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Local Campaign Management: Winning Votes or Wasting Resources?

Current debates within studies of election campaign management focus on the extent to which the process has evolved, becoming more centrally-orchestrated and professional, over the last two decades. The normative account is that election campaigns focus on news management and elevate the status of party leaders; mediated pseudo-events have replaced direct interaction with the voter. However marketing literature, as well as work on local campaigning, suggests an alternative model is more successful for electoral systems such as the UK. This promotes a more disparate set of individually tailored campaigns focusing on issues relevant to constituencies. In 2005 it seems that parties were promoting this more localised approach, however do voters value this more postmodern approach, or is it the national campaign that counts. Research among voters within three marginal constituencies finds that both national and local factors are influential upon voter behaviour; furthermore however, a not insignificant group of voters make their choice based on the service provision of their local representative.

Keywords: election, campaigning, constituency service, party politics

Introduction

Studies of developments in political campaigning over the last two decades note marked changes in the way that elections are managed. It appears now to be the normative view that campaigns are highly strategic and coordinated affairs under the control of small cadres at the top of party structures (Dylan and Griffiths 2001; Wring 2004). These campaign teams will rely heavily on the advice of consultants, often from the commercial sector, who will be embedded within the coordinating body (Plasser and Plasser 2002; Wring 1999); use extensive market intelligence to design the

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campaign (Acton and Lilleker 2004; Lees-Marshment 2001); seek to control the national media agenda in order to receive favourable publicity (Jones 1996; 2001a; 2001b; Sanders et al. 1999); and attempt to transmit their messages to key groups in society, those whose support the campaign team has identified will be crucial for the parties electoral success (Panebianco 1988; Gould 1997; Bannon 2003). These features are described as central to the third age of campaigning (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999) or the campaign of the postmodern era (Norris 2000) and feature in many of the debates surrounding the professionalisation of campaigning (Mair et al. 2004; Mancini 1999; Negrine and Lilleker 2003; Swanson and Mancini 1996) and the extent to which global trends match those synonymous with an American style of campaigning (Holtz-Bacha 2002; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos 1996; Mair et al. 2004).

Cutting across the discussion of the professionalisation and centralisation of campaign management in the UK is the argument that such developments can be counter productive (Lilleker and Negrine 2003; Negrine and Lilleker 2003) and that actually it is the strength and relevance of local campaigning that has the propensity to mobilise voters as well as having some role in persuading local electorates to support one candidate over another (Denver and Hands 1997; Denver et al. 2003; Johnston and Pattie 2003; Pattie and Johnston 2003). This is due to UK elections having two parallel components, a national campaign fought out between party leaders and a series of 646 local campaigns between local candidates and parties. While it is argued that the majority of voters focus purely on the national election, and who should be prime minister, the evidence suggesting that local campaigning has an effect (Denver and Hands 1997) and that sitting members of parliament can earn a personal vote (Cain et al. 1987) counters this normative view of voter behaviour. This research disentangles these two influences on voting behaviour, the local and national, seeking to explain the extent to which local campaigns and the candidates matter to individuals when making their choice at the ballot box. Following a discussion of the evidence surrounding the importance of local factors on voting, the paper will offer an introduction to the party strategies nationally and in the following section contrast that with an analysis of the local campaigns within three marginal seats in Dorset UK, each held by one of the major three UK political parties contending the 2005 General Election. The final section will assess what effect the local campaign had and whether local activity is effective in mobilising and persuading voters or if it is simply a waste of time and resources.

All Politics is Local? The Localisation of Campaigning

It is difficult to contest the accuracy of claims that campaigning has become

centralised and a more professional affair. It is possible to contest what is meant by the term professional (Lilleker and Negrine 2002), but not that campaigning has changed fundamentally in a number of important ways. Any text covering the future of marketing communications, which is not largely dissimilar from political campaign communications, tells of key challenges that force campaign professionals to rethink their behaviour. In no particular order of importance or their temporal arrival these are the fragmentation and increasing assertiveness of the consumer in a commercial as well as a political context; the fragmentation of media and rise of new technological communication challenges; and the increasing globalisation and localisation of culture and identity. These trends mean that consumers and voters are becoming harder to reach but even harder to mobilise and persuade; messages need to be carefully constructed, innovative and targeted at individual's real identities, as opposed to mass marketing to perceived homogenous groups. Debates surrounding these issues are prevalent in modern marketing and management literature (for example see Gabriel and Lang 1999), politics remains some way behind yet faces similar challenges and questions (Lees-Marshment and Lilleker 2005). Yet central to marketing theory is the concept of targeting the individual not the mass, suggesting a localisation of campaigning in a political context.

Marketing informs us that consumers like to be treated as being postmodern, they like their own identity to be reinforced, which may well relate to their perceived community. They like to be communicated 'with' rather than 'to' in a way that means their individuality is recognised and their issues addressed (Jackson and Lilleker 2004); this can also mean that they desire communication relevant to their 'community', be that defined in terms of race, gender, geography, age or whatever is deemed an important point of personal reference by the individual. Equally the consumer desires communication about the issues that concern them and tend not to process that which is irrelevant. Politics, despite narrowcasting tailored messages, largely employs the mass communication of catch-all and often bland promises despite evidence suggesting that the opposite is a more successful means for interaction. However in the lead up to the General Election of 2005, parties were suggesting a more individualistic and tailored form of communication centring on the local and not the national. This did not mean an abandonment of national campaigning, but that local activities would not necessarily be intrinsically dependent on their national counterpart.

Developing from a study of campaigning at the local level, Lilleker and Negrine (2003) argued that candidates themselves felt they were better placed to design and administer their campaign than those at party headquarters. Many posited that the 'one size fits all' or Mandelsonian model of campaigning, named after New Labour strategist and MP Peter

Mandelson (Bartle and Griffiths 2001), featuring strict news management and rapid rebuttal of opponent attacks, turns off the voters. Furthermore the central offices' rigid control over political communication means that a candidate cannot develop a personalised and locally relevant campaign.

