The face of the party? Leader personalisation in British campaigns

Dr Caitlin Milazzo
caitlin.milazzo@nottingham.ac.uk
University of Nottingham
Nottingham NG7 2RD

Dr Jesse Hammond
jrhammon@nps.edu
Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, CA
United States

Abstract

The personal characteristics of political elites play an important role in British elections. While the personalisation of the media’s election coverage has been the subject of much debate, we know less about the conditions under which voters receive personalistic messages directly from elites during the campaign. In this paper, we use a new dataset that includes more than 3,300 local communications from the 2015 general election to explore variation in the personalisation of campaign messaging. We find that there is systemic variation in terms of where photographs of party leaders are included in election communications, which provides further evidence that campaign messages are deployed strategically to portray the candidate – and their party – in the best possible light.
Introduction

The personal attributes of political elites are now a common feature of electoral campaigns, even in the most party-centred of systems. The “personalisation” of politics is frequently attributed to two long-term factors: party dealignment and the changing nature of the media. With respect to the former, the ties between citizens and political elites have long been eroding in most western European democracies (e.g., Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000; Berglund et al., 2005). As the traditional basis of party support has weakened, electorates have become more volatile. Political elites have been forced to consider new ways to attract support, and voters have become more willing to consider other factors, such as the personality and image of political elites, when deciding how to cast their ballot. The ability of voters to access – and make use of – personalistic information has been greatly aided by the growing prevalence of electronic media, such as television, internet websites and newspapers, more recently, social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.¹

British elections are no exception. While there is some debate as to whether the media’s coverage of election campaigns has become more personalised over time,² there is widespread consensus that individual elites – and in particular, party leaders – now feature prominently in British media (see, Wring and Ward, 2010). There is also ample evidence that evaluations of party leaders influence voting behaviour (e.g., Clarke et al., 2004, 2009; Evans and Andersen, 2010).

¹ See McAllister (2007) for an excellent summary of these arguments.

² Dalton et al. (2000) find that the media coverage of candidate vis-à-vis parties increased between 1952 and 1997. Likewise, Deacon and Harmer (2014) conclude that presence of party leaders in newspapers has become more pronounced since 1951, particularly following the introduction of televised leadership debates in 2010. However, other studies conclude that the evidence in favour of increasing personalisation is mixed (see, Kriesi, 2012; Karvonen, 2010; Vliegenthart et al., 2011).
But, while much attention has been devoted to exploring the nature of personalistic election coverage in the media (e.g., Kriesi, 2012; Wring and Ward, 2010), we know less about the personalisation of campaign materials.

In this paper, we use a new dataset comprised of more than 3,300 leaflets from the 2015 general election to explore the conditions under which party leaders feature in campaigns communications. Building on the literature that points to the increasingly targeted nature of modern election campaigns in Britain (e.g., Denver et al., 2004; Fisher et al., 2015; e.g., Pattie et al., 1995), we contend that the inclusion of political leaders is a strategic choice. Specifically, we argue that the decision to include a party leader will depend on the perceived popularity of the leader, as well as the local context and characteristics of the party’s local candidate. Our findings suggest while that national popularity is the most significant determinant of whether party leaders feature in election communications, the local context also drives variation in the personalisation of campaign materials.

Our study is significant for two reasons. First, electoral communications – or “leaflets” – are the main avenue of communication between voters and political elites during the campaign (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016). In 2015, 40 per cent of all the funds spent on the campaign – more than £15,000,000 – were attributed to the production and dissemination of “unsolicited materials”, which includes election leaflets and other communications that are sent to voters via post. Moreover, nearly 90 per cent of the British Election Study respondents who were contacted

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3 In Britain, an increasing personalisation of politics can also be attributed to the growing presidentialisation of the British premiership, particularly under Tony Blair (Foley, 2000; Heffernan and Webb, 2005; Hennessy 1998).

4 This category of campaign spending includes “design costs and all other costs in connection with preparing, producing and distributing such material” (Electoral Commission, 2015). We use the terms “leaflets” and “electoral communications” interchangeably when referring to
by a political party during the campaign indicated that they had received a leaflet or letter from at least one party. And yet, despite the prominence of election communications, there has been very little study of the messages contained in these materials or how the material differs across constituencies.

