



# Incumbent parties, incumbent MPs and the effectiveness of constituency campaigns: Evidence from the 2015 UK general election

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## Abstract

Parties' local campaign efforts can yield electoral dividends in plurality elections; in general, the harder they campaign, the more votes they receive. However, this is not invariably the case. Different parties' campaigns can have different effects. What is more, the particular status of a candidacy can also influence how effective the local campaign might be. Analyses of constituency campaigning at the 2015 UK General Election reveal inter-party variations in campaign effectiveness. But looking more closely at how a party was placed tactically in a seat prior to the election, and at whether sitting MPs stood again for their party or retired, reveals distinct variations in what parties stand to gain from their local campaigns in different circumstances.

## Keywords

campaign effects, constituency campaign, incumbency, political parties, United Kingdom, voting

Local election campaigns matter. A vast international literature shows that, on the whole, the harder parties work on their local campaign in an election, the greater the dividends in terms of vote share (e.g. Denver and Hands, 1997b; Green et al., 2016; Jacobson, 2015; Fisher et al., 2014; Benoit and Marsh, 2003). For instance, campaigning can increase turnout among supporters and swing undecided voters to a party. Yet, there is little evidence that those who previously voted for another party are won over by the doorstep canvassing characteristic of local British campaigns. As such, a persistent topic for analysis within the literature concerns the relative efficacy of campaigns conducted by incumbents and their challengers. In a now-classic analysis of US Congressional elections, Jacobson (1978) demonstrated that incumbents standing for re-election received much smaller benefits

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from their campaign expenditure than did challengers. Since Jacobson's pioneering paper, his claim has been subject to repeated scrutiny, with some studies corroborating his findings and others challenging them. Consensus remains elusive.

What is more, much of that research effort has focussed on campaigns in systems dominated by two political parties (or, in multi-party polities, on the two most competitive parties in an area). A question mark hangs, therefore, not only over the relative effectiveness of challengers' and incumbents' campaigns but also over whether all challengers in a seat gain similar advantages. Moreover, incumbent races can be split into those which involve an incumbent candidate seeking re-election versus those where only party incumbency is involved (such as where the incumbent representative has retired before the election).

In this article, we extend the literature on challenger and incumbency campaign effects by examining how they vary across parties and different types of candidates in Great Britain. Using data from the 2015 UK General Election,<sup>1</sup> we show that not all challengers were equally advantaged by intensive campaigns and not all parties defending a seat were equally disadvantaged by such campaigns (much depended on whether their incumbent MP stood again). But surprisingly, the effects of the campaign also differed significantly depending on which party we consider – the effects vary, both in size and (in some cases) direction from party to party.

## **Campaign effects for incumbents and challengers: Past research**

Much of the debate over the relative merits of incumbents' and challengers' campaigns stems from Jacobson's (1978) paper on US Congressional elections in the 1970s, in which he showed that incumbents enjoyed far smaller electoral gains from their campaigns than did challengers. The difference, he argued, reflected the candidates' relative positions. Incumbents were already relatively well known within their districts as a result of their legislative records, work for their districts, and local media coverage. In contrast, most challengers were much less well known initially. Their campaigns provided an opportunity to introduce themselves to the electorate and to increase their name recognition. Incumbents, therefore, had relatively little to gain from campaigning hard as they already enjoyed wide recognition; challengers, meanwhile, had much to gain as the campaign helped raise their local profile. Indeed, for incumbent candidates, having to campaign hard might even represent weakness rather than strength, as it reflected a closer-than-expected race generated by a particularly strong challenger.

Some have challenged Jacobson's core finding, arguing that incumbent campaign spending actually has a substantial influence on voting (see for example Benoit and Marsh, 2008; Compston, 1993; Erikson and Palfrey, 1998; Gerber, 1998; Green and Krasno, 1988, 1990; Magee, 2012; Samuels, 2001; Thomas, 1989). But other work, across a range of elections and polities, supports Jacobson's claim, suggesting that incumbents' campaigns are less effective than their challengers' (see Benoit and Marsh, 2010; Gerber, 2004; Jacobson, 1990, 2006; Kenny and McBurnett, 1992; Palda and Palda, 1998); note, however, Levitt's (1994; Levitt and Dubner, 2005) claim that the only 'true' test of the impact of campaign spending is where the same pair of candidates contested two successive elections (Jacobson, 2006; Johnston and Pattie, 2006a). In sum, a consensus has yet to emerge.

A notable feature of the literature, however, is how dominated it is by the particular example of elections in the United States. While there are studies in countries such as

France (Palda and Palda, 1998), Ireland (Benoit and Marsh, 2003, 2008, 2010) and Brazil (Samuels, 2001), they are very much in the minority. Yet, US elections are unusual in at least two important ways. First, in accordance with Duverger's law, the United States has a two-party system (Duverger, 1964); hence, there are only two viable candidates in most races for the House of Representatives, Senate, and state legislatures. What is more, the growing cohesiveness of the major political parties notwithstanding (on the effects on candidate campaigning, see Kim and Leveck, 2013), US elections tend to be more candidate-centred than elections in most other countries.

These unique features may have consequences for debates over challenger and incumbent campaigns. In a two-party, two-candidate world, campaigning begins to approximate a zero-sum game: one candidate's gain is the rival candidate's loss. In a multi-party system, however, things are more complicated, and several candidates can gain in the same contest by using their campaigns to squeeze the support of less viable candidates in the same race. We might expect, therefore, that 'challenger effects' depend critically on the viability of the challenger. In a multi-party world, challengers representing parties which are in second place in a seat stand some chance of winning that seat, as they 'only' have the incumbent party to beat. Candidates of parties in third place or worse in the race have a much harder job as their campaigns have to take them past at least two other locally successful parties if they are to have a chance of winning. (There are very few three-way marginal contests in the United Kingdom: Johnston et al., 2017.)

Past research in multi-party politics also suggests that different parties are more or less successful in running their local campaigns. In the United Kingdom, for instance, the centre-ground Liberal Democrats have long enjoyed a reputation for particularly effective local campaigning, working hard through grassroots organisations to build support in particular areas, which they then convert into MPs who enjoy substantial incumbency advantages (Cutts, 2006; Dorling et al., 1998; Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005). Labour, too, developed a reputation for effective constituency campaigns, focussing its efforts on marginal seats the party needed to win elections and gaining votes in consequence (although to a lesser degree than the Liberal Democrats: Pattie et al., 2003).

