Targeting Persuadable Voters Through Social Media:
The Use of Twitter in The 2015 UK General Election

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The idea for this thesis occurred during the 2015 UK General Election campaign. After one year of studying US political campaigns' use of micro targeting techniques, I was interested to see whether UK political parties used social media as a targeting tool. Despite my hometown seat in Wales being a Labour stronghold for over 100 years, on May 7, 2015, the Conservative party won it. How did this happen? The Conservative party's success in seats such as my own was due to an extremely skillful campaign – and thus, I began my research.

I have received an incredible amount of help throughout this process. Firstly, thank you to my supervisor, David Karpf, for supporting me since the first day I came to you with this idea. To my two readers: Michael Cornfield, thank you for all your advice and Matthew Hindman, thank you for teaching me that data can be fun! Thank you to the extremely kind people who work in the Library Research Data Center in the George Washington University – your help allowed me to conduct the content analysis portion of this research. Thank you also to my coder who painstakingly analyzed the vast number of tweets I collected. In order to understand fully campaign tactics, I needed to talk to the people who worked on both the Conservative and Labour campaigns and other people who work in and study this field. I am truly grateful to every person I interviewed, be it over the phone, via email or face-to-face. You provided valuable insights for this research. Thank you to all the people who read over my many drafts, and offered advice to improve the paper.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
List of Tables	v
List of Graphs	vi
Introduction	1
Literature Review	5
Research	23
Results	30
Discussion	67
Conclusion	71
Bibliography	73
Appendices	76

List of Tables

Table 1	35
Table 2	37
Table 3	39
Table 4	43
Table 5	46
Table 6	47
Table 7	49
Table 8	53
Table 9	54
Table 10	65

List of Graphs

Graph 1 56

Graph 2 57

Graph 3 60

Introduction

How do political campaigns target and persuade voters to support their candidates? Since 2000, US political campaigns have focused heavily on data analytics to micro target individual voters with personalized messages.[1] Micro targeting moves away from the traditional assumption that voting behavior is determined purely by demographics. Instead, this method allows campaigns to predict accurately an individual's voting behavior and deliver to them the most appropriate message.[2] The ability to micro target relies on acquiring a wealth of the electorate's personal data. In 2008 and 2012, the Obama campaign purchased personal information from data-gathering companies and through an extensive ground operation. Intertwining database management and traditional canvassing methods contributed to Obama's electoral success. It also blurred the distinction between online and offline campaigning which has ultimately paved a new way of political campaign strategy.[3]

There is considerable debate across scholarly literature about whether US micro targeting techniques can be emulated in political campaigns elsewhere. Many political analysts hoped that 2015 would be the first election year British parties would incorporate micro targeting methods into their campaigns.[4] However, the UK has structural obstacles which prevent campaigns from developing such precise targeting techniques. Data protection laws do not allow an individual's data to be made public to the same extent as in the US. Moreover, micro targeting is expensive. Campaign spending in the US is typically far greater than it is in the UK due to expenditure caps administered by the British Electoral Commission. Thus, political parties

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[1] D. Sunshine Hillygus and Todd G. Shields, *The Persuadable Voter: Wedge Issues in Presidential Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) 2 & 6. See also Luke Bunting, 'The Evolution of American Microtargeting: An Examination of Political Messaging,' *Butler Journal of Undergraduate Research* 1 article 2 (April, 2015): 5.

[2] Rachel K. Gibson, 'New Media and the Revitalisation of Politics,' *Representation* 44 no.3 (2009): 291. See also Dietram A. Scheufele, 'The End of Framing as We Know It … And the Future of Media Effects,' *Mass Communication & Society* (August, 2015): 17.

[3] Ramus Kleis Nielsen, *Ground Wars: Personalized Communication in Political Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

[4] Louis Reynolds, 'Political Microtargeting: Why it Won't Happen At The Next Election,' *The Huffington Post* August 26, 2014 http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/louis-reynolds/political-microtargeting-_b_5713587.html accessed October 25, 2015.

must use other inexpensive means to identify and target key voters with a persuasive message. Mobilizing the party base is important. Yet it is the persuadable voters – those who have the propensity to switch political allegiance – who ultimately decide an election's outcome. This paper focuses on the use of social media by the Labour and Conservative campaigns in the 2015 UK General Election and whether it was employed as a targeting tool and a method to engage with these targeted voters. More specifically, it examines the claim that Labour used social media purely to communicate with its core supporters whilst Conservatives used it effectively to target and engage with persuadable voters and this ultimately contributed to the Conservatives' victory.

The 2015 political climate was unique. For the first time since World War II, the British government was a coalition, with the Conservatives as the leading party and the Liberal Democrats as the junior partner. Typically, British elections see a 'third party bias' which favors Labour: Liberal Democrat candidates tend to do best in areas where Conservatives are more successful than Labour – thus taking away seats from the Tories (another term for the Conservative party).[5] Yet this was not the case in 2015 due to the unpopularity of the Liberal Democrats and the rise of Scottish National Party (SNP) support. The SNP's primary aim is Scottish secession from the UK, which prompted a referendum on the issue in 2014. Although the party is not popular in the rest of Britain, it threatened Labour's stronghold in Scotland during the election. Therefore, despite not running candidates outside of Scotland, there were fears of a Labour-SNP coalition if Labour won a majority of seats in the rest of the UK. Moreover, public opinion did not favor the Liberal Democrats in the lead up to the election, leaving the third party's seats obtainable for the two main parties. Thus, the key persuadable voters in 2015

[5] Charles Pattie and Ron Johnson, 'Electoral Bias in the UK after the 2015 General Election,' *The Crick Center* June 4,2015 http://www.crickcentre.org/blog/electoral-bias-in-the-uk-after-the-2015-general-election/ accessed October 29,2015. accessed October 25, 2015.

were disillusioned Liberal Democrat supporters and those who feared a Labour-SNP coalition in Westminster. Targeting and engaging with this group of voters was vital in order to win the election.

Campaigns communicate with the electorate across a variety of different media platforms. This paper concentrates solely on the use of social media and whether it was used effectively to target and to then engage with voters. Social media use alone does not determine the outcome of an election, yet it is increasingly becoming a fundamental component of campaign strategy. Many scholars believe that British campaigns' discourse is still dominated by the mainstream media.[6] However, in 2015, the political parties understood the importance of social media as a platform to by-pass mainstream news organizations and communicate directly with the electorate. Therefore, this research provides a timely analysis of the changing nature of British political campaigns: political parties are starting to understand that social media can help win elections.

This research develops a classification of social media targeting techniques to understand the main strategies used by Labour and the Conservatives. The three main components of campaign targeting that this research focuses on are: matched targeting; the US style of micro targeting, which requires high levels of spending and access to an individual's data, saturation targeting; which uses social media tools to focus on an individual's demographics and unique interests, and peer-to-peer targeting; which relies on social media users to disperse a campaign's message through their own social networks. A content analysis of Labour, the Conservatives, and both parties' leaders - David Cameron and Ed Milibands' - Twitter handles during the 38-day campaign provides insights into both campaigns' social media strategy. Twitter research provides information on how both campaigns engaged with voters and the

[6] Such authors include Darren G. Lilleker and Nigel A. Jackson, 'Towards a more participatory style of election campaigning? The impact of Web 2.0 on the UK 2010 General Election,' *Policy & Internet* 2 issue.3 (2012): 69-98 and Martin Moore and Gordon Ramsay, 'UK election 2015: Setting the Agenda,' *Center for the Study of Media, Communication and Power* (October 2015): 1-87.

types of messages they tweeted. This paper examines tweets for two main reasons. Firstly, Twitter provides researchers with primary data. Secondly, whilst it is not the only social networking site voters' use, it is becoming an increasingly important platform for political communication. A series of statistical graphs allows an understanding of the types of messages which reached the broadest Twitter audience and an analysis of polling data allows this paper to observe which messages influenced the wider electorate. Interviews with campaign members from the Labour and Conservative parties, academic scholars and practitioners contextualize these findings and provide an insight into each party's tactics as well as their broader social media strategy.

Literature Review

This literature review aims to understand better scholarly research about the use of social media targeting tools in British political campaigns, using the three main classifications of social media targeting as a framework. It focuses on how campaigns can digitally target voters, the role digital media plays in UK elections and whether political parties currently use it as an effective targeting tool. There is much scholarly debate about which group of voters political campaigns should target; digital technology can help campaigns mobilize the partisan base yet some researchers argue that political success is not guaranteed by relying on this group alone. As well as appealing to partisans, campaigns need to target persuadable voters and gain their support. However, defining persuadable voters is challenging. Some scholars describe this group as partisans who are concerned about issues which their preferred party does not support. Campaigns can appeal to these voters through issue messaging. Others study the impact of personality attacks and whether this method truly swings voters. Moreover, the use of Twitter as an effective tool to persuade voters is a subject of academic debate. Although politicians and parties are more likely to be followed by the partisan base, some argue that the heterogeneous nature of Twitter's networks allow messages to be easily dispersed across party lines. Thus, a persuadable voter may not follow a political campaign on Twitter, yet can still see its messages through retweets. Campaigns may rely on this peer-to-peer targeting to ensure a wider audience is exposed to its message. However, the accuracy of retweets as a measurement for success is limited. A consideration of campaigns' digital tactics and methods to target key voters enables this paper to apply scholarly literature to the 2015 UK general election and reflect on the two main parties' social media strategy.

The use of social media in campaign strategy

Matched Targeting

As this case study is so recent, most scholarly literature on how campaigns use digital strategy to target persuadable voters refers to elections before 2015. Many researchers agree that it is impossible to emulate the American style of micro targeting in other countries due to contextual and institutional differences. Cristian Vaccari argues that Obama's success in 2008 inspired political campaigns across the world to replicate his digital style of campaigning.[7] However, he warns against generalizing from US campaign tactics. He writes:

> Although parties and politicians worldwide eagerly attempt to emulate American innovations in digital politics, transplanting online tools outside the United States has rarely achieved the desired goals.[8]

Vaccari suggests that this is due to the different political context and institutional arrangements of the US compared to other countries.[9] Whilst the United States is a 'role model' for the rest of the Western world, it does not offer a 'reliable empirical guide to the actual development and outcome of online political communication across Western democracies.'[10]

Bruce Bimber agrees with Vaccari's claims. He argues that the use of new technology is linked to democratic dominance: its effective use leads to electoral success.[11] Bimber uses Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns as examples of integrating digital technology and campaign strategy. However, like Vaccari, he suggests that Obama's micro targeting techniques cannot be replicated in other countries: 'privacy regulations prevent parties and candidates in many countries from engaging the practices undertaken in the US …'[12] Indeed, data protection laws in the UK do not allow voters' information to be made public to the same extent as in the United States. Will Straw and Nick Anstead compare UK and US elections and note: 'in America, far more information about voters is in the public domain, most notably their party registration and

[7] Cristian Vaccari, *Digital Politics in Western Democracies: A Comparative Study* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013) 3.
[8] Ibid., 25.
[9] Ibid., 201.
[10] Ibid., 4.
[11] Bruce Bimber, 'Digital Media in the Obama Campaigns in 2008 and 2012: Adaptation to the Personalized Political Communication Environment,' *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 11 issue. 2 (2014): 130.
[12] Ibid., 132.

whether they voted in previous elections.'[13] This information allows political campaigns to understand precisely who to target with particular messages.[14] Britain simply does not have such a wealth of individual information publically available.

The lack of open information about individuals indubitably prevents the UK from fully embracing US matched targeting techniques. Yet, there are strategic elements of American campaigns which the UK can adopt. Bimber notes: 'the most important tactical use of data analytics by the Obama campaign appears to have been in support of the effort in swing states to persuade undecided voters.'[15] He claims that the goal is to find persuadable voters to target with tailored messaging. Micro targeting enabled Obama's campaign team to do this. Bimber writes: 'the Obama campaign had predicted with enviable accuracy the behavior of voters in swing states and reached a sufficient number of them with the right message.'[16] In the absence of US style micro targeting abilities, UK political parties can use social media to reach voters. Social media users upload personal information on their accounts. Campaigns can use this information to determine whether an individual should be targeted with a persuasive message.

Jessica Baldwin-Philippi studies the 2010 Midterm elections in the United States. She notes:

> As social media has become a place where people disclose a large amount of information, campaigns are often able to gain access to this information, and use it to categorize people based on geography, interests, issue-salience, or demographic information.[17]

Campaigns can use social media to target people who ultimately decide the election: the persuadable voters. Locating the key audience through this method of saturation targeting is a

[13] Will Straw and Nick Anstead, 'Yes We Can: how the lessons from America should change British politics,' *Fabian Society* (2009): 11.
[14] Contextual changes in the US allowed George W. Bush's 2000 campaign to have access to more individual level data. This campaign was the first in the US to use such data to target key voters. For the Bush campaign, these target voters were partisan evangelicals. Costas Panagopoulos and Peter Wielhouwer, 'Polls and Elections The Ground War 2000 – 2004: Strategic Targeting in Grassroots Campaigns,' *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 38 issue.2 (2008): 350.
[15] Bimber, 'Digital Media in the Obama Campaigns in 2008 and 2012' 142.
[16] Ibid., 143.
[17] Jessica Baldwin-Philippi, *Using Technology, Building Democracy: Digital Campaigning and the Construction of Censorship* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015) 24.

crucial first step before delivering them personalized persuasive messages in the hope that they will engage with the campaign online and eventually support it offline. Baldwin-Philippi writes that in the US: 'campaigns and consultants see social and mobile media as capable of reaching and engaging individuals and target audiences that were previously untapped.'[18] Without effectively using social media, a campaign cannot formulate a digital strategy to engage with its target audience. In the UK, political campaigns typically focus on marginal constituencies that determine the elections' outcome. Campaigns have access to social media to target voters in these constituencies, yet are they using it to maximize their electoral success?