Second, variation in campaign content can shape the considerations that voters emphasise. By “priming” voters with certain types of information, elites alter the accessibility of the criteria for making political choices (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Druckman, 2004). In doing so, elites influence the information that British voters weigh when evaluating their politicians (Stevens et al., 2011, Stevens and Karp, 2012). And, there is every reason to expect that variation in campaign message will have an effect. Scholars of British politics have repeatedly demonstrated that disparities in the intensity of local campaigns affect voter turnout (e.g., Fisher et al., 2011, 2015; Trumm and Sudulich, Forthcoming) and parties’ vote share (e.g., Cutts, 2014; Fisher et al., 2011; Johnston et al., 2012). If the intensity of local campaigns has an effect on what voters do, then the nature of those campaigns may also shape considerations they use when making decisions. In other words, if there is variation in where campaigns are disseminating personalistic appeals, then we should also expect parallel variation in the degree to which British voters rely on the personal characteristics of political elites when determining their vote choice (see, Takens et al., 2015).

unsolicited materials. Data on party spending is available at
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/.

5 This figure outweighs the number of people who were contacted via other mediums, such as telephone (12 per cent) or email (34 per cent), as well as the number of people who reported that a party worker visited them in person at home (34 per cent) or engaged with them in the street (11 per cent). Figures are taken from wave 6 of the 2014-2017 British Election Study Internet Panel.
In the following section, we present a new means of collecting data on the electoral communications distributed in British general elections that takes advantage of existing crowdsourced information. We then outline our expectations regarding variation in the personalisation of election communications. Finally, using our novel dataset, we gain new insights into how personalistic content is employed by examining the conditions under which photographs of party leaders are included in election leaflets.

**Studying variation in campaign messaging**

Election communications inform voters about the qualifications of the party’s local candidate and convey information about the policy positions of the candidate and/or the candidate’s party. By providing this information, elites help voters to process campaign information by distilling complex political issues to concise bits of information that are easily processed and assimilated (Panagopoulos, 2012). Indeed, providing such information is one of the core functions of local campaigns in Britain (Kavanagh, 1970). But nothing says that all voters receive the same information. Exploring variation in Labour party communications in Scotland during the 2001 and 2005 general elections, Shephard (2007) finds evidence that variation in messages used by Scottish Labour was correlated with the socio-demographic characteristics of constituencies. Similarly, Fisher (2005) compares the campaign messages of the Conservative Party, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats during the 2005 general election. His analyses suggest that there is variation in the messages employed by the three main parties in terms of both the issues mentioned and the tone of the messages.

Both of these studies provide evidence of systematic variation in campaign messaging, but they also demonstrate the challenges associated with studying electoral communications in Britain. Candidates and parties are legally required to report how much they spend on unsolicited materials, but they are not required to provide information about what they say in those communications. Therefore, researchers must rely on other approaches to study variation in campaign
messaging, such as contacting election agents (Shephard, 2007) or relying on volunteers located within each constituency to collect the election materials that they receive (Fisher, 2005). While we do not take issue with either approach, the high costs associated with these methods of data collection make it more difficult for communications to be monitored in many constituencies and across multiple elections. As a result, it is perhaps unsurprising that there have been no systematic analyses of election communications since these studies were published.

Creating a new dataset of crowdsourced election communications

Gathering data on electoral leaflets from a large number of constituencies would be prohibitively difficult – at least, without major outside funding – without the resources of the crowdsourced record-keeping website Electionleaflets.org (http://www.electionleaflets.org). This site is run by a non-profit organisation that urges users to photograph or scan leaflets they receive, and upload them to a centralised online repository. The result is a compilation of thousands of scanned leaflet images, making it the largest collection of British election communications in existence. Each leaflet contains information about the constituency in which each leaflet was received and the date it was uploaded.6

We limit our data collection to include only general election leaflets published by Britain’s most competitive parties, defined as six of the seven parties that were invited to participate in the leaders’ debates: the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the Green Party, and the Scottish National Party (SNP).7 These parties are unique in that they (1) have the resources available to engage in campaigning across a wide range of constituencies, and (2) are mainstream political parties with broad policy platforms

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6 See the supplementary appendix for further discussion of the data collection.