But not all British parties have been so effective. For many years, the efficacy of the Conservative party's constituency campaigning underwhelmed as the party focussed efforts most heavily on its safest seats, where support was already nearly as high as it could go and where no further Parliamentary representation could be gained (Pattie et al., 2003; Denver and Hands, 1996, 1997a; Johnston and Pattie, 2007). This result is because virtually all of the money spent on constituency campaigns in the United Kingdom is raised locally by the candidates' local party organisations. Although the parties' central and regional offices have become increasingly more involved in the local campaigns, this has rarely meant that money has been transferred from central to local budgets (for the major exception, see Cutts et al., 2012). Instead, the central party offices undertake complementary activities, such as canvassing potential supporters by post, email, and social media. The intensity of a candidate's campaign thus depends on the constituency party's available funds. In marginal seats, they will work hard to raise the needed amount; in safer seats, it may be that the local party is relatively affluent and can afford to spend on the campaign even though victory is virtually ensured – and this latter situation has applied mainly to local Conservative parties in the past.

These inter-party differences in campaign effectiveness are not set in stone, however. The Conservatives' poor performance depended in part on a relatively archaic party structure, which left local constituency associations largely independent of the national party. Reforms in the early 2000s made it easier for the national party to co-ordinate

local efforts to greater effect by focussing (like its rivals) more on the battle in marginal seats (Pattie and Johnston, 2009a). In the run-up to the 2005 General Election, several large donors to the Conservatives provided substantial sums of money to local parties where it seemed these could deliver electoral success, such donations being in response to solicited business plans submitted by the local parties (Johnston and Pattie, 2007). For the 2010 election, this programme was sponsored by the national party to direct central funds to key marginal seats in order to improve the party's chances (Cutts et al., 2012). In more recent elections, the Conservative constituency campaign has begun to gain the party votes, especially in the marginal seats where such additional support can help the party most.

At the same time, other parties' campaigns can falter. Between 1997 and 2005, for instance, the impact of Labour campaign spending on the party's constituency vote share diminished as it moved from being the challenger party at the previous four elections to the incumbent, disappearing entirely in 2005 (Pattie and Johnston, 2009b); it recovered somewhat at the 2010 General Election when Labour was expected to lose power and its main focus was on retaining as many of its marginal seats as possible (Johnston and Pattie, 2014). In multi-party politics, therefore, we need to pay attention to which party is campaigning and how well its campaign might work. Thus, we expect challengers to benefit more from their campaign efforts than incumbents – but in a multi-party world, challengers representing some parties may enjoy greater campaign benefits than challengers from other parties.

We also differentiate between seats defended by a party and whether the incumbent MP stands again for re-election or retires. In the former contests, we expect limited campaign effects, in line with Jacobson's (1978) classic results. In the latter, however, we expect the incumbent party to benefit from its local campaign since it can use the campaign to promote a new and unknown candidate to the electorate.

In the remainder of the article, we explore these expectations using data on constituency campaigning at the 2015 UK General Election. We analyse variations in the impact of the intensity of local campaigns according to the nature of the contest in each constituency. Did incumbent parties and MPs benefit less from their expenditure than their challengers, for example, and were there inter-party differences in the size of those benefits?

## **'Short campaign' constituency spending in 2015**

The United Kingdom's three major parties – Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat – all had good reason to focus on their constituency campaign strategies for the country's 2015 General Election.<sup>2</sup> While pre-election opinion polls suggested a close race between Labour and the Conservatives, every vote potentially counted, especially in marginal seats which might change hands if one party out-campaigned another. At the start of the year, Labour's leader set his party the goal of talking to up to 4 million voters over the course of the campaign (Watson, 2015).<sup>3</sup> The Conservatives, meanwhile, targeted 80 key constituencies which they had to win to gain an overall majority in the House of Commons: 40 seats where they had lost narrowly in 2010 and 40 they held narrowly then – and in the former group, they targeted seats held not only by their Labour opponents but also by the Liberal Democrats, their coalition partners in the 2010–2015 government (Bale and Webb, 2015). While Labour's approach emphasised 'volume', contacting as many voters as possible, the Conservatives micro-targeted their message to suit particularly salient groups of voters (Barwell, 2016; Cowley and Kavanagh, 2015: 255ff). As for the Liberal

Democrats, polls suggested that the costs of joining the Conservatives in the 2010–2015 coalition government would be severe. A sharp fall in the party's vote and hence in its parliamentary representation was therefore anticipated. They turned their attention to holding on to those seats they already held, in the hope that a mixture of campaign effort and incumbency effects might mean fewer losses than the polls suggested.

We follow previous studies by using candidate spending during the so-called 'short campaign' (the 4 weeks or so of the official election campaign, from the date on which parliament is prorogued to polling day itself). While not a perfect measure of campaign effort by each party in each seat (the increasingly important work of unpaid volunteers, for instance, is not well captured in the data: Fisher et al., 2014), campaign spending does correlate well with other independent measures of campaign effort (Denver and Hands, 1997b: 242ff; Johnston and Pattie, 2006b: 202; Pattie et al., 1994). The more parties spend, the more intensive other aspects of their campaigns, such as the number of activists recruited to undertake doorstep canvassing. The spending data also have the distinct advantage of providing extensive coverage, in a standardised form, of almost all campaigns across the United Kingdom. Candidates are required by law to provide local Electoral Administrators (local government officials charged with running elections in their areas) details of their campaign expenditures for both the short and 'long' campaigns (the latter begins 4 months before Parliament is prorogued). In recent years, Returning Officers have then lodged the data with the United Kingdom's Electoral Commission, which makes them available in a standardised form to all interested citizens.<sup>4</sup> We draw on these data in the following analyses.