It was argued that UK voters did not like it when candidates or their representatives met them but only reproduced the party mantra, like 'speak your weight machines', rather than tailoring messages to the locality or the individual (Lilleker and Negrine 2003). The arguments of candidates at the 2001 General Election, who felt constrained by their constituency parties or the national strategy, argued they were unable to produce an effective campaign that would be relevant to the people they were offering to represent. Party strategies such as 'policy days', when each constituency party held an event highlighting one area of the manifesto as part of a news management strategy, were claimed to be popular with journalists but fell flat among voters. Voters desire to engage with the candidates, but on their terms and about the policies important to them, it was claimed. These opinions appear to be reinforced by the findings of the British Election Survey which argued the importance of salience in terms of messages being received, processed and accepted (Clarke et al. 2004).

The centralisation of campaigning is perhaps appropriate for political systems where there is little link between voting and local representation. Under proportional representation votes are cast solely to gain representation within national political legislatures. However in the UK the vote is cast primarily for a local representative. This does not mean that the representative is selected for any other reason than the party they stand on behalf of, but there is a sense that the strength of the local campaign as well as the relevance of messages is of importance to local voters (Denver and Hands 1997). Equally, due to the zero-sum nature of UK elections, supporters of one party may be unable to influence the outcome of the election if they cast it for that party; this is because that party has insufficient support within the voting region to have any chance of winning. Parties thus try to gather the support of these voters, as well as the 'undecideds', through local campaigning. This means that centralisation can be argued to be anathema to the context of UK elections; however it was argued by candidates who stood in 1997 and 2001 that that process was occurring and prevented them from offering themselves as constituency representatives.

The demands of the post-modern voter and the peculiarity of the UK electoral context produces a high degree of regional and local disparity in terms of support for parties and the marginality of the local contests. Thus as Tim Hames wrote in *The Times* "The pattern in particular seats varies much more randomly and starkly so that to speak of a national swing is no longer really accurate" (2005, p. 60; see also Baines and Mortimore 2005). Hames

describes the situation where Labour can safely win in their most marginal seat, Dorset South, while losing a swathe of numerically safe seats such as Enfield Southgate to the Conservatives. The Liberal Democrats are returned in some areas with increased majorities, can beat Labour in heartland constituencies like Manchester Withington (where a Labour majority of 11,524 votes was swept away), but still cannot hold off the Conservatives in Guildford. This suggests that there is much to play for at the local level and thus local campaign management is a highly important component of modern campaigning, something that campaign strategists appear to be alert to.

Suggestions of a shift away from centralisation were first aired at a panel at the Elections, Parties and Opinion Polls Conference held in September 2004. Labour's Head of Political Strategy Greg Cook and his then Conservative counterpart Dominic Schofield both argued that the campaign must be focused more at the local level, there were even hints of some degree of separation between the two levels of campaigning. David Evans, former assistant general secretary of the Labour party speaking at a Conference in February 2005, argued the party had become out of touch with the communities it represented; partially talking of Labour loyalists but also hinting at making the campaign relevant. Such comments were reinforced by Will Harris, Conservative Director of Marketing 2003-4, speaking at the same event. He argued that politics must be bottom up and that campaigning must reflect that. Tony Blair himself, speaking at a briefing at Labour's headquarters in February 2005, instructed candidates that face-to-face contact with the voters would be vital to "inspire, enthuse and engage and give the public a sense of empowerment" (BBC News www.bbc.co.uk/news/1/hi/uk_politics/4272741.stm accessed 17 February 2005). Such comments set the scene for a sea change in campaigning at the 2005 General Election, this paper seeks to identify to what extent this change materialised and to what effect.

Methodology

Campaigns took place in 646 constituencies, however their intensity was governed by the marginality of the contest locally. In the marginal seats campaigns receive significantly higher resources and it would be expected, as a result of the resource input, central control would be tighter. Three campaigns were examined, those of the incumbents in three marginal seats: Dorset Mid, Dorset West and Dorset South, each one held by one of the three major parties: the Liberal Democrats, Conservatives and Labour respectively. Dorset Mid was held by backbench Liberal Democrat MP Annette Brooke with a majority of 384 votes. Brooke defeated the Conservative incumbent Christopher Fraser in 2001, the first time that this seat, divided as it is

between urban conurbation and rural Dorset, private and social housing, had elected a non-Conservative representative. Brooke as a former mayor of Poole and local school governor capitalises on her local identity and her track record as an active, hard working politician. It was these qualities that her 2005 Conservative opponent, Simon Hayes, tried to undermine; attempting to sell himself as a local man despite having moved to the constituency just prior to the campaign. His campaign was largely negative, attacking the Liberal Democrats policies on sentencing criminals, Europe and immigration.

Dorset West is the seat of Conservative Shadow Chancellor Oliver Letwin, a staunchly Conservative seat, constituting mainly rural areas that grace many postcards. However Letwin has seen an increasingly strong challenge from the Liberal Democrats, who have taken control of Dorchester town council and reduced his parliamentary majority to just 1,414 in 2001. Letwin was clearly a target in the Liberal Democrats' well publicised decapitation strategy, an attempt to assert themselves as 'the real opposition' by defeating key members of the Conservative shadow cabinet. His opponent, Liberal Democrat Justine McGuinness, had earned a high profile in Dorchester town and had presented herself at all times as a viable alternative MP since her acceptance of the candidature in 2003. Thus the fight between the two main combatants was on their ability to represent the area and party politics was largely eschewed.