Some scholars argue that British parties did not effectively use digital media in campaigns prior to 2015. Rather, they used it as a platform to present themselves to existing supporters.[19] Darren Lilleker and Nigel Jackson compare Internet use between the main British political parties in 2010 and Obama's 2008 campaign. They argue that despite claims of the UK embracing more American style campaigns, 'the Internet [was not] adopted as a campaign hub for raising money, mobilizing activists or bypassing the mainstream media.'[20] Instead, campaigns used the Internet to promote the party via its website and to convert 'loyal supporters into activists.'[21] British political parties' online strategy was different to that of the Obama campaign where the focus was: 'not the mobilization of activists, but … participation in the forms of sharing and acting as an advocate online through providing feedback to the campaign.'[22] Lisa Harris and Paul Harrigan agree that in the 2010 campaign social media was mainly used as an echo chamber rather than a tool for engagement. They argue that:

[18] Ibid., 92.
[19] See also Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 48 where the author notes that British mainstream media still dominates political campaign discourse.
[20] Lilleker and Jackson, 'Towards a more participatory style of election campaigning?' 72.
[21] Ibid., 94.
[22] Ibid., 71.

> In the UK, an intrinsic lack of understanding of the interactive nature of social media persisted, thereby preventing the political parties from leveraging the power of their data and truly engaging with the electorate.[23]

This is the critical distinction between the 2008 Obama campaign and the 2010 UK general election campaign. The Obama campaign targeted otherwise latent, persuadable members of the electorate and encouraged them to participate both online and offline. British political parties used the Internet as a platform to promote their manifestos to existing supporters, but not to engage with the wider public – in particular, persuadable voters. In terms of digital strategy, this was not effective. As Baldwin-Philippi notes: 'if you're not using social media to *engage,* you're failing.'[24]

Rachel Gibson also compares the 2010 UK election campaign with Obama's 2008 campaign. Like Lilleker and Jackson, Gibson argues that the Obama campaign's online strategy inspired typically dormant voters to take part offline: 'new possibilities were opened up for the casually interested citizen with only limited previous involvement in campaigning to play an active role.'[25] She claims that while the main British political parties did use digital media in 2010, they did so purely to harness the support of party activists. In her subsequent research concerning the use of online tools to mobilize the electorate in the US 2008 campaign and the UK's 2010 campaign, Gibson concludes that: 'American campaigns retain their vanguard status in the adoption of new electioneering technologies.'[26] Gibson notes that engaging with a diverse audience online is becoming more commonplace in US campaigns. Yet, she argues, 'UK parties have not yet "bought" into digital communication with voters…'[27] Although Gibson does not

[23] Lisa Harris and Paul Harrigan, 'Social Media in Politics: The Ultimate Voter Engagement Tool or Simply an Echo Chamber?' *Journal of Political Marketing* 14 issue.3 (2015): 276.
[24] Baldwin-Philippi, 'Using Technology, Building Democracy' 34.
[25] Rachel K. Gibson, "Open Source Campaigning?' UK Party Organizations and the Use of the New Media in the 2010 General Election,' *Institute for Social Change* (2010): 185.
[26] John H. Aldrich, Rachel K. Gibson, Marta Cantijoch and Tobias Konitzer, 'Getting out the vote in the social media era: Are digital tools changing the extent, nature and impact of party contact in elections?' *Party Politics* 1, no.4 (2015): 175.
[27] Ibid.

mention the need to use new media as a targeting tool and to persuade key voters, this paper argues that it was a key strategy missing from the 2010 campaign. Preaching to the partisans does not decide an election, converting persuadable voters to support the campaign does.

Todd Graham and his colleagues focus specifically on candidates' use of Twitter in the 2010 British election campaign. They aim to answer the question: 'are [political parties] simply broadcasting their messages or are they beginning to tap into this participatory potential by engaging and interacting with the public?'[28] The researchers find that candidates mostly used Twitter as a platform to broadcast messages. In particular, candidates tweeted updates of their campaign more so than criticizing other candidates and far more than promoting their party's policy stance.[29] The authors conclude that political campaigns' preliminary use of Twitter in 2010 focused on mobilizing and organizing the party base. It was not used as a platform to engage users or to discuss political issues. This paper's content analysis of Twitter in the 2015 campaign builds on scholarly work of previous British election campaigns. It examines whether Labour continued to use it as a tool to promote themselves to existing followers whilst the Conservatives used it as a platform to reach the voters who would decide the election.

In the lead up to the 2015 UK General Election, researchers turned their attention towards the role of social media in shaping public opinion and election forecasting.[30] Although studies subsequent to the election have looked at the influence of social media during the campaign and the parties' use of it as a platform for engagement, limited research has been conducted about the use of social media as a targeting tool.[31]

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[28]Todd Graham, Marcel Broersma, Karin Hazelhoff & Guido van Haar, 'Between Broadcasting Political Messages and Interacting With Voters,' *Information, Communication & Society* 16, no. 5 (2013): 693.

[29] Ibid.,703.

[30] Nick Anstead, Ben O'Louglin, 'Social Media Analysis and Public Opinion: The 2010 UK General Election,' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20 issue.2 (2015).

[31] Initial studies after the General Election argue that despite political pundits' claims that 2015 was the first 'social media' election, traditional media dominated the campaign discourse. For more information, see Charlie Beckett, 'Broadcasting: at the centre of the most managed election campaign' in Daniel Jackson and Elinar Thorson (eds) 'UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign,' Centre for the Study of Journalism, Culture and Community, Bournemouth University (May, 2015): 14. See also David

Tim Ross is one of the few researchers to provide an analysis of Labour and the Conservatives campaign strategy in 2015. He claims that it was the first British political campaign to use social media to target voters. Using information from interviews with key figures from both parties, Ross notes that the Conservative party's success lay in its strategic decision to concentrate on undecided voters and to target them via social media. Craig Elder was the Digital Director for the Conservatives' campaign. Ross writes: 'Elder had learned … that his job was to focus on the target audience and where to find them.'[32] Elder believes that the target audience was the undecided voters who 'will ultimately decide the election.'[33] He claims that the Conservatives' social media strategy in the 2010 campaign did not reach the right audience: it appealed exclusively to the typical Tory voter and not the wider electorate. Andrew Feldman, the Conservatives' co-chairman, suggested that the party's failure to broaden its appeal cost the Conservatives a majority win.[34] Thus, in 2015 the campaign ensured maximum use of social media as a tool for targeting persuadable voters. Elder tells Ross:

> Your first bit of targeting is making sure you're only speaking to people in the marginal constituencies … we were able to work with Facebook using constituency targeting to focus on the constituencies that were going to decide the election … we could do demographic targeting, and interest targeting …[35]

The Conservative campaign focused on Liberal Democrat marginal seats in southwest England. Winning over these seats was referred to as the 'black-widow strategy,' which Ross claims: 'above all else enabled David Cameron to return to No. 10 to rule alone.'[36] Having defined these

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Deacon, John Downey, James Stanyer and Dominic Wring, 'General Election Analysis 9: News media performance in the 2015 General Election campaign,' *Political Insight* (June 17, 2015) https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/blog/general-election-analysis-9-news-media-performance-2015-general-election-campaign

[32] Tim Ross, *Why The Tories Won: The Inside Story of the 2015 General Election* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2015).

[33] Craig Elder, 'The Role of Digital in the Conservative Election Campaign,' YouTube 21:06 June 18, 2015 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-BPRArB5gg accessed October 2, 2015.

[34] Ibid. Ross notes that Lord Ashcroft 'warned that the party must be able to appeal to the wider electorate beyond the traditional Tory voters.'

[35] Ross, 'Why The Tories Won.' See also Dominic Wring and Stephen Ward, 'Exit Velocity: The Media Election,' *Britain Votes* (2015): 234, who also note that this was the Conservative campaign's strategy.

[36] Ibid. Black-widow spiders are known for killing the male after they mate. This strategy may be a metaphor for the Conservatives to destroy their partners: the Liberal Democrats.

constituencies as key, Ross notes that the campaign used social media to target persuadable voters on online platforms with a 'striking' degree of precision. The campaign's accuracy was enabled by the plethora of information social media users upload about themselves.[37] Using this information to target key voters was undoubtedly an effective social media strategy. Ross praises the 'genius' of the Conservatives' campaign, as 'being able to spot the route to victory was through the Lib Dem marginal seats in the south-west, and then to actually deliver it.'[38] Social media was crucial in targeting the voters who decided the election.

Ross also discusses the election's pivotal issues and their influence on persuadable voters. He writes: 'make sure the battle to persuade voters … is a discussion about your strongest issues; force your opponents to fight you on the policy battlefield on which you can win.'[39] He argues that this meant Labour focused on the National Health Service (NHS) and pledged to save it from 'Tory cuts,' whilst the Conservatives concentrated on the economy.[40] Dominic Wring and Stephen Ward agree that whilst saving the NHS was a clear choice for Labour's campaign message, the Conservatives 'aimed to exploit continuing voter anxieties about ... economic trauma.'[41] By focusing on the NHS, Labour unfailingly appealed to the party's base – those who are against privatization and welfare cuts. Yet, the economy is undoubtedly a contentious issue and one which has the ability to persuade. Although Labour sought to mobilize its core voters, the Conservatives understood which issues would sway target voters.

The Conservatives' narrative set the agenda for the campaign. Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw define agenda setting as the process in which the media influences the salience of certain issues over others.[42] Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder suggest that voters are primed to

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Tim Ross, 'Why the Tories Won.'
[40] Ibid.
[41] Wring and Ward, 'Exit Velocity: The Media Election' 225.
[42] Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, 'The Agenda Setting Function of the Mass Media,' *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2016): 176 – 187.

use the issues which are salient in their minds to evaluate parties and political candidates.[43] Therefore, the issues a campaign continuously emphasizes influence the public to associate those issues with the party.[44] In the case of 2015, by continuously linking the need for a strong economy in order to have a strong NHS, the public was primed to think that the Conservatives was the best party to deal with such issues. Subsequent scholars build on McCombs and Shaws' research and study political campaign's use of social media as a platform to promote their message.[45] Although many conclude that social media mirrors the agenda set by the traditional news, it is an important outlet for campaigns to present their narrative directly to the electorate.[46]

Whilst the Conservative campaign was data-driven and focused on locating key, persuadable voters, Labour adopted a safer approach – concentrating on mobilizing its core supporters.[47] Ultimately, appealing to the partisan base was not enough to secure a Labour victory. Ross provides a useful overview of the 2015 General Election campaign. Yet this paper offers a more nuanced approach, focusing specifically on the two main parties' social media strategy to target persuadable voters. It examines Conservatives' tactics to win over the persuadable voters and why Labour only focused on its core supporters, which ultimately cost the party its electorate success.

Defining persuadable voters

Saturation Targeting

[43] Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Public Opinion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
[44] Spiro Kiousis, Jesper Strömback and Michael McDevitt, 'Influence of Issue Decision Salience on Vote Choice: Linking Agenda Setting, Priming, and Issue Ownership,' *Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 3350.
[45] For more information, see Bethany A. Conway, Kate Kensi and Di Wang, 'The Rise of Twitter in the Political Campaign: Searching for Intermedia Agenda-Setting Effects in the Presidential Primary.' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20 (2015): 363 - 380.
[46] Scholars who focus on this research include: Leticia Bode, Ben Sayre, Dhavan Shah, Dave Wilcox, Chirag Shah, 'Agenda Setting in the Digital Age: Tracking Attention to California Proposition 8 in Social Media, Online News, and Conventional News,' *Policy and Internet* 2 issue.2 (2010): 1 – 27 and GR Boynton and Glenn W. Richardson, 'Agenda setting in the twenty-first century,' *New Media and Society* (2015): 1 – 19.
[47] Wring and Ward, 'Exit Velocity: The Media Election' 234.

Defining persuadable voters and their importance in British political elections is not a widely researched topic of academic concern. Therefore, the majority of the research focuses on US election campaigns. Eitan Hersh concentrates on the 2008 and 2012 Obama campaign's use of individuals' data to create perceptions of the electorate. He hopes to:

> reveal new explanations for how campaigns engage with the electorate by developing an understanding of how they form perceptions of voters and how those perceptions guide their strategic choices.[48]

Hersh's 'Perceived Voter Model' theorizes that campaign teams gather electoral data and form perceptions about voters using this information.[49] Based on these insights, campaigns focus on mobilizing perceived partisans. Hersh believes that attempting to predict and define persuadable voters is a waste of a campaign's efforts because:

> Persuadability is a psychological disposition that is very difficult to predict … therefore … because available data do not permit campaigns to perceive accurately the disposition of persuadability, campaigns are not able to direct their contacting efforts to persuadable voters.[50]

He suggests that campaigns simply have a lack of information about perceived persuadable voters to be able to justify spending time and resources predicting who they are. Moreover, he claims that bypassing efforts to find these voters does not cost a political campaign its success. Registered, partisan voters are likely to turn out to support their preferred candidate more so than undecided 'fickle voters.'[51] This may be true in the United States where the electorate and its politicians are becoming more polarized, prompting political campaigns to concentrate on partisans rather than potential swing voters.[52] Yet, this paper argues that this was not the case for the last UK General Election. These 'floating voters' live in marginal constituencies and

[48] Eitan D. Hersh, *Hacking the Electorate: How Campaigns Perceive Voters* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 4-5.
[49] Ibid., 7.
[50] Ibid., 43.
[51] Ibid., 166.
[52] 'Political Polarization in the American Public,' *Pew Research Center* June 12, 2014 http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/ accessed November 5, 2015. This study concludes that partisan divisions are more prominent now than at any point in the last two decades

ultimately decide the election. In 2015, these voters were largely in southwest England, in Liberal Democrat seats, disillusioned with their party and against the rise of the SNP. The Conservative campaign understood this and its strategy capitalized on it.