7 All 6 parties won more than one million voters and they were the only parties to exceed this threshold. For the seventh party, the Plaid Cymru, we did not acquire sufficient leaflets to perform a reliable analysis.
rather than single-issue parties relying on niche appeals. These parties have both the resources and the motivation to tailor their broader message differently to different local audiences. As such, they are a logical choice for our analysis of local communication strategies.

The final dataset contains 3,304 leaflets from the 2015 general election. While our dataset represents the largest collection of election leaflets to date, we acknowledge that it is a sample of convenience. These are self-reported data; there are no incentives or institutions encouraging citizens to upload their leaflets to the Electionleaflets repository, nor are parties required to report how many leaflets they disseminated. This means that we are unable to determine whether our sample is representative of larger population of leaflets distributed by parties in the run-up to the 2015 general election. That being said, we have no reason to believe that there is bias associated with the types of leaflets that individuals chose to upload. As we have stated previously, Electionleaflets is run by a non-partisan organisation. On the website, individuals are encouraged to upload any – and all – leaflets they receive, and we have no reason to believe that those who uploaded leaflets did so strategically. And while we are unable to determine whether our data constitutes a representative sample of the total number of leaflets sent out by parties, the distribution of leaflets across parties in the dataset is consistent with the patterns we observe in campaign spending.

Figure 1 summarises the distribution of leaflets across constituencies. Our dataset includes leaflets from 429 constituencies, or 68 per cent of all seats contested in Britain in the 2015

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8 The distribution of leaflets across parties is presented in Table A1.

9 The largest share of the leaflets in our dataset were authored by the Labour party, which spent more than £7,000,000 on unsolicited materials – a figure that outweighed the spending of any other party in this area. We have fewer leaflets for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, both of which spent less on leaflets and other unsolicited materials. Our dataset contains far fewer leaflets for the minor parties, but these parties spent considerably less on unsolicited materials.
When we compare candidate spending on unsolicited materials with the distribution of leaflets by party across constituencies, we see that for all parties except the SNP – for which we have relatively few leaflets – there is a positive correlation between candidate spending on unsolicited materials and the total number of leaflets we have for the candidate’s party in the seat. In other words, we have more communications from seats where candidates devoted a larger portion of their budget to unsolicited materials. This indicates that systematic bias in which leaflets are reported, and where, is unlikely.

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**Measuring personalisation in election communications**

In order to explore variation in the personalisation of election communications, we manually code additional information about each leaflet’s contents. ‘Personalised’ communications are those that related to individual political elites (Wattenberg, 1994). Building on the literature that stresses the importance of personal appearance and image, we measure the personalisation of a communication by determining whether a leaflet contains a personalised photograph.

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10 Our data records a mean of 7 leaflets per constituency, with a range from 1 to 133.

11 For each candidate we add the total spending on unsolicited materials during the long and short campaign and we compare this figure to the total number of leaflets we have for the candidate’s party in the constituency. The correlations for the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, Liberal Democrats, the Green Party, and UKIP are 0.32, 0.38, 0.50, 0.45, and 0.30, respectively. In all cases, the correlations are statistically significant at p < 0.01. For the SNP the correlation is -0.10, but p > 0.05. We note, however, that party spending on unsolicited materials can only be considered a rough proxy for the number of leaflets distributed. Some parties may spend more money on design, while others may favour a wider distribution.

12 For a further discussion of the potential bias issue and additional robustness checks, see the supplementary appendix.
The conventional wisdom is that the average person spends very little time considering political matters, and thus, those crafting election communications have limited space to convey their message. Photographs convey a great deal of information in a concise manner. In addition to information about demographic characteristics – such as age or gender – images also lead voters to form impressions and opinions about political elites (Verser and Wicks, 2006) or solicit an emotional response (Marcus and MacKuen, 1993). Moreover, even a quick glance a photograph is sufficient to form the type of first-impression judgements that are well-known to influence social decisions (e.g., Ambady and Rosenthal, 1993; Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994; Olson and Marshueltz, 2005). Not only are these ‘snap’ judgements accurate predictors of election outcomes (e.g., Todorov et al., 2005; Mattes and Milazzo, 2014), they are also resistant to change (Redlawsk, 2002). Finally, there is evidence that individuals who are less interested in politics may be particularly inclined to use appearance when determining their vote choice (Johns and Shephard, 2011; Lenz and Lawson, 2011). Therefore, even those not inclined to read their leaflets closely may be able to form an impression based on the photographs contained within them.

