

Parliamentary Communication Allowances:

Good for Nothing?*

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Abstract

In many countries, members of parliament receive publicly-funded allowances to communicate with the electorate. Some hope that ensuing parliamentary communication engages the people with politics and increase electoral participation. Others worry that such use of public funds might create an unfair advantage for incumbents and affect electoral results. Yet, the consequences of this practice remain unknown. Data from the UK House of Commons suggests that both the hopes and the worries are baseless: there is no evidence that parliamentary communication allowances increase electoral turnout or affect incumbents' vote share. If these allowances are not effective, both parliaments and their members might want to reconsider their use and usefulness.

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Introduction

From informing the people to educating them about political affairs, communication has always been a function of parliaments (Bagehot, 1867). If long overlooked, public disengagement with politics—particularly in elections—seems to have put parliamentary communication high on the agendas again (Kelso, 2007; Leston-Bandeira, 2016). Indeed, many parliaments have developed new communication strategies in the last couple of decades (Leston-Bandeira, 2013; Power, 2012). One of these strategies is to provide the members of parliament (MPs) with allowances to spend on communicating with the electorate (Auel and Umit, 2018). A lot is being invested in this strategy, in terms of both money and expectations, but we still do not know whether parliamentary communication allowances are effective in increasing public engagement with politics.

The stakes are high for parliaments. Parliamentary allowances, as well as salaries, are a source of public controversy in general (Kelso, 2009). Any new allowance comes with an increased risk of public cynicism towards MPs, and it takes a minority of them to misuse that allowance to create a scandal (Kelso, 2009; vanHeerde-Hudson and Ward, 2014). Such risks are particularly high for communication allowances, not least because the line between parliamentary communication (i.e. use) and political campaigning (i.e. misuse) is dangerously thin. It is also because, even within its intended use, some *believe* that communication allowances give incumbents an unfair advantage in elections (Kelly, 2010, p. 68), distorting the will of the people at their own expense. Yet, again, we do not know whether there really is such an electoral advantage.

This article analyses the Communications Allowance of the British House of Commons to address the fact that “in the absence of clear evidence about the impact of all that money on the performance of MPs specifically and the effectiveness of [parliaments] in general, most people will continue to look on in disbelief” (Kelso, 2009, p. 334). The results are most compatible with the null hypothesis that parliamentary communication has no important

effect on the differences in turnout or vote share.

Context

MPs had long had free stationery and postage-paid envelopes in the UK, but these had to be used only for solicited communication with individual constituents. After a series of reports on the disconnect between the public and the parliament, emphasising—among other issues—the decline in electoral participation (Putnam, 2005; White, 2006), the House of Commons established a new allowance in 2007 for MPs ‘to assist in the work of communicating with the public on parliamentary business’ (Tebbit, 2007, p. 54). They had £10,000 for the 2007–2008 parliamentary year, raised to £10,400 for the following two years, to pay for ‘regular reports and constituency newsletters, questionnaires and surveys, petitions, targeted communications, contact cards, distribution costs including direct mailing and postage, websites, [and] some capital purchases’ (House of Commons, 2007, p. 6). With the Communications Allowance, therefore, MPs could communicate with *all* constituents *proactively*, without worrying about its cost, at least, up to a certain limit.¹

Before long, and amid the scandal around the parliamentary expenses in 2009,² the Committee on Standards in Public Life, an advisory public body on the ethical standards of public office holders, called for the Communications Allowance to be abolished. Unrelated to the scandal per se, the Committee nevertheless deemed the allowance more of an unfair electoral advantage for incumbent MPs and parties than of a boost to public engagement with politics (Kelly, 2010, Chapter 8). Acting on this advice, the House of Commons abolished the allowance in 2010.

¹Besides, MPs could surpass these (£10,000–£10,400) limits by transferring funds from other allowances into the Communications Allowance (House of Commons, 2007, p. 6).

