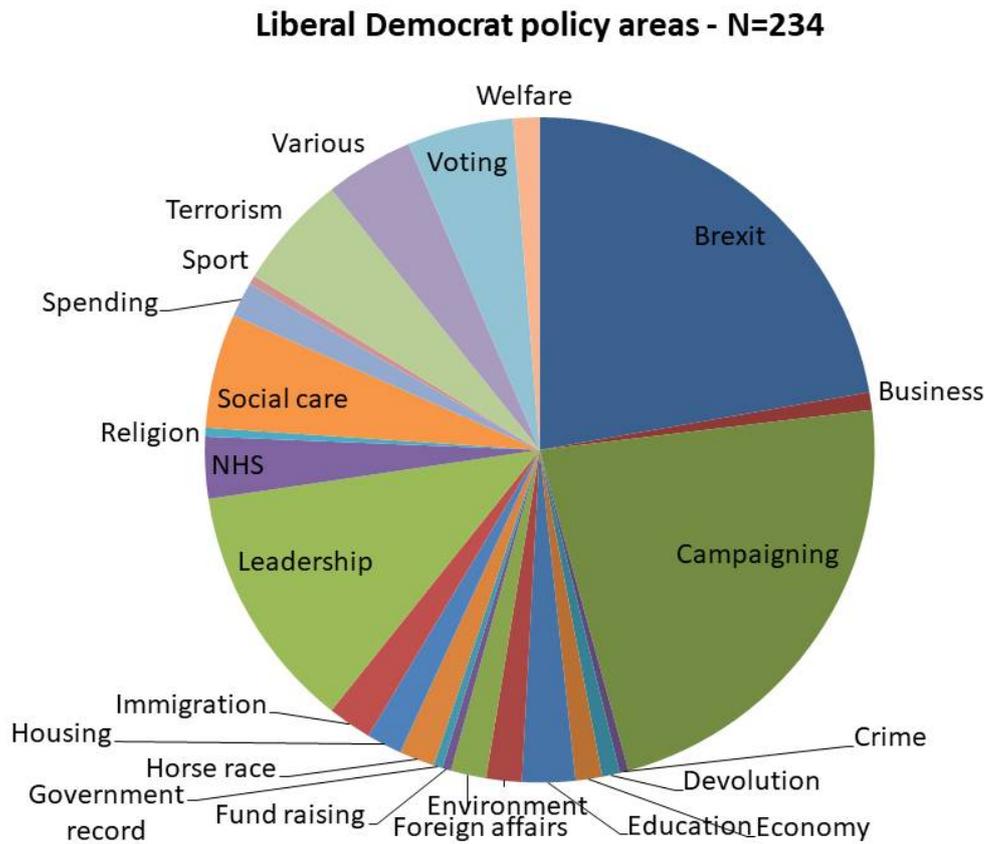


Figure 16 - Liberal Democrat Facebook posts by policy

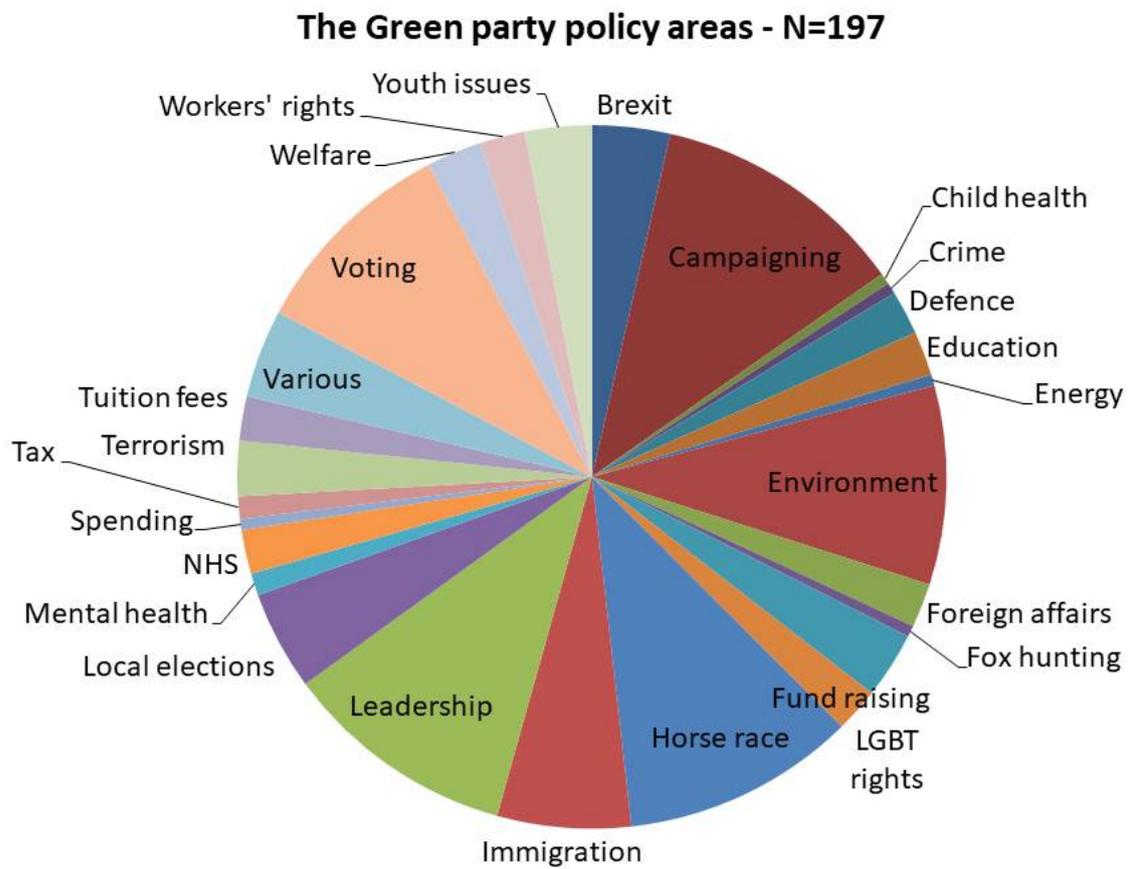


Figure 17 - Green party Facebook posts by policy

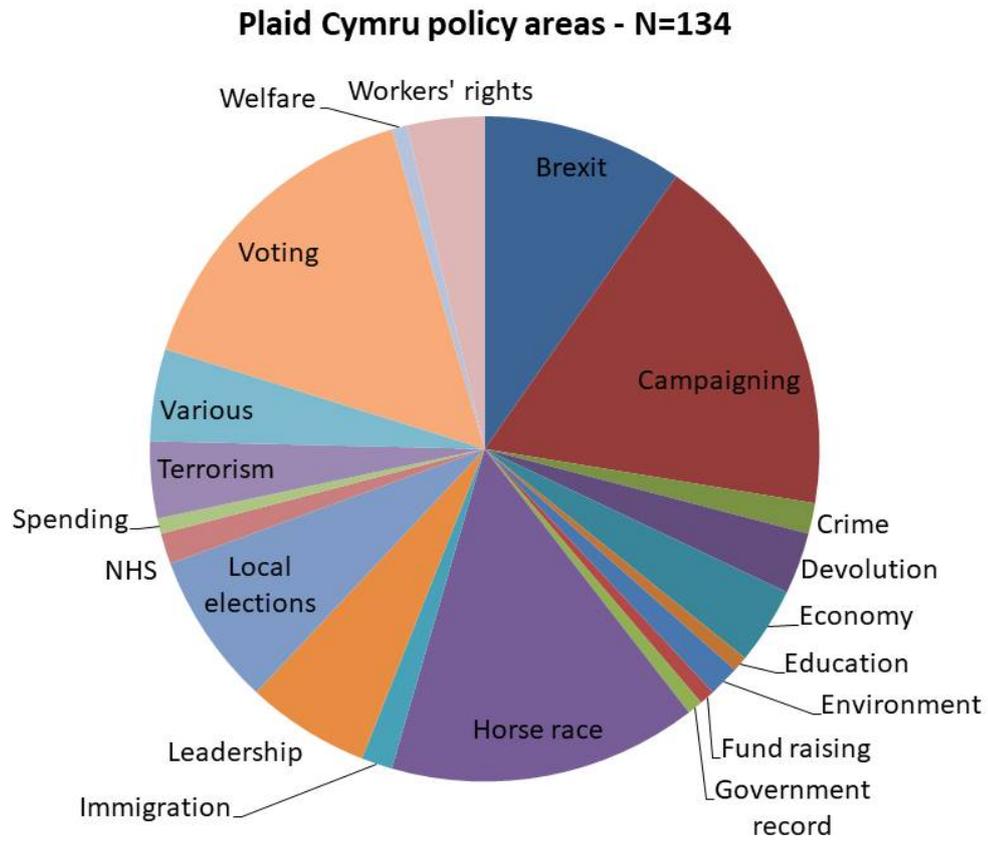


Figure 18 - Plaid Cymru Facebook posts by policy

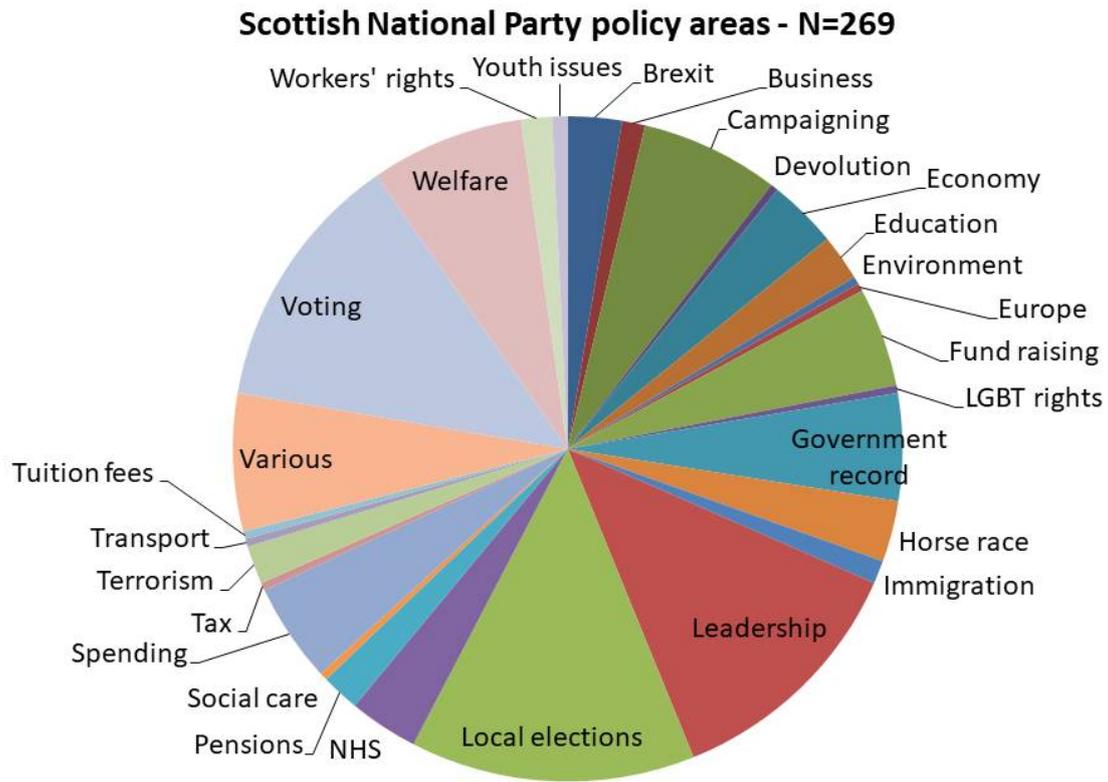


Figure 19 - SNP Facebook posts by policy

**UKIP policy areas - N=125**

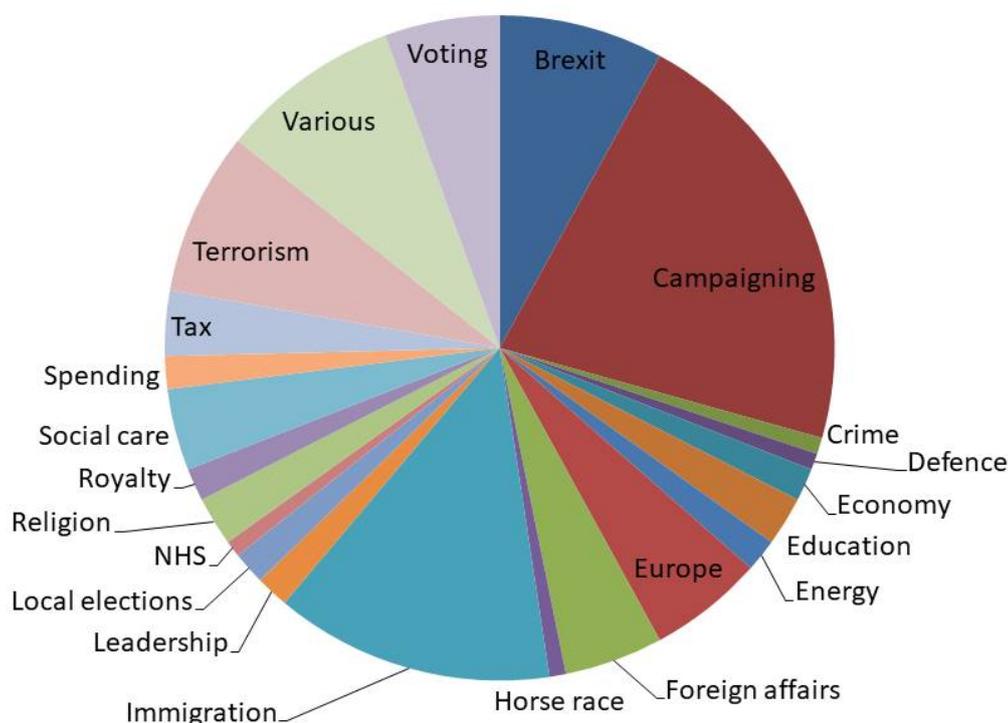


Figure 20 - UKIP Facebook posts by policy

The Facebook accounts of the leaders tended to have a similar but not identical policy mix to the official party accounts. Sometimes this was strategic; Theresa May’s account was far more positive than the Conservative account. All attack ads were posts on the Conservatives account whereas Mrs May’s tended to concentrate on positive messages about Brexit. Jeremy Corbyn’s account featured more campaigning material than the Labour party’s one, as well as piloting celebrity endorsements aimed at younger voters, which were picked up some days later by the official party account.

