

**Crowdsourcing campaigns:  
A new dataset for studying British parties' electoral communications**

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**Abstract**

Parties' electoral communications play a central role in British campaigns. Yet, we know little about the nature of the material contained in these communications and how parties' campaign messages differ across constituencies or elections. In this paper, we present a new dataset of 8,600 election leaflets from four recent general elections that relies on crowdsourced information. We illustrate the utility of the OpenElections dataset by comparing the use of negative campaign messaging across parties and over time.

## Introduction

Election leaflets play a key role in British general election campaigns. They tell voters what political parties – and their candidates – stand for, how they will serve their local communities and the nation, and provide information about parties’ chances of success. Despite the increasing focus on social media, traditional unsolicited election communications – i.e., election leaflets – remain the most common form of contact that voters have with political elites during a general election campaign.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, political parties spend more money on designing and distributing election leaflets and other unsolicited communications than on any other campaign activity.<sup>2</sup> While there are no official figures of how many leaflets parties distribute, based on a survey of election agents, Fisher et al. (2012) estimate that the main parties sent out 27-35 million leaflets and other unsolicited communications prior to the 2010 general election.

Analysing election leaflets can provide helpful insight into the nature of electoral campaigning in Britain. For instance, some studies (e.g., Milazzo and Hammond, 2018; Milazzo and Townsley, 2020) have used analysis of leaflet data to show how various factors influence the extent to which candidates personalise their election campaigns. Despite the importance of election leaflets, we still know little about the nature of these communications.<sup>3</sup> While citizens across the country receive leaflets and direct mail from parties at election time, these are often targeted to particular voters and constituencies (e.g., Anstead, 2017; Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018; Fieldhouse et al., 2019; Johnston et al., 2012). As a result, voters do not necessarily know what parties are talking about elsewhere. Similarly, as candidates and parties are not legally required to report what they said in their communications, researchers must rely on other approaches to study variation in campaign messaging.

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<sup>1</sup> Around half of the 32,000 respondents in the British Election Study reported being contacted by a party in the final weeks of the 2019 general election campaign. Of these, 88 per cent indicated they had received a leaflet or letter from at least one party, far exceeding the corresponding figures for contact via email (22 per cent), social media (13 per cent), telephone (7 per cent), or an in person interaction at home (27 per cent) or in the street (7 per cent) (Fieldhouse et al., 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Data on campaign spending is available at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk).

<sup>3</sup> Notable exceptions include Fisher (2005), Shephard (2007), Milazzo and Hammond (2018), Milazzo and Townsley, (2020).

The OpenElections project (<https://www.openelections.co.uk/>) aims to increase the transparency of British general elections by allowing citizens and researchers to analyse what political parties and candidates across the country talk about in their election leaflets.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, we present a new dataset of electoral communications distributed by parties in the last four general elections (2010-2019), created using crowdsourced leaflet information. The resulting dataset, which includes more than 8,600 leaflets, constitutes the largest collection of election communications available to date. We also provide some preliminary analyses to demonstrate how researchers can use the OpenElections dataset to study British general election campaigns.

### **Creating a new dataset of crowdsourced election communications**

Gathering data on leaflets from a large number of constituencies would be difficult without the resources of the crowdsourced record-keeping website Electionleaflets.org, which encourages users to photograph or scan the leaflets they receive and upload them to an online repository. The result is a compilation of thousands of leaflet images, making it the largest collection of British election communications in existence. Each leaflet contains information about where and when it was received and uploaded.

As we are interested in political communication during general election campaigns, we discard leaflets that pertain to other elections, such as mayoral, local, and European elections.<sup>5</sup> We also limit the dataset to only include leaflets published by Britain's most competitive parties: the Brexit Party, the Conservative Party, the Green Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party, and the UK Independence Party. While the decision to leave out other parties was made purely on a data-availability basis, those included have the resources to campaign across a wide range of constituencies and represent the parties of choice for the vast majority of British voters. For instance, at each of the four general elections

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<sup>5</sup> We include all general election leaflets that were uploaded after the start of the long campaign in 2010 and 2015, and after the start of the short campaign in 2017 and 2019. As leaflets are frequently uploaded after the general election, we also considered leaflets that were uploaded in the six months following the election day.

covered by the dataset (2010-2019), between 95 and 97% of votes cast across the United Kingdom were cast for these parties.