Before embarking on those analyses, however, we need to discuss two quirks of the data. First, local spending on both the long and short campaigns is legally capped, with potentially severe penalties for candidates who exceed the spending limits.<sup>5</sup> Those limits are a function of each constituency's electorate and of whether the constituency is a borough (urban) or county (more rural) seat.<sup>6</sup> We therefore express each candidate's 2015 campaign expenditure as a percentage of the legal maximum in their seat. Second, while candidates are legally required to declare their spending to Returning Officers, there is no equivalent requirement for Returning Officers to forward this information to the Electoral Commission. In previous elections, this was unproblematic. Yet, in 2015, it seems that some Returning Officers did not forward spending data to the Electoral Commission;<sup>7</sup> in these instances, the data show a candidate as having spent £0 on the campaign. While a few constituency campaigns really do spend nothing (usually in seats where the party has no chance of winning, but where it wants to be seen to field a candidate), more candidates for the three leading parties are recorded as making a £0 return in 2015 than was the case in 2010.<sup>8</sup> We are therefore unable to differentiate between so-called 'paper candidates' (for whom a £0 return is genuine) and real candidates who did spend on their 2015 campaigns but whose spending did not make it into the Commission's data. We err on the side of caution and treat all £0 returns as missing data.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1 shows how much the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats spent on their short campaign in those seats for which we have reasonable data. Conservatives spent £4.8 million on their 'short' campaigns, compared to £4.1 million by Labour and £1.8 million by Liberal Democrats. How widely this expenditure was spread across constituency campaigns varied substantially among the parties, as indicated not only by the mean and median levels of spending but also by the percentage of constituencies in each spending bracket. The average Conservative constituency party spent 57% of the permitted maximum, compared to 50% for the average Labour constituency party and just 25%

**Table 1.** The distribution of constituency short campaign spending, 2015.<sup>a</sup>

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
Total spent on short campaign (£)	£4,839,165	£4,082,107	£1,847,826
	% of seats		
Short campaign spending as % of limit	%	%	%
0.1%–10.0%	5.5	11.9	46.6
10.1%–20.0%	12.2	13.7	20.6
20.1%–30.0%	8.1	9.5	9.2
30.1%–40.0%	7.2	6.8	4.6
40.1%–50.0%	8.9	8.6	2.7
50.1%–60.0%	7.0	6.1	1.7
60.1%–70.0%	8.7	10.7	1.0
70.1%–80.0%	11.1	9.3	1.3
80.1%–90.0%	12.9	10.0	1.9
90.1%–100.0%	18.3	13.4	10.5
Mean short spend as % of limit	56.7	49.9	24.7
Median short spend as % of limit	61.6	49.6	10.7
Standard deviation short spend as % of limit	30.2	31.0	29.7
N	596	590	524

<sup>a</sup>Estimates exclude seats where candidates' returns are recorded as £0 or where returns exceed the legal limit.

for the average Liberal Democrat. Most Liberal Democrat constituency parties spent very little: Two-thirds spent less than 20% of the limit. The party's constituency campaign resources, such as they were, were intensely focused in just a few seats: 12% of local campaigns spent more than 80% of the limit. Far fewer Labour and Conservative constituency parties spent almost nothing, while rather more spent close to the maximum: 18% of Conservative and 26% of Labour constituency parties spent under 20% of the limit, while 31% of Conservative and 23% of Labour local parties spent over 80% of the limit.

To examine how the parties targeted their campaign resources, we regressed each party's 2015 short campaign expenditure on the marginality and status of each seat, as well as their interaction. Marginality is measured by the absolute difference between a party's 2010 vote share in a seat and the share of either (where the party won the seat) the party in second place or (where the party lost) the winning party. Thus, the most marginal seats for each party have scores closest to zero. Seat status differentiates among three types of contest for each party: seats where it lost in 2010 and was a challenger in 2015, seats it won in 2010 and was defending in 2015 but where its MP had retired (we term these 'open' contests, in keeping with usage in the American literature), and seats won in 2010 where its MP was seeking re-election (incumbent seats).<sup>10</sup> The interaction allows us to test whether the effect of seat marginality is conditional on whether a party is contesting as an incumbent, challenger, or open seat.

The results from our campaign spending regression models for each party are presented in Table 2 and graphically in Figure 1.<sup>11</sup> First, all three parties' constituency campaign resources were targeted rationally, on the most marginal races. The negative coefficients for absolute marginality in 2010 reveal that the parties spent less on safer, incumbent-held seats.<sup>12</sup> For instance, where incumbents stood for re-election, Conservative incumbents

**Table 2.** The effect of seat marginality and status on campaign spending by all three parties in 2015: OLS regressions (standard errors in brackets).

	Short campaign spending in 2015		
	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem
Constant	85.06** (2.60)	69.93** (2.43)	95.84** (4.21)
2010 Seat marginality	-0.74** (0.12)	-0.35** (0.11)	-0.27 (0.26)
Party position (comparison = incumbent: won 2010, MP stands again)			
Challenger (lost 2010)	-15.33** (3.45)	18.39** (3.26)	-53.98** (4.69)
Open (won 2010, MP retires)	-0.20 (8.46)	4.36 (6.85)	-13.54 (10.13)
Marginality × Challenger	-0.57** (0.15)	-1.42** (0.13)	-0.71* (0.27)
Marginality × Open	0.28 (0.33)	-0.17 (0.29)	0.91 (0.73)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.48	0.59	0.67
N	596	590	524

OLS: Ordinary Least Squares.