At other times this reflected the character of the leader. Plaid Cymru leader, Leanne Wood, clearly operated her own Facebook account and its posts reflected her interests and thoughts. She also regularly engaged with voters in comments.

**Jonathan Bartley policy areas - N=32**

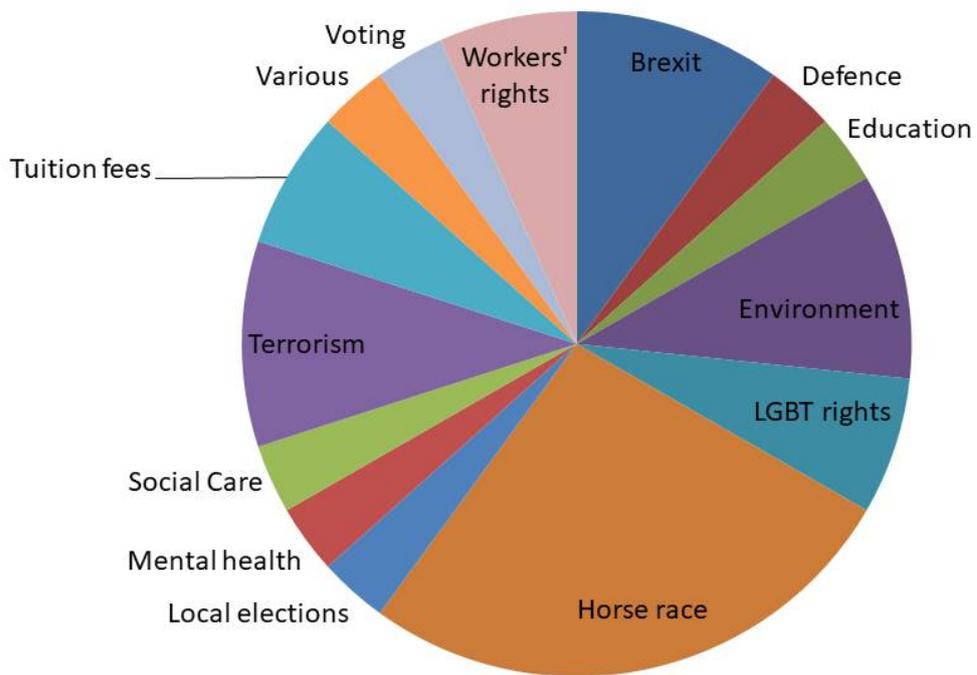


Figure 21 - Green party leader Jonathan Bartley's Facebook posts by policy

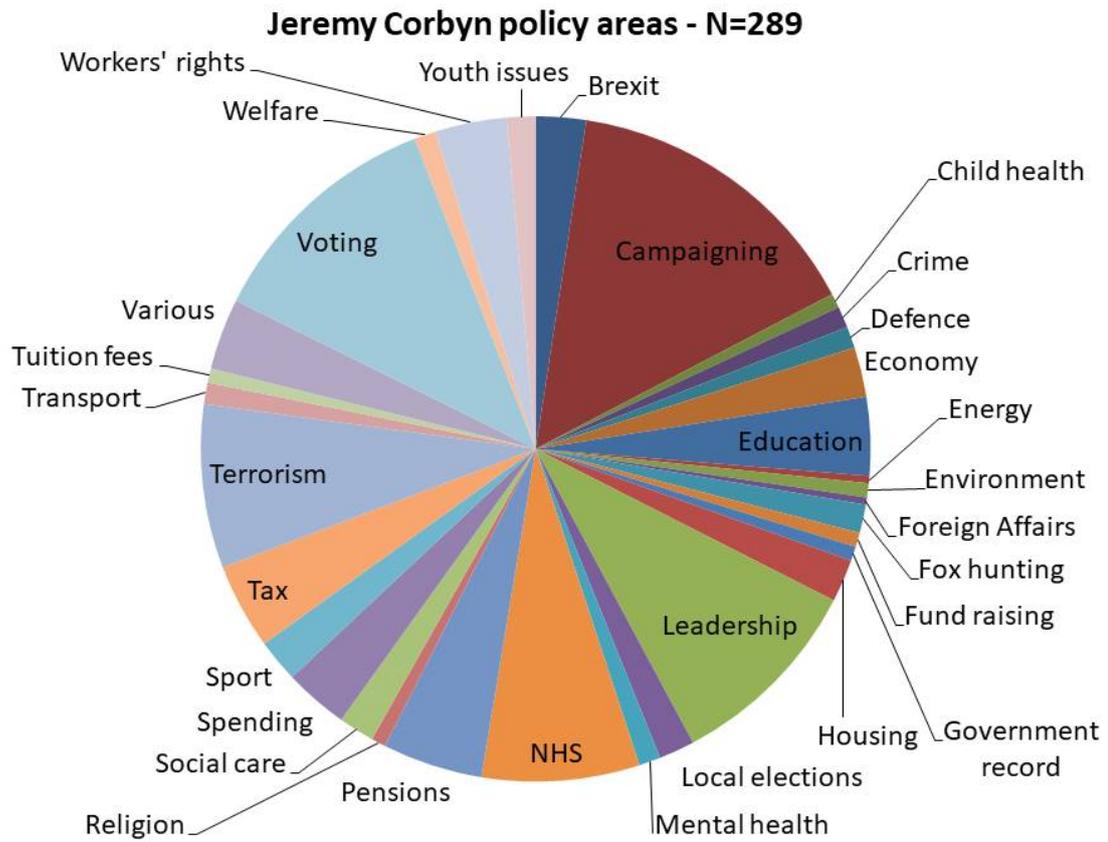


Figure 22 - Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn's Facebook posts by policy