²Briefly, some dozens of MPs were found to have abused their allowances, particularly the Additional Cost Allowance, which covered the expenses for keeping two residences—one in MPs’ own constituency and another in London (Kelso, 2009; vanHeerde-Hudson and Ward, 2014).

Over its three-year lifetime, £13.8m was claimed from the Communications Allowance,³ with MPs spending on average about £7,100 per year to communicate proactively with their constituents. Studying their expenditure behaviour, Auel and Umit (2018) found that re-election seeking MPs spent significantly more of their allowance than those standing down, especially if their seat in Parliament was at greater risk. For example, compared to their colleagues with a 10% electoral majority, MPs barely winning the previous election invested about £690 more per year on parliamentary communication (Auel and Umit, 2018, p. 742).

What remains unknown is (a) whether, as the proponents of the allowance hoped, the disconnect with politics decreases with the parliamentary communication financed by the taxpayer, and (b) whether, as the opponents worried, the electoral prospects of incumbents increases with it. Indeed, in the absence of such empirical evidence, the recommendation to abolish the Communications Allowance was based on arguments that were ‘difficult to evaluate’ (Kelly, 2010, p. 69). In fact, the allowance was introduced with similar lack of evidence in the first place.

Data and Methods

The claims in this analysis are based primarily on a combination of data from the (2005 and 2010) UK general elections and the Communications Allowance. A complication is that there was a boundary change for most of the constituencies in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland at the 2010 election, and only 138 constituencies—59 of which were in Scotland—remained unchanged from the time when the allowance was in use. To address this complication, I use notional results—estimations from the wards that make up each constituency—for constituencies with boundary change.

The dependent variables are the constituency-level turnout and vote shares in the 2010

³Note that this figure does not include the administrative costs, and therefore that the total cost of the Communications Allowance to the taxpayer is likely to be much higher.

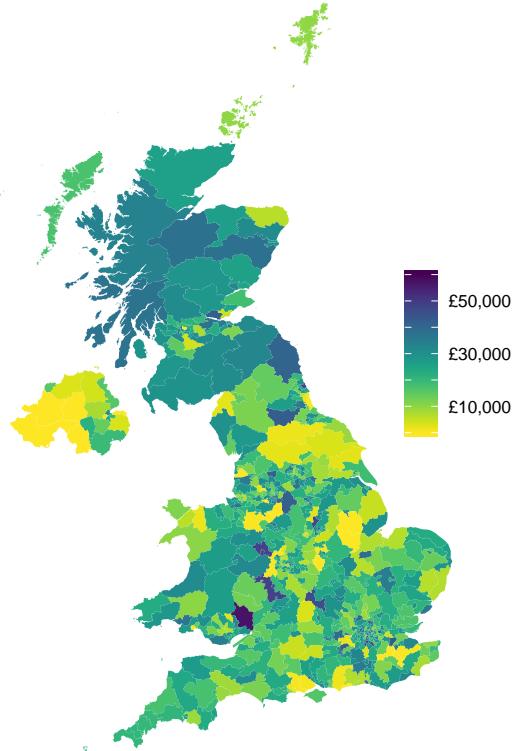


Figure 1: Expenditure of the Communications Allowance (2007–2010) within the 2010 constituency boundaries.

UK general election, the election that followed the allowance, which took place in 650 constituencies under the first-past-the-post system.

The independent variable of interest (*Communication*) is the amount of money, in £1,000s, claimed from the Communications Allowance. Figure 1 plots how much was spent for parliamentary communication in each constituency, using the new boundaries.

Exploring the potential relationships between parliamentary communication on the one hand and turnout and vote share on the other, I estimate ordinal least squares (OLS) regressions, here in the main body of the article, with data from all constituencies. In the Appendix, I re-estimate the same regression models for only the constituencies without a boundary change. All models are with fixed effects, limiting the analysis to within regions for turnout or to within parties for vote share. In addition, final models include lagged dependent variables and

a number of other controls for (a) boundary changes, (b) campaign spending, (c) incumbent candidates, and (d) constituency majority. For more details on these variables, see the Appendix.