The resulting dataset contains 8,678 election leaflets. Table 1 summarises the distribution of leaflets across parties and constituencies for all elections between 2010-2019. It also shows the average number of leaflets per constituency and its range.

**Table 1. Distribution of leaflets by party**

	2010		2015		2017		2019		Total	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Brexit Party	--	--	--	--	--	--	56	5.4	56	0.7
Conservative Party	875	26.8	702	22.6	342	25.7	317	30.3	2,218	25.6
Green Party	168	5.3	355	11.4	112	8.4	75	7.2	710	8.2
Labour Party	849	26.6	838	27.0	401	30.1	256	24.4	2,344	27.0
Liberal Democrats	1,002	31.3	673	21.7	373	28.1	295	28.2	2,343	27.0
Plaid Cymru	12	0.4	19	0.6	9	0.7	3	0.3	43	0.5
Scottish National Party	73	2.3	93	3.0	28	2.1	37	3.5	231	2.7
UK Independence Party	236	7.4	424	13.7	64	4.8	9	0.9	733	8.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,197</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>3,104</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,329</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>1,048</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>8,678</b>	<b>100.0</b>
# of constituencies	485		432		276		228		612	
% constituencies	76.7		68.4		43.7		36.1		96.8	
Mean # of leaflets per constituency	6.6		7.2		4.8		4.6		14.2	
Range	[1, 55]		[1, 105]		[1, 75]		[1, 34]		[1, 221]	

To create the OpenElections dataset, we then assess each leaflet on eight policy dimensions: the economy, immigration, health, education, environment, social welfare, governance, and Brexit/Europe.<sup>6</sup> In addition, we identify whether the leaflet: i) discusses or features an image of the candidate and/or party leader, ii) talks about the tactical situation in the constituency, and iii) criticises an opposing party or candidate.

Due to the flexible size and content of electoral leaflets, a single leaflet may include multiple policy statements, mentions of opposing parties, or other forms of potentially interesting content. For example, a leaflet distributed by the Liberal Democrats in Bath in 2015 contains the following statements:

- “Only the Liberal Democrats are fighting to get a better deal for our local NHS services” (health)

<sup>6</sup> Details on the coding are available in the online appendix.

- A promise to “Cut Income Tax by an additional 400[pounds] for low- and middle-income workers” (economy)
- “Liberal Democrats have spent our time in Government and on the Council standing in the way of unfair policies the Tories wanted to put through” (mention of an opposing party)
- This leaflet also includes pictures, mentions, and quotes from their candidate, Steven Bradley.

Similarly, a Labour leaflet distributed in Broxtowe during the 2019 general election states that the party will:

- “Give patients the care they need through increase NHS funding, more doctors and nurses and an end to privatisation” (health)
- “Invest in our children’s futures with National Education Service that is free for everyone” (education)
- “Kickstart a Green Industrial Revolution to tackle the climate emergency...” (environment)  
“...and create high skilled, high wage jobs” (economy)
- The leaflet also makes references to opponents (“Stop Boris Johnson’s disastrous Brexit deal and give the people the final say”), but does not mention the party’s local candidate, Greg Marshall.

Our dataset represents the largest collection of election leaflets to date, but it is a sample of convenience. These are self-reported data; there are no incentives or institutions encouraging citizens to upload leaflets to the Electionleaflets.org repository, nor are parties required to report how many leaflets they disseminate. This means that we are unable to determine whether our sample is representative of the total population of leaflets distributed by parties. That said, we have no reason to believe that there is bias associated with the types of leaflets that individuals choose to upload. Electionleaflets.org is run by Democracy Club, a non-partisan organisation, and on the website, individuals are encouraged to upload all the leaflets they receive. We have no reason to believe that those who uploaded leaflets did so strategically.