Two types of political elites should feature prominently in election communications: party leaders and candidates. In this paper, we focus solely on the presence of the party leader for two reasons. First, all else being equal, we would expect candidate photographs to be included frequently in leaflets. Leaders are more visible and well-known, and they are less in need of local publicity to raise their profile. Therefore, much of the campaign literature voters receive should be tailored to raising the profile and name recognition of the local candidate, who will be less familiar to voters. Second, the cost of any unsolicited materials that mention, or promote the election of, a local candidate will be counted against the candidate’s election spending. Of the more than 3,300 leaflets we examined, more than 80 per cent mentioned the party’s local candidate, Jim Messina, who signed on as a campaign strategy advisor to the Conservative Party in 2013, famously warned that average person thinks about politics for just four minutes a week.
and therefore, we can reasonably conclude that the vast majority of election communications are paid for by the candidates, rather than their party.\textsuperscript{14} Any attention devoted to – or images of – the party leader inevitably reduces the space that a candidate can devote to raising her own profile. Many candidates will have limited funds to devote to their campaign, and even candidates with a more extensive ‘war chest’ will face legally mandated spending limits. In either case, a candidate will need to be strategic on how she uses her communications.\textsuperscript{15} She may wish to publicise her party leader – particularly if the leader is perceived to be an electoral asset – but increasing her own profile will be her first priority. Therefore, the interesting question is not why a candidate would choose to include her own image, but rather, under what conditions would she choose to sacrifice space in her leaflets to devote attention to her party leader?\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} There is also less interparty variation in the presence of candidate photo across parties. Further information on the distribution of leader and candidate photographs across parties is included in the supplementary appendix.
\item \textsuperscript{15} It is important to note that candidates frequently do not have full control over the design of their election communications. Leaflet design is often overseen by the central party organisation. Candidates and local party elites may be able to personalise the content, but the design is often consistent across constituencies.
\item \textsuperscript{16} While including an image of the party leader may entail a trade-off in the terms of text, the decision to include an image of the party leader does not appear to reduce the chances that a candidate will include her own image. We find no evidence that leaflets featuring an image of the party leader are less likely to include an image of the party’s local candidate.
\end{itemize}
Leader personalisation in local campaigns: Theory and hypotheses

Margaret Thatcher’s resignation as Conservative Party leader – and Prime Minister – initiated a period of British politics that was characterised by increasing policy convergence between the elites of the Labour and Conservative parties. As it became more difficult for voters to differentiate between the major parties on policy grounds, scholars began to emphasise the importance of non-policy determinants on voting behaviour in Britain (see, e.g., Clarke et al., 2004, 2009; Evans and Tilley, 2012; Milazzo et al., 2012). Those that advocate the ‘valence’ theory of politics frequently stress the importance of party competence – the perceived ability of parties to deliver on their campaign commitments. All else being equal, voters prefer to cast their ballot for parties that are competent and that will govern effectively.

Clarke et al. (2009: 5) argue that “leader images serve as cost-effective heuristic devices or cognitive shortcuts that enable voters to judge the delivery capabilities of rival political parties”. They demonstrate that assessments of the parties’ leaders played an important role in explaining Labour’s success in in the 2005 general election. The importance of party leaders was reinforced during the 2010 general election when voters had their first opportunity to witness live debates between the leaders of Britain’s major parties, and empirical studies continue to document a strong relationship between leader performance and electoral choice (Clarke et al., 2011; Stevens et al., 2011).

The fact that leader assessments weigh heavily in voters’ minds cannot have escaped those crafting campaign content. Unfortunately, not all leaders are equally well-regarded, and the popularity of the party leader may be beyond a party’s control by the time the campaign is underway. If candidates and election agents are strategic when designing the content of their communications, then we would expect a leader’s national popularity to feature heavily in the decision to include the leader’s photograph. Furthermore, we would expect this to be true regardless of whether the leaflet is designed according to a central party template or crafted by a candidate according to her own design. Party elites who know their leader is at a personal disadvantage vis-à-
vis her opponents should be less likely to feature the leader on their materials in general, and candidates should be less willing to devote space to a leader who is unlikely to strengthen the candidate’s position with voters. Therefore, (H1) leaders who are popular nationally will be more likely to feature in election leaflets.