Results

Table 1: (OLS) Regression models of turnout—Summary results

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Communication	−0.002 (−0.041, 0.037)	0.006 (−0.015, 0.027)	0.009 (−0.013, 0.032)
Constant	66.467*** (64.794, 68.141)	18.113*** (15.571, 20.655)	18.680*** (15.473, 21.887)
Controls	No	No	Yes
Lagged DV	No	Yes	Yes
Region FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	650	650	650
R ²	0.212	0.775	0.779

Note: Models are calculated with ordinary least squares regressions. The lower and upper limits of 95% confidence intervals are in parentheses. Units are constituencies. The dependent variable is the percentage turnout in the 2010 UK general election. *Communication* is the amount of money, in £1,000s, claimed from the Communications Allowance. For a more detailed version of the table, see the Appendix. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Table 1 presents the regression models of turnout. Here *Communication* is a constituency-level measure, indicating the total amount of allowance spent in each constituency.⁴ In all models, the point estimates for *Communication* are small, and the 95% confidence intervals around these estimates include zero. These suggests that, if there is a relationship between parliamentary communication and electoral turnout, it is—substantively and statistically—

⁴Notice that, due to by-elections as well as boundary changes, this figure can cover the expenditure of one or more MPs, from one or more parties.

an insignificant relationship. According to Model 3, the best estimate is that the average constituency, upon receiving 21.3 thousand pounds worth of communication, saw about a (21.3×0.009) 0.2 percentage point increase in turnout. If MPs are to spend all of their allowance of around £10,000 per year, consistently for, say, five years between elections, this increase would not be more than half a percentage point—a change that is likely to go unnoticed after rounding.

Table 2: (OLS) Regression models of vote share—Summary results

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Communication	0.341*** (0.283, 0.399)	0.065*** (0.031, 0.098)	-0.001 (-0.039, 0.037)
Constant	43.614*** (42.207, 45.020)	8.222*** (6.474, 9.969)	7.604*** (5.721, 9.488)
Controls	No	No	Yes
Lagged DV	No	Yes	Yes
Region FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	808	803	803
R ²	0.280	0.790	0.808

Note:

Models are calculated with ordinary least squares regressions. The lower and upper limits of 95% confidence intervals are in parentheses. Units are parties by constituencies. The dependent variable is the party vote share in the 2010 UK general election. *Communication* is the amount of money, in £1,000s, claimed from the Communications Allowance. For a more detailed version of the table, see the Appendix. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

The results from vote shares, as Table 2 shows, are similar. Here *Communication* is a party-by-constituency-level measure, indicating the total amount of allowance spent by one or more MPs from each party in their constituency.⁵ While *Communication* is associated with a significant increase in vote share in the basic model, this decreases dramatically with

⁵Therefore, the scope of this analysis is limited to those constituencies where parties had one or more incumbent MPs.