Scholars who suggest that campaigns do focus on undecided voters claim that it is issues which persuade them. Although the existing research concentrates predominantly on US political campaigns, certain aspects can be applied to the UK. D. Sunshine Hilygus and Todd G. Shields 'challenge … the enduring conventional wisdom that persuadable voters are the least admirable segment of the electorate.'[53] Instead, they suggest that these voters play a fundamental role in the election and make their decisions based on policy issues. Hillygus and Shields define persuadable voters as partisans who disagree with their preferred party on certain 'wedge issues': topics about which the voter personally cares.[54] For these authors, persuadable voters are not 'fickle' as Hersh believes, rather they are well informed and politically invested. Like Hersh, Hillygus and Shields claim that campaigns should focus on the voters who are guaranteed to turn out to vote. This group is typically partisans.[55] Yet they believe that there are 'cross-pressured partisans in today's polarized environment.'[56] A certain issue may be resonant with partisan voters, compelling them to consider the opposing side.

The authors claim that technological advances have made it easier for campaigns to target these voters. Before such technology was available to political campaigns, information about voters was limited to geography and demographic characteristics. Now, campaigns have access to information about a voter's preferences and beliefs. Moreover, 'micro targeting enables candidates to focus attention on the issues that will help them win.'[57] A campaign's goal is to specifically target persuadable voters and to present them with a message about issues in which

[53] Hillygus and Shields, 'The Persuadable Voter' 4.
[54] Ibid., 2
[55] Ibid., 25.
[56] Ibid., 50.
[57] Ibid., 14.

they are likely to be invested as: 'a candidates partisan base is simply not sufficient to win the White House.'[58] Stefaan Walgrave and his colleagues agree with this claim. They note: 'parties have become more aware of the strategic importance of issues and the potential advantages of issue ownership.'[59] Targeting voters who are invested in a particular issue and providing them with personalized messages about it is a vital strategy for electoral success.

Costas Panagopoulos contests Hillygus and Shields' claims. Like Hersh, he argues that US campaigns use micro targeting techniques to mobilize the base rather than persuade voters. Panagopoulos suggests that:

> While it may be the case that micro-targeting *(sic)* can facilitate more effective campaign outreach to persuadable voters, partly by leveraging wedge issues to appeal to cross-pressured voters … the advantages in terms of base mobilization outstrip any persuasion effects.[60]

He claims that micro targeting methods to persuade voters are both difficult and risky. Thus, campaigns focus on targeting the base to ensure maximum success.

It must be noted that Hillygus and Shields construct their argument around the 2000 and 2004 elections whereas Hersh focuses on Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns. The electorate may have looked less polarized in the former two election years, meaning that persuadable voters were more pertinent to a candidate's success. While this paper supports Hillygus and Shields' claim that persuadable voters are important to target, mobilizing the base is still a fundamental element of a political campaign's strategy. Moreover, issues may sway voters to agree with the party but not to turn out to vote for the candidate. David Nickerson and Todd Rogers argue:

> Even if the persuasive communication were effective at convincing … citizens to support the campaign's candidate or issue, the usual assumption among

[58] Ibid., 44.
[59] Stefaan Walgrave, Anke Tresch and Jonas Lefevere, 'The Conceptualisation and Measurement of Issue Ownership,' *West European Politics* 38, no.4 (2015): 779.
[60] Costas Panagopoulos, 'All About That Base: Changing Campaign Strategies in U.S. Presidential Elections,' *Party Politics* 1 no.12 (2015): 2.

> practitioners is that changing citizens' candidate or issue preferences does not meaningfully change their likelihood of voting.[61]

Although issue messaging should be a component of a political party's campaign strategy, it should not be the sole focus. Individuals' involvement with a campaign's message depends on their investment in the issue.[62] Therefore, Hillygus and Shields' theory may only apply to a small section of the electorate who are highly involved in certain issues. Nevertheless, the authors present a sound argument as to why persuadable voters are important and how candidates can define and reach them.

Scholars are largely unanimous in arguing that personality attacks have a negative persuasive effect. These attacks typically appear in campaigns' advertisements. Although the media is often quick to report on 'who is attacking whom,' research suggests that personal attacks between candidates are largely unsuccessful in persuading voters.[63] Richard Lau and his colleagues study negative advertisements' influence on voters' assessments of candidates and find: 'no evidence that negative political advertisements are any more effective than positive ads.'[64] Kim Fridkin and Patrick Kenney go further, arguing that personality attacks can even result in a negative view of the sponsoring candidate.[65] It is important to note that their findings are true for personality attacks on the opposition rather than negative attacks on their policy position. Indeed, researchers find: 'Advertisements that negatively attack issues a candidate stands for are significantly less likely to generate backlash than advertisements that attacks the opposition's personal life or family.'[66] The adverse effects of personality attacks are especially

[61] David W. Nickerson and Todd Rogers, 'Political Campaigns and Big Data,' *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 28, no.2 (2014): 62.
[62] Ronald Paul Hill, Michael Capella & Yoon-Na Cho, 'Incivility in political advertisements: a look at the 2012 US presidential election,' *International Journal of Advertising* 34, no.5 (2015): 814.
[63] Demirae Dun, 'Propaganda vs. Persuasion in Politics: Public Beware,' *Spotlight on First Year Writing* 9 (2012): 148.
[64] Richard Lau, Lee Sigelman, Carol Heldman, and Paul Babbitt, 'The Effects of Negative Advertisements: A Meta-Analytic Assessment,' *American Political Science Review* 93, issue. 4 (1999): 857.
[65] Kim Fridkin and Patrick Kenney, 'Do Negative Messages Work? The Impact of Negativity on Citizens' Evaluations of Candidates,' *American Politics Research* 32, no.4 (2004): 594.
[66] Hill et al., 'Incivility in political advertisements' 815. Among scholars who agree are: Karen S. Johnson-Cartee and Gary Copeland, *Negative Political Advertising: Coming of Age* (New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989), Deane H. Shapiro, 'A Preliminary Study of Long-Term Mediators: Goals, Effects, Religious Orientation, Cognitions,' *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 24, no.1

important for a campaign's strategy to win over persuadable voters. It is this group who are most likely to have a negative reaction as they do not have a long-standing affiliation with the party.

Despite scholarly research highlighting personality attacks' negative effects, this method is still used in campaigns. Leticia Bode and her colleagues focus on the use of Twitter in political campaigns. They argue that campaign teams understand that negative attacks produce the risk of voter backlash. Thus, they 'go on the attack only when the stakes are high – namely, when the race is more competitive.'[67] However, whilst this seems to be campaigns' strategy through traditional media such as television advertisements, the authors do not find a correlation between competitiveness of the race and negative messages on Twitter. This finding suggests that there is a difference between campaigns' traditional media tactics and social media strategies. The authors conclude that campaigns use Twitter to emphasize positive messages and to promote the party's policies rather than as a platform for negatively attacking the opposition.[68]

Bode and her colleagues' research provides the foundation for this paper's analysis of the Conservative and Labour parties' message tactics on Twitter during the 2015 election. Do UK campaigns adhere to the American-style of social media campaigning and steer away from negative attacks in the fear of voter backlash and instead focus on promoting the party's stance on key issues? Or, did the Conservative party use negative attack techniques to capitalize on persuadable voters fears of a Labour and SNP coalition? As 2015 was the first British election in which political parties used social media to engage with voters, there is not substantial research

(1992): 23 - 49 and Alina B. Sorescu and Betsy D. Gelb, 'Negative Comparative Advertising: Evidence Favoring Fine Tuning,' *Journal of Advertising* 29, issue. 4 (2002): 25-40.

[67] Leticia Bode, David Lassen, Young Mie Kim, Dhavan Shah, Erika Franklin Fowler, Travis N. Ridout and Michael Franz, 'Social and Broadcast Media in 2010 Midterms: The Expanding Repertoire of Senate Candidates,' *Campaign Strategies* (2011) http://users.polisci.wisc.edu/behavior/Papers/BodeEtAl2011.pdf accessed October 22, 2015.

[68] Ibid.

on this issue. This thesis provides new insights into how the Conservatives developed a more effective social media strategy than Labour in seeking to appeal to persuadable voters.

Twitter, as a social media platform to reach persuadable voters

Peer-to-peer Targeting

Many academics acknowledge that Twitter is evolving as a popular sphere of political communication. Benjamin Toff notes: 'scholars have just begun to observe how candidates and parties strategically utilize digital tools such as Twitter to organize and reinforce support by disseminating personalized, direct, and immediate messages.'[69] Bethany Conway and her colleagues agree as they claim: 'the social networking site … is considered unique because it allows users to display a network of connections openly and has been touted for enhanced facilitation of politician-public interaction.'[70] However, there is considerable debate about the type of voters' campaigns can reach through Twitter. The platform allows campaigns to directly target message advertisements to a specific group of voters. Yet organic tweets from the campaign's Twitter handle are only seen by the account's followers and through retweets. Some argue that voters only follow a party or candidate with whom they are invested. Therefore, a campaign's tweets are typically catered towards its core supporters. However, conversations on Twitter do not occur in a vacuum. The inclusivity of Twitter as platform of over-lapping networks enables users to be exposed to other viewpoints. If persuadable voters see a campaign message which directly appeals to them, they may even be swayed to support it. Thus, once a campaign defines who its persuadable voters are, it can use social media both to direct targeted messages to these voters and to encourage its loyal supporters to broaden the message's reach.

Alex Hanna and her colleagues focus on political candidates' use of Twitter during the 2010 US Midterm campaign. They note that whilst it is increasingly becoming a prominent tool for

[69] Benjamin J. Toff and Young Mie Kim, 'Words That Matter: Twitter and Partisan Polarization,' Draft paper prepared for presentation at UW-Madison's Political Behavior Research Group meeting, November 13, 2013, Madison, Wisconsin. 4.
[70] Conway et al., 'The Rise of Twitter in the Political Campaign' 365.

political communication, campaigns mainly use it to engage with the partisan base: 'political use of Twitter by candidates included efforts to reach out to potential supporters, direct them to particular pieces of information, request campaign contributions from them, and mobilize their political action.'[71] The authors conclude that Twitter users are disparate and communicate in distinct left and right wing spheres. Therefore, political candidates focus on users who align with their views.

This argument may be true for loyal partisans. However, it does not take into consideration Twitter users who do not staunchly support one side of the political spectrum or the other. Maurice Vergeer and his colleagues study the use of Twitter as an election campaign tool. They suggest that although a candidate's immediate network is predominately comprised of loyal supporters, the influence of a 'second degree network' must not be underestimated.[72] A second degree network spreads the campaign's messages to its 'weak ties': users who are not in the campaign's immediate circle, but may follow those who are. The authors argue that: 'a re-tweet *(sic)* of a candidate's posting by someone in the first degree network to the second degree network … would vastly increase the online network's potential.'[73] Weiwu Zang and his colleagues agree, claiming that while persuadable voters may not actively follow a campaign on Twitter, they do not avoid any messages which may appear on their newsfeeds.[74] Thus, campaigns rely on the heterogeneous nature of Twitter to indirectly communicate with

[71] Alex Hanna, Ben Sayre, Leticia Bode, JungHwan Yang, Dhavan Shah, 'Mapping the political Twitterverse: candidates and their followers in the Midterms,' *AAAI Publications* Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, July 2011, Barcelona, Spain. 1 http://alex-hanna.com/static/pdf/Hanna_etal.ICWSM2011.pdf

[72] Maurice Vergeer, Liesbeth Hermans, Steven Sams, 'Online social networks and micro-blogging in political campaigning: The exploration of a new campaign tool and a new campaign style,' *Party Politics* 13, no.3 (2001): 497.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Weiwu Zhang, Trent Seltzer and Shannon L. Bichard, 'Two Sides of the Coin: Assessing The Influence of Social Network Site Use During the 2012 US Presidential Campaign,' *Social Science Computer Review* (2013): 7.

persuadable voters through its immediate network. As Sara Vissers notes: 'political parties no longer only preach to the converted, but they also preach through the converted.'[75]

Vaccari studies whether Twitter allows information to spread beyond the confinements of political ideology. He notes the importance of a campaign's ability to indirectly reach persuadable voters through its core supporters, who become a campaign's 'persuasion agents'.[76] Vaccari quotes Kevin Thurman; Hillary Clinton's deputy Internet director during her 2008 campaign, who suggests that social media: 'changes persuasion in the sense that it allows us to more effectively use old ways to persuade people.'[77] Campaigns can use online platforms to mobilize supporters, who then 'address other citizens.'[78] This method of peer-to-peer targeting is especially influential as individuals are more likely to be persuaded if they see a message from someone they know and trust. Vaccari notes: 'online supporters are capable of both spreading messages to their acquaintances and using their personal influence to increase the credibility of the messages they disseminate.'[79]

Indubitably, persuadable voters may use a variety of social media platforms. However, the literature suggests that Twitter can be used as an example of how campaigns disperse persuasive messages. Second degree networks are extremely important for a campaign's message to reach a broader audience than simply its loyal followers. Successful campaigns recognize that Twitter can enable messages to transcend its immediate network; therefore allowing messages to reach key, persuadable voters.

Despite retweets' use as a measurement for success on Twitter, they are vanity metrics which produce little informative data beyond a tweet's reach. Kenneth Plowman and Beki Winchel

[75] Sara Vissers, 'From preaching to the converted to preaching through the converted,' *Parliaments, Parties, and Politicians in Cyberspace*, ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops 2009, Workshop 20 April 14-19, 2009, Lisbon. 27.
[76] Cristian Vaccari, 'From echo chamber to persuasive device? Rethinking the role of the Internet in campaigns,' *New Media and Society* (2012): 14.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.

note that such metrics should be analyzed alongside other quantitative or qualitative analytics.[80] Therefore, an examination of polling data during the election allows this paper to understand whether the parties' online narrative transcended beyond Twitter users and influenced the wider electorate.