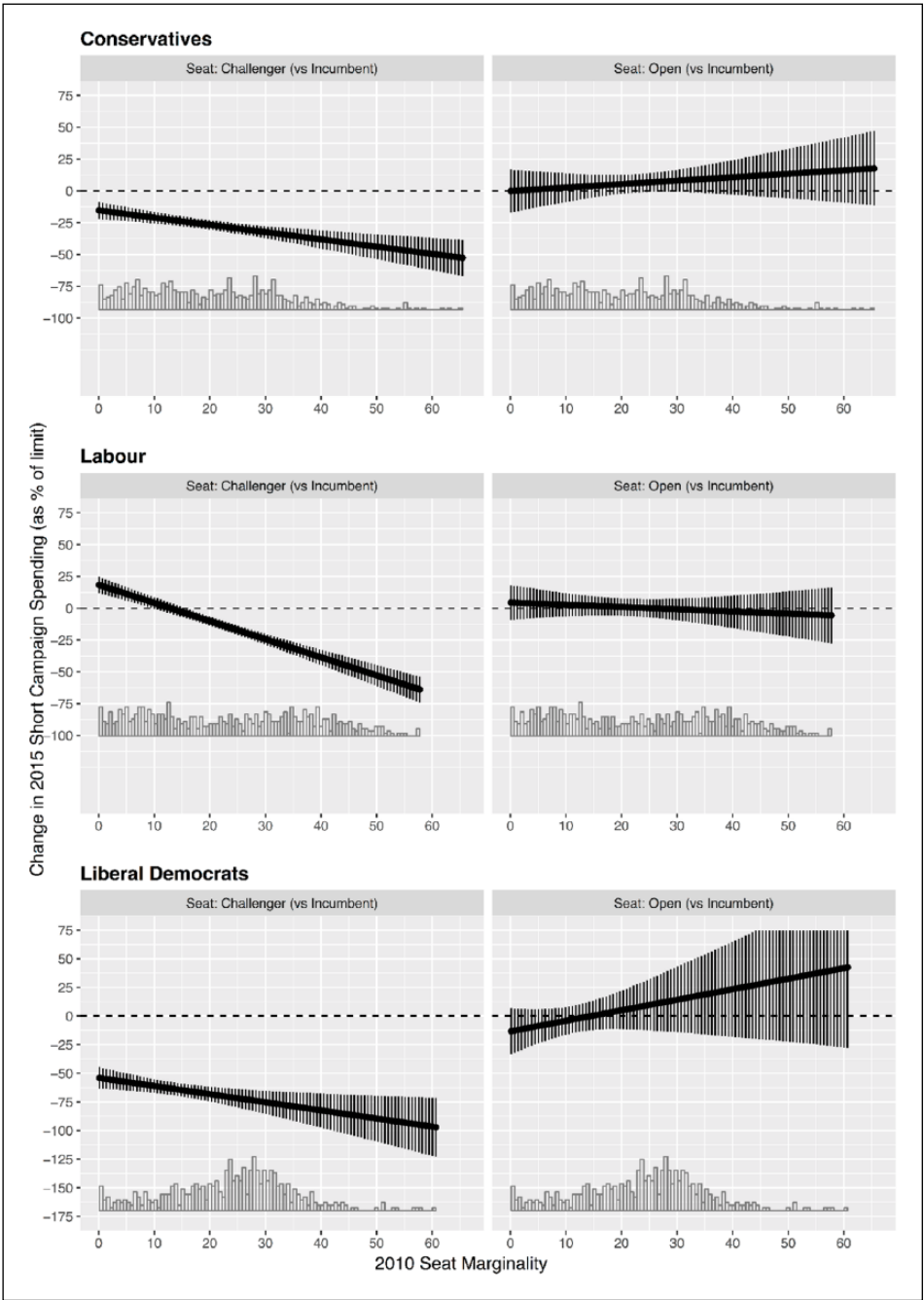
\*Significant at  $p = 0.05$ ; \*\*significant at  $p = 0.01$ .

spent 0.74 less (as a percent of the legal limit) for each additional point in marginality; the coefficients for Labour and the Liberal Democrats are -0.35 and -0.27, respectively (although the latter coefficient is not statistically significant). For challengers, the effects of seat marginality are magnified: the coefficient is -1.31 for Conservatives, -1.42 for Labour, and -0.98 for Liberal Democrats. Finally, the effects of open seats seem to fall somewhere in between, but none of the interactions are statistically significant.

Figure 1, which plots the marginal effects, confirms that deploying substantial campaign resources in the 'wrong' seats was not an issue for any of the three major parties in 2015. All three spent relatively little in seats where they were far behind the winner and more in seats where they lost in 2010 but where the margin of defeat was small. Indeed, for all three, there is a fairly clear divide in the seats they had lost in 2010 between those where they spent little and those where they spent a lot: they spent a middling amount in relatively few 'lost' seats. These seats were divided into places where there was a reasonable prospect of making a gain and places where there was not. While intense campaigns were fought in the former, only limited campaigns were fought in the latter. And when we look at seats each party won in 2010 and was defending in 2015, there is a clear tendency to spend more in seats that were won by narrow margins than in seats where the party was safe – although more so for Labour and the Conservatives than for the Liberal Democrats, who had fewer truly safe seats and were fearful that their poor poll ratings might presage defeats for even their best-established MPs.

## The effects of campaign spending on vote share

But did this campaign effort make a difference? Our initial models analyse the parties' 2015 vote shares across all constituencies (Table 3). Each model controls for that party's 2010 constituency vote share, taking into account the tendency for parties' vote shares at one election to correlate strongly with their vote at previous contests (thereby capturing many of the underlying influences on the geography of the vote other than campaign effects). Not surprisingly, the coefficients for 2010 vote share are invariably positive and



**Figure 1.** Effect of seat marginality on campaign spending conditional on seat status.

statistically significant. The better a party performed in a seat in 2010, the better (relatively) it performed there again in 2015.

Turning to the local campaign impacts, there are striking disparities between Labour and the other parties. The more that the Conservative and Liberal Democrats spent (the



**Table 3.** The effect of short campaign spending on vote share: OLS regressions (standard errors in brackets).

	Party % vote share 2015		
	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem
Constant	-2.21** (0.41)	3.70** (0.73)	-4.76** (0.44)
Party % vote share 2010	1.03** (0.01)	0.98** (0.03)	0.40** (0.02)
Party % short campaign spend, 2015	0.04** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.14** (0.01)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.95	0.78	0.85
N	596	590	524

OLS: Ordinary Least Squares.

\*Significant at  $p = 0.05$ ; \*\*significant at  $p = 0.01$ .

great majority of which went on printed materials to be distributed to potential voters<sup>13</sup>), the more votes they gained, controlling for their past strength in the seat. Other things being equal, every extra percentage point towards the legal limit spent by the Conservatives raised their vote share by an average of 0.04 percentage points. This represents a 4 percentage point increase in vote share from spending nothing to spending right up to the limit. Such shifts are sufficient to win in marginal seats where the party lost in 2010 (or to lose in a seat won then).

For the Liberal Democrats, the positive effect of campaign effort was much greater. Other things being equal, increasing spending from nothing up to the legal limit would increase its vote share in a seat by an average of 14 percentage points. Given the party's dismal performance in 2015, however, this apparent success should be interpreted in a more muted light: rather than indicating strength, it suggests that in general the harder the Liberal Democrats campaigned in a seat, the less ground they lost in 2015. The campaign, where it was in full swing, helped minimise the damage.