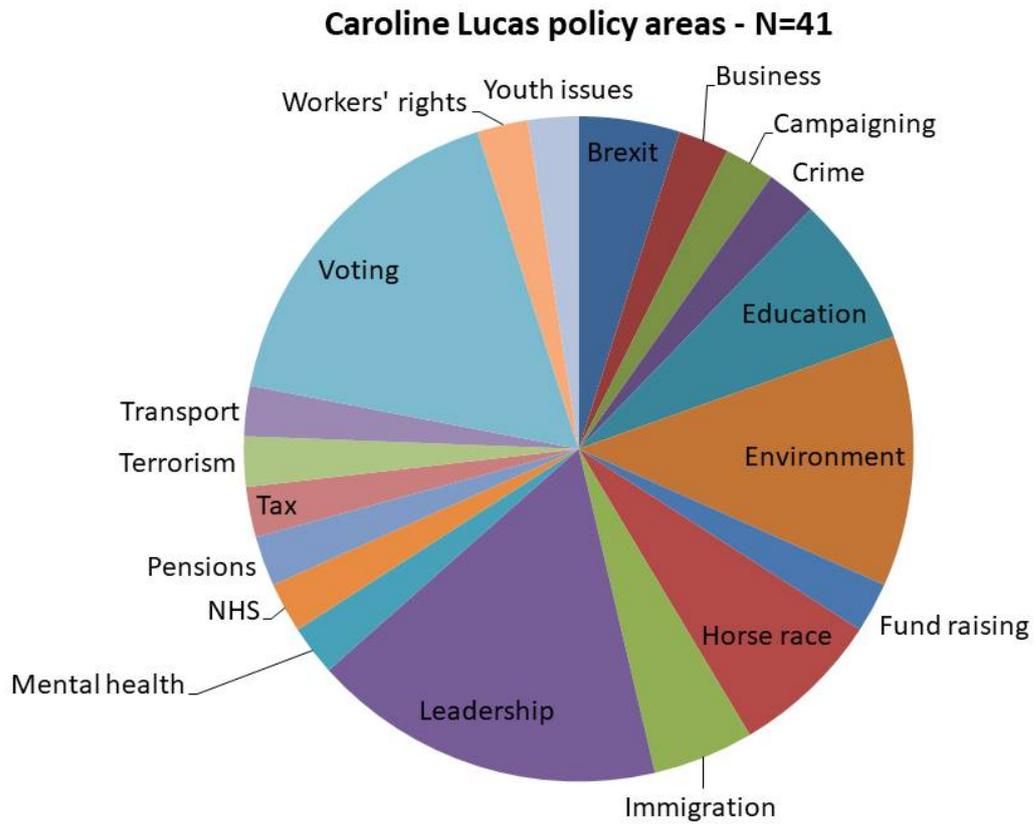


Figure 23 - Green party leader Caroline Lucas's Facebook posts by policy

**Theresa May policy areas - N=78**

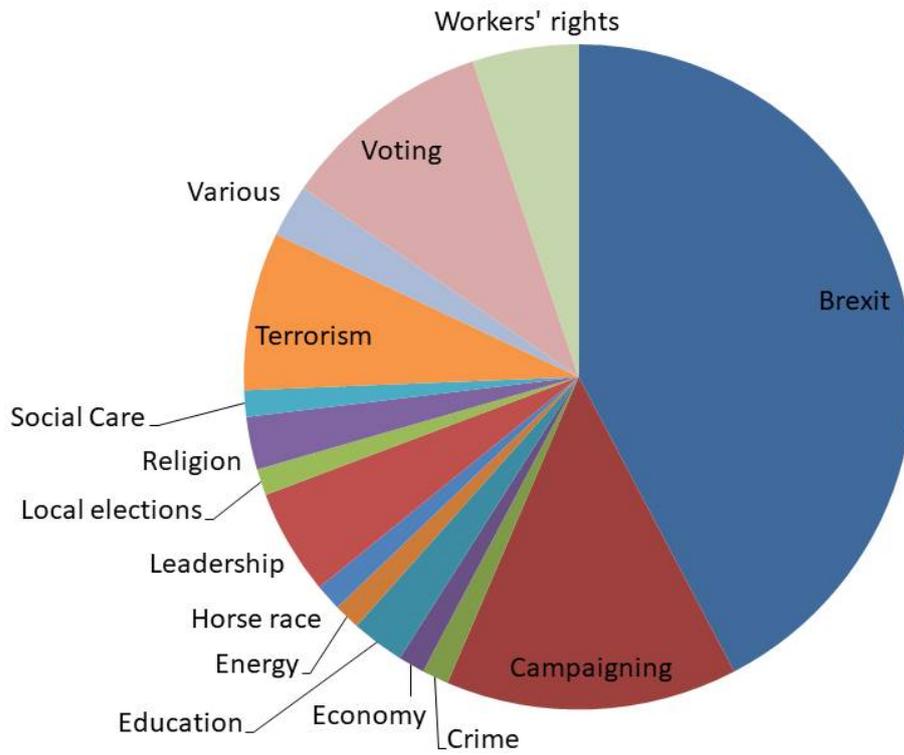


Figure 24 - Conservative party leader Theresa May's Facebook posts by policy

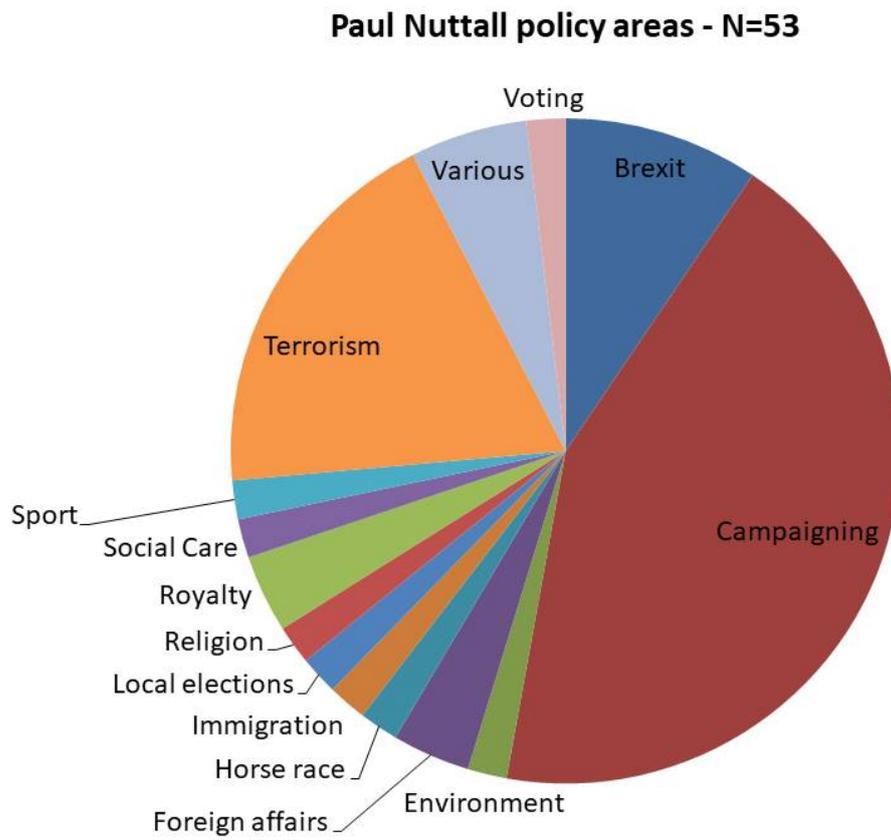


Figure 25 - UKIP leader Paul Nuttall's Facebook posts by policy

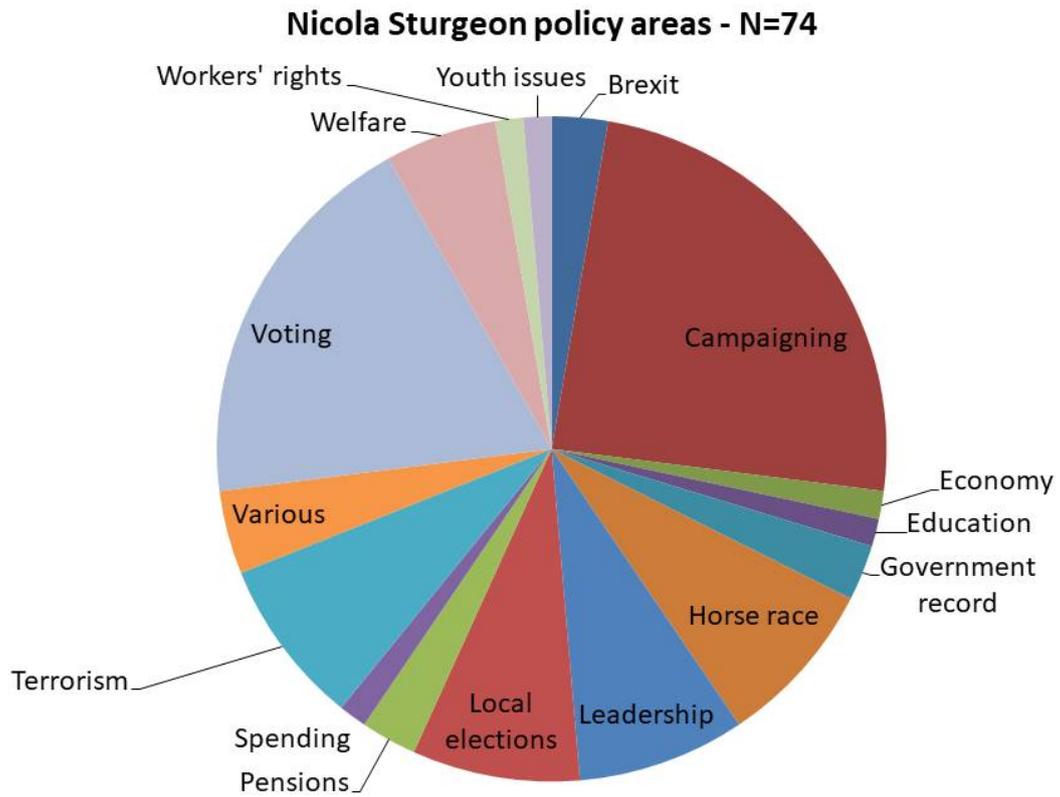


Figure 26 - SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon's Facebook posts by policy