An overview of the existing literature suggests that British political campaigns do not have access to the electorate's data to the same extent as American campaigns. Thus, UK political campaigns are limited in their ability to use matched targeting. However, they can replicate micro targeting methods by using data available through social media. Once a campaign locates its target audience in this way, candidates can appeal for its support. In previous electoral campaigns, Labour and the Conservatives did not use digital media to engage with their audience. Ross argues that this changed in 2015. Whilst Labour continued to use social media to engage with their key supporters, the Conservative party used it as a saturation targeting tool. The party understood that it must target persuadable voters through social media and mobilize them both online and offline. This strategy ultimately contributed to a Conservative victory. This paper builds on the existing scholarship to examine in more detail the methods used by parties to target persuadable voters and suggest how social media strategies may be used effectively in future UK campaigns.

[80] Kenneth D. Plowman and Beki Winchel, *The Social Media Communication Matrix: A New Direction in Public Relations* (New York, NY: Business Expert Press, 2000).

Research

Research Questions

R1) a. How has social media been used to target persuadable voters?
b. How effectively did the Conservative party use social media in the 2015 General Election to target persuadable voters?
R2) a. What were the Twitter message tactics of both major parties?
b. Which type of messages were most successful in influencing persuadable voters both on Twitter and offline?
R3) To what extent did the Labour party use social media in the 2015 General Election to focus on mobilizing core supporters rather than to reach out to persuadable voters?

These three research questions aim to determine whether the political parties in the UK use social media to target key voters in a campaign. Moreover, this research intends to understand the social media tactics used by both the Labour and Conservative parties in 2015 and whether the Conservative party used social media more effectively to both target and deliver a persuasive message to key voters. A content analysis of the main parties Twitter feeds during the 2015 election campaign allows this thesis to draw inferences about social media strategy. Graphing message-types against the number of retweets they gained indicates message success on Twitter, whilst polling data measures which messages influenced public opinion. Interviews contribute to a broader discussion about the use of digital tools to target persuadable voters and the extent to which UK political parties embraced such methods in 2015.

Research Design

This is the first research to use a content analysis of the two main parties' and their leaders' tweets during the entirety of the 2015 General Election campaign in order to understand how they used Twitter as a campaign tool. It analyzes a total of 5,484 tweets during the 38 days of the General Election campaign: beginning on March 30th, 2015 and ending on Election Day, May 7th, 2015. A study of the two main parties tweets during the campaign, excluding the period

beforehand, allows a comprehensive examination of campaign strategy. Moreover, it examines whether the Twitter strategy was cohesive across the leader's and their party's accounts. The reasons this research focuses on the two main parties are threefold. First, it aims to explore the ways in which social media helped the Conservative party to win the election. Second, this analysis provides an insight into the methods which were missing from the Labour campaign's strategy to enable a Labour win. Third, although the Liberal Democrats were the third largest party in the UK at the point of the election campaign, public opinion was dramatically against them. Thus, Nick Clegg's party was not in a viable position to remain successfully in coalition with the Tories. Nor could the Liberal Democrats choose to partner with Labour if it was the largest party and did not have an overall majority.

Twitter restricts the amount of data available to researchers. This 3,200-tweet limit prevents this research from obtaining each party's handle's tweets prior to the afternoon of April 2nd, 2015.[81] As both party leaders tweeted less frequently than the party's Twitter handles, the data from @Ed_Miliband and @David_Cameron spans the entirety of the campaign. Tweets from both @UKLabour and @Conservatives are only available from April 2nd, 2015 to Election Day. This research analyzes each leader's Twitter handle separately to their party's handle to observe whether the message tactics differed or if they were centralized and cohesive. Two coders ran a random sample of 10% of the tweets as a test prior to the full analysis. After completing several tests, 250 tweets were analyzed at a time and were reconciled after every section. The content analysis took four months to complete.

R1) a. and b. focus on using social media to target key voters. As it is difficult to determine this from a content analysis, interviews provide answers to these questions. Four individuals who worked on each campaign were interviewed. Three were interviewed face-to-face and one

[81] It is possible to obtain a snapshot of a particular day in Twitter through the 'Internet Archive's Wayback Machine' archive.org. However, it did not provide snapshots of the same day for all four accounts. Thus, this paper only used the original Tweets obtained through Twitter API.

interview was conducted over the phone. Four academic scholars and two political practitioners were emailed for a broader perspective. Although each interviewee was asked specific questions about their individual role in the campaign, it was important to standardize each question so as to avoid bias and to gain different, cross-ideological perspectives on each issue.

The content analysis provides insight into R2) a. and R3). Previous scholarly literature argues that campaigns use issue messaging to engage persuadable voters. Yet this research also aims to study the use of negative personality attacks. Thus, the content analysis' codes focus largely on determining whether a tweet promotes a policy or explicitly attacks either the leader of the opposition, a named opposition member of parliament (MP), or the opposition party. It also differentiates between an explicit policy mention, (including tweets about the party's manifesto and a note of which policy the tweet references) and a party promotion or promise of what it will do in the future. Tweets denouncing the opposition are distinguished by those which personally attack named MPs and those which criticize the opposition's policy preferences. Tweets attacking the opposition whilst offering a better alternative are also noted. Indeed, some tweets do not solely mention one point; rather, they may include a mixture of promoting the party's policies and attacking the opposition. For tweets such as these, this research codes for the first point mentioned and makes a note of the second point.

Conservative campaign directors acknowledge that the party emphasized the potential threat of a Labour-SNP coalition to appeal to persuadable voters. To analyze this, there is a code for tweets which claim that the opposition party will have to depend on another party in order to form a majority parliament. This research expects that the Conservative party used this tactic more frequently than Labour. If this is true, it contributes to the understanding that the Conservatives recognized that playing on fears of a Labour and SNP coalition was a vital method to attract key, persuadable voters.

R2) b. focuses on the success of a message. Success on Twitter can be measured through retweets. The number of retweets a message gains indicates its reach to a broader audience. Using Stata, a data analysis program, this research constructs a series of graphs to understand which type of message strategy gained the most retweets. Two graphs detail the frequency of retweets across the campaign and the number of retweets for each individual handle. Following this analysis, a third graph is created which measures the different types of messages from each account and the number of retweets they received throughout the campaign. Thus, this research can draw inferences into the relationship between the likelihood of being retweeted and a particular message. Retweets also provide this research with insights into the extent both parties relied on using social networks to disperse the message. This paper examines whether Labour focused more so on such organic, peer-to-peer targeting, whilst the Conservatives relied more so on targeting individual's with specific messages.

However, despite the attention most political communication scholars give to retweets, they are vanity metrics and do not provide researchers with accurate data measurements beyond message diffusion and reach. Moreover, active Twitter users are only a subset of the overall voting population. Therefore, an analysis of polling data taken before and during the election allows this paper to understand which type of message resonated with the wider electorate. Comparing the dates when parties tweeted with the polling data allows an understanding of each campaign's Twitter strategy and its influence on public opinion.

R3) explores the claim that Labour did not use social media to engage with the wider electorate; rather the campaign employed it as a method to mobilize its base. Thus, the content analysis includes a code for instances when a party directly responds or mentions a named supporter. This research hypothesizes that Labour is more likely to do this than the Conservatives. If this is correct, it can be argued that Labour's concentration on purely

mobilizing the base contributed to the party's defeat. This emphasizes that partisans do not decide election outcomes; persuadable voters do. Moreover, codes are created to observe the degree to which the party's main Twitter account engaged with other Twitter handles in general. This includes retweets from other party members, celebrities and newspapers that both attack the opposition party or its members or promote a party's policy. Finally, a code is included for general information about the campaign. This discerns whether parties in 2015 adopted different campaign tactics from those used in 2010 when social media was employed as a platform to broadcast campaign information.

Research Limitations

Unlike Facebook, Twitter provides researchers with a source of data collection.[82] The platform provides this research with primary data on the message tactics of the two major British parties and can help explain how both campaigns engaged with voters. The dataset contains each accounts' Twitter handle, the full text of each tweet, a URL of the tweet, its hashtag, the number of retweets the tweet received, the time of day and date it was sent and the number of account followers at the time the tweets were harvested. Although useful for a content analysis, the dataset proved to be too restrictive for any further quantitative research. Moreover, there are undoubtedly a number of limitations when applying Twitter data to this specific research. The main issue is: campaigns typically use Twitter to engage with the partisan base. Thus, the analysis cannot exactly capture the extent to which both parties' message tactics were successful in persuading key voters. A content analysis of tweets alone does not explain each party's social media strategy. The data does not show *how* each campaign targeted persuadable voters, it only demonstrates the types of messages both campaigns sent. Whilst it provides

[82] Luke Sloan, Jeffrey Morgan, William Housley, Matthew Williams, Adam Edwards, Pete Burnap and Omer Rana, 'Knowing the Tweeters: Deriving Sociologically Relevant Demographics from Twitter,' *Sociological Research Online* 18, issue.3 (August 2013) http://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/3/7.html accessed November 30, 2015.

useful insights, it is unknown whether the parties' messages were reactionary to the opposition and traditional media or whether the messages sent were part of a broader social media strategy.[83] Due to the lack of demographic information available through Twitter data, it cannot be certain which type of voter engaged with certain tweets.[84] Thus, the interview portion of this research is a vital component to explain the context of the tweets.

Substantive content analysis has its shortcomings. To begin a content analysis, researchers must devise a codebook. A reliable codebook has clear definitions for each code, setting a common standard of judgment for the researchers. If these definitions are not clear, the validity of the codebook is compromised, as researchers may not capture the messages' true meaning. Moreover, content analysis requires a high degree of inter coder reliability. Researchers may differ in their interpretation of the content, thus, it is important for them to meet frequently and to reconcile any differences. Indubitably, this process is lengthy, and time constraints must be considered.

Content analysis provides researchers with only inferences into campaign strategy. Thus, this research uses interviews with key campaign members and scholars to contextualize the analysis. However, interviews as a form of qualitative research also have limitations. This research aimed to include interviews with those who held prominent positions in both parties' campaigns. Although many eminent digital media campaigners from the 2015 election were interviewed, it was not possible to interview as many as intended. This undoubtedly impacts the research's reliability, as the small sample size may not reflect the opinions of everyone who worked on both campaigns.

[83] An extension of this analysis would compare the social media tactics with the party's messages through other, traditional forms of media.

[84] Sloan et al., 'Knowing The Tweeters.' The authors note that: 'A perennial criticism regarding the use of social media in social science research is the lack of demographic information associated with naturally occurring mediated data such as that produced by Twitter.'

Polling data provides this research with an understanding about message success. However, polls have a number of shortcomings which should be addressed. For example, the construction of a question is very important as it may influence the way a respondent replies. Herbert Asher notes that follow up questions after an initial query can have a large effect on apparently stable attitudes.[85] Moreover, polls can be administered across a variety of different platforms. The polls used in this research are all online surveys. Internet surveys are a growing phenomenon as they are inexpensive. They also have an element of anonymity which encourages respondents to answer more honestly than they would otherwise, eliminating social desirability bias.[86] Moreover, as these polls asked about public attitudes towards the parties during the campaign, respondents' answers should be accurate as they were simply asked about current events. However, as the surveys are anonymous, administrators do not have a concrete idea about who answered the questions. Lastly, similar to interview questions, a poll's sample size affects its generalizability. Despite these evident problems, an amalgamation of these methods allows this research to determine the social media strategies of the 2015 UK General Election campaign.

[85] Herbert Asher, *Polling and the Public: What Every Citizen Should Know* (Washington, DC: CQ Press College, 2011).
[86] Ibid.

Results

R1) a. and b. Social media as a targeting tool

Social media was used to target key voters in the UK 2015 General Election. Jessica Toale, a member of the Fabian Society – a British socialist organization – notes that: 'social media became a much more prominent campaign tool during the 2015 election, with British politician clamoring to learn from the Obama experience.'[87] However, she suggests that whilst Labour continued to use more traditional methods of campaigning, the Conservative party developed a 'widespread social media strategy.'[88] Matt Wall agrees, noting that micro targeting tools through social media were available in the 2015 campaign, yet: 'the Tories were the only party to exploit its potential.'[89] Alex Masters-Waage worked for NationBuilder, an online targeting and mobilizing platform, during the 2015 election campaign for both Labour and the Conservatives. He believes that the Conservatives emphasis on targeting through social media did have a positive effect and contributed to its overall success.[90] He notes that online tools make it easier for campaigns to target using social media. For example, 'Facebook mash' uses an individual's email address to identify their social media account. From this, a campaign has access to the voter's basic information such as location, age and interests and can start making an assessment on whether or not the voter is persuadable. Targeted emails and Facebook and Twitter adverts allow the campaign to enrich the voter's profile, whilst delivering the appropriate message. In 2015, 72% of adult Internet users had a social media profile.[91] Therefore, although this method does not capture the entire electorate, it does have the potential to reach a wide number of potential voters. Moreover, this suggests that whilst the Conservative campaign did not

[87] Jessica Toale, email to author, January 26, 2016.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Matt Wall, email to author, February 1, 2016.
[90] Alex Masters-Waage, telephone interview with author, December 7, 2015.
[91] James Ellis, 'Key Social Media Statistics from Ofcom's Communications Market Report,' *Econsultancy* August, 19 2015 https://econsultancy.com/blog/66824-key-social-media-statistics-from-ofcom-s-communications-market-report/ accessed January 10, 2016.

precisely emulate the US style of micro targeting, it used online saturation targeting to capture key voters.