Both patterns are consistent with previous research (Pattie and Johnston 2003, 2009; Fisher et al., 2011; Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005). But the most striking result is the absence of a constituency campaign effect for Labour in 2015: the coefficient is very small and falls well short of conventional levels of statistical significance. This result is unusual, to say the least, as Labour's constituency campaigns have generally (2005 excepted: Pattie and Johnston, 2009b) worked in the party's favour at elections since at least the late 1980s (Johnston, 1987; Denver and Hands, 1997b).

All three parties had counted on their local campaigns in 2015. All had good reasons, based on past (and long-standing, in the case of Labour and the Liberal Democrats) experience, to suspect that local effort in key seats might help them outperform predictions from national polls. But these expectations were vindicated for only two of the parties. Why was Labour's 2015 constituency campaign so conspicuously different in its effectiveness from its two rivals? Anecdotal evidence suggests that the issue was not a simple function of resources. Rather, the parties seemed to have differed in how they targeted their messages. Labour focussed on volume of contacts in 2015, while the Conservatives especially deployed micro-targeting, with different messages aimed at different voter demographics within marginal seats (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2015: Chapter 10). To some extent, then, the differences in campaign effectiveness may reflect the relative finesse with which parties deployed their resources. But it may also be a function of the rather different tactical challenges facing each party in those seats where it was a challenger,

**Table 4.** The effect of short campaign spending and seat status on vote share: OLS regressions (standard errors in brackets).

	Party % vote share 2015		
	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem
Constant	8.49** (1.49)	26.21** (2.65)	20.63** (3.87)
Party % vote share 2010	0.88** (0.02)	0.62** (0.04)	0.33** (0.02)
Party % short campaign spend 2015	0.00 (0.01)	-0.11** (0.02)	-0.04 (0.04)
Party position (comparison = Incumbent: won 2010, MP stands again)			
Challenger (lost 2010)	-8.52** (1.26)	-21.02** (2.55)	-23.29** (3.80)
Open (won 2010, MP retires)	5.01* (2.37)	1.41 (4.12)	-35.39** (5.41)
Short spend × Challenger	0.06** (0.01)	0.22** (0.03)	0.13** (0.04)
Short spend × Open	-0.09** (0.03)	-0.07 (0.06)	0.31** (0.06)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.96	0.81	0.91
N	596	590	524

OLS: Ordinary Least Squares.

\*Significant at  $p = 0.05$ ; \*\*significant at  $p = 0.01$ .

where it was defending, and so on. Labour and the Conservatives, for instance, had to defend seats they currently held and had to take others from their rivals if they were to obtain a Parliamentary majority. The Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, had little prospect of winning new seats, and the polls suggested that going into the election they faced losing many of those seats they held. Did seat status affect how effective each party's local campaign was?

## Campaign effects for incumbent MPs, incumbent parties and challengers

To answer that question, this section turns to the effects of context (in particular, the contrast between being the incumbent party in a seat and being a challenger) on the effectiveness of constituency campaigning. We repeat the regression models reported in Table 3, but add dummy variables for challenger and open seats: the comparators for these dummies are incumbent seats (as defined above). To test whether constituency campaigns had different effects in various local tactical contexts, we also include terms for the interaction between each dummy variable and the party's short campaign spending.

The results show that past party strength remains (unsurprisingly) a clear predictor of 2015 vote share in a constituency (Table 4) and is controlled for in all subsequent discussions.<sup>14</sup> In line with past research, incumbent MPs standing for re-election enjoy some electoral advantages (Cain et al., 1987; Wood and Norton, 1992), but the size of that incumbent advantage varies. When spending is held at its minimum, Conservative MPs standing for re-election enjoyed a relatively modest advantage of 8.5 percentage points over candidates fighting in seats where their party was a challenger. Labour incumbents did rather better, gaining an extra 21 percentage points on average over Labour challengers. And Liberal Democrat MPs seeking re-election enjoyed by far the most substantial incumbency advantage, an average boost of 23.3 percentage points (a finding also in line with past research: Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005; Smith, 2013; Whiteley et al., 2006). In open seats, however, the three parties' candidates fared rather differently compared to their

counterparts standing for re-election. Conservative candidates did slightly better (by about 5 percentage points on average) in 2015 than did Conservative MPs who sought re-election when spending is set to its minimum. For Labour, the average difference in vote share between open seat candidates and incumbent MPs was very small and not statistically significant. But the Liberal Democrats' sitting MPs seeking re-election fared much better (by 35.4 percentage points on average) than their candidates in open seats: given the party's travails in 2015, being a well-known MP helped minimise losses (although still not enough to prevent several prominent Liberal Democrats losing their seats).

Our main interest, however, is in how effective campaign efforts were in different contexts. The interaction terms can be used to test for these relationships, and we have used the results for each party to visualise the marginal effects of short campaign spending on party support in 'challenger' and 'open' seats, compared to 'incumbent' seats.

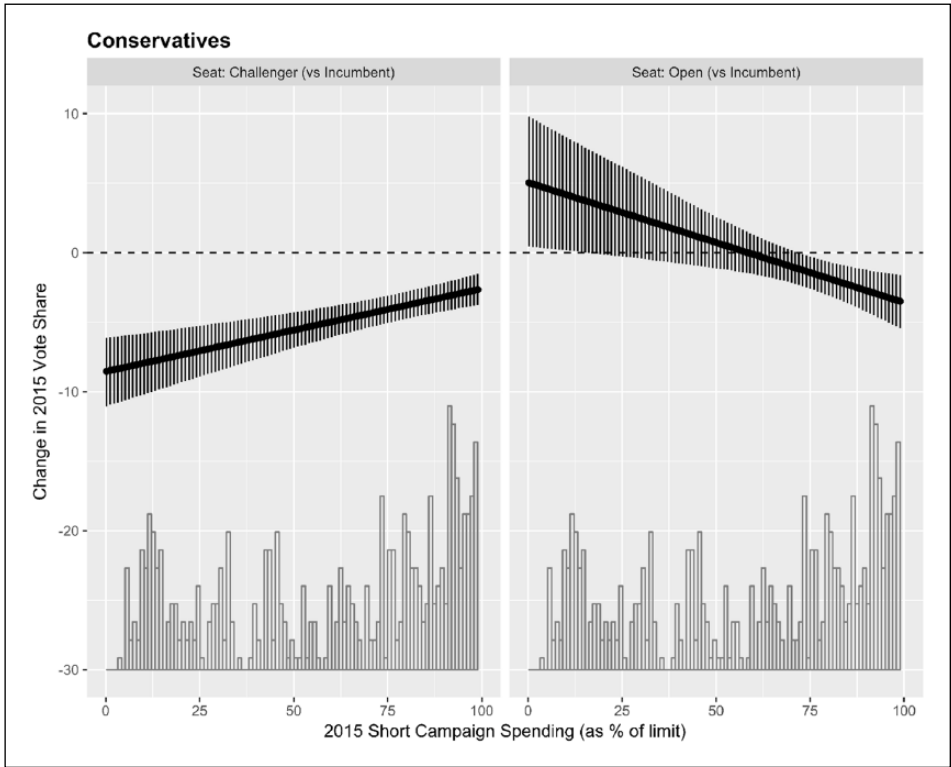
The main effect for spending shows whether it influenced the outcome in seats where each party was defending a seat and where the incumbent MP was standing again. Combining the coefficient for the main effect of spending with each interaction term gives the effect of spending on 2015 vote share (controlling for 2010 vote), where each party was a challenger going into the 2015 election and where it was defending a seat but had a new candidate.