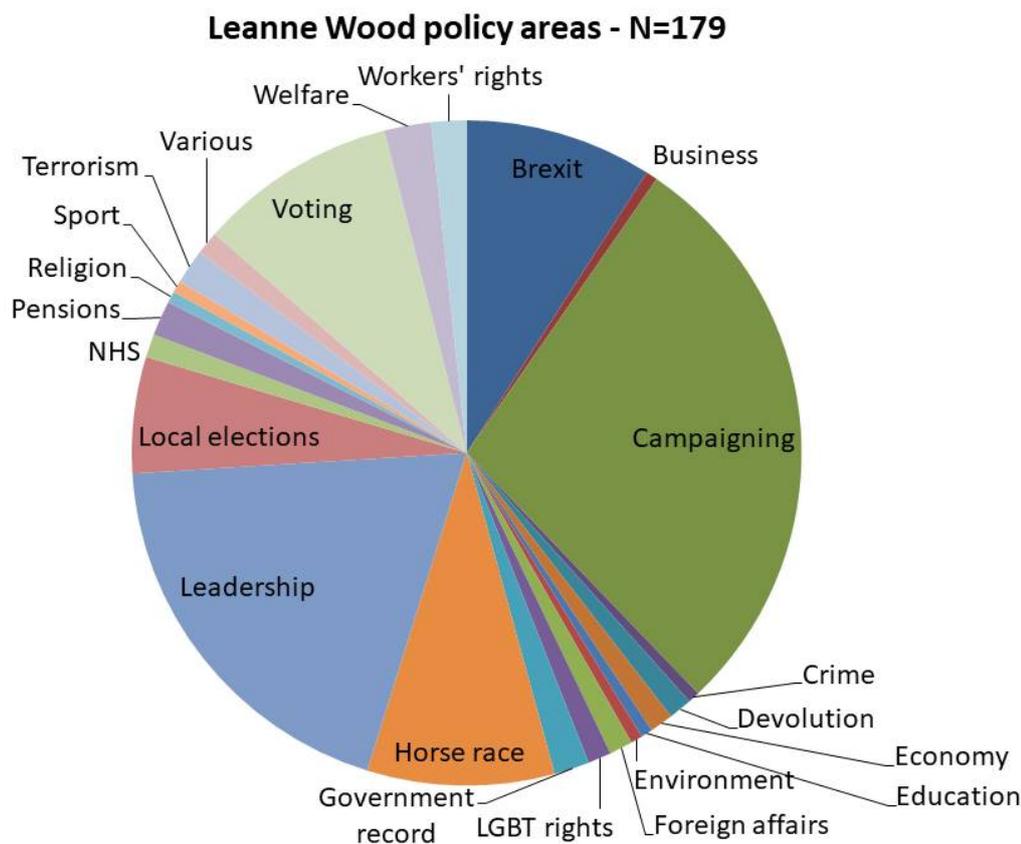


Figure 27 - Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood's Facebook posts by policy

### Use of video

While a significant proportion of the Conservatives' video content featured attack ads, Labour's tended to focus on the campaign and policies. Subsequent reporting has made it clear that Corbyn himself urged his team not to resort to negative campaigning (Stewart, 2017), although he was able to do this at least in part because other political actors were doing it for him.