However, others are more cautious about the extent of social media's effectiveness to target key voters. The senior social media manager for the Labour campaign, Luke Waterfield, explains that although David Cameron's Facebook page grew its following exponentially, its audience was primarily from countries outside the UK.[92] The Conservatives' Facebook targeting was not effective enough to prevent this. Targeting voters on social media is not as accurate as US micro targeting: without an individual's primary data, the Conservatives were unaware of its exact reach to vital voters. Although the party understood the need to use social media to target persuadable voters, its overall effectiveness was limited. This suggests that whilst the use of social media as a targeting tool contributed to the Conservatives' success, other factors, such as the campaign's messages' ability to resonate with key voters, were equally important. As Nick Anstead notes: 'the story in 2015 was about … identifying types of voters and effectively targeting them with messages that convince them.'[93]

Social media is only part of a campaign's overall strategy. Whilst it is clear that the Conservative party attempted to use it as a targeting tool more so than Labour, many believe that the latter party won the critical ground game. Jessica Toale suggests that Labour reached Ed Miliband's goal of engaging in conversation with four million people.[94] Face-to-face conversations with potential voters are undoubtedly important. Simon Kitchen, a Conservative candidate in a marginal seat, emphasizes that the ground game is critical due to the local nature of British campaigns.[95] Unlike in the US, where the electorate directly votes for the president, the British public votes for local parliamentary candidates. Door knocking enables campaign

[92] Luke Waterfield, interview with author, December 14, 2015.
[93] Nick Anstead, email to author, January 15, 2016.
[94] Jessica Toale.
[95] Simon Kitchen, interview with author, December 11, 2015.

staff and volunteers to understand which houses to re-visit and which to leave. Simon Kitchen notes that his own campaign re-visited voters who initially showed interest in the campaign, which signaled to him that they were potential persuadable voters. He believes that campaigns should focus on the ground game, which should be supported, rather than influenced by social media.[96] Luke Waterfield agrees that the ground game is crucial for gathering voter information: 'field is huge,' as it directs campaigns to the people who it can potentially persuade.[97]

Most of the interviewees agree that the UK saw a blend of online and offline campaigning in 2015. Jessica Toale calls it a 'synergistic process,' where campaigns focus on: 'converting people you have attracted online to campaign offline and encouraging supporters to click and share their support online.'[98] Merging online and offline was evident in the Conservative party's campaign. Matt Wall notes: 'The Tories were impressive in this aspect of the campaign with their "Team 2015" initiative seeing them bussing groups of ground campaigners to targeted seats around the country during the campaign.'[99] These seats were targeted through social media.[100] Other interviewees believe that online targeting enables campaigns to gain more precise goals. Nick Anstead describes: 'Much online campaigning is about doing things you have always done more efficiently and better than you have been able to do them in the past.'[101] Richard Royal, a Conservative candidate in 2015, goes further; arguing that online will eventually replace traditional offline methods of campaigning:

> It is more of a blend now than when I was first involved in major campaigns in 2001 and 2005, at which time social media was nearly non-existent and websites tended to be very basic … I personally think that the days of knocking on peoples' doors is nearing the end of its usage, often there are more people out or unwilling to talk than those who engage. Online methods cut through this problem with minimal effort.[102]

[96] Ibid.
[97] Luke Waterfield.
[98] Jessica Toale.
[99] Matt Wall.
[100] Ross, 'Why the Tories Won.'
[101] Nick Anstead.
[102] Richard Royal, email to author, December 17, 2015.

Some, like Richard Royal, argue that targeting voters through social media is increasingly becoming a prominent element of a campaign's overall strategy. Others suggest that whilst the Conservatives employed it effectively, its use in British campaigns is still restricted. Although this paper does not claim that online will entirely replace offline campaigning, it is clear that the Conservatives made a concerted effort to use online tools to target key voters in 2015. Nick Anstead notes that: 'this type of politics greatly amplifies the power of some voters over others. If you can figure out who they are and how to communicate with them, you can gain a significant advantage.'[103] The Conservatives understood this and the party concentrated its campaign efforts to locate key voters and deliver a persuasive message.

Therefore, both Labour and the Conservatives used social media as a targeting tool. However, the Conservative party used it most effectively because the campaign identified potential persuadable voters whereas Labour used it to mobilize its partisan supporters on social media platforms and through its ground game. Although its utility was arguably limited, digital saturation targeting allowed the Conservative campaign to both understand which voters it should canvas offline and online and the type of messages which would resonate with specific members of the electorate. As Alex Masters-Waage notes: 'the Tories did put a lot of focus on social media and they did win.'[104] Thus, whilst the UK cannot precisely emulate US micro targeting, the 2015 Conservative campaign understood the utility of social media to target members of the electorate whose vote would enable the party to win the election.

[103] Nick Anstead.
[104] Alex Masters-Waage.

R2) a. Message Tactics

Policy

A fundamental component of the Labour and the Conservative parties campaign was the message. Luke Waterfield notes that the top topics of the 2015 election mirrored those of 2010 and were the economy, welfare and immigration. He suggests that the: 'consistency of that message was so important for success.'[105] Jessica Toale agrees as she says: 'In politics you have to have a clear message, [and] repeat it over and over again.'[106] Unanimously, the interviewees believe that the Conservative party developed a stronger message than Labour. Nick Anstead notes that the 2015 campaign focused on: 'identifying types of voters and effectively targeting them with messages that convince them. The Conservatives did it very well.'[107] Luke Waterfield agrees that the Conservatives understood that the message was vital and built a campaign on the foundation of a few core economic messages which would appeal to persuadable voters. Labour's key policy was the NHS. Its emphasis on the party's commitment to public health care catered towards its core supporters. Its appeal did not extend outside of this partisan group. Both parties message strategy is apparent on Twitter. Labour mentioned the NHS more so than other policies, whilst the Conservatives most frequently tweeted about the economy. Any mention of a party's economic policy includes its broad plan as well as specific mentions about minimum wage and job growth.

[105] Luke Waterfield.
[106] Jessica Toale.
[107] Nick Anstead.

Table 1
Explicitly promoting a party policy – NHS and Economy[108]

	@UKLabour	@Ed_Miliband	@Conservatives	@David_Cameron
	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
Economy	20	3	132	16
Economy & NHS	0	0	32	1
Minimum Wage	15	1	1	0
Job Growth	31	3	87	12
NHS	141	29	40	3

N = number of times each policy was mentioned

The Labour party and Ed Milibands' handles mentioned Labour's key policy more so than the Conservatives and David Cameron. @UKLabour's tweets about the NHS often stated that the party aimed to 'save' or 'rescue' the healthcare system.[109] Miliband tweeted a similar narrative: the leader claimed six times that his party would save the NHS. This suggests that Labour's policy improves on that of the Conservative party yet it does not explicitly criticize the opposition. Only once did Labour overtly juxtapose its own plans for the NHS with the Conservatives' NHS policy: '@UKLabour: Labour's plan: Protect and improve the NHS The Tories' plan: More privatisation, reorganisation (*sic*) and longer waits.' However, Labour's narrative did not appeal to voters beyond the party base. As Luke Waterfield suggests: whilst the NHS is an important social issue for core supporters, the party that is viewed as more economically competent and trustworthy has a broader appeal.[110] Jessica Toale emphasizes that while Labour's 'strategy was to focus on the party's strengths: the NHS … you cannot win if the electorate does not believe in your leader or your economic credibility.'[111]

The interviewees claim that the Conservatives' core message focused on the economy. On Twitter, the party concentrated on its economic achievements during its previous five years in

[108] Tweets that explicitly promoted a policy first and attacked the opposition party second are coded as an explicit policy promotion. Those which primarily attack the opposition on its policies are coded as an explicit attack on the opposition party.
[109] The party mentioned this 10 times.
[110] Luke Waterfield.
[111] Jessica Toale.

office and attacked the last Labour government for its apparent economic failures. As Richard Royal notes: 'most polling shows that voters trust the Conservatives on the economy, and this had clearly been a major issue in the previous five years or so, so it made sense to focus on that.'[112] Many of the party's economic messages focused on this trust. For example: 'RT @CCHQPress: Kinnock: 'People think voting Conservative will improve their economy security. They are right. #GE2015.' Others implicitly mentioned Gordon Brown's Labour government whilst promoting the Conservatives' economic record: 'RT @ChrisPincher: Clear message from calm, controlled PM. Let's finish job restoring economy; let's have a better UK & not go back to square one.' Evidently, the Conservatives' agenda sought to stress its economic achievements, because as Luke Waterfield suggests: 'the Tories always win on the economy.'[113]

The Conservative party understood that Labour's NHS legacy was strong, yet rather than ignoring this issue, the party linked it with its most successful policy. Therefore, the party sought to set the agenda as it framed its message highlighting the importance of a strong economy for a successful NHS. According to Simon Kitchen, all Conservative candidates were briefed about emphasizing this message.[114] This strategy is apparent on Twitter. For example, the Conservatives' handle retweeted: 'RT @CCHQPress: You need a strong economy for a strong NHS - only @Conservatives can deliver that.' Other tweets simply stated: 'RT @DavidGauke: If your economy tanks, you can't fund the NHS #bbcqt.' Richard Royal comments that: 'this was an obvious strategy as polling shows that's where they're [Labour] strongest.'[115] Matt Wall notes:

> Labour really struggled to project credibility on the economy, where … the Conservatives were broadly successful in linking other, weaker policy areas to their strong economic performance – everything was ultimately brought back to their 'long term economic plan'. So, Labour's lack of communication on this topic on Twitter reflected a significant general weakness in their campaign platform.[116]

[112] Richard Royal.
[113] Luke Waterfield.
[114] Simon Kitchen.
[115] Richard Royal.
[116] Matt Wall.

David Cameron tweeted a similar narrative. For example: '@David_Cameron: There's a clear choice at this election: a stronger economy, or more of what got us in a mess in the first place.' His only tweet about the need of a strong economy for the NHS stated: '@David_Cameron: I believe in the NHS. It was there for me when my son needed help. A stronger economy allows us to fund it so it's always there for you.' Here, the Prime Minister makes the issue personal, showing his commitment to the NHS with its funding based on a strong economy.[117] Labour did not defend itself from these attacks, nor did the party have its own distinctive message against the Conservatives' economic record. Ultimately, the Conservative party's message successfully stressed its positive economic achievements whilst undermining Labour's strongest policy.

Table 2
Explicitly attacking opposition party policy – NHS and Economy

	@UKLabour	@Ed_Miliband	@Conservatives	@David_Cameron
	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
Economy	17	1	81	5
NHS	76	6	26	0

N = number of times each account attacked the opposition

Both parties attacked the opposition more frequently on its own most successful policy. Yet, the Conservatives attacked Labour far more on the NHS than Labour attacked the Conservatives on the economy (although, interestingly David Cameron did not negatively tweet about Labour's NHS policies at all). Whilst the Conservatives enjoyed a relatively stable economic record, Richard Royal notes that Labour's last government did not have a particularly good NHS reputation.[118] Simon Kitchen agrees that the Conservatives' narrative highlighted the failure of core services such as the NHS under the last Labour government.[119]

[117] David Cameron's son had severe epilepsy and cerebral palsy and died in 2009.
[118] Richard Royal.
[119] Simon Kitchen.

The Conservatives also used the previous Labour government as an example of economic failure. Out of the 81 negative tweets about Labour and the economy, it pointed blame at the last Labour government 32 times. Tweets included: '@Conservatives: under Labour, UK went into financial crisis worst placed of any major nation to respond' and 'Labour left the biggest deficit in our peacetime history - we've cut it by half & will eliminate it in nxt (*sic*) parliament.' As well as attacking its opponent, the Conservatives emphasized its economic achievements in the same tweet. David Cameron tweeted a similar tone. After the leaders debate he wrote: '@David_Cameron: Last night I reminded everyone of how shameless Labour are about the state they left our finances in. #leadersdebate.' Jessica Toale suggests:

> Labour consistently failed to defend its record throughout the 2010-2015 Parliament. By the time the election rolled around Labour had failed to counter the Tory's 'Labour caused the crash' narrative and had no credible alternative story to tell.[120]

Indeed, Labour did not fashion a narrative on social media to respond to such claims. Rather, its negative policy tweets mainly focused on the Conservatives' unequal spending cuts: '@UKLabour: We will cut the deficit every year and balance the books, sensibly and fairly, without the extreme spending cuts the Tories have planned' and '@UKLabour: The Tories' unfunded spending commitments will cost your family £1,400 a year. Labour has a better plan: http://t.co/H7XuUUMAZG.' Yet, as Luke Waterfield stresses, persuadable voters did not trust Labour's promises, rather they placed their confidence in the Conservatives' economic record.[121]

The public also considered immigration and welfare as important issues during the 2015 campaign. Welfare encompasses tweets about public railways, child benefits, child-care and general equality. The non-dom policy is a loophole which allows wealthy people to claim non-domiciled status to reduce their tax liability. This is coded separately to taxation, as it was one of

[120] Jessica Toale.
[121] Luke Waterfield.

Labour's key issues. Moreover, distinctions are made between taxation, housing and education (which includes tweets about tuition fees) as although they are included in many tweets about welfare, they were frequently individually tweeted.

Table 3
Explicitly promoting a party policy – Immigration and Welfare

	@UKLabour	@Ed_Miliband	@Conservatives	@David_Cameron
	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
Immigration	13	3	1	0
Non-dom	46	3	0	0
Welfare	17	1	42	5
Taxation	57	6	111	12
Education	26	4	16	2
Housing	67	8	49	3

N = number of times each policy was mentioned

It is apparent that the Labour party tweeted about immigration most frequently. In particular, it often mentioned the party's plan to control immigration: 'Read more about our plans to control immigration: #leadersdebate https://t.co/4F6v3fYhkd'. Labour was also concerned about promoting its plan to stop the existing non-dom policy. Such tweets include: '@UKLabour: Britain succeeds when everyone plays by the same rules. That's why Labour will scrap non-dom status: http://t.co/GixIcQmRKt' and '@UKLabour: Labour's plan to abolish non-dom tax rules – six things you need to know: http://t.co/GixIcQmRKt.' Labour's supporters favored the party's non-dom plan. The party's frequent tweets about it suggest that it catered its message towards these partisans. The Conservatives only tweet about immigration was a retweet from a Conservative MP: 'RT @SamGyimah: Cameron strong and balanced on immigration. Control our borders and reform the benefits system. #bbqt.' Similar to Labour, the Conservatives used the word 'control' to discuss immigration policy. Yet, it is clear the Tories did

not prioritize policy messages concerning immigration in comparison to the economy, NHS and taxation.