Consistent with past research, stemming back to Jacobson's (1978, 1990) seminal work, spending by incumbent MPs does not seem to have helped them (and in some cases, more intensive campaigning was associated with poorer performances at the ballot box). For Conservative and Liberal Democrat incumbents, there was no significant campaign effect. For Labour incumbents, more dramatically, the effect was negative – and substantial. The more Labour incumbents spent on their re-election, the worse they did (and, other things being equal, the vote share for a Labour incumbent who spent the maximum possible would have been, on average, 11 percentage points lower than would have been the case for another incumbent who spent nothing on their re-election). There is almost certainly a selection effect here. Incumbents, as we have seen, enjoy advantages. As a result, they almost certainly only have to campaign hard when faced with more effective and intense campaigns from their local rivals and hence are already in some trouble politically. For Labour incumbents, campaigning hard was a sign of local weakness, therefore, and not a sign of strength.

Unlike incumbents seeking re-election, all three parties' challengers enjoyed benefits from their campaign efforts (all the relevant interaction terms in Table 4 are positive and statistically significant). Again, this is consistent with past research. Campaigning raises challengers' profiles: the harder they worked in 2015, the more they stood to gain.

The benefit was smallest for Conservative challengers: other things being equal, every extra percentage point spent boosted their vote share by an average of 0.06 percentage points (this combines the main effect for short campaign spend with the effect for the short spend  $\times$  challenger interaction: slope =  $0.00 + 0.06\text{Challenger}$ ). It was more substantial for Liberal Democrat challengers, whose vote shares increased by an average of 0.09 percentage points (slope =  $-0.04 + 0.13\text{Challenger}$ ) for every percentage point increase in short campaign spending. And it was largest for Labour challengers, whose average vote 'boost' from each percentage point increase in spending was 0.11 percentage points (slope =  $-0.11 + 0.22\text{Challenger}$ ).

It is also striking that the average 'boost' Labour challengers obtained from their 2015 constituency campaigns was roughly the same size (albeit in the opposite direction) as the effect of local campaign spending on Labour incumbents' vote shares (0.11 vs  $-0.11$ ).



**Figure 2.** Effect of campaign spending on vote share conditional on seat status (Conservatives).

This gives us some insight into why Labour’s 2015 constituency campaign seemed to have no overall effect (see Table 2): the benefits enjoyed by the party’s challengers were cancelled by the disadvantages suffered by its incumbents.

The marginal effects are shown graphically in the ‘challenger versus incumbent’ graphs in Figure 2 (for Conservatives), Figure 3 (for Labour) and Figure 4 (for the Liberal Democrats). In each graph, the X-axis displays the amount spent on the short campaign, and the Y-axis shows the marginal effect on party vote share; the dashed horizontal line represents ‘incumbent’ seats, while the solid line shows the marginal effect of campaigning in ‘challenger’ seats. In addition, the figures show the 95% confidence intervals around the marginal effects and also show histograms of the number of seats at each point along the campaign spending axis.

In all three cases, the ‘challenger’ line is positive, showing that increased spending improved their marginal returns in terms of votes vis-à-vis their party’s incumbent MPs. For the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats (Figures 2 and 4), the challenger line (and its confidence interval) never crosses the ‘zero’ incumbent line, suggesting that as challengers spend more their marginal return in vote share approaches, but never equals, that of incumbents spending at the same level. For Labour, however, challengers and incumbent MPs spending at around 80% of the campaign limit enjoyed similar marginal returns (Figure 3). But for all three parties, the marginal effects of increased spending for ‘challenger’ candidates (shown on the vertical axes) are always negative, suggesting they do less well in vote share than incumbent candidates spending at the same level. But the gap

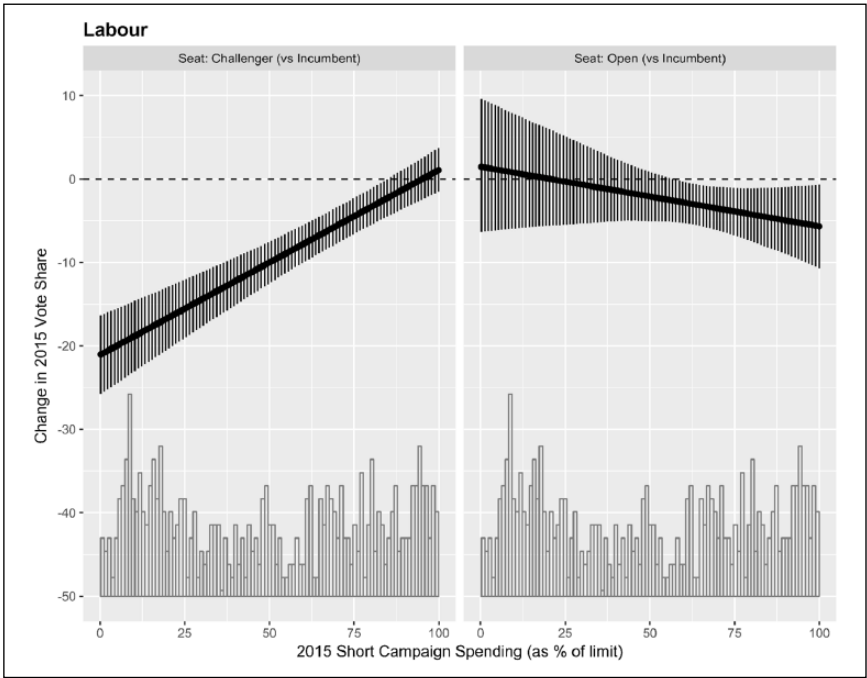


Figure 3. Effect of campaign spending on vote share conditional on seat status (Labour).