While national popularity should be the most important predictor of whether a leader appears in her party’s leaflets, we also expect that strategic elites will take into account a leader’s local appeal. As campaigns have modernised, parties become increasingly adept at targeting their resources (e.g., Fisher et al., 2011, 2015; Johnston et al., 2012) and content (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016). The popularity of party leaders varies considerably across the country, and even well-regarded leader may be more popular in some seats than they are in others. Prior to the start of the short campaign, David Cameron received more favourable ratings from BES respondents than Ed Miliband overall, but Cameron tended to be less popular than Miliband in northern constituencies, as well as those located in Scotland and Wales. Strategic elites should recognise that even a popular leader may be less of an asset in certain areas, and we would expect them to alter the content of their leaflets accordingly.

However, the leader’s local appeal should be more likely to shape leaflet content in marginal constituencies for two reasons. First, when small shifts in votes can alter the outcome of the race, political elites have a stronger incentive to take voters’ preferences into account when designing their campaign messages, because aligning their content with voters views may help them attract additional support. Given the importance of leader evaluations in shaping voter behaviour (Clarke et al., 2004, 2009 Clarke et al., 2011; Stevens et al., 2011), a candidate contesting a marginal seat should be more willing to emphasise a leader who is popular with her voters – even if it comes at the expense of her own content – in the hopes that the emphasis will prime voters to consider the leader’s positive image. If her leader is perceived be a liability, priming voters to consider a leader’s poor image could cost her critical votes in a competitive environment. Second, parties spend far more time gathering information in marginal seats. Local parties are often active
locally four to six months before the official campaign even begins (Johnston et al., 2012) or, in some cases, throughout the entire electoral cycle (Cutts, 2006; Cutts et al., 2012). Extensive door-step canvassing, leafleting, private polling, and public meetings give candidates and election agents more information about the views of their prospective voters, including voters’ views of party leaders.

In safe seats, the messages disseminated by parties have less potential to effect the outcome of the race. Local popularity may still feature in a candidate’s decision to include their leader in their leaflet, but including an unpopular leader is unlikely to have an effect on the outcome. As a result, candidates and local elites may be less concerned with ensuring a match between voters’ preferences and their communication content, and local elites are less likely to have nuanced information regarding voters’ views of the leaders. Therefore, (H2) **party leaders who are popular locally will be more likely to feature in election leaflets, but local popularity should have a stronger effect in marginal seats.***

While our arguments thus far relate to party or the context of the election, characteristics of the party’s local candidate may also influence the decision to include a photograph of the party leader. If the party’s candidate has a personal advantage, then election communications may be more likely to emphasise these traits. For example, MPs spend roughly half of their time working in their constituency or working on constituency issues (Rosenblatt, 2006). If the party’s candidate is the incumbent MP, then her election materials may stress actions taken on behalf of her constituents, as British voters tend to value such services (e.g., Cain et al., 1987; Wood and Norton, 1992; Heitshusen et al., 2005). Similarly we know that voters value local connections (Arzheimer and Evans, 2012; Campbell and Cowley, 2014; Childs and Cowley, 2011; Cowley, 2013). Despite of the fact that there is no local residence requirement for candidature in Britain, Johnson and Rosenblatt (2007) find that local ties are consistently amongst the most important characteristics that voters look for in their candidates. Given that electoral communications contain limited content, those designing election communications may not with to sacrifice space to the party
leader if the local candidate possesses the advantage of local connections. Thus, (H3) *party leaders will be less likely to feature in leaflets distributed in seats where the party’s candidate is an incumbent or has local connections to the community.*

**Predicting leader personalisation in election communications**

In order to test whether leaders who are perceived to be more popular nationally are more likely to appear in election communications, we compare the percentage of each party’s leaflets that contain an image of the party’s leader against the percentage of all BES respondents and party supporters who indicated that they “liked” the party leader (Figure 2). The comparison indicates that there is considerable variation in the degree to which party leaders appear in election communications and that this variation is broadly consistent with H1 – i.e., popular leaders appear more frequently.