The Conservative party tweeted far more about its welfare policy than Labour. Most tweets concentrated on the party's plan to reduce welfare spending for the good of the economy. For example, the party retweeted: 'RT @SamGyimah: Cameron passionate so far on why welfare reform is so necessary to securing the recovery. #bbcqt.' This suggests that the party continued to stress the importance of a good economy throughout its policy messages. The Conservatives supported state spending for specific social benefits. This is surprising, as the party traditionally does not favor increased welfare. It discussed its plan to increase the number of free hours of childcare for working parents: 'RT @CCHQPress: The next @Conservatives govt *(sic)* will double free hours of childcare for working parents of 3-4 yr *(sic)* olds during term time.' David Cameron also promoted this plan: '@David_Cameron: Great to meet mums and children at Stepping Stones nursery - telling them about our plan for 30 hours free childcare.' This policy was remarkably similar to that of the Labour party, which tweeted: '@UKLabour: Our promise: 25 hours of childcare for working parents of 3- and 4-year-olds Paid for by: Increasing the banking levy by £800 million.'

The Conservatives are traditionally the party of low taxation and this is reflected in the majority of the party's tweets. The party mentioned tax almost twice as frequently as Labour. Its Twitter handle focused on its pledge to lower income, pension and retirement tax. David Cameron's taxation tweets are more general. For example, he stated: '@David_Cameron: I have a simple view that if you have done the right thing - worked, saved and paid your taxes - you should be rewarded, not punished.' This suggests that the party's handle focused on specific taxation policies, whereas Cameron's tweets are more generic.

Labour's Twitter handle largely focused on its plan to end the bedroom tax: in which claimants lose benefit if spare bedrooms in their houses are unoccupied. Most tweets stated: '@UKLabour: Labour in → Bedroom Tax gone.' Yet, like Cameron, Ed Miliband's tweets were broader, focusing on a fairer taxation system. For example, '@Ed_Miliband: On day one of a Labour government we will start to tackle tax avoidance. We believe everyone should play by the same rules.' It seems as though the party handles were used to outline specific taxation plans, whilst the leaders' mainly tweeted non-specific comments on tax.

Labour tweeted most frequently about its education policy. One of the party's key points was to limit class sizes. Thus, @UKLabour tweeted: '@UKLabour: Children deserve a better start than being crammed into huge classes. We'll cap class sizes for 5, 6 and 7-year-olds.' In other tweets, Labour provided an example of how it would fund this policy: '@UKLabour: We will end the wasteful Free Schools programme *(sic)* and use the money to cap infant class sizes.' Ed Miliband tweeted similarly: '@Ed_Miliband: We'll protect the entire education budget. We'll restore the role of Sure Start We'll deliver smaller class sizes.' The Labour party also tweeted about higher education and its pledge to cut university tuition fees. Miliband mentioned tuition fees three times whilst the party discussed them nine times. @UKLabour tweeted: 'UKLabour: #9days9reasons to vote Labour: (5) We'll cut tuition fees to £6k & guarantee an apprenticeship for each school leaver getting basic grades.' Whilst Ed Miliband simply stated: '@Ed_Miliband: With me as your Prime Minister, tuition fees will be cut. You have my word.'

The Conservative party tweeted about education far less than its opposition. When it did, it focused on its primary and secondary education policy achievements in government and how it would build on these in the future. For example: '@Conservatives: A million more children in good or outstanding schools since 2010. RETWEET to let friends know, and let's keep going.' The party only tweeted about tuition fees once, when it quoted Ruth Davidson, leader of the

Scottish Conservatives: 'RT @CCHQPress: Ruth Davidson on tuition fees: "I don't want the binman to pay for the duke's daughter to go to university." #ScotDebates.' David Cameron did not mention tuition fees at all. He tweeted about education twice and in succession of one another. His first tweet mirrored the words of his party's Twitter handle: '@David_Cameron: And our plan on education is working - with a million more children being taught in good or outstanding schools.' This was followed by: '@David_Cameron: The @Conservatives are the union for parents - fighting to ensure more discipline, more rigour, *(sic)* and zero-tolerance of mediocrity in schools.' However, it is apparent that the Conservative party was less explicit than Labour about its education policy. Perhaps this was because education was not considered a key policy during this election – thus, the Conservatives placed their efforts in emphasizing policies that had greater resonance with the electorate.

Like childcare policies, both parties promoted comparable housing plans. The Conservatives used Twitter to promote the party's 'Right to Buy' policy. It pledged to ensure that 1.3 million people would have the ability to buy a house: 'RT @ToryTreasury: Right to Buy: 1.3 million extra families given the security of a home of their own. #VoteConservative.' Cameron similarly tweeted: '@David_Cameron: The @Conservatives are the party of working people: we're giving 1.3m housing association tenants the right to buy their home at a discount.' Labour also tweeted about first time buyers, as it endorsed its Future Home Fund policy: '@UKLabour: Labour will restore the dream of homeownership for millions of working families by building 200,000 new homes by 2020.' Ed Miliband emulated his party's Twitter account by stating: '@Ed_Miliband: Our new Future Homes Fund will unlock at least £5 billion to deliver 125,000 houses that local people need, putting first time buyers first.' Thus, although Labour tweeted about its housing plans less than its opposition, both parties promoted similar ideas.

Table 4
Explicitly attacking opposition party policy – Immigration and Welfare

	@UKLabour	@Ed_Miliband	@Conservatives	@David_Cameron
	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
Immigration	0	0	3	0
Non-dom	11	1	13	0
Welfare	18	4	3	0
Taxation	65	1	32	1
Education	1	0	4	0
Housing	3	1	14	0

N = number of times each account attacked opposition

The Conservatives refuted Labour's non-dom policy. It attacked its opposition 13 times with tweets such as: 'RT @CCHQPress: @UKLabour are not actually abolishing non-dom status in way they claim because 60% non-doms won't be affected.' One day later, the Labour party responded by saying: '@UKLabour: On the wrong side of the non-dom argument, the Tories resorted to personal attacks today. It hasn't gone well: https://t.co/4cZrw5Jvq4.' The tweet included a link to screenshots of tweets from journalists who condemned the Tories attacks on Labour's plan. This exchange suggests that both parties used Twitter as a channel to post their rebuttals of the opposition's attacks. Ed Miliband's single tweet criticizing the Tories' non-dom stance stated: '@Ed_Miliband: If you were in any doubt about who the Tories stand up for, they're now defending the indefensible nom-dom tax loophole.' It is clear that Labour was determined to draw attention to the Conservatives' refusal to change the non-dom policy while promoting its own plan.

Whilst the Tories are traditionally the party of welfare cuts, the Labour party stands to extend social benefits. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Labour attacked the Conservatives' plans. Most tweets mentioned both tax and welfare – for example: '@UKLabour: The Tories are planning £12bn in welfare cuts but won't tell us where. The truth is they will raid tax credits.' These tweets are clearly aimed at Labour's core supporters who favor a large welfare state. Ed

Miliband also attacked the Tories on welfare reform and in particular, child benefit policy. He often contrasted the opposition's plan to cut child benefit with Labour's plan to defend it: '@Ed_Miliband: I've just finished speaking in Bristol about our commitment to protect Child Benefit and the Tory plan to cut it.' Again, attacking the Conservative party on the basis that it threatens to limit benefits speaks to Labour's core supporters. The Tories only attacked Labour three times on its welfare plans. All three tweets criticized the last Labour government: 'RT @CCHQPress: Labour led to unlimited welfare and they'd do the same again #SameOldLabour #BBCQT', 'RT @CCHQPress: PM: Labour trapped the poor on welfare & widened inequality. The true party of working people in Britain today is us, the @Conservatives' and 'RT @CCHQPress: @David_Cameron: Under Labour the welfare system deterred people from work. It destroyed aspiration & created resentment.' Similar to its negative tweets against Labour's NHS plans, the Conservative party attacked the former Labour government's welfare policies in an attempt to undermine Miliband's party's ideas. Moreover, these tweets reinforced the Conservatives' message that it is the party of growth as it contrasted the party with the idea that Labour was still living in the shadow of its last government.

Both parties criticized the opposition's taxation plans more frequently than any other policy. Labour's attacks on Tory tax policies focused on credit cuts. Most tweets stated: 'UKLabour: SHARE THIS → The Tories will cut tax credits and working families will pay the price.' Ed Miliband's single tweet about this issue referred to the Conservative's non-dom policy: '@Ed_Milband: This week, the Tories have gone from defending tax avoidance to personal abuse to launching policies without saying how they'll be paid for.' Whilst Labour focused these types of tweets on the negative effects tax cuts present on society, the Conservatives denounced Labour's tax policies for impeding economic growth. For example, the party's handle retweeted Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne: 'RT @George_Osborne: Have been

speaking with @DavidGauke & @patel4witham about the £15 billion tax hikes & £30 billion borrowing Labour's plans involve.' In his only critical tweet about the Labour party's immigration and welfare policies, David Cameron succinctly stated: '@David_Cameron: 'A Labour Government would mean more borrowing, more debt and more taxes - taking us back to square one. My video: https://t.co/SU2eepEzjH.' Similar to its criticisms of Labour's plans for other key policies, the Conservative party emphasized the economic disaster of a Labour government.

Although both parties offered similar housing policies, the Conservatives frequently attacked Labour's plan. The party mostly retweeted Brandon Lewis, minister for Housing and Planning. For example: 'RT @BrandonLewis: Property experts: 'First-time buyers could lose out under a Labour government' and 'RT @BrandonLewis: Labour left office with over 420,000 less social housing than when they came into govt. *(sic)*' The MP's second tweet continues the Conservatives' narrative of blaming Labour for its incompetence while in government. Labour only criticized the Conservatives' housing policy three times. Two of such tweets were identical and read: '@UKLabour: Five more years of the Tories will lead to millions more families being priced out of the housing market' and the other retweeted Miliband who focused on rent and offered a better alternative: 'RT @Ed_Miliband: People who rent deserve better than this Tory government. I have a better plan to help → http://t.co/nR9PxHkR4P'

It is clear that both parties placed precedence on certain key policies. Whilst Labour fervently promoted its non-dom and immigration plan, the Tories were more concerned with highlighting their taxation and welfare policies. Labour explained its policies through ideas of egalitarianism. Yet the party's tweets failed to continue to promote a uniform narrative. Meanwhile, the Conservative campaign consistently highlighted the party's commitment to

economic growth, whilst criticizing the last Labour government – a trend that is apparent throughout the party's tweets.

Table 5
General party promotion

	@UKLabour	@Ed_Miliband	@Conservatives	@David_Cameron
	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
Party Promotion	206	19	360	29

N = number of times account promoted its party

This research aims to distinguish between a clear mention of policies and a general party promotion. The majority of Labour's tweets in this category emphasized the fight for a more equal Britain. The phrase 'Britain succeeds when working people succeed' appeared 22 times in different tweets and a 'fairer' Britain was mentioned 13 times. The majority of such tweets highlighted Labour's commitment to working people, who are traditionally Labour's core supporters.[122] For example, '@UKLabour: We have the better plan for working families. We can build a better future for Britain. #VoteLabour.' Miliband followed a similar narrative. Of the 19 tweets he sent, 14 mentioned working people. For example: '@Ed_Miliband: Vote for a country where we put working families first. That's what's on the ballot paper tomorrow.' These words highlight Labour's traditional stance for a more equal society and this undoubtedly resonates with its core supporters.

For the Conservatives, the words 'brighter' and 'secure future' were mentioned most often (34 and 26 times respectively). The latter plays on the party's narrative which stresses the importance of a stable economy. Unlike Labour, which directly mentioned the working class, the Conservatives' tweets were more broadly aimed – projecting itself as a party for all. The majority of the Conservatives' tweets noted the party's achievements in government, urging

[122] The phrase 'working people' was mentioned 45 times.

voters that Britain must continue on the same path. For example, 'RT @CCHQPress: Let's stick to the plan that's delivering a brighter future for you, your family & Britain #VoteConservative' and 'RT @CCHQPress: We've come a long way in our recovery, but there's still more to do. Let's finish the job #VoteConservative.' This tweet hints at the fact the party inherited a failing economy under Labour, whilst promoting its own progress. David Cameron mentioned 'a more secure future' six times and a 'brighter future' five times. The remainder of his tweets were consistent with those of his party and stressed how far Britain progressed under a Conservative government. Luke Waterfield explains that voters are typically conservative in their political decision-making. Therefore, by stressing the party's success in government, the Tories encouraged voters to stick to the status quo.