Dorset South was Labour's most marginal seat. The MP, backbencher Jim Knight, defeated Conservative Ian Bruce at his second attempt in 2001 by 153 votes. The swing some attribute to the loss of jobs at the naval base, which Bruce failed to defend, though the closures were the result of Labour government policy. The seat contains affluent rural areas, but the majority of voters live in the towns of Swanage and Weymouth which demographically fit an Old Labour profile. While the seat was expected to fall, given the polls showing a swing from Labour to Conservatives, Labour leader and prime minister Tony Blair gave Knight the ultimate boost of appearing in the constituency on the day of the election being called; an appearance that launched the contest in the local paper the Daily Echo. Perhaps of most benefit to the Knight campaign, however, was the 'accident prone' campaign of his rival: Conservative Ed Matts. His doctoring of photos supporting a family seeking asylum and further inaccurate claims led him to make three public apologies to the voters, to Olympic gold medallists he had used on campaign literature without permission, and to Knight himself; thus his reputation became tarnished locally.

The rationale for choosing these seats is that within marginal seats campaigns are of a far higher intensity than elsewhere, they enjoy far higher resourcing from the national parties; equally they would be expected to come under greater control than seats that are considered safe. This would mean

that the campaign management should evidence aspects of the professionalised model, and that due to the intensity the effects upon voter behaviour should be clearer. In terms of interest and convenience, they are also three of the most marginal seats of the major parties in close proximity, so aiding contact with the campaign teams locally and observation of the strategy as it unfolded. Furthermore, and perhaps against the odds, all three campaigns were successful with the incumbents being returned with higher majorities. A key question is to what extent incumbency played a role.

Throughout the campaign each office was visited in order to gain a feel for the campaign, its organisation and the strategy locally. Face-to-face interviews with party strategists and the candidates took place after the election², allowing the opportunity to reflect on the strategy, the successes and failures and to provide a view of how the campaign fitted with the professional model. There was also contact with representatives of the party's national strategy teams via email and telephone to gain further information about campaign strategy generally.³ In order to assess the effectiveness of the campaigns, questionnaires were posted to 3,000 voters chosen randomly from a sample of demographically-identified key voter groups; the response rate was 32%, a total of 966. A breakdown of the sample is provided in Table 1. The questionnaires were also used to recruit volunteers for focus groups. Two in each constituency were held during June 2005 to gain some qualitative insights into voter opinions of campaigning and its influence over their decision making.

The respondents were, obviously self-selecting, and the focus group participants were volunteers. While the latter cannot be viewed as reliable above offering these voters' personal insights into the campaign, the questionnaire respondents match the overall demographics of the constituency within acceptable levels and the data suggests that, while it is interesting, these respondents are not necessarily unusual in any specific way and their opinions and influences should map on to the ordinary voter within other marginal seats within the UK.

² Interviews were conducted with Annette Brooke MP, Lin Hudswell (Brooke's Campaign Manager) and David Budd (Councillor and Leader of Dorset Liberal Democrats); Antony Stanley (Letwin's Campaign Agent) and Stephen Frey (Dorset West Constituency Association); and Jim Knight MP, Kay Wilcox (Knight's Campaign Agent) and Gareth Thomas (Chair of Dorset South Constituency Labour Party).

³ Informal discussions and more formal interviews were carried out with representatives of all three national party's strategy teams, due to participants requests these are anonymised.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

	Vote 2001 %		Vote 2005 %		Age % *		Gender % **	
	Sample	Actual†	Sample	Actual†	Sample	Actual	Sample	Actual
Dorset	Con 35	41.1	Con 35	36.6	18-30 25	25	M 50	48
Mid and Poole	Lab 12	15.5	Lab 10	11.6	31-50 33	32	F 50	52
	LD 39	42.0	LD 49	48.7	50+ 42	42		
North	Other 3	1.4	Other 3	3.1				
	None 9		None 3					
N = 276								
Dorset	Con 32	41.6	Con 37	37.9	18-30 36	25	M 45	46
South	Lab 44	42.0	Lab 41	41.6	31-50 32	31	F 55	54
	LD 13	14.4	LD 17	15.7	50+ 32	44		
N = 336	Other 3	2.0	Other 3	4.8				
	None 13		None 2					
Dorset	Con 35	44.6	Con 42	46.5	18-30 34	28	M 45	44
West	Lab 21	13.6	Lab 10	7.8	31-50 30	36	F 55	56
	LD 42	41.8	LD 42	41.9	50+ 36	40		
N = 339	Other 3		Other 4	3.8				
	None 9		None 2					

N = 966

* Derived from local council data

** Derived from Census 2001: Report for Parliamentary Constituencies, The Stationery Office 2002.

† 100% of actual voters only, non-voters cannot be factored in.

Party Strategies: The Centralised Campaign

Few commentators or pollsters would have predicted Labour losing the 2005 General Election, the safe bet was that the party would be returned to power with a reduced majority. Yet, as soon as journalists saw an election on the horizon, the closeness of the result was being talked up. Any shift in the polls towards the Conservatives was exaggerated, despite their endemic margin of error, and this seemed to dominate the two major party's strategy. From the very beginning Labour appeared to be afraid that the Conservatives could pull off a victory, thus their strategy was to get out their vote. Alongside the daily media-led pseudo events, often enforcing the image of unity between Blair and Brown, the party used ten separate paid-for mailouts to convince voters of the achievements of Labour since 1997, that the leadership recognised there was 'more work to do' and that they were the best choice for government. Letters from Brown talked up Tony Blair, encouraging the public to trust him, while a less formal letter from Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott detailed the dangers of not registering a vote for the government and 'waking up with Michael Howard'. The letters were targeted chiefly at Labour supporters disillusioned with Blair in the aftermath of the Iraq war and subsequent Hutton Inquiry, but who were

unlikely to vote for Howard and so could either vote for a minority party that had little chance of winning or abstain from voting altogether. The voters targeted were chosen using state of the art direct marketing Experian mosaic software that employs demographics to calculate consumer and now voter behaviour. The party's plans were set out in *Forward, Not Back*, the manifesto which reinforced the perception of a party having achieved much of their programme in the previous terms but equally determined to be proactive in their third term of office.