Moreover, if we compare our data to contact rates reported in the British Election Study (BES), similar patterns emerge. We find a positive and statistically significant correlation for all

parties in all elections when we compare the percentage of BES respondents in the constituency who reported receiving a leaflet from a given party in the previous four weeks to the total number of leaflets we have for the same party in the same constituency.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, we acknowledge that our samples from the 2017 and 2019 snap elections contain fewer leaflets and cover fewer constituencies than the 2010 and 2015 samples. Between the long and short campaigns, 2010 and 2015 general election candidates had more than twice as long to plan and execute their campaigns than 2017 and 2019 general election candidates. These patterns are also consistent with contact rates reported in the BES. In 2010 and 2015, 54 per cent and 51 per cent of respondents, respectively, reported that they had received at least one leaflet (Fieldhouse et al., 2015; Sanders and Whitely, 2010). In 2017 and 2019, these figures were just 36 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively (Fieldhouse et al., 2017; Fieldhouse et al., 2019). However, while our 2017 and 2019 samples cover fewer constituencies, comparing these constituencies to those omitted from our sample reveals that they are as representative as our 2010 and 2015 samples.<sup>8</sup>

### **Using the OpenElections data to study variation in negative messaging**

People do not think much of politics and politicians these days. According to Ipsos MORI's 2019 veracity index, just 14% of respondents indicated that they trust MPs to tell the truth (Ipsos MORI, 2019); the only time during the 36-year history of the index when trust in politicians has been lower was following the 2009 expenses scandal. Similarly, nearly quarter of respondents to the 2019 post-election BES said that they have no trust in MPs and nearly 40 per cent said they could 'hardly ever' trust the Westminster government to do what is right (Fieldhouse et al., 2020). Do our political elites contribute to these sentiments by running negative campaigns?

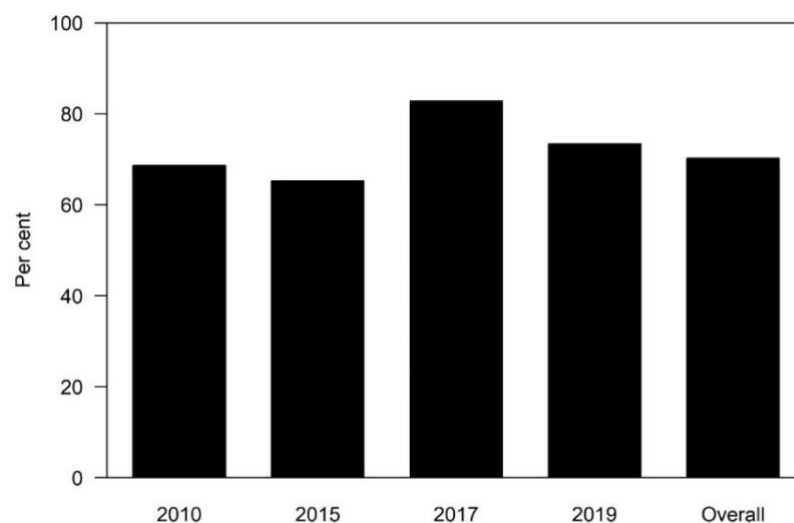
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<sup>7</sup> These correlations are presented in Table S1 in the online appendix.

<sup>8</sup> To evaluate the representativeness of the constituencies for which we have data, we conduct a series of t-tests to identify systematic differences in constituencies that report leaflets versus those that do not (see Table S2 in the online appendix).

Discussing one's opponent can take many forms, such as referring to their policy positions, qualifications, or previous record, but the content is almost always negative as it focuses on the *weaknesses* of the opponent. While recent work suggests that negative messaging may provide more information than messages focused solely on one's strengths (Mattes and Redlawsk, 2015), there is a long tradition of empirical research arguing that the decision to target one's opponent can also have detrimental effects, including depressing turnout (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995), damaging evaluations of the target and the sponsor of the message (Kahn and Kenney, 2004), and increasing political cynicism (Mutz and Reeves, 2005). If campaigns are indeed becoming more negative, then this may help explain the growing distrust that people feel towards political elites in Britain.