Personal Attacks

Table 6
Exploiting fears of a coalition with a third party

	@UKLabour	@Ed_Miliband	@Conservatives	@David_Cameron
	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
Conservative-UKIP	31	0	-	-
Labour-SNP	-	-	417	20

N = number of times each account mentioned a potential coalition between the opposition and a minor party

As part of the Conservatives' strategy to appeal to persuadable voters, this paper hypothesizes that the campaign played on the electorate's fear of a Labour and SNP coalition. Indeed, following policy promotions, most of the party's tweets concerned Labour's reliance on the SNP to govern. Jessica Toale agrees that this was one of the Tories tactics, noting that they aimed to: 'stoke fears about a possible Labour-SNP pact – one of the reasons people decided not to vote Labour.'[123] Yet, she argues that: 'the SNP threat was over played.'[124] Many of the

[123] Jessica Toale.

interviewees agreed that public opinion was not necessarily frightened about an SNP coalition but voters were uncertain about its impact. Simon Kitchen believes: 'people voted to maintain the status quo than to risk Labour and the SNP.'[125]

Labour also tweeted about a potential political partnership. Although the party's tweets about a Conservative and UK Independence Party (UKIP) coalition were far less frequent than those from the Tories, it is evident that Labour hoped to play on the electorate's concerns of UKIP supporting a Conservative government. Eleven times Labour tweeted: '@UKLabour: The Tories are getting ready to do a deal with UKIP.' Other tweets named UKIP's leader, saying: '@UKLabour: "He's somebody we could sit down and talk to" – Nigel Farage is ready to do a deal with the Tories.' For many of Labour's core supporters, such a coalition is disastrous: Nigel Farage is anti-immigration and anti-NHS. Therefore, this type of message would resonate with these voters.

The Conservatives tweeted about a Labour-SNP coalition in three different ways. One simply stated Labour's need to partner with the SNP in order to govern: 'RT @PCollinsTimes: To command a majority Labour will need to know it will be upheld by SNP.' A different tactic emphasized the negative consequences of the coalition in relation to policy. For example; 'RT @CCHQPress: A Lab-SNP deal = a dangerous cocktail, where taxes are going up, spending is going up & interest rates are going up.' Highlighting the negative impact that this potential coalition would have on the economy continues the Conservative party's economic narrative. The final method played on the idea that Ed Miliband was a weak leader who would not be able to stand up to the dominance of the SNP. Such tweets include: 'RT @MattHancock2015: Miliband struggling against SNP - can you imagine the coalition negotiations #BBCDebate' and 'RT @CCHQPress: Nicola Sturgeon dominated Miliband – an interesting glimpse into what life

[124] Ibid.
[125] Simon Kitchen.

would be like under a Miliband/SNP deal.' Nick Anstead notes that this was a powerful tactic as: 'it combined the personality with the political … the possibility that there might be a hung parliament where Labour would rely on the SNP to form a government [led to the question]: "is Ed Miliband strong enough to pull together those kind of negotiations?"[126]

Table 7
Negative attacks on opposition leader

	@UKLabour	@Ed_Miliband	@Conservatives	@David_Cameron
	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
General attack	135	2	143	3
Policy attack	128	14	215	0

N = number of times party attacked opposition

The Conservatives undoubtedly accentuated the argument that Ed Miliband was a weak leader. Matt Wall suggests: 'the attacks on Miliband were a key plank of the Conservatives' campaign strategy.'[127] Jessica Toale agrees, noting that: 'Ed Miliband had a particular poor public persona and was particularly open to this type of attack.'[128] Labour also tweeted negatively about David Cameron, although the attacks on the Prime Minister were fewer.

Of the 358 negative tweets about Ed Miliband, the majority mentioned policy. Within that category, most tweets concerned Miliband's handling of the economy (this policy was mentioned 80 times). For example, the party's handle retweeted a Conservative MP who wrote: '@MattHancock2015: Ed Miliband has demonstrated tonight why he is #JustNotUpToIt - don't put the economic recovery at risk #BBCQT.' Accentuating Miliband's apparent economic incapability further strengthened the Conservatives' argument that it was the only party with a trustworthy economic reputation.

[126] Nick Anstead.
[127] Matt Wall.
[128] Jessica Toale.

Moreover, Ed Miliband held a Treasury position in the last Labour government. This suitably played into the Conservatives' message that Miliband was instrumental in the economic failure under Gordon Brown and should not be trusted to be in a position of leadership. Simon Kitchen suggests that: 'Miliband was a liability because he was part of the last Labour government,' and his party did not defend its government record.[129] The Conservatives' tweets reflect this view and negatively mentioned Miliband and the former Labour government 35 times. For example, a retweet from the party headquarters' handle stated: 'RT @CCHQPress: Ed Miliband, who wants to be PM next week, still doesn't accept that Labour spent too much. What planet is he on? #BBCQT #JustNotUpToIt.' The party continuously reiterated Ed Miliband's denial that Labour overspent: '@GregHands: Audience gasp as Miliband says he doesn't accept that Labour overspent in Government. #JustNotUpToIt #BBCQT.' Simon Kitchen believes that Miliband brought his party 'too close to the problems' of the last Labour government – and this was escalated by his refusal publicly to admit its role in the economic crisis.[130]

The Conservatives tweeted general negative attacks towards Ed Miliband 143 times. The majority of these tweets compared the Labour leader to David Cameron. Richard Royal argues that: 'many people considered David Cameron to be more Prime Ministerial than Ed Miliband.'[131] The Conservatives' tweets evidently play on this belief: 'RT @CCHQPress: One thing is clear from tonight: David Cameron has a plan for the country, Ed Miliband is weak #Securetherecovery #BBCQT.' This tweet refers to the Conservatives' economic policy. Thus, as well as juxtaposing Cameron and Miliband in terms of leadership qualities, the Tories continued to emphasize their strength on economic decision-making. Jessica Toale succinctly summarizes this point: 'The Conservatives had a consistent lead in the polls on leader and economic

[129] Simon Kitchen.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Richard Royal.

competence. History shows that you cannot win an election unless you have a lead on these two issues.'[132]

The Conservative party was not alone in negatively tweeting about the opposition leader. Yet Labour's tweets about David Cameron were slightly more general than policy focused. This implies that unlike the Conservative party, Labour did not have a consistent negative social media message. Many negative tweets about David Cameron focused on voting him out of government. Such tweets include: '@UKLabour: If you don't want to wake up on Friday to David Cameron waving from Downing St. click here: http://t.co/BI1JNxbnO0' and '@UKLabour: Tomorrow you can vote for a Labour government, and kick David Cameron out of No 10. RT if you're with us. http://t.co/zrVCzSjKR0.' These messages may resonate with a Labour supporter, yet they do not highlight Cameron's character in the same way as the Conservatives' tweets about Miliband.

Labour mentioned the NHS 54 times in its negative attacks against David Cameron. The party discussed this policy more frequently than others in these types of tweets. For example: '@UKLabour: David Cameron is totally silent on his NHS record' and: 'RT @LucyMPowell: Less than 24 hours to go to #VoteCameronOut, to put working people first, to rescue the NHS, to give young people hope. #GE2015.' Highlighting Cameron's NHS policies was important. As Alex Masters-Waage suggests: 'People certainly were concerned about the Conservatives' actions on the NHS and other core services.'[133] Yet those people who were concerned about the Tories' NHS record were likely to be longstanding Labour supporters. Unlike messages about the economy, the narrative Labour created around the NHS did not resonate with the wider public.

Paradoxically, Ed Miliband negatively tweeted about David Cameron more so than Cameron did about Miliband. Similar to his party's Twitter handle, Miliband tweeted about Cameron's

[132] Jessica Toale.
[133] Alex Masters-Waage.

actions on the NHS more so than another other policy. Of Cameron's three negative tweets about Ed Miliband, two highlighted the Labour leader as weak in comparison to himself: '@David_Cameron: Britain faces a simple and inescapable choice - stability and strong Government with me, or chaos with Ed Miliband' and '@David_Cameron: This is the most important election for a generation - with a stark choice between me and Ed Miliband. My video: https://t.co/lt931rWuFS.' The other tweet which stated: '@David_Cameron: The one thing Nicola Sturgeon and I agree on - Ed Miliband must answer this simple question: https://t.co/ysTlIp8qK4,' lead to a YouTube clip of an interview with Nicola Sturgeon claiming that Labour would need the SNP in order to govern. Similar to the party's main Twitter account, Cameron played on fears of a Labour and SNP coalition.

However, both leaders tweeted less about each other, concentrating more on promoting their party's policies. Alex Masters-Waage believes that this is a common tactic in British election campaigns. He suggests that: 'the notion that negative, personal attacks are "not very British" is ingrained in British politics.[134] The UK doesn't have a tradition of going after the opponent.' Nick Anstead confirms that this tactic: 'is not about pure personality, but is also related to political issues … character assignation was prominent in 2015, but not an angry attack like we see in the US.'[135] Therefore, although negative personality attacks were present in both parties' tweets, the leaders' shied away from many overt attacks on each other. Miliband's negative messages focused on the Prime Minister's NHS record. Meanwhile, Cameron tweeted negatively less so than other types of messages and when he did, he reiterated his party's message on leadership and fears of a SNP and Labour coalition. Moreover, Alex Masters-Waage notes that as the British electorate vote for the party, the leader is not entirely blamed for bad

[134] Ibid.
[135] Nick Anstead.

policies.[136] This may explain why both parties chose not to concentrate negative attacks purely on the opposition leader, but also tweeted about the opposition party and its members' role in policy failures.

Table 8
Negative attacks on named opposition member

	@UKLabour	@Ed_Miliband	@Conservatives	@David_Cameron
	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
Attack	47	1	138	2

N = number of times account attacked opposition member

@Conservatives tweeted negatively about named opposition members overwhelmingly more so than @UKLabour. In particular, the Conservative party tweeted about Ed Balls. As Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, Balls' role was pertinent to the Conservatives' message on economic competence. The Conservatives negatively attacked Balls 79 times and almost half of those attacks were followed by the hashtag #BallsUp. The hashtag surfaced after Balls miscommunicated Labour's taxation policy in a radio interview. The Conservative party responded immediately, tweeting a link to the clip and saying: '@Conservatives: RETWEET to remind everyone what Ed Balls said about his key economic policy ... just 3 months ago. #BallsUp https://t.co/RgqsSR0UUH' Not only did this gaffe provide ammunition to the Conservatives' central message of its campaign; that Labour could not be trusted with the economy, but it emphasizes how the party used social media to instantly attack its opposition.

Following Ed Balls, Shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham was negatively tweeted the most.[137] Although far less than Balls, (Burnham was mentioned 9 times) Richard Royal notes that attacking Burnham was part of the Conservatives' strategy. He believes that as Andy Burnham served as Minister of State for the Department of Health under Gordon Brown it: 'made it easy

[136] Alex Masters-Waage.
[137] Jim Murphy was mentioned more so than Andy Burnham, however this research chose not to include him in the analysis as he was running as the leader of Scotland – not for a seat in Westminster's parliament.

to link him to previous failures.' For example, the Conservative party retweeted: '@ToryTreasury: Labour are calling our NHS commitment 'irresponsible'. In 2010, Andy Burnham said: 'It's irresponsible to give the NHS real terms increases.' Like Miliband, the Conservatives used Andy Burnham as an example of the previous Labour government's shortcomings. Other tweets, such as one from Conservative MP Charlie Elphickle, directly tied Burnham to the Conservative message that a good NHS needs a strong economy: '@CharlieElphickle: Incredible to see Andy Burnham admit Labour *cannot* fund the NHS & would not back the NHS's plan for the future, the Five Year Forward View.'

Over half of Labour's negative attacks on a named opposition member were directed at Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne. This suggests that Labour aimed to criticize the Tories' economic policy – despite it being the party's most favorable issue. Interestingly, Labour only negatively attacked Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt once: '@UKLabour: Q: How will you pay for this promise? Jeremy Hunt: ¯_(ツ)_/¯ https://t.co/MsFsGyFmPu' Therefore, unlike the Conservatives who consistently emphasized Labour's weakness, Labour failed to successfully highlight its opposition's actions against the NHS. Instead, the party focused on attacking Osborne who represented the Conservatives' strongest policy.

Table 9
Summary Table of Messages Tweeted By All Four Twitter Accounts

	@UKLabour	@Ed_Miliband	@Conservatives	@David_Cameron
	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
Explicitly promoted policy	550	87	592	62
Explicitly attacked opposition party policy	334	24	324	8
General party promotion	206	19	360	29
Fear of coalition with third party	31	0	417	20
Negative attacks on opposition leader	263	16	358	3
Negative attacks on named opposition member	47	1	138	2

N= number of times each message was Tweeted

An analysis of the party and leaders' Twitter handles suggests that both campaigns promoted policies more so than negatively attacking the opposition. More specifically, they both highlighted the party's most successful policy. However, the type of message matters. As the interviewees note: persuadable voters are ultimately swayed by the economy. The Conservatives employed a stronger economic message by emphasizing their record in government whilst criticizing the last Labour government's role in the financial crisis. Moreover, the Tories successfully created a narrative whereby instead of ignoring its weakest policy, it combined it with the need for a strong economy. Thus, it undermined Labour's messages about the NHS by linking it with a policy which concerns the broad electorate. Labour simply did not retaliate. The same trend occurs in the Conservatives' tweets criticizing Ed Miliband and his shadow cabinet. The majority of these tweets featured Labour's economic incompetence. Although Labour did fervently promote the NHS, the party did not have a consistent message throughout its tweets. Moreover, it did not successfully defend its economic record. Nor did Labour effectively promote Ed Miliband against Conservative attacks which characterized him as a weak leader in comparison to Cameron. This played into the Tories narrative that Miliband could not stand up to Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP. The Conservatives evidently amplified the perceived fear among voters of a Labour and SNP coalition. As many interviewees state: when in doubt, voters look towards the status quo. The Conservative party was able to create an element of unknown around the potential Labour-SNP coalition, which influenced voters to choose the Tories as the party of stability.