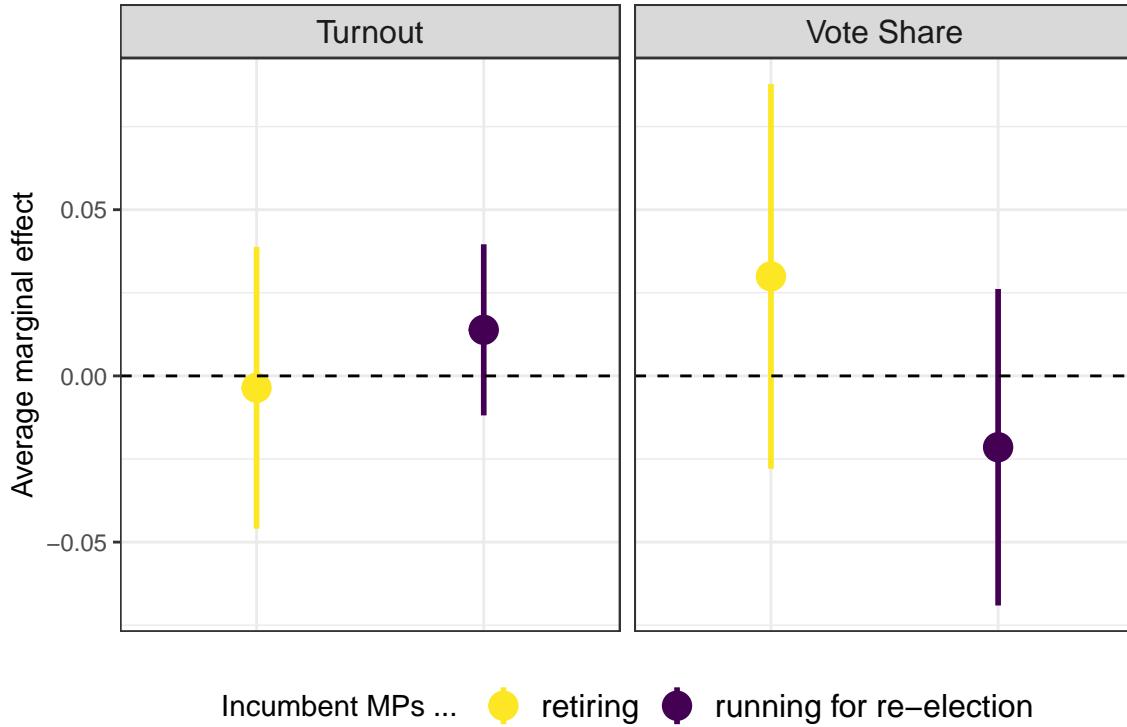


Figure 2: Average marginal effects of parliamentary communication. *Note:* Vertical lines represent 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are based on the interaction models in Table A6 in the Appendix.

the lagged dependent variable, and disappears completely with the controls in the final model. In Model 3, the estimates do not only include zero, they also centre almost exactly on it. According, where MPs spend £10,000 for parliamentary communication, their party could see a change ranging between a 0.39 percentage point decrease to a 0.37 percentage point increase in their vote share.

If parliamentary communication leads to a ‘personal vote’ (see Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina, 1987) for communicators alone, pooling the electoral races with and without an incumbent candidate could be misleading. To explore the null results further, Figure 2 therefore visualises the average marginal effects of *Communication* on turnout and vote share, for incumbent MPs standing down *versus* running for re-election at the end of their term. It shows that incumbency does not change the results. In all cases, the average marginal effect of a unit increase in *Communication* is indistinguishable from zero: the average communication effort

can have a small, positive or negative, effect on the results but they can as well have no effect at all—and the incumbents' presence among the candidates seeking re-election does not change this fact.

Conclusion

In this article I looked for the anticipated effects of publicly funding parliamentary communication from MPs to their constituents. The UK House of Commons experimented with this idea between 2007 and 2010, at a cost of at least £13.8m to the taxpayer. However, the results suggest that the money spent on parliamentary communication did not have a meaningful effect on electoral participation or incumbent vote share. This is good as well as bad news for actors looking to engage the public with politics through parliamentary communication.

On the one hand, it is bad news as communication allowances seem ineffective in terms of a main indicator of public engagement with politics: turnout in elections. If this is the case, it would be harder for policy-makers to justify the money and effort that goes into parliamentary communication. Having said that, parliamentary communication is more than what takes place between MPs and their constituents as parliaments themselves are also involved in communicating directly with the public (Leston-Bandeira, 2016). Similarly, parliamentary communication might aim at results other than electoral participation, such as increasing political knowledge among the public (Fox, 2009). Further research can analyse other actors and indicators of parliamentary communication.