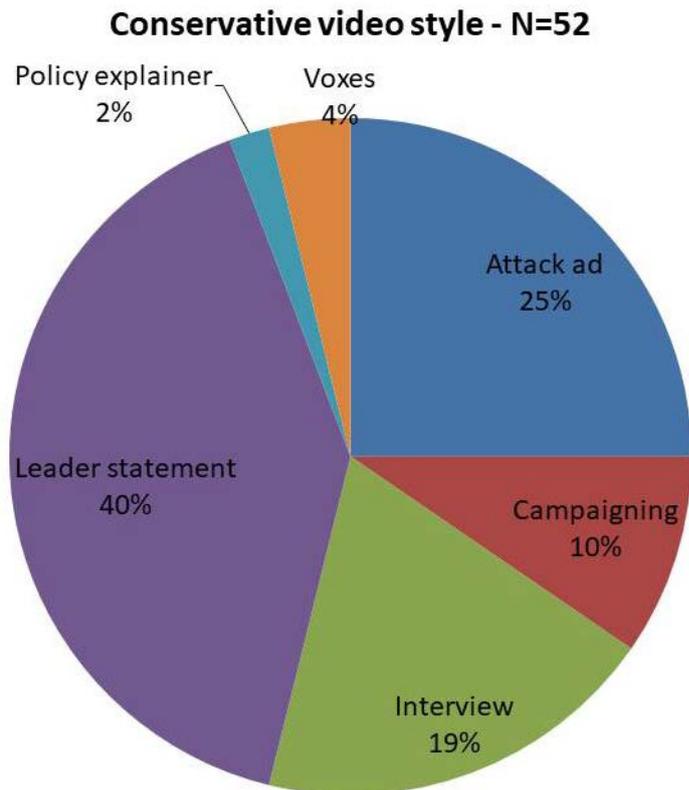


Figure 28 - Conservative Facebook posts by videos style

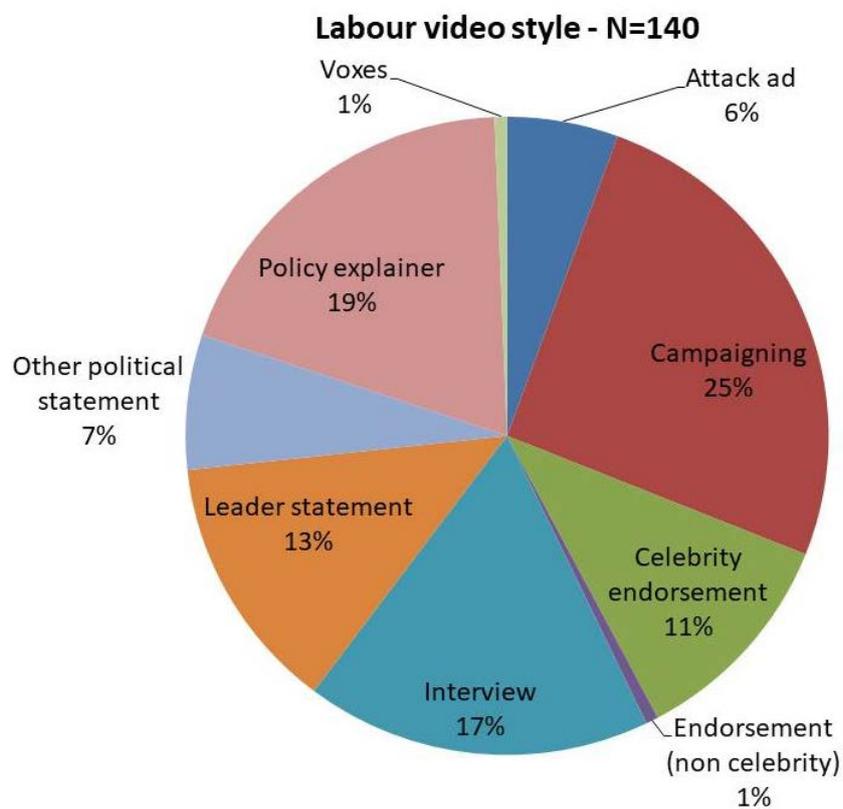


Figure 29 - Labour Facebook posts by video style

The videos proved to be highly effective. Viewing figures jumped enormously on the 2015 general election where a Labour party election broadcast, again featuring Steve Coogan, was the most popular video, watched 1.2 million times on Facebook (Walsh, 2016). This time there was significant increase in watching of videos by both Conservative and Labour. It should be noted that a view is recorded by Facebook after a user has consumed three seconds of video.

<b>Top 5 Facebook videos</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Party</b>	<b>Views (per million)</b>
1	Attack ad on Corbyn's record on national security	Conservative	7.9
2	Corbyn's question to May on ITV's Facebook live	Labour	4.6
3	10 reasons to vote Labour animation	Labour	4.4
4	Attack ad on May's record on national security	Labour	3
5	Attack ad on Abbott's record on national security	Conservative	2.9

Figure 30 - Most watched Facebook videos

It is notable that despite Jeremy Corbyn's intention to resist the black arts of negative campaigning, Labour's third most watched video was an attack ad on Theresa May's security record, both as Prime Minister and Home Secretary. With a dramatic background music track and a reprise of Police Federation complaints on the impact of cuts on policing, its tacit allegation is clear, that through unthinking, uncaring and unnecessary austerity measures Mrs May allowed the Manchester and London Bridge terror attacks to take place.

Labour's policy of maximising social engagement through organic mechanisms such as repeated posts delivered clear success in getting content shared and engaged with – News

Whip analytics suggest that in the month preceding the election, the average Jeremy Corbyn video had 23,081 reactions versus the average Theresa May's one with 11,842 (Concorran, 2017). However, organic sharing was not the only mechanism for driving users to content. Both Labour and the Conservatives spent a considerable amount of money on targeted advertising.

During the 2015 election, targeted advertising by the Conservatives in key marginal was credited as being a key factor in the success of the David Cameron's campaign (Ross, 2015). Using a data model developed by the former advisor to Barack Obama, Jim Messina, the Conservatives digital team were able to use Facebook to identify undecided voters and deliver them targeted messages based on their interests. According to the Electoral Commission, the Conservatives spent £1.21 million on Facebook advertising during the 2015 campaign, hugely surpassing Labour who spent just £16,454. Such was the perceived impact, both the Conservatives and Labour committed to significant digital advertising spend in 2017 with both parties reported to have spent in excess of a £1 million on digital advertising. The Labour party also developed its own internal tool, Promote, which matched social media accounts to voter interests to help it deliver more targeted advertising (Stewart, 2017). According to The Guardian newspaper, the party also spent £100,000 on Twitter adverts in a single day and another £100,000 on Snapchat with the intention of motivating younger people to vote. Facebook native digital tools were also developed, such as a nearest polling station finder and a chat app that directed users to relevant policies. These also had the added value of retaining user data for future contacts, indeed the chat app was reactivated with personalised messages for supporters at the start of the next party conference the following September.