Labour's nervousness has been attributed to the Conservative's attack strategy that began in advance of the election being called (Smith 2005). The Conservatives offered themselves as a party listening to the public using six statements that were expressions of important issues. These were cemented together with the slogan 'Are you thinking what we're thinking?'. However the Conservative campaign was one of the most negative the UK has seen, while all three parties displayed a flair for going negative, and between March 21 and April 1 over 75% of all party's press releases contained negative messages (see www.cx-i/online_politics/negative_campaigning), the Conservatives appeared to lead more often on a negative argument. This is the nature of oppositional politics, and of being in opposition; however attacks on Labour's record, as well as on Liberal Democrat policies were sent out within constituencies that pitted Conservatives against one of the others in a close fight. These messages were targeted using Voter Vault which, similar to Experian Mosaic, works on the principle that "if you know what people's social characteristics are, it is not difficult to identify how they will vote" (Conservative leader Michael Howard quoted in Watt and Borger 2005). Beyond this the party was occupied in a high level media war with Labour to get the upper hand on a range of issues, predominantly plans for state welfare provision, and its funding, immigration and the issue of trust. The Conservatives were keen to undermine public confidence in Blair and repeatedly called him a liar in leaflets, broadcasts and statements.

The least negative party are usually the Liberal Democrats; however they were equally keen to attack the record of Blair, particularly over the Iraq War. However their communication largely accentuated their reform of the tax system, particularly the replacement of Council Tax with a Local Income Tax, and the scrapping of tuition fees for university students. Unlike the Conservatives, the record will show that their economic proposals did add up and were independently verified; however there were several questions regarding who would be worse off and by how much. Liberal Democrat campaigns tend, however, to be more localised affairs; Kennedy was in the spotlight throughout, partly due to him becoming a father within the first week of the campaign, but largely their campaigns were local rather than national, though greater uniformity has been called for by the centre (Lees-

Marshment and Lilleker 2005). In terms of direct mail, they deluged the constituencies they were targeting, employing direct 'hand written' letters from the candidate and promoting the record of the party locally as well as leading on issues of relevance to a particular constituency: scrapping of student fees in Cardiff Central, Council Tax reform among the older population of Corfe Mullen and Broadstone in Dorset Mid.

While the above details the parties' national strategies and messages, the level of roll out to the local constituencies was less transparent. The party strategists argued that candidates would be expected to both 'reflect the national message', while also 'showing they were part of the community'. The Conservatives particularly promoted using direct mail to highlight party policy on local issues. However it appeared that the parties were happy for the local political organisation to take the lead in the campaign more than they had in the past, with the exception of the Liberal Democrats who were more ambiguously talking about both centralisation and localisation without any clear elucidation of how these might fit together. This indicates that the national campaign is largely transparent and recorded within the media; it is at the local level that the story may be more interesting.

A Home Grown Campaign: A View from the Local Parties

The reflections on the use of resources showed that UK parties are aware of the criticisms of centralisation and have taken them seriously. Labour nationally, the architects of the Mandelsonian model, argue that only those candidates that are lazy will rely simply on the templates they supply: yet they supply rafts of such material. Jim Knight, Labour incumbent in Dorset South, observed that as a marginal seat he was given access to 'an enormous amount of resources... not all of it we used... and not all of it we wanted'. However his campaign locally was run in the way Knight wanted and it was he, along with his tight-knit team, led by Knight and his agent Kay Wilcox, who were in control of strategy; a claim of independence made by all three of the local campaign teams. None saw their strategy as running counter to central office, and would not have wished to do so, however believed they were better placed to know what style of campaign and which messages would be most appropriate for success in the constituency in which they were standing.

The Knight team argued that at times central office interventions could be problematic. For example visits by Cabinet members were not always useful. On a practical level they caused local resources to be diverted in order to collect the visitor and then lead them to the 'event', often this involved high security and it was the team that had to find locations for helicopters to land, plan routes and organise a photo opportunity. While unspoken, the Labour

team hinted that such efforts were not worth the benefits. One reason for this is the perceived negative connotations that some cabinet ministers have. While Knight explains his reasons for supporting the Iraq War on his website (www.jimknightmp.co.uk), was Blair's visit reinforcing Knight's link to a prime minister branded a liar a useful public relations event, given the local campaign was to elect 'Just Jim' a good local representative; the team hinted such attachments were not always useful. The Conservatives had far fewer visits, and could not comment on the reason but stated they were 'very useful'; the Liberal Democrats in Dorset Mid were visited by Kennedy, Baroness Williams, and a number of high profile party members not known to the wider public. An in-house video capturing the high points of the Brooke campaign records that though visits were useful to gain media attention, largely they provided morale boosts for campaign volunteers.

For the two major parties, however, the key problem was that two campaigns were running parallel, and at times counter, to one another. The national campaign within Dorset South involved a lot of direct mail, ten individual pieces, which was then backed up with phone calls from the call centre in Tyneside. The fear within the Knight team was that the national campaign within Dorset South would annoy voters and put them off; his campaign was very personal and focused on local achievements that linked to government policy. Knight and his team argued that the highly personalised and locally focused campaign was the best for the constituency. Hence all communication placed him centre-stage as the product, and often simply as 'Jim', as opposed to Jim Knight MP: as per the slogan 'If you value him, vote for Jim'. Leaflets and his DVD promoted personal campaigns, for example him spearheading a road safety scheme that earned him the title Road Safety Parliamentarian of the Year. Knight also repeatedly reminded Dorset South voters that he had dealt with 5,953 constituent cases since his election in 2001. He argued that his high degree of activism had built him a profile locally meaning he had a relationship with his electorate; hence the product was 'Just Jim'. Knight argued he had 'earned the permission to contact them'. He recognised the public's general dissatisfaction with junk mail and cold-calling, based probably on his past career as a salesman for Yellow Pages, so saw lesser value in the party direct communication strategy. Due to his service provision he felt that voters would be more interested in mail from him, someone they knew, than an anonymous party machine.