On the other hand, the results are good news as communication allowances do not seem to give incumbents an unfair advantage through public funds. Hence parliaments can push back on the claim that communication allowances distort the will of the people. This might, however, lead to another problem: parliaments might find it harder to encourage MPs to spend their time and effort, if not their own money, for parliamentary communication if there

is no electoral incentives for them to do so.

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Appendix

Codebook of variables

This section provides detailed descriptions of the variables used in this study, with summary statistics presented in Table A1. Notice that *Communication*, *Inc incumbency*, and *Campaign* have two versions as these variables are coded (1) for constituencies for the models of turnout and (2) for parties in each constituency for the models of vote share.

Table A1: Descriptive statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Turnout	650	64.97	5.75	44.29	77.30
Vote Share	808	42.24	11.46	6.37	71.96
Expenditure (Constituency)	650	21.26	10.63	0.00	57.06
Expenditure (Party)	810	17.02	12.22	0.00	57.06
Past Turnout	650	61.02	6.32	37.62	76.43
Past Share	804	44.16	10.29	7.49	71.80
Boundary	650	17.62	25.62	0.00	135.89
Campaign (Constituency)	650	187.15	69.21	0.00	479.28
Campaign (Party)	810	69.91	26.43	0.00	108.99
Inc incumbency (Constituency)	650	0.76	0.43	0.00	1.00
Inc incumbency (Party)	810	0.60	0.49	0	1
Majority	650	18.99	12.39	0.03	58.39

Note: *Constituency* indicates the versions of variables used in the models of turnout while *Party* indicates the versions used in the models of vote share.

Dependent variables

The two dependent variables are from the 2010 UK general election, as announced by the Electoral Commission.

Turnout. The percentage of eligible voters who cast a ballot in each constituency.

Vote Share. The percentage of valid votes cast for parties, in constituencies where these parties had at least one MP before the 2010 election. Despite the single-member districts

of the UK, parties could have had more than one MP spending allowance in a given 2010 constituency due to boundary changes as well as by-elections since the previous general elections.

Independent variable

Communication. The amount, in 1,000 pounds sterling, that MPs claimed from the Communications Allowance. This is aggregated (1) at the constituency level for the models of turnout and (2) at the party level for the models of vote share. This data is publicly available, albeit scatteredly, on the House of Commons website (www.parliament.uk)

Lagged dependent variables

Past Turnout. The percentage of eligible voters who cast a ballot in each constituency in the 2005 UK general election.

Past Share. The percentage of valid votes cast for parties, in constituencies where they had at least one MP following the 2005 election.

Control variables

Boundary. A continuous variable, measuring how different the 2010 constituencies were from their original 2005 constituencies, as calculated by Rallings and Thrasher (2007).

Campaign. The percentage of the electoral campaign limit spent between the dissolution of the parliament (12 April 2010) and the election day (6 May 2010), known as the ‘short campaign’. This variable, originally from the Electoral Commission, is aggregated (1) at the constituency level for the models of turnout and (2) at the party-by-constituency level for the models of vote share.

Inc incumbency. A binary variable indicating whether there was an incumbent MP running for re-election (coded as 1) or not (coded as 0). This variable is coded (1) for constituencies

(whether there was an incumbent MP from any party in a given constituency) for the models of turnout and for parties (whether parties had an incumbent MP in a given constituency) for the models of vote share.

Majority. The percentage difference between the votes for the winning and the runner-up parties in each constituency in the general election of 2005.

In constituencies with boundary changes, *Majority* as well as the lagged dependent variables are based on the notional results estimated by Rallings and Thrasher (2007). Otherwise, they are based on the actual results released by the Electoral Commission (www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

Detailed Tables

This section provides the complete results (except for the fixed-effects), respectively for the models of turnout (Table 1) and vote share (Table 2) summarised in the main text.