Of the parties included in our dataset, the SNP was the most likely to feature its leader in its communications – Nicola Sturgeon appeared in two-thirds of SNP leaflets in our dataset. Sturgeon was also considerably more popular amongst all respondents and her own supporters than her counterparts. After Sturgeon, David Cameron was most likely to feature in his party’s communications. More than 40 per cent of the Conservative communications we examined include an image of the Prime Minister. He was also the second most popular leader amongst both his supporters and the public more generally.

[Figure 2 here]

The remaining leaders were considerably less popular and featured less frequently in their party’s leaflets, though the correlation between popularity and appearance is not perfect. The Green Party leader, Natalie Bennett, was less popular than the other leaders, and yet she featured

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17 The question reads, ‘How much do you like or dislike each of the following party leaders?’ Higher numbers indicate that the respondent had a more favourable impression of the leader.
in more than a third of the party’s communications in our dataset. In contrast, very few communications from Labour, UKIP, or the Liberal Democrats contain an image of the party’s leader. Arguably, these same parties also struggled most significantly with the unpopularity of their leader in the months preceding the general election. Nigel Farage was well liked by his supporters, but his evaluations amongst the general public were considerably less favourable. Whilst the Labour leader, Ed Miliband, was the third most popular leader overall, his ratings amongst his own supporters were lower than any other party leader except Nick Clegg. The Deputy Prime Minister was unpopular with both the public and his own supporters. The popularity of these two leaders – or lack thereof – amongst their own supporters would have made them a risky bet for campaigners seeking to use electoral communications to secure the support of those who had voted for the parties in previous elections.

That being said, all leaders experience varying levels of popularity across constituencies. We measure a leader’s local popularity by taking the average likeability rating of the leader across all BES respondents in the constituency.\(^\text{18}\) Table 1 presents the percentage of leaflets that include a photograph of the party leader in seats where the leader’s local likeability is higher than the median likeability for all leaders vs. seats where the leader’s local likeability falls below the median. We make this comparison for both marginal and safe seats.\(^\text{19}\) Consistent with H2, we find that local popularity has a stronger effect in marginal seats. Where the local context is competitive, there is nearly a 15-point difference between the two types of areas – i.e., 30.1 per cent

\(^{18}\) Table A2 in the appendix gives the average local likeability for each leader, as well as the standard deviation and the minimum/maximum values.

\(^{19}\) Marginal seats are defined as constituencies where the margin of victory was less than 10-points following the 2010 general election.
of leaflets from areas where the leader’s local popularity is above the median contain a photograph of the leader, compared to 15.3 per cent of leaflets in areas where the leader’s local likeability is below the median. In safe seats, the difference declines to 10.5 points.

Finally, we find limited support regarding the effect of candidate characteristics. If we take a simple measure of incumbency – the candidate is either an incumbent or she is not – we find that, contrary to H4, leaflets from incumbents are more likely to contain a photograph of the party leader.\textsuperscript{20} However, when we use an alternative measure of incumbency – the length of the incumbent’s tenure as an MP – we observe a different pattern. Just 15 per cent of leaflets from candidates who have served as the constituency MP for more than 10 years include a photograph of the party leader, compared to 25 per cent of leaflets for candidates who served as the incumbent MP for less than a decade. We also find no evidence that candidates with local ties were hesitant to devote space to their party leader in their leaflets. Indeed, candidates who discussed their connections to the local community were more likely to also include a photograph of their party leader than candidates who made no reference to their party leader.\textsuperscript{21}

The descriptive analyses above provide a preliminary test for our hypotheses regarding the personalisation of local campaign communications. However, the true value of our novel dataset is

\textsuperscript{20} Data on incumbency and tenure is taken from the Parliamentary Candidates UK 2015 General Election Candidates dataset, v1. Available at: www.parliamentarycandidates.org/ [accessed 1 July 2017].