The Conservatives in Dorset West hinted that they faced a similar situation, but were less concerned about inconsistencies between national and local messages. They found the centrally produced attacks against their opponents, the Liberal Democrats, highly useful; though they were also more focused on selling their incumbent Oliver Letwin as the local representative and attempted to steer the campaign away from overt negativity. The

problem here is that the party uses its free direct mail to each voter to send the messages set out by the central office strategy teams. Locally the message is set by the candidate and their team, the fear was that voters received conflicting messages which are perceived to be from the same source. Indeed, the lack of synergy between the parallel campaigns was argued by some voters to be confusing. One voter noted "I was coming to like the MP then I got this stuff on immigration through the door, that reminded me why I couldn't vote for [Letwin]" (Focus Group, Dorset West, 27/06/05). This is something that Knight was also aware of and concerned about, though there was no evidence that Labour central office flyers or phone calls had turned any voters away from his campaign.

The Conservative and Liberal Democrat both received daily bulletins, in the Conservatives case sent out by Lynton Crosby. Dorset West agent Antony Stanley argued these were useful and some could be cut and pasted into a leaflet, but largely they were irrelevant to the kind of campaign that, he in consultation with Letwin, deemed appropriate. Letwin was happy to lay out the party pledges, however the majority of his communication focused on personal achievements over the last twelve months as well as his personal pledge to the constituency. The last paragraph of his 'handwritten letter', distributed during the last week of the campaign among weak Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters read: 'For the last eight years, I have tried to do a conscientious job as your MP. I hope you feel that I have done the job properly. I hope you will give me a chance to continue that work...'. The note does refer to the election of a 'government that takes action to serve and support the hardworking majority that has too often been forgotten by Mr Blair'; yet the party is not named and the focus is predominantly Letwin. High visibility was also key, as one senior Conservative advisor noted with annoyance given Letwin was needed to be publicly defending Conservative economic proposals. Letwin ensured he was seen throughout the large constituency throughout the campaign, including trying to penetrate the Liberal Democrat stronghold of Dorchester. Visibility was not targeted to key groups in geographic areas, but designed to reach the majority of voters independent of potential voting behaviour.

Dorset Mid's Liberal Democrat incumbent largely agreed with this strategy. Brooke's was another campaign that was locally focused and references to party policy were secondary to the promotion of Brooke as a hard working, local MP. Though the Liberal Democrats attacked and counter attacked the Conservative's policies and communication, and promoted many of the party's key policy themes, the key message was that Brooke was a local person working for the community. This is encapsulated in a sentence from her letter to potential Labour voters: 'please remember my fight is not against other parties - it is for our area and everyone who lives here'. Glossy

leaflets showed her to be highly active within parliament and the constituency enforcing the message of an active representative, the link to the party was only made when arguing that as the Liberal Democrats increase their number of seats, as was expected, then Brooke herself would have 'an even stronger voice in Parliament to effect the change you want'.

Appropriateness was determined through market intelligence, though not of the nature described in campaign texts. Though the national messages may well be simple heuristics created from qualitative research carried out by the party strategists, locally it appears that knowledge 'from the streets' is of more use. This meant talking to voters in surgeries, at meetings and on the doorsteps, discovering what issues affected them and their community. For some Dorset Mid voters, for example, it was council tax reform that was a key issue, a central plank of Liberal Democrat policy; similarly some Dorset West voters wanted to talk of the problems of immigration and the cleanliness of hospitals, all key Conservative manifesto issues; but across the three constituencies there were also post office closures, public transport problems and a range of non-party political issues that candidates were expected to respond on. These micro political issues were often highlighted in communication, Letwin's campaign for a flood warden at Bridport's West Bay, Knight's road safety campaign and Brooke's victory to gain funding for a school in the rural area of Lytchett Minster are all examples. All the candidates argued that the national messages were useful in synthesising the core reasons for voting for the party, and stated that they had resonance.

Table 2. Messages in Candidate's Communication
(All presented as a percentage of overall content)

	Annette Brooke	Oliver Letwin	Jim Knight
Local Campaign (no connection to party policy)	11%	19%	16%
Personal Qualities and Background	17%	21%	20%
Personal political achievements	32%	31%	32%
Party Policy (manifesto)	19%	22%	14%
Party Leader (picture or reference)	1%	1%	0%
Attack on opponent	7%	6%	5%
Tactical Voting Message	13%	0%	13%

Locally, however, the messages had to focus more on the qualities of the individual candidate and their record for dealing with the day-to-day issues that voters raised.

The candidates' communication, for Brooke and Letwin a combination of leaflets and a letter, in Knight's case leaflets and a DVD, all accentuated the same features; these are shown in Table 2. What is striking is the lack of reference to the party leader and de-prioritisation of party policy. All had an element of negativity, Brooke and Letwin against a party; Knight being more personal, reporting that the Sunday Times, 17 April, had named Matts 'Twit of the Week'. However the key message is not which party the candidates represent, as would perhaps be expected, but the candidates' personal qualities and representative activities over their period as MP.

This highlights the importance of permanent campaigning, firstly in order to have achievements to promote. Also, however, to promote an incumbent's work using direct communication via regular newsletters which then prepare the voters for the more intense election campaign communication and provide what Knight described as permission to make contact. Candidates then expect to gain a warmer reception at public meetings, on the door-steps and during high visibility activities that exposed voters to the candidate. These activities are backed up by sustained locally focused leafleting, all of which were the dominant communication tools in these marginal seats. Backed by the resources of the Labour government, Knight also provided a DVD that focused exclusively on him 'the product' and the local causes he had promoted. This was circulated to Labour voters within the constituency as part of the get out the vote strategy. The campaign teams all agreed that an incumbent must promote a strong record, built through permanent campaigning, as this provides the candidate credibility; they will be trusted to defend the local post office, therefore voters will bring them their concerns as a matter of course; though one candidate commented that the list of causes could 'spiral out of control'.