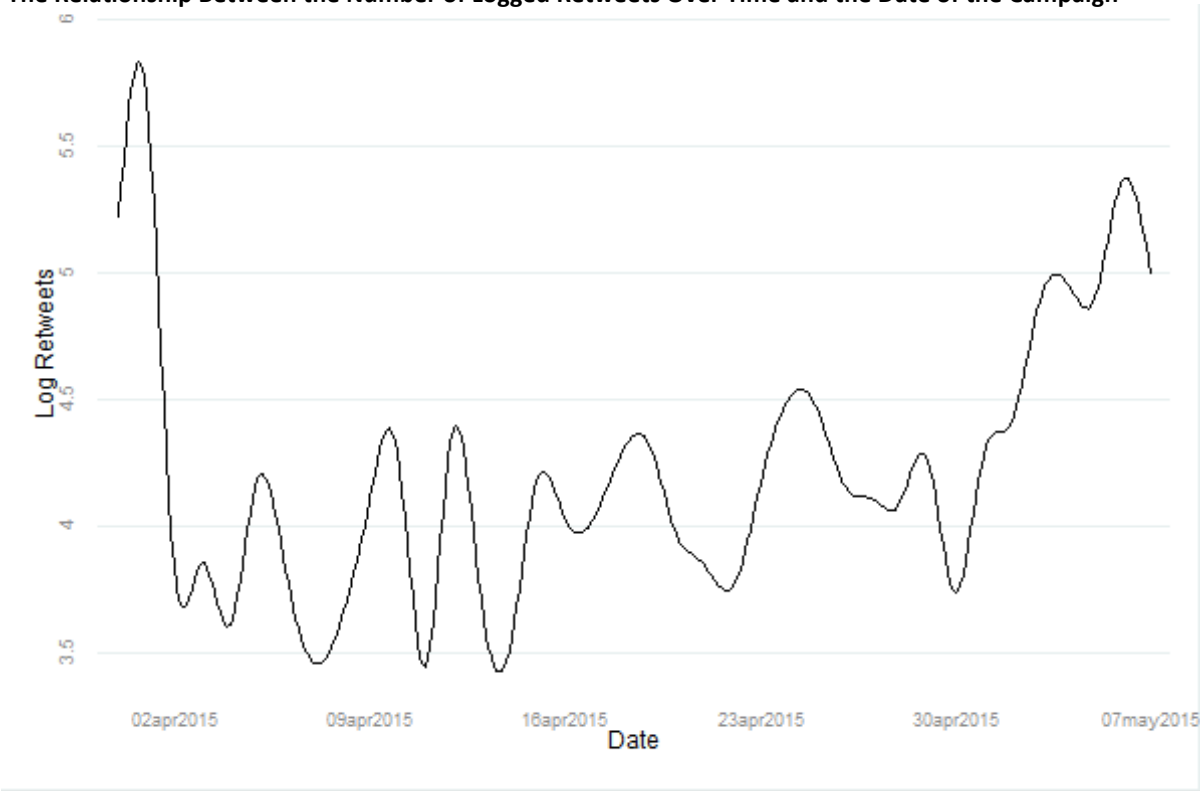
R2) b. Message success

Retweets are vanity metrics. They indicate to researchers which message-type transcended beyond an account's immediate online following, yet they do not provide a comprehensive

analysis of public opinion. Therefore, whilst an examination of the frequency of retweets from each account provides insight into the use of peer-to-peer targeting online, this research also aims to understand messages' effects on the wider electorate. Public opinion polls show the electorate's attitudes towards both political parties. Survey analysis before and during the election campaign allows this paper to understand which issues most concerned voters. These polls focus on public attitudes towards a potential Labour-SNP coalition, the election's most important issues and perceptions of both David Cameron and Ed Miliband. Furthermore, examining the correlation between the poll dates and when each message was most frequently tweeted enables inferences to be drawn about a party's narratives influence on public opinion.

Message success on Twitter

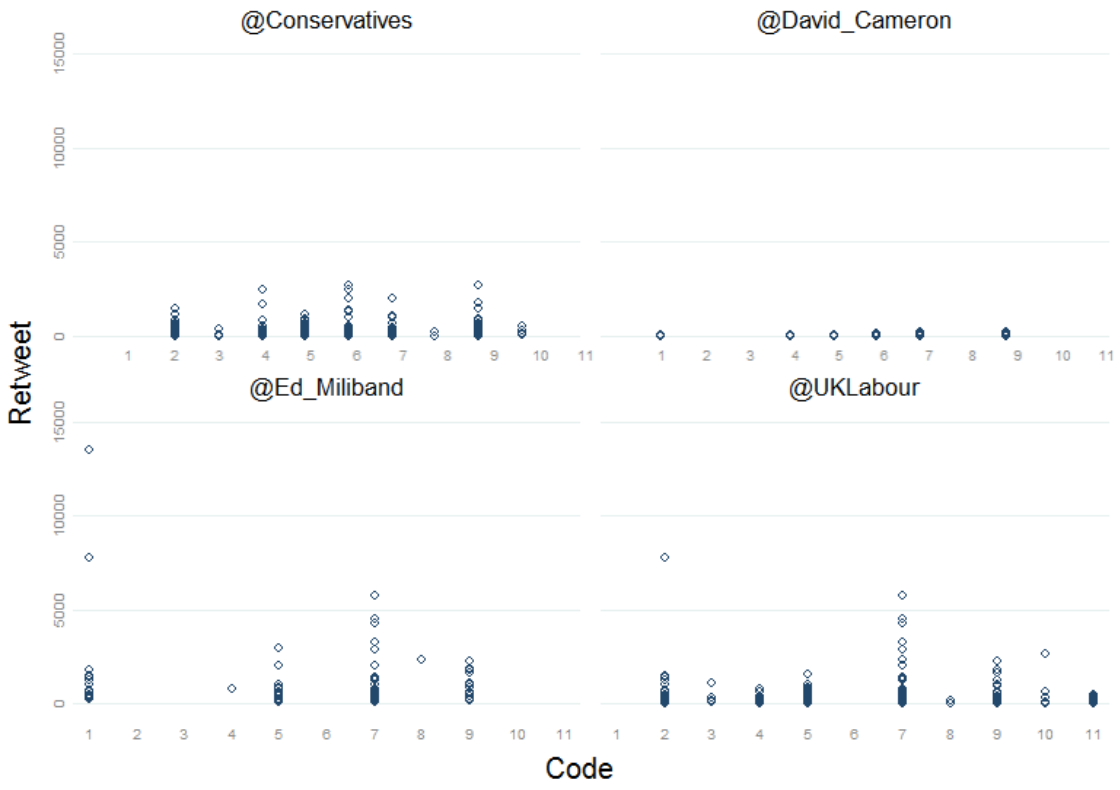
Graph 1
The Relationship Between the Number of Logged Retweets Over Time and the Date of the Campaign[138]



[138] This researches use logretwets instead of the raw values, as its residuals are not normally distributed. Therefore, a log reduces the possibility of certain high values influencing the results.

There were 796,885 retweets throughout the campaign. Yet, the graph suggests that the retweets' frequency was not consistent. Despite initial high occurrence, the first month saw periods of low activity. Towards Election Day, the number of retweets significantly increased. There are two possible reasons for this: the parties may have tweeted more regularly in the latter month of the campaign, or, the public may have become more involved in the election as the campaigns' momentum increased.

Graph 2
Relationship Between Message-type and The Number of Times it was Retweeted



1 = Leader attack (specific to @David_Cameron and @Ed_Miliband)
2 = Leader attack (specific to @Conservatives and @UKLabour)
3 = Retweet from member of public/news organization attacking opposition leader
4 = Attack on named opposition member
5 = Attack on opposition party
6 = Labour-SNP coalition (specific to @Conservatives and @David_Cameron)
7 = Policy promotion
8 = Retweet from public promoting party policy
9 = Party promotion

This graph maps the number of retweets each message-type received. The results show that there was not a consistent retweeted message throughout all four accounts. Yet, there is continuity across the Labour party and Milibands' Twitter handles. For both accounts, whilst a single attack on David Cameron gained the highest number of retweets, policy messages were consistently most retweeted. Labour's most popular message gained 7,771 retweets. Interestingly, this tweet was a retweet from Miliband's account which stated: '@David_Cameron I believe my plan can give this country a better future than yours. Disagree? Prove it - debate me & let the people decide.' The Labour leader tweeted this six minutes before his party retweeted it and gained 13,545 retweets, the highest number of retweets across all four accounts. This suggests that the public were disappointed that Cameron did not participate in a televised leader's debate. Luke Waterfield notes that the Labour campaign used Twitter around a 'big political moment.'[139] The leaders debate was one such moment. Furthermore, these results support his claim that: 'attack content was by far the most popular' in terms of engagement with Labour supporters.[140]

Labour's policy preference stances were stably retweeted in relatively high numbers. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the party tweeted most frequently about its policy plans, as they received a lot of engagement from Twitter users. Moreover, Ed Miliband's negative attacks towards the opposition party's policies received more retweets than Labour's attacks on Tory plans. Although such messages received less retweets than those which promoted policy, it suggests that Twitter users were predominantly concerned with issues rather than personality attacks.

[139] Luke Waterfield.
[140] Ibid.

The Conservative party did not gain as many retweets as Labour. The graph indicates that the messages that received the most retweets were those playing on the threat of a Labour-SNP coalition. This finding supports the narrative that the Conservatives focused on the potential threat because voters were worried about this partnership. However, it is clear that in terms of reach, it was not the most powerful message across all four accounts. Rather, the Labour party was far more successful than the Conservative party in gaining a high frequency of retweets.

One reason for this is due to Labour's reliance on earned media to spread its message. The Labour digital team understood that it could not rival the Conservatives in terms of digital spending. A document outlining its principles states:

> The Tories are spending more than £100k a month on Facebook advertising … so they can afford to make sure their message is shown to people on social media. We don't have the budget to be able to do the same … so instead we focus on making shareable campaigns that surprise and delight and reply on supporters to get the message out online by sharing.[141]

Labour's high levels of retweets suggest the party focused on peer-to-peer targeting more so than the Tories. Indeed, one of the principle approaches of Labour's digital team states that the campaign must 'get [the] message out through peer-to-peer sharing.'[142] Luke Waterfield notes that the Labour campaign used supporters to amplify the party's message: 'Twitter became about how to enthuse supporters and enthuse them to influence their friends.'[143]

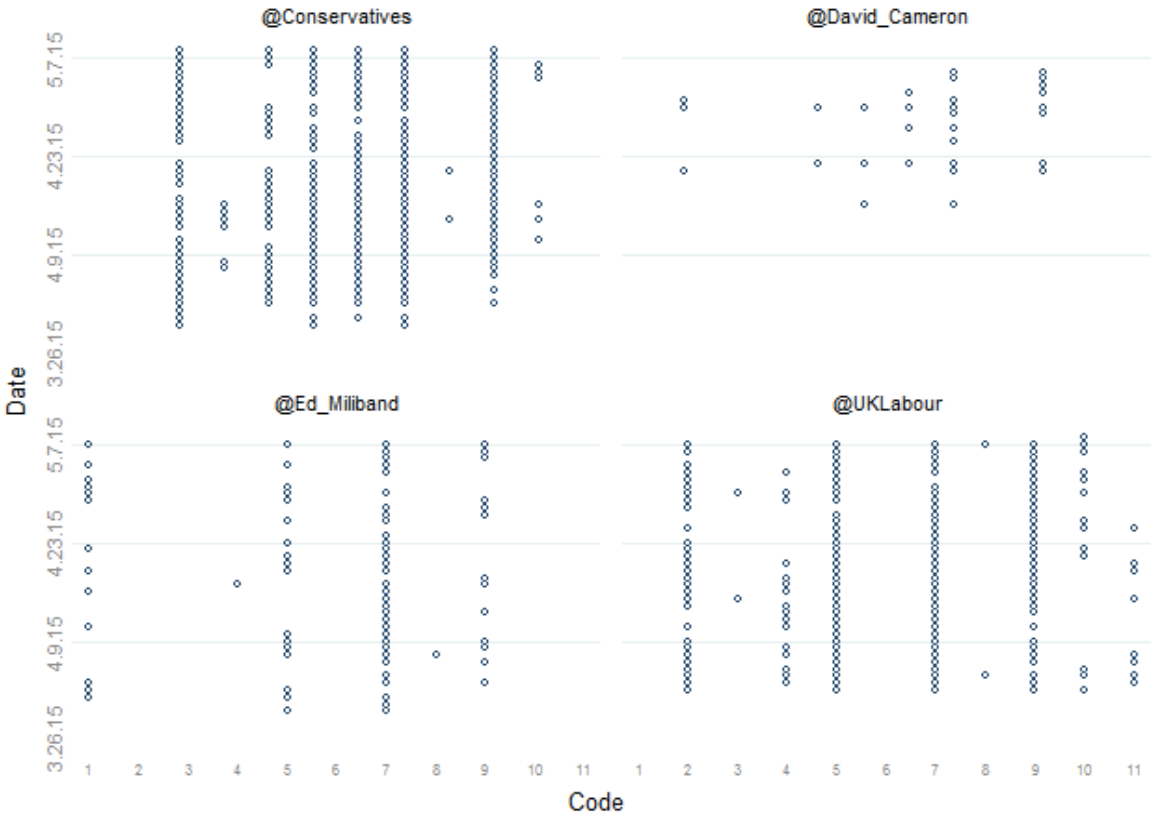
In the 2015 campaign, there was not a singular message-type which was consistently efficient at reaching Twitter users. Labour's successful message-type was arguably negative attacks, whilst the Conservative's message about a Labour-SNP coalition were most effective. Labour's messages were retweeted more so than those from the Conservatives. This suggests that Labour's followers were core supporters, who were committed to retweet their party's

[141] Luke Waterfield, email message to author, December 14, 2015.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Luke Waterfield, interview, December 14, 2015.

message. Moreover, it highlights that the party focused more so on peer-to-peer targeting through shareable content. However, the Conservative party aimed its message towards voters who were beyond its immediate core supporters.

Message success beyond Twitter

Graph 3
The Relationship Between the Date a Tweet was Sent and The Message-type of Tweet.



1 = Leader attack (specific to @David_Cameron and @Ed_Miliband)
2 = Leader attack (specific to @Conservatives and @UKLabour)
3 = Retweet from member of public/news organization attacking opposition leader
4 = Attack on named opposition member
5 