**Figure 1. Percentage of election leaflets including at least one negative message, 2010-2019**



Our dataset allows us to explore how often electoral communications include messages about an opponent. Figure 1 presents the percentage of coded leaflets in each general election between 2010 and 2019 that contained at least one message related to an opposing party or candidate. We can draw two conclusions from these figures. First, the vast majority (70 per cent) of leaflets included in our dataset contain negative content. Second, leaflets in the dataset from recent general elections are not significantly more likely to use negative messages than those

from earlier elections. So, while negativity in election leaflets is common, this has been the case since at least 2010 when our data begin.

The data also allows us to tease out more nuance about *who* is negative – candidates or parties. The cost of any unsolicited materials that mention, or promote, a local candidate is counted against the candidate’s election spending. While it is certainly possible that candidates could distribute materials that do not mention their identity, the limits on candidate spending generally make this an unattractive prospect. Therefore, using mention of the local candidate, we can gain a reasonable estimate of leaflet authorship and distinguish between leaflets distributed by candidates versus parties.

**Table 2. Percentage of leaflets containing a negative message by author and party**

	2010	2015	2017	2019	Overall
<i>Leaflet authorship</i>					
Candidate	67.9	64.4	80.7	70.8	68.8
Party	75.2	69.9	91.0	80.7	77.5
<i>Party</i>					
Conservative	77.1	75.5	77.5	73.2	76.1
Labour	67.0	79.4	84.3	79.7	75.8
Lib Dem	81.5	79.9	92.8	81.7	82.9
National	55.3	56.3	91.9	75.0	63.5
Others	24.8	29.5	67.1	44.3	34.0

Table 2 summarises this comparison for each general election, as well as the percentage of leaflets in our dataset delivered by each party that included at least one negative message. These figures indicate that parties are consistently more negative than their candidates, but not substantially so. Regardless of whether the leaflet can be attributed to the party or the candidate, the majority of leaflets in the dataset contain negative messaging. We also find interesting inter-party and temporal variations. Negative messages tend to be more common for the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and the Liberal Democrats. These parties employ negative messages in most of their leaflets. By contrast, fewer of the leaflets in our dataset from the national and minor parties contain a negative message. However, given the more limited sample sizes of leaflets



from these parties – particularly in 2017 and 2019 (e.g. only 3 from Plaid Cymru and 37 from the SNP in 2019) – these estimates must be taken with a degree of caution.

Taken together, while we cannot reject the notion that political elites are fuelling distrust by engaging in constant criticism, our data do not suggest that the election leaflets voters receive in the run up to the polling day have become a lot more negative in the last decade. Negative messages have always been common, particularly in leaflets distributed by the three main parties.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we present a new dataset of British parties' electoral communications. It is based on crowdsourced information from the four most recent general elections. Spanning a decade of British politics, the dataset represents the largest collection of British election communications to date and provides a new and exciting avenue for exploring variation in the campaign behaviour of parties and their candidates. A similar dataset has been used to explore campaign personalisation in British general elections (Milazzo and Hammond, 2018; Milazzo and Townsley, 2020). In this paper, we demonstrate the utility of the dataset by examining the use of negative content across parties and analysing how messaging styles have changed over time.

The dataset is particularly useful because it covers a key form of direct communication with voters that is otherwise very difficult to measure. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that its self-reported nature has limitations. While our dataset includes a large number – and a wide range – of electoral communications, it is not a complete count of leaflets distributed during general election campaigns. As such, one must be cautious about drawing deterministic conclusions about the larger population of leaflets and parties' behaviour more generally. However, 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. While a representative sample would certainly be preferable, we nevertheless contend that our sample provides better insights than no sample at all. Election communications are such a key point of interaction between voters and political

elites during an election, that failure to gain insight into these messages would leave a significant gap in our understanding of how British campaigns are conducted.

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