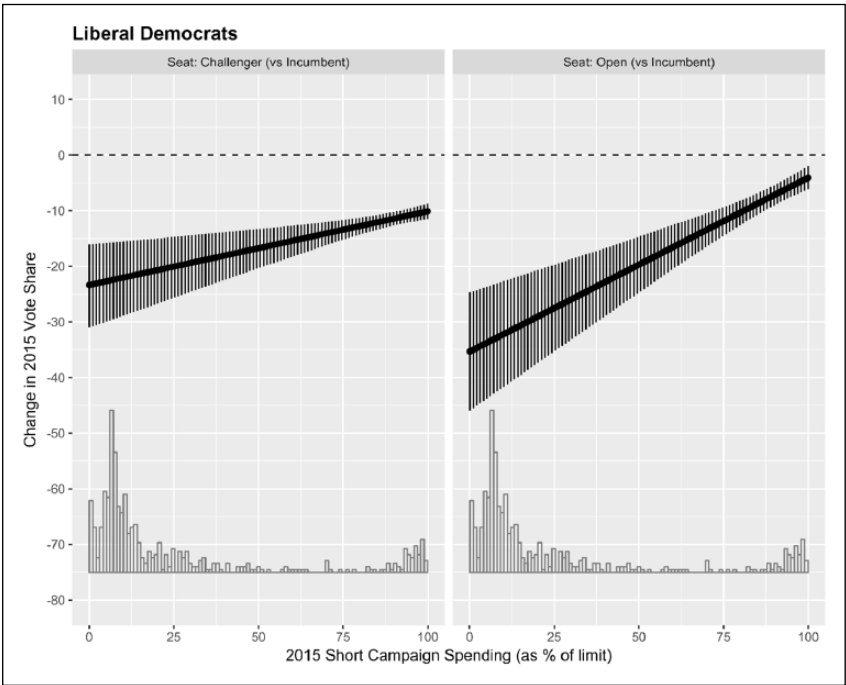


Figure 4. Effect of campaign spending on vote share conditional on seat status (Liberal Democrats).

between challengers and incumbents narrows in all three cases as spending increases (and at high levels of spending, Labour challengers catch up with their incumbent peers).

In open races, meanwhile, the three parties experienced rather different outcomes. New Conservative candidates standing in seats the party held actually experienced negative campaign effects. On average, every extra percentage point spent on their short campaigns was associated with a fall in vote share of 0.09 percentage points.

Campaign effects for Labour in that party's open races were not significantly different from those experienced by Labour incumbents. But since (as already seen) Labour incumbents' campaign effects were negative, this was not good news for the party. The harder it campaigned, the worse it did. On average, each extra percentage point spent by Labour on its open race short campaigns was associated with a drop of 0.18 percentage points in its vote share.

Both the Conservatives' and Labour's constituency campaigns in their open race seats had the effect predicted by Jacobson (1978, 1990), albeit applied to incumbent parties, not incumbent candidates. The harder they campaigned, the worse they did in vote share. Once again, the logic would seem to be that in seats a party already holds, its candidates only need to campaign relatively hard when they are under pressure from strong opponents – a sign of weakness, not strength.

But Liberal Democrat campaigns in that party's open races had a very different experience. For them, harder work on their local campaign yielded rich dividends, significantly boosting their vote shares. On average, every extra percentage point spent on an open Liberal Democrat race boosted the party's 2015 vote by 0.27 (slope =  $-0.04 + 0.31\text{Open}$ ) percentage points. Only a small number of Liberal Democrat MPs (10 of the 56) stood down before the 2015 election to create open races for the party, however. Even so, this implies that in these 'open' Liberal Democrat races the party's vote share would increase by 27 percentage points on average if it increased its campaign spending from nothing to the permitted limit. This is the largest 'campaign effect' discussed in this article. In 2015, the Liberal Democrats faced an electoral near-wipe-out as many voters punished them for joining the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010. Hard-fought local campaigns in seats the party was defending in 2015 could not prevent the steep decline in the party's support. But greater campaign efforts there did apparently prevent even deeper losses. And where the party fielded new candidates in open races, who were untainted by personal involvement in the coalition, that local campaign effort was even more effective in offsetting the general decline.

The graphs of the marginal effects of campaigning in open races, compared to incumbent MPs seeking re-election, reveal further nuances. The marginal effects for Labour and Conservative candidates in open races are negative, while those for Liberal Democrats are positive (relative to the effects for incumbents). But the confidence intervals reveal further detail. At relatively low levels of spending (below around 50% of the limit), the marginal effects for open races compared to incumbent races are indistinguishable for both Labour and Conservative campaigns (Figures 2 and 3: the relevant confidence intervals enveloping the 'incumbent' horizontal line). But at higher levels of expenditure (over 50% for Labour, over 75% for the Conservatives), the marginal effects on vote share begin to differ, with candidates in open races falling behind incumbents who spend at similar levels. For Liberal Democrats in open races, however, increasing spending always brings improving vote share relative to the party's incumbents seeking re-election (Figure 4). The effects are always negative, suggesting that, overall, Liberal Democrats in open races always do worse than Liberal Democrat incumbents. But the gap narrows rapidly as both sets of candidates spend more.

## Conclusion

The results discussed above throw new light on the debate over differential campaign effects for challengers and incumbents. As expected from past research, challengers benefitted from the intensity of their candidates' campaigns (basically, the amount spent on campaign literature), while at least some incumbents experienced negative campaign effects. The most widely cited explanation for this effect is that campaigning helps challengers by raising their profile, while incumbents (whether incumbent parties or candidates) already enjoy strong recognition within their seats and so have little to gain by campaigning more intensively. Incumbents only have to campaign hard, it is argued, when they face a strong challenge and so campaign more as their position weakens. Indeed, they may even see their vote fall more the harder they campaign (almost certainly because they are forced into more active campaigns by strong local challengers who threaten their hold on the seat).