The regions in Table 1 are East Midlands (the base category), East of England, London, North East, North West, Northern Ireland, Scotland, South East, South West, Wales, West Midlands, and Yorkshire & the Humber.

The parties in Table 2 are Conservative (the base category), DUP, Labour, Lib Dems, KHHC, SF, SDLP, SNP, PC, Respect, UKIP, and UUP.

Table A2: Detailed results for Table 1 (turnout)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Communication	-0.002 (-0.041, 0.037)	0.006 (-0.015, 0.027)	0.009 (-0.013, 0.032)
Past Turnout		0.773*** (0.735, 0.811)	0.766*** (0.724, 0.808)
Boundary			0.004 (-0.005, 0.013)
Campaign			0.002 (-0.002, 0.006)
Inc incumbency			-0.731** (-1.254, -0.209)
Majority			-0.008 (-0.031, 0.015)
Constant	66.467*** (64.794, 68.141)	18.113*** (15.571, 20.655)	18.680*** (15.473, 21.887)
Region FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	650	650	650
R ²	0.212	0.775	0.779

Note:

Models are calculated with ordinary least squares regressions. The lower and upper limits of 95% confidence intervals are in parentheses. Units are constituencies. The dependent variable is the percentage turnout in the 2010 UK general election. *Communication* is the amount of money, in £1,000s, claimed from the Communications Allowance. For a more detailed version of the table, see the Appendix. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Table A3: Detailed results for Table 2 (vote share)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Communication	0.341*** (0.283, 0.399)	0.065*** (0.031, 0.098)	-0.001 (-0.039, 0.037)
Past Share		0.884*** (0.845, 0.924)	0.787*** (0.736, 0.838)
Boundary			-0.007 (-0.021, 0.006)
Campaign			0.041*** (0.025, 0.056)
Inc incumbency			3.012*** (2.134, 3.891)
Majority			0.062** (0.023, 0.101)
Constant	43.614*** (42.207, 45.020)	8.222*** (6.474, 9.969)	7.604*** (5.721, 9.488)
Party FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	808	803	803
R ²	0.280	0.790	0.808

Note:

Models are calculated with ordinary least squares regressions. The lower and upper limits of 95% confidence intervals are in parentheses. Units are parties by constituencies. The dependent variable is the party vote share in the 2010 UK general election. *Communication* is the amount of money, in £1,000s, claimed from the Communications Allowance. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Robustness Checks

This section provides three robustness checks: Could the null results arise due to (a) constituency boundary changes (b) pooling of all races with and without incumbents among the candidates, or (c) multicollinearity? The tests below suggest not.

Constituencies without boundary change

As mentioned in the article, most of the UK parliamentary constituencies had a boundary change before the 2010 general election. Therefore, the official data—be it on the 2005 election results or on the expenditure of the Communications Allowance between 2007 and 2010—is not accurate for the constituencies with a boundary change. Regression models address this issue in the main body of the article by including notional variables adjusted for the new boundaries as well as a variable (*Boundary*) measuring the extent of change in each constituency. This avoids a considerable limitation on the number of observations in the analysis.

As a robustness check for the null results, this subsection provides re-estimates of the regression models with data from only the unchanged constituencies (*Boundary* = 0). Despite a dramatic decrease in the number of observations, the results remain substantively the same. These are presented in Table A4 for turnout and in Table A5 for vote share.