Figure 31 - Targeted Facebook ad by Labour

Targeted advertising became a controversial issue in the campaign. The lack of media oversight was perceived by many to mean that the press was unable to perform its watchdog function of questioning false claims. The Observer's Carole Cadwalladr has done considerable research into the use of targeted advertising and data retention in recent elections and the Brexit referendum and her findings suggest that the area is operating without sufficient regulatory oversight. The issue is currently being considered by the Electoral Commission and, by early 2018, it is likely to make recommendations for future elections. However, work done by the campaign group Who Targets Me, appears to show that Labour was better at targeting defensive marginals than the Conservatives. The

Conservatives, until the last week of the campaign, were targeting seats that would see increases in Labour majorities, suggesting their data model wasn't flexible enough to respond to the changing circumstances of the campaign – or that Conservative Campaign Headquarters didn't believe the message its foot-soldiers were receiving on the doorsteps. (Wallace, 2017).

### **Other political actors**

There were two other significant factors that helped support the Labour campaign on Facebook and both were from political actors that sat outside the party's traditional structure.

The first was Momentum, the campaign group that had grown out of a youth focussed support group for Jeremy Corbyn's leadership bid. Having fought two leadership elections in two years, it had developed a strong sense of how to use social media, and in particular, video to deliver to its followers positive messages with viral attributes. Humour was a key tool, the emotional response adding to the shareable nature of the content (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013). With 24,000 activists across the country, it was able to mobilise support for Labour in previously hard to reach environments, for example southern cities with large student populations, such as Canterbury which returned its first ever Labour parliamentarian (Grierson, 2017). According to the Momentum activist, Adam Peggs, during the final week of the election, the group's Facebook videos were watched more than 23 million times by 12.7 million unique users (Peggs, 2017).

A significant part of this was due to the 'Dad, do you hate me?' film, which was watched around 7 million times in the final week of the campaign.

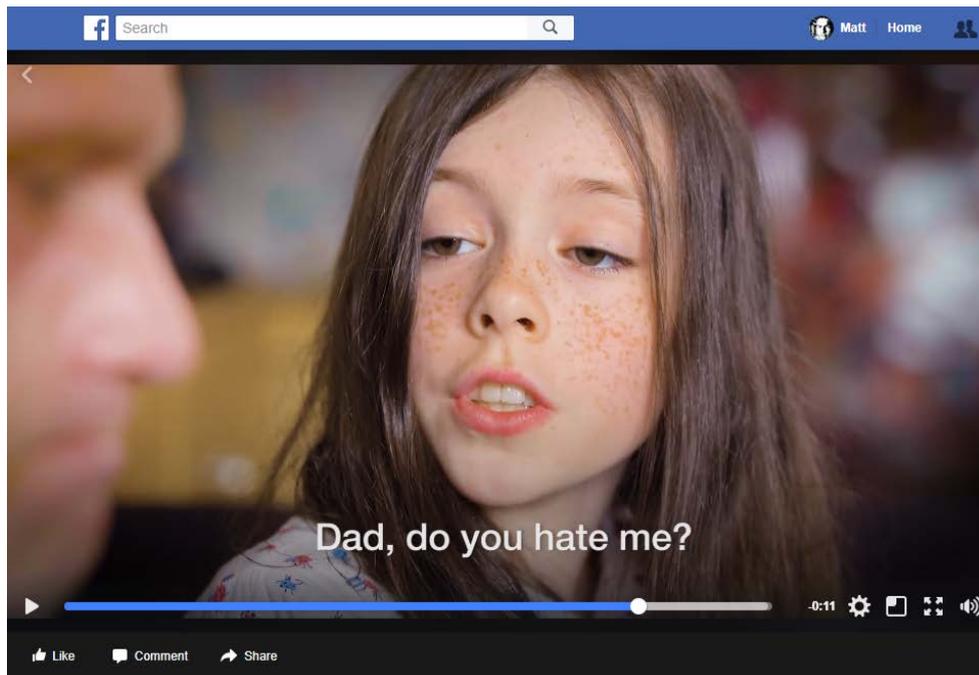


Figure 32 - Momentum viral video Tory Britain 2030

The film played on the inter-generational tensions the election had raised by suggesting a father in 2030 would have to tell his daughter about all the benefits he'd enjoyed as a young man, which would be denied to her because he had voted for Theresa May. Its impressive viral performance, which made it one of the most watched political films of the election by any political actor, suggests it struck a chord with its target audience.

Momentum also had significant social media impact in areas Labour needed to win, including Cardiff, Derby, Sheffield, Canterbury and Plymouth. In the final week of the election, the group says 42.2% of Facebook users in Canterbury viewed its videos, while in Sheffield Hallam, where the former Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg was unceremoniously ejected, the percentage was 55.9% (Peggs, 2017).

The other significant factor in Labour's success was the growth of hyperpartisan political blogs. Sites such as The Canary, Another Angry Voice and the London Economic presented a

relentlessly positive view of Jeremy Corbyn, an irredeemably damning view of his opponents, both outside and inside the party, and an intensely hostile view of the mainstream media. While partisan political blogging is not new, Guido Fawkes, Left Foot Forward and ConservativeHome have all been in existence since the New Labour years, the new hyperpartisan sites have achieved a level of success outside the wonkish circles of their forebears. As BuzzFeed’s UK Political Editor, Jim Waterson, has pointed out in a seminal article on the sites “The rise of the Alt-Left”, the use of graphics, clear and understandable writing and consistent tone often mirrors the tabloid press they hold in such contempt (Waterson, 2017).

In this era of Fake News though it is worth making the point that these sites, while biased, do not merely make up stories for financial gain. But there is a ferociousness to them that means that fairness to other points of view is not a defining characteristic. But the sites’ editors would argue that they’re fighting austerity cuts that are killing people in disasters such as the Grenfell tower fire and this means they’re justified in taking an aggressive tone.

What is clear is that these sites are having significant impact on Facebook audiences. In data analysed by the Press Gazette after the election, in measures connected to social sharing they outperformed some of their mainstream rivals.

#	Headline	Publication	Facebook shares
1	This Facebook comment about Jeremy Corbyn is going viral	thelondoneconomic.com	136,800
2	Green Party pulls out of crucial general election seat to help Labour beat Tories	independent.co.uk	75,600

3	Stop the Tories – Infogram, charts & infographics	infogr.am	68,900
4	If ever there was a time to vote Labour, it is now	theguardian.com	63,500
5	NHS workers have spoken. The general election is our only chance of saving the health service [TWEETS]	thecanary.co	61,900
6	Labour will scrap university tuition fees if they win general election	independent.co.uk	53,600
7	EU leader: UK would be welcomed back if voters overturn Brexit	theguardian.com	52,100
8	Can't be bothered to vote? If you're young, you simply can't afford not to	theguardian.com	52,000
9	UK hasn't done enough to tackle terrorism, says woman whose job it was to tackle terrorism	newsthump.com	48,800
10	Diane Abbott to replace Rachel Riley on Countdown	southendnewsnetwork.com	48,800

Figure 33 – Most shared news stories on Facebook. Source: Pressgazette/Buzzsumo

The most shared story, by some distance, was from The London Economic, a left wing blog set up to deliver pro-Corbyn news by journalists working at the news agency, South West News Service. SWNS, which has a financial stake in the blog, is a professional, rather than citizen journalist, operation, although writers on the London Economic are unpaid. It has seen considerable success with a pro-Corbyn agenda (Walker, 2017).