But, in an electoral system with more than just two viable parties, a simple incumbent/challenger dichotomy does not fully capture the diversity of campaign effects. Where candidates were running as challengers, how viable their challenge was generally mattered – but not equally so for all parties. Similarly, where a party was defending a seat, whether or not the existing MP was seeking re-election affected the relationship between campaign effort and vote share. Incumbents seeking re-election either gained no advantage from their campaign (in the case of the Conservatives) or – as Jacobson (1978) argued – saw their vote share drop the more they campaigned. Incumbents campaigned harder where they faced stronger challenges from challengers, and as we have seen, challengers' spending boosted their vote share. But as the competition for vote share in a seat is a zero-sum game, an increase in vote share for the challenger is likely to result in a decreasing vote share for the incumbent. It isn't the incumbents' own campaigns which lose them votes: it is the challengers' campaigns which take votes from them. But where new candidates stood in seats their party was defending, they fared rather differently – and the difference depended on which party they represented. Conservative and Labour candidates in open races defended by the party saw their vote fall the harder they campaigned (and fell faster than for incumbent MPs from each party seeking re-election); where parties fielded new candidates in seats they were defending, their opponents were able to gain an advantage by intensive campaigning which the defending parties' own campaigns did not counter. But Liberal Democrat candidates in open Liberal Democrat races experienced strong positive benefits from their campaigning.

For Labour and Conservative candidates defending their parties' own seats in 2015, therefore, this meant that increasing levels of campaign spending widened the electoral advantage incumbent MPs seeking re-election enjoyed over new candidates in open races. But for the Liberal Democrats, the opposite was true: the more they campaigned, the more 'open seat' Liberal Democrat candidates caught up, in vote share, with Liberal Democrat incumbents.

To fully understand campaign effects, therefore, we need to go beyond analysing all seats together and differentiate incumbent from challenger effects. We also need to differentiate between party incumbency and candidate incumbency: 'incumbent seat' effects can be very different in open races compared to races where the existing MP runs again. And, in party systems with more than two parties, we need to take into account inter-party variations.

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## Notes

1. The analyses reported below examine the effects of campaign spending in almost all constituencies in Scotland, England and Wales. Northern Ireland is excluded from our analysis because it has a separate party system from the rest of the United Kingdom. The Speaker's constituency is also excluded, as by convention the main political parties do not campaign there.
2. In the following analyses, we focus only on the constituency campaigns for the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. We do not examine the effects of the Scottish Nationalist Party and Plaid Cymru constituency campaigns (or at the Greens or UK Independence Party (UKIP)). Our intention in this article is not to provide a comprehensive account of constituency campaigning at the 2015 UK General Election but to focus on the extent to which each party's campaign rewards varied depending on whether a seat was defended by the incumbent MP, was an 'open race' (where the party is defending but has a new candidate), or was one where the party was a challenger (i.e. its candidate did not win there at the preceding general election; subsequent by-elections are not taken into account). None of the other parties in 2015 had sufficient incumbent MPs standing for re-election (six for the Scottish National Party (SNP), two for Plaid Cymru and one each for the Greens and the UKIP), nor were there sufficient open races (none for the SNP, UKIP and the Greens, and only one for Plaid) to make this analysis possible.
3. <http://www.politics.co.uk/comment-analysis/2015/01/05/ed-miliband-election-campaign-launch-speech-in-full>
4. <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/uk-general-elections/candidate-election-spending>
5. Technically, all expenditure in constituency campaigns is incurred by candidates, not by local party organisations. Only candidates are mentioned in the legislation governing local campaign spending in the United Kingdom, and it is the candidates who are legally responsible for keeping within the spending limits, for returning their accounts, and so on.
6. In 2015, the 'long campaign' legal limit for a candidate was £30,700 plus 9p per elector in county seats and 6p per elector in a borough seat. During the 'short campaign', it was £8,700 plus 9p (for county) or 6p (if borough) per elector.
7. We have some anecdotal evidence that this may be a result of austerity measures affecting local government budgets during the 2010–2015 parliament, forcing local authorities to make savings wherever possible.
8. In 2015, 17.1% of Conservative candidates were recorded as spending £0 on their long campaigns, as were 5.5% on the short campaign: the equivalent percentages for 2010 were 12% and 1% respectively. For Labour, the percentages with £0 long and short campaign expenditures were 18.5% and 6.0% (compared to 13% and 2% in 2010). And for the Liberal Democrats, the 2015 percentages were 49.2% and 16.6% (compared to 24% and 6% in 2010).
9. The problem is particularly acute for long campaign spending, where we lose nearly 50% of Liberal Democrat candidates if we treat £0 expenditure as missing data. We concentrate on expenditure during the 'short' campaign, a period for which we have spending data for about 95% of Conservative and Labour candidates and for 85% of Liberal Democrat candidates. To further preserve our sample sizes, we look at the effect of each candidate's short campaign expenditure on his or her own vote and do not consider how each campaign affected other parties. We also omit a small number of candidates (three Labour and two Liberal Democrat) whose short campaign spending returns suggest they spent over the legal limit in their seat (most likely due to a reporting error). We have, however, rerun our analyses including these cases: our results are much the same, whether we include or exclude them.
10. In 2015, the Conservatives fought 268 constituencies where their incumbent MP ran again, 38 'open' races where they were defending a seat but with a new candidate, and 325 constituencies where they were the challenger. Labour, meanwhile, fought 218 incumbent races, 40 open races, and 373 challenger races. For the Liberal Democrats, there were 47 incumbent seats, 10 open seats and 574 challenger seats.
11. Models were fitted, and figures were produced, using R (R Development Core Team, 2013). Replication data and code are available for download on GitHub: <https://github.com/tkhartman/replication-uk-campaign-spending-2015>.
12. Since the models interact marginality with party position, the main effect for marginality indicates the effect of marginality when both 'party position' dummy variables have a value of 0. This result happens



when the party's candidate in the seat is the incumbent MP. The effects of marginality for challenger candidates is derived by adding the main effect of marginality with the coefficient for the interaction between 'challenger' and marginality. The effect of marginality in open races is derived in the same way, by adding the main effect coefficient for marginality to the coefficient for the interaction between open races and marginality.

13. Just under 67% of all candidate spending in 2015 went on the production of unsolicited materials (primarily leaflets) to be sent to electors (Electoral Commission, 2016: 33).
14. The interpretation of the main effects and interaction terms in these models is based on the same considerations as the analyses reported in Table 2.

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