The strategy detailed by local campaign teams contrasts with the national focus on the media; as one candidate argued 'people read the bits in the newspapers they are interested in, but they will engage with someone on the doorstep on their terms'; in other words a door step or street meeting allows the candidate to both collect information and promote themselves, a combination of which gains the permission to contact the voter that national politics is unable to earn.

The type of campaign communication, as well as the core message of each of these campaigns, negated the narrowcasting of simple messages, such as messages on health care to those who have registered an interest or fit a demographic. Instead communication was targeted as widely as possible by the local campaigners, the aim being to get the widest coverage of the constituency that was possible. There was a greater focus on core voters to some extent, particular areas where support and turnout was high; these were targeted specifically by Liberal Democrats in Dorset Mid and West with

'Good Morning' leaflets, delivered between 6-8am on election day to remind people to vote and how important each vote was. But few argued that the Voter Vault and Experian data, which provided a profile of constituents and calculated their propensity to support the party, had much practical utility locally. Canvassers were provided with sheets of voters scaled 1-9 by Conservatives, or in Labour's case in order of probable voting behaviour, however few at the local level believed the data was wholly accurate. As Conservative strategist Antony Stanley observed, "voting is no longer determined by class... the only thing we can count on is that the working families, in small houses with white vans in the driveway are more socially conservative and are coming our way". While appearing to defend the model of class-based voting, the point Stanley was making was that these people are not necessarily identified purely by their postcodes, and that the marketing software creates group identities that do not exist in reality; this point was made also by Prof Paul Whiteley commenting on the use of Experian (Mathieson 2005).

Stanley argued that voter attitudes are mainly learned on the street. Profiling failed to differentiate between Conservatives and UKIP supporters; neither could it find disillusioned Labour voters. Software packages also had problems identifying waverers and so the strategy remained to canvass widely in order to avoid wasting resources later. More fundamentally, the promotion of the incumbent as hard working was universally regarded as a message every constituent should be exposed to. The national party campaigns did use these packages to target individual voters in the marginals, however on the ground the message to every voter highlighted the record of the incumbent, only on the doorsteps were messages tailored as discussion was drawn onto topics relevant to the voter being visited. This is the method of communication traditionally employed by Liberal Democrats, voters are contacted on the doorsteps, their allegiance and its strength recorded, but also the issues that concern them are noted. This allows for a more personalised mode of direct communication from the local party; only two pieces of direct mail came from central office, both of which were from Charles Kennedy simply detailing party policy.

To summarise, interviews with the members of local campaign teams, and observation of the campaign, seem to suggest a rejection of the Mandelsonian, centralised, model of campaign management. While the national party campaign follows this format; across the 646 constituencies, and particularly in the marginal seats where the battle is toughest, the campaign strategists discuss professionalism in terms of appropriateness, which prioritises a different set of benchmarks. The first and most important is that the campaign is one that local voters will respond to, this means designing constituency specific campaign messages and styles; increasingly it

seems that this builds upon a successful, permanent campaign and the record of the incumbent. Even challengers are argued to have to become constituency servants, provided they are selected early enough, in order to have a record; something that was of great importance to the campaign of Justine McGuinness the Liberal Democrat in Dorset West. Secondly, communication is highly interpersonal; whether it is face-to-face or using direct mail the message will be locally focused and will promote the service-orientation of the candidate within the constituency. This is argued to be the way to win, and given that all three retained their seats it would seem to be proven, however, neither party evidence nor academic study can offer real insights into whether such a strategy cuts any ice with the voters.

A further important factor within the marginal constituencies, that the parties shrugged off but which gained a high level of media attention, is tactical voting. All the parties involved highlighted who the main combatants were and encouraged voters to focus on the straight choice; in Dorset Mid and West this was Conservative or Liberal Democrat, in Dorset South Conservative or Labour. The Liberal Democrats and Labour were happy to admit that their candidates in seats where they had little chance were encouraged not to campaign. Dorset West Labour candidate Dave Roberts was active in Jim Knight's campaign in the constituency next-door throughout and little was heard from Labour's Philip Murray in Dorset Mid. Only Graham Oakes the Liberal Democrat in Dorset South put up a fight. To aid the victory of non-Conservative candidates www.votedorset.net was created, a site dedicated to encourage vote swapping. This non party tactical voting campaign was spearheaded by former Labour activist and pop star Billy Bragg, the site asked Labour voters in Dorset Mid and West to find a 'voting valentine' in Dorset South, a Liberal Democrat who would vote Labour. Only 132 voters registered with the website, and a cursory glance over the discussion board indicates that many of these were from outside of the three constituencies; however this may well have had an impact upon voting behaviour that is hard to measure. 43.5% (455 out of 966) of the questionnaire respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their vote was tactical; the question remains: were they convinced by the media campaign, party literature or the Bragg website? This research focuses on voter recall and interaction with the party communication; however some insights on this are drawn.

Message Received and Understood?

There are three questions posed through the analysis of the local campaigning in these marginal constituencies in 2005: is there evidence of an incumbency factor; does this encourage recall of communication; and

acceptance of the message. The questionnaire was designed to elicit the extent to which voters had noted the permanent campaigning activities, if they did recall communication and, given the argument that incumbents have permission to contact voters, would voters then recall communication from or about the incumbent more than they would from challengers after weighting for political loyalties. The questionnaire also measured the extent to which local factors mattered and if incumbents were seen as the 'best representative of the area' independent of other factors. This analysis will assess whether the model of local campaigning, as set out by the three parties in marginal seats, has any influence over voter perceptions of the incumbents and if any effect upon voting can be detected?