\textsuperscript{21} We acknowledge that identifying local connections using leaflet content is an imperfect measure, but lack of overlap between our data and other sources of candidate data prevented us from employing alternative measures of local ties. However, given the well-known benefits associated with having local connections, we assume that candidates choose to emphasise any connections they may have with the community.
that it allows us to engage in a more sophisticated and systematic analysis of communication content. Table 2 reports results of a series of logistic regression models, where the dependent variable is coded “1” if the leaflet contains a photograph of the party leader, and “0” otherwise.\(^{22}\) These estimates confirm that popular leaders appear more frequently (H1); Nicola Sturgeon and David Cameron are considerably more likely to appear in their parties’ leaflets than the other leaders. In Table 3, we present the marginal effect of minimum/maximum change in each of the variables on the probability that a leaflet will contain a photograph of the party leader. An SNP leaflet is nearly 50 percentage points more likely to include a photograph of the leader than a communication from a Labour party elite, while Conservative Party communications are 25 percentage points more likely to include such an image. For the parties with the least popular leaders – i.e., UKIP, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats – there are only modest difference in the likelihood that leader’s photograph would appear in the election communications. Taken together, the predicted values and the model fit statistics indicate that party-level differences account for most of the variation in – and are the strongest predictors of – leader personalisation.

[Tables 2 and 3 here]

Even when we control for party-level effects, we still find interesting differences in across constituencies. The multivariate analyses confirm that leader popularity has a stronger effect in marginal seats (H2). The coefficient associated with local liability – the effect of local liability

\(^{22}\) In supplementary analyses, we re-estimate our main models in two way. First, we limit our analysis to include only those leaflets where the candidate is mentioned by name. While this is an imperfect of measure of whether a leaflet is disseminated by candidate, it gives us a conservative measure of the leaflet’s authorship. Second, we use a Heckman selection model to account for the fact that certain types of constituencies may be more likely to ‘select’ into our dataset. The results of both sets of analyses support the findings from our original analysis and our conclusions remain unchanged.
when the margin of victory is equal to zero – is positive and statistical significant, indicating that leaders with more positive local ratings are more likely to appear in leaflets in marginal seats. The predicted values show that popular leaders are nearly 13 points more likely to appear in leaflets received in marginal seats than unpopular leaders.\textsuperscript{23} The same pattern is evident in safe seats, but the differences are more modest.

Finally, we find little support for our arguments regarding the effect of candidate characteristics (H3). Once we control for party-level differences and the effect of the local context, we find that candidates with local ties are more likely to include a photograph of their party leader, but we find little evidence that incumbency has an effect on leader personalisation, regardless of how incumbency is measured.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In this paper, we present a new dataset of British electoral communications collected during the 2015 general election campaign. The dataset represents the largest collection of British election communications to date, and it provides a new mechanism for exploring variation in the campaign behaviour of British parties. We use the dataset to explore variation in the personalisation of the communications and find that popular leaders are more likely to appear in their party’s leaflets, particularly in marginal seats. Our findings are significant because they provide additional insight into important variation in the content of campaign material. These findings provide further evidence that not only are parties strategic in how they spend their money across constituencies, but they are also strategic in what they say to voters in those seats.

\textsuperscript{23} To identify a marginal and safe seat, we take the 10\textsuperscript{th} and 90\textsuperscript{th} percentiles of the margin of victory following the 2010 general election. This equates to a margin of victory of 3.6 and 34.2, respectively. Our substantive conclusions remain unchanged if we use the minimum and maximum values of the margin of victory.
While our data offer a unique and important window into the communication strategies of British parties, we do acknowledge the limitations associated with the data. First, as discussed previously, these are self-reported data, meaning that we have no control over who uploads leaflets or where they are uploaded. However, supplementary analyses demonstrate that our results remain robust after controlling for a wide variety of potentially biasing factors. Second, while our dataset includes a large number – and a wide range – of electoral communications, this is nowhere near a complete count of leaflets distributed during the campaign. While there are no official figures of election communication distribution, based on a survey of election agents, Johnston et al. (2012) estimate that the main parties distributed 27-35 million leaflets and communications prior to the 2010 general election. Many of these leaflets would have been of the same design, distributed to households across the country, but we acknowledge that our data captures only a small portion of the leaflets distributed. The nature of our sample of convenience means that we must be cautious about drawing deterministic conclusions about the larger population of leaflets and parties’ behaviour more generally. Finally, we are unable to determine who received the leaflets or why. British parties have become adept at using demographic data to personalise campaign materials (see, Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016). Leaflets frequently ask voters to respond to questions about their views, while telephone banks and canvassers continually collect information about voters they contact. As a result, the profile of the individual receiving the material – rather than the characteristics of the constituency where the material is disseminated or the traits of the party’s local candidate – now plays a more significant role in determining the content of election leaflets than it did previous elections.