Table A4: Models of turnout in unchanged constituencies

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Communication	0.082 (-0.001, 0.166)	0.023 (-0.011, 0.057)	0.024 (-0.011, 0.059)
Past Turnout		0.831*** (0.768, 0.894)	0.808*** (0.738, 0.877)
Campaign			-0.015 (-0.053, 0.023)
Incumbency			-0.852 (-1.755, 0.050)
Majority			0.004 (-0.003, 0.010)
Constant	69.469*** (62.326, 76.613)	15.670*** (10.678, 20.663)	17.033*** (11.403, 22.664)
Region FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	138	138	138
R ²	0.231	0.879	0.885

Note:

Models are calculated with ordinary least squares regressions. The lower and upper limits of 95% confidence intervals are in parentheses. The dependent variable is the percentage turnout in the 2010 UK general election. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Table A5: Models of vote share in unchanged constituencies

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Communication	-0.182* (-0.324, -0.041)	-0.005 (-0.118, 0.108)	-0.004 (-0.118, 0.110)
Past Share		0.797*** (0.637, 0.957)	0.555*** (0.332, 0.777)
Campaign			0.202** (0.073, 0.330)
Inc incumbency			1.136 (-1.597, 3.869)
Majority			0.009 (-0.047, 0.065)
Constant	54.549*** (50.240, 58.857)	12.650** (3.630, 21.670)	19.355** (7.355, 31.355)
Party FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	137	137	137
R ²	0.158	0.516	0.551

Note:

Models are calculated with ordinary least squares regressions. The lower and upper limits of 95% confidence intervals are in parentheses. The dependent variable is the incumbent party vote share in the 2010 UK general election. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Interaction models

A plausible expectation is that the relationship between parliamentary communication and electoral results depends on incumbency. Specifically, it could be that communication mobilises constituents only if their incumbent MP, whom they have been presumably hearing from, is among the candidates in the following election. To adjust the estimates for this factor, the final models of turnout and vote share include a variable, *Incumbency*.

Table A6 further investigates this possibility with interaction terms between *Communication* and *Incumbency*. As discussed in the text and visualised in Figure 2, these interaction terms are substantively and statistically insignificant, confirming that the null results are robust to the incumbency factor.

Table A6: Interaction models for Figure 2

	Turnout	Vote Share
	(1)	(2)
Communication	-0.004 (-0.046, 0.039)	0.030 (-0.028, 0.088)
Past Turnout	0.767*** (0.725, 0.809)	
Past Share		0.775*** (0.721, 0.829)
Boundary	0.004 (-0.005, 0.013)	-0.008 (-0.021, 0.006)
Campaign	0.002 (-0.002, 0.006)	0.041*** (0.025, 0.057)
Inc incumbency	-1.055* (-2.100, -0.010)	3.848*** (2.375, 5.320)
Majority	-0.008 (-0.031, 0.015)	0.065** (0.026, 0.104)
Expenditure X Inc incumbency	0.017 (-0.031, 0.066)	-0.051 (-0.124, 0.021)
Constant	18.874*** (15.621, 22.128)	7.693*** (5.807, 9.580)
Region FEs	Yes	No
Party FEs	No	Yes
Observations	650	803
R ²	0.779	0.808

Note:

Models are calculated with ordinary least squares regressions. The lower and upper limits of 95% confidence intervals are in parentheses. *Communication* is the amount of money, in £1,000s, claimed from the Communications Allowance. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Generalised variation inflation factors

One concern is that there might be dangerously high levels of correlations between two or more independent variables, not least because the regression models include lagged dependent variables. Looking for such correlations, I calculated generalised variation inflation factors, based on the complete models of turnout (Model 2 in Table 1) and vote share (Model 2 in Table 2). With this test, a factor score of 1.0 refers to no multicollinearity while values higher than 10.0 are considered problematic (Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson, 2014). The results are presented in Table A7, showing reassuringly low factor scores—ranging between 1.06 and 2.26. In other words, there are no signs of high linear correlations among the independent variables.

Table A7: Generalised variation inflation factors

Variables	df	Turnout	Vote Share
Expenditure	1	1.28	1.78
Past Turnout	1	1.61	
Boundary	1	1.17	1.06
Campaign	1	1.53	1.42
Incumbency	1	1.13	1.54
Majority	1	1.80	1.90
Region FEs	11	1.98	
Past Vote	1		2.26
Party FEs	9		1.42