Incumbency has long been argued to be a factor in UK politics (Cain et al. 1987), however few have found evidence that it has any significant influence upon voting behaviour. The respondents, on the whole and independent of political bias, rated the incumbent's service highly with a mean of 6.94 but a standard deviation of 2.979. More important, however, is the stronger association with voting behaviour, the data is displayed in Table 3. The data suggests there are strong and significant associations between voting and incumbency, the anomaly is the data from Dorset Mid, where a far higher proportion of constituents who voted Conservative also scored Brooke very highly for her service provision than was the case elsewhere.

Table 3. Testing for the Incumbency Factor

	Incumbency Score (All)		Incumbency Score among their voters		Voting and Incumbency Score (r^2)
Dorset Mid	Mean	8.1	Mean	8.9	.363*
	SD	2.1	SD	0.9	
Dorset West	Mean	6.08	Mean	8.9	.558*
	SD	3.2	SD	0.4	
Dorset South	Mean	6.9	Mean	8.8	.489*
	SD	3.01	SD	1.2	

* significant at $>.001$

Given the overall high score for incumbents, is it the case then that there is some form of permission awarded them, by constituents, to communicate to them during elections and are constituents then more likely to recall and respond positively to the communication. Respondents were asked if they recalled communication from the candidates, to rate out of ten the communication overall and to rate, also out of ten, the candidates on their presence, this data correlated with incumbency score is shown in Table 4; analysis is weighted to factor out party loyalty derived from those who agreed or strongly agreed to the voting behaviour question 'I always vote for that party'.

Table 4. Voter Responses to Incumbents' Communication

	Level of Recall‡ and association with incumbency (r ²)		Communication Score (mean) and association with incumbency (r ²)		Presence Score (mean) and association with incumbency (r ²)	
Dorset Mid	Recall	96.5%	Score	7.81	Score	7.01
	r ²	.307*	r ²	.423*	r ²	.495*
Dorset West	Recall	95.3%	Score	5.49	Score	4.73
	r ²	.038	r ²	.607*	r ²	.492*
Dorset South	Recall	94.3%	Score	6.24	Score	6.93
	r ²	.209**	r ²	.604*	r ²	.757*

‡ The recall score amalgamates individual responses to questions asking if they recalled candidate's leaflets as well as being visited by the candidate or one of the campaign team or saw the candidate in the media. To be included in the percentage each voter would have recalled at least two different forms of communication, in all cases one piece of communication was a leaflet, in Dorset South the DVD was classed as a leaflet.

* significant at >.01

** significant at >.05

The data indicates that nearly all the voters recall having had communication from or with the incumbent; this is consistent with a strategy to reach as many voters in the constituency as possible. Statistical analysis shows that there is a strong association between recall of communication and awarding a high incumbency score; it would be wrong to suggest that this were causal, or make assumptions as to the direction of cause, however it can be inferred that the combination of the permanent campaign and the intensity of the communication leads voters to have a positive view of the incumbent and perhaps this also means they are more susceptible to their communication. The context of the Dorset West constituency makes the finding there less positive, the reason for this is the sharp division within the constituency between Dorchester town and the rural area. Dorchester is staunchly Liberal Democrat and voters in the area 'almost see McGuinness as the MP anyway' (Focus Group, Dorset West, 15/6/05); therefore there are many who do not feel Letwin is as active in this town. In contrast the rural areas feel much better served and so award Letwin a higher score for both incumbency and presence during the campaign.

To test the extent that the voters are more likely to recall and rate higher the communication of the incumbent above the challenger it is useful to run the same tests for the main contender, who in each case campaigned with as much vigour. The level of recall and high mean scores for the communication and presence are shown in Table 5. Consistent with the argument, incumbents have a far higher level of recall, and receive higher scores than challengers, even when weighted for party loyalty. The exception is in Dorset

West where a larger percentage of respondents found McGuinness was more active within Dorchester; thus suggesting that within this town Letwin lacks permission to contact voters while the Liberal Democrat challenger was welcomed, which was clearly evidenced in the focus groups where Dorchester voters were astonished at the perception of Letwin as a good incumbent advocated by voters living in the communities of Tolpuddle, Winterbourne Abbas and Bridport.

Table 5. Challenger Recall

	Level of Recall		Communication Score (mean)		Presence Score (mean)	
Dorset Mid (Conservatives)	Recall	76.5%	Score	3.54	Score	2.64
Dorset West (Liberal Democrats)	Recall	99%	Score	6.93	Score	6.7
Dorset South (Conservatives)	Recall	82%	Score	3.31	Score	3.81

At this stage the data may suggest that there is likely to be some level of association between service provision and voting behaviour. This was tested for using a number of questions on the questionnaire, though only employing simple comparisons with the other candidates. Given that incumbency appears important then there should be some clear associations.

Across the three constituencies the incumbent scored highest in two cases for being the candidate 'who best understands you and your community'. 95% of Dorset Mid voters said Brooke, 72% of Dorset South voters said Knight but only 41% of Dorset West voters said Letwin. Overwhelmingly respondents indicated that they did care about the quality of the candidate and seemed to suggest they voted for the candidate that was more likely to offer a good service; this is shown in Table 6.

Voters were also asked to explain their voting behaviour in terms of candidate-related as well as national factors. One raft of questions required agreeing or disagreeing with statements such as those above (Table 6) a second set asked for responses on national factors influencing voting behaviour; such as 'I voted for the representative of the party I wanted to see in government' or 'represented the best potential prime minister' and asked voters to tick the candidate that possessed that quality independent of voting behaviour (see Table 7). The findings were interesting in themselves, however grouping together national factors and local factors one sees both factors are of equal importance to voters.