Despite these limitations, there are currently no other data available that allow us to explore messaging contained in these materials across a large number of constituencies in recent elections. A representative sample would certainly be preferable, but nevertheless, we still contend that our sample of convenience provides better insights than no sample at all. Election com-
Communications are such a key point of interaction between voters and political elites during an election, that failure to gain insight into these messages leaves a significant gap in our understanding of how campaigns are conducted. More importantly, our data provide a unique avenue to explore the variation in the extent to which voters in different constituencies receive personalised information, and future research should consider whether voters in constituencies that receive a higher volume of personalised information are more likely to rely on this information when casting their ballots.
### Appendix

Table A1. Distribution of election leaflets by party

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>22.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>11.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>891</td>
<td>26.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lib Dem</td>
<td>727</td>
<td>22.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKIP</td>
<td>467</td>
<td>14.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,304</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A2. Distribution of local likeability by party leader

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bennett</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>6.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>6.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clegg</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farage</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>6.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miliband</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sturgeon</td>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>7.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Evans, Geoff, and James Tilley. 2012. “How Parties Shape Class Politics: Explaining the


Figure 1. Distribution of leaflets by constituency
Figure 2. Leader personalisation and likeability, by party

Source. Likeability data is taken from wave 4 of the 2014-2017 British Election Study Internet Panel.
Table 1. Differences in leader personalisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Leader photograph included (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marginal seats</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High local likeability</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low local likeability</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>+14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Safe seats</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High local likeability</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low local likeability</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>+10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Incumbent</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>+3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tenure in parliament</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-10 years</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Candidate has local ties</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>+8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. All differences are statistically significant at p < 0.01.
Table 2. Logistic regression model of leader personalisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Party only</th>
<th>Local context only</th>
<th>Candidate traits only</th>
<th>Full model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party (ref: Labour)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>2.116** (0.146)</td>
<td>1.928** (0.147)</td>
<td>-0.740** (0.230)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrat</td>
<td>-0.740** (0.230)</td>
<td>-0.753** (0.232)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>3.078** (0.248)</td>
<td>2.913** (0.276)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKIP</td>
<td>0.422* (0.192)</td>
<td>0.588** (0.205)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>1.756** (0.167)</td>
<td>1.838** (0.175)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local popularity</td>
<td>0.639** (0.105)</td>
<td>0.301** (0.107)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 Margin of victory</td>
<td>-0.008 (0.020)</td>
<td>-0.003 (0.018)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local popularity*Margin of victory</td>
<td>-0.000 (0.005)</td>
<td>-0.003 (0.004)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>0.345** (0.099)</td>
<td>0.158 (0.125)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP more than 10 years</td>
<td>-0.286 (0.179)</td>
<td>-0.286 (0.179)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.286 (0.179)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local ties</td>
<td>0.589** (0.094)</td>
<td>0.537** (0.093)</td>
<td>0.526** (0.103)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-2.478** (0.125)</td>
<td>-3.793** (0.434)</td>
<td>-1.704** (0.066)</td>
<td>-1.573** (0.057)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-3.597** (0.450)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>3.304</td>
<td>3.304</td>
<td>3.304</td>
<td>3.304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McFadden $R^2$</td>
<td>0.181</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.014</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Correctly classified</td>
<td>81.42</td>
<td>80.51</td>
<td>80.57</td>
<td>80.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Robust standard errors are given in parentheses. * p<0.05 ** p<0.01.
Table 3. Change in the predicted probability of including a leader photograph

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Min/max change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party (ref: Labour)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>+0.254 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrat</td>
<td>-0.033 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>+0.492 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKIP</td>
<td>+0.045 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>+0.235 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local popularity – Marginal seat</td>
<td>+0.125 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local popularity – Safe seat</td>
<td>+0.052 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent</td>
<td>+0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local ties</td>
<td>+0.039 **</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Marginal effects are calculated using the estimates from the full model in Table 3. p<0.10 * p<0.05 ** p<0.01.