While there are some satirical articles here, from Newsthump and Southend News Network, the most shared articles tend to come from a left-wing perspective and be broadly supportive of Labour. Indeed, according to Press Gazette's Buzzsumo analysis, just five of the top 100 most shared stories during the election were explicitly pro-Conservative (Mayhew, 2017).

### **Electoral impact**

It was clear from the moment that the exit poll was published at 10pm on 8<sup>th</sup> of June, that Theresa May's electoral gamble had failed to pay off. An election she called to strengthen her hand had weakened it, almost certainly terminally, as she lost her majority. The final result saw her lose 13 seats, while Labour gained 32. Mrs May was still able to form a minority government propped up by Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party, but far from being the electoral liability some of his MPs feared, Jeremy Corbyn again proved himself to be a formidable campaigner. In opinion polls published since the election his party has been running neck and neck with the Conservatives.

An examination, by the pollsters YouGov, of voting behaviour by age demonstrates the split in the electorate. The Conservatives only outperform Labour with voters aged more than 50.

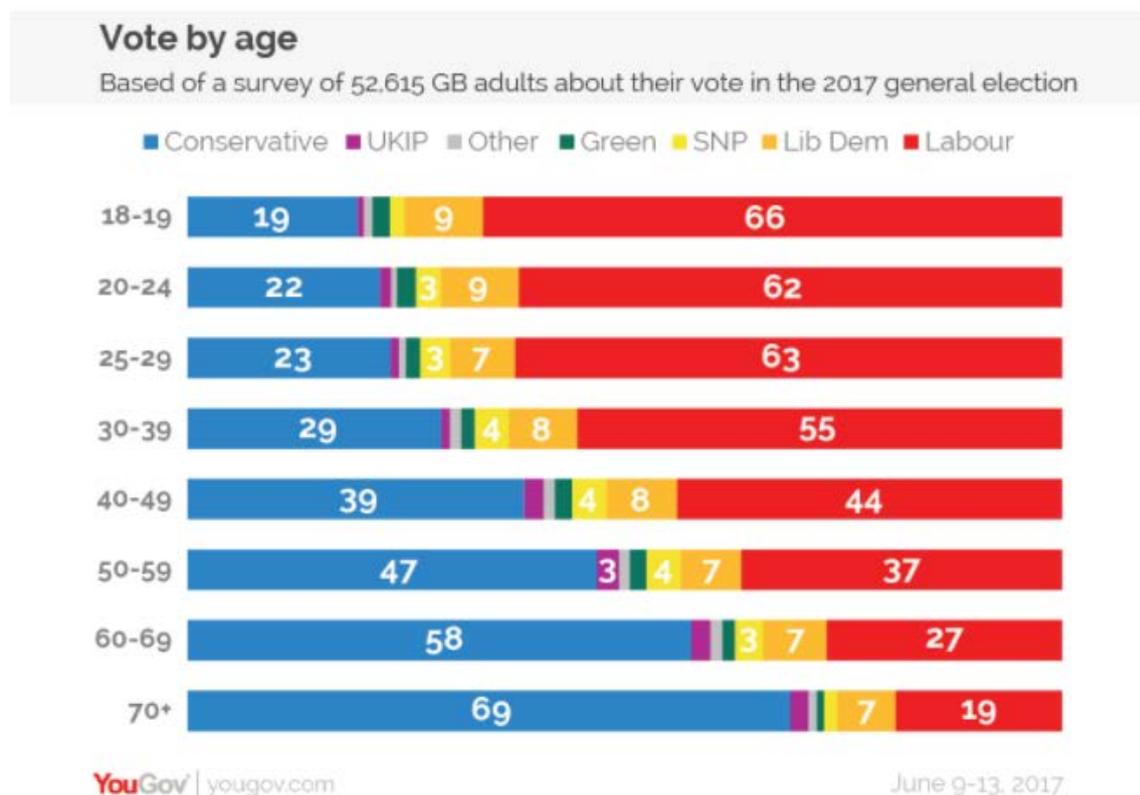


Figure 34 - vote split by age. Source: YouGov

Turnout was high at 69%, the highest since 1997, but lower than the 2016 European referendum when it reached 72%. There was considerable speculation in the immediate aftermath of the election about the size of the youth turnout, with some commentators attributing Labour’s success to a “Youthquake”. According to a survey carried out by the British Election Study and Ipsos Mori, youth turnout (those aged 18-24) was the only demographic to increase on the European Referendum with some 64% voting, up from 60% at the referendum and 43% at the 2015 election (Burn-Murdoch, 2017). This was clearly a substantial increase, but Labour’s message resonated further than Millennials.

The analysis of Facebook activity by the parties and other political actors leads me to draw a number of conclusions about its impact on the 2017 general election.

1. Labour outperformed other parties on Facebook. More content was produced by the party and its supporters, and it generated more engagement with Facebook users than its rivals.
2. Labour galvanised voters online and offline supported by radical media and activist groups. The Labour party's strategy of promoting Jeremy Corbyn and his policies successfully engaged voters, including youth voters who had not voted in a General Election in such large numbers since 1992. The party was able to successfully extend its message beyond Facebook into real world events, which could be filmed, transmitted live, and used to engage more people via social media. Corbyn's supporters in activist groups such as Momentum and the hyperpartisan media were able to successfully amplify these messages.
3. Labour was able to neutralise negative mainstream media coverage by speaking directly to voters. It is notable that Labour felt no need to share supportive messages in the mainstream media with its followers. By curating large communities of interest online and using these to promote real-world events, Labour was able to bypass a mediated and predominately hostile press.
4. Labour used Facebook to deliver positive, organic messages and tackle negative messaging. By concentrating on policy explanation and positive messaging about the political movement it was creating, press negativity about Corbyn was successfully neutralised. As the Conservatives struggled to explain complex policies to concerned voters on issues such as social care, Labour was able to cut the Gordian knot, with

simpler messages that addressed voter concerns, for example the abolition of student tuition fees.

5. Labour used paid ads effectively in marginals to target voters concerned by Conservative social care plans. Labour's targeting of ads seems to have been more effective than the Conservatives, in both defending its own marginal as well as target seats. Conservative over-confidence may have played a key role in the failure to adjust expectations as the campaign developed, particularly after the unsuccessful manifesto launch.
6. Those least likely to use social media were most likely to vote Conservative. Age was the key indicator of voting intention, as it is for likelihood to use social media.

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