Table 6. The Importance of the Candidate Among Voters (in %)

	Not important	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I voted for the best representative for me and my community	6.5	4	11.8	39.8	36.3
I voted for the candidate who best addressed my concerns	10.8	2.4	10.5	47.6	27.2

The findings here are mixed. In terms of voting, all but Dorset South, possibly because Knight was a representative of the governing party, local factors appear of more importance than national factors and in all cases the individual who was selected by the voters overwhelmingly earned recognition for their local credentials; be that potential or actual. However when selecting an MP national factors are also of great importance. There were strong, significant associations in all cases for national factors: support for the party, or best potential prime minister, or that the party had the best policy on one or more issues. The associations between voting behaviour and the candidate's qualities are far lower, suggesting that only the incumbent is judged on their local record, except in Dorset West where both Letwin and McGuinness had been involved in permanent campaigning and so had earned equal prominence across the constituency as a whole.

Table 7. The Importance of National and Local Factors

(all percentage of respondents stating very important or who award these qualities to the person they voted for)

	Importance of local factors on voting behaviour	Importance of national factors on voting behaviour	Local-related qualities awarded to candidate who earned vote	National-related qualities awarded to candidate who earned vote
Dorset Mid	35.7	28.7	64.4	79.7
Dorset West	33.3	24.8	65.7	68.5
Dorset South	32.8	33.6	66.5	97.4

What is less tangible is whether the national qualities are used by respondents to justify a non-rational choice. In focus groups many argued that local factors mattered when voting Liberal Democrat, and in Dorset South when voting Labour due to the poor local perception of Conservative candidate Ed Matts after his forced apologies. However, in general, there

were mixed feelings about the importance of local factors; they would encourage non-voters to vote, persuade Labour loyalists to vote tactically for the anti-Conservative candidate and imbue a sense of being represented, but few argued that they voted on the candidate's qualities alone as they felt that party policy was the most important factor. This may have been a feature of the natural unrepresentativeness of self-selecting focus groups, or suggest that while recognition for the strong local activities may be high it is actually an assessment of the national party and the perception that their policies are better for the area, making the candidate seem the best person for the job regardless of their individual ability. The problem with taking the focus group data on face value, as opposed to the quantitative data, was the predominance of the politically interested.

An interesting group within the respondents were those who had changed their vote between 2001 and 2005⁴; these offer some fascinating observations. On the whole Conservatives in Dorset South moved to Labour, while Dorchester Conservatives moved across to the Liberal Democrats.

Table 8. Vote Switching and the Local Factor

	Local factors	National Factors	Incumbency score	Awarded local credentials to candidate voted for	Awarded national credentials to candidate voted for
Association with switching (n = 92)	.845*	.035	.625**	.745*	.234**

* significant at >.01

** significant at >.05

Labour voters in Dorset West and Mid moved overwhelmingly to the Liberal Democrats yet there were eighteen Dorset West voters in the rural areas that voted Conservative in 2005 having voted Liberal Democrat in 2001, indicating this was due to Letwin's record as these were not tactical moves. Liberal Democrats in Dorset South turned to Labour. On the whole the switchers shifted for national reasons, they were voting tactically. However a minority, 8.9% of the overall sample, seem to have been motivated by the incumbency factor. By selecting those Dorset Mid Conservatives who shifted to support Brooke, their Liberal Democrat counterparts in Dorset West who voted for Letwin and the Conservatives that supported Knight in Dorset South we find that local factors overwhelmingly predominate. The results are displayed in Table 8. On the whole it is the local factors and high

⁴ Respondents were asked to record their voting behaviour for both general elections in order to detect shifts of allegiance.

incumbency score that show the strongest associations. Combining these three variables using regression analysis we find that 88% of the voting behaviour is accounted for here, so for this group it seems that local campaigning really does matter.

Conclusion

The data shows that in 2005 a new model of campaigning had evolved, one that centred on the local issues, promoted the record of the incumbent, or the challenger where possible, focused on face-to-face contact supported by leafleting and followed a relationship management model of communication as opposed to the marketing and public relations models ascribed to the national party campaigns. In terms of recognition, despite the equal strength of the campaigns, the incumbents earned greater recall, except within Dorchester, and they were recognised as having been good, local MPs. Thus the message is not only recalled but is accepted into the subconscious of the voters. Those suggesting that voting decisions are often ill-considered snap judgements, founded on peripheral knowledge, may take heart in the fact that one simple heuristic being employed is recognition of service, or the potential for service, when selecting an MP.

However voting is far more complex. Local factors appear to be important, yet national factors are seen as most influential on voter behaviour; logical given that the votes locally decide the composition of the legislature. Yet for almost 9% of this sample, local factors are paramount. They switch their vote based on the strength of the incumbent's record and perhaps accept their lack of ability to influence the national result. In this way they are able to influence one outcome as well as feel some satisfaction over the result. These 9% may appear trivial. However, provided they are representative, this indicates that almost 6,000 votes may be winnable through incumbency. Letwin's increase in his majority was 1,047, Brooke's 5,098 and Knights' 1,659 (increases in real votes of 2,637, 3,642 and 1,204 respectively); none were able to capture 9% extra votes, however all three incumbents earned significant support for their service provision; significantly more than Butler allowed when arguing MPs were worth little more than 500 votes (Butler 1952, p. 75), suggesting there has been a shift in the importance of incumbency.

But was incumbency the factor. Would they have earned a swing towards them had they not engaged in permanent campaigning, built themselves a strong local profile, and then campaigned on that record sidelining party political messages in favour of localised and focused relationship building; the data from questionnaires and focus groups suggest not. Voters liked their styles, when exposed to it, and thus some were more interested in listening

to them. This suggests that the incumbent not only wins voters looking for local representation, but as the party representative can also be an effective advocate of party policy. Thus perhaps resources should be focused on the local level to a greater extent, and the permanent relationship building, as it seems to have clear potential to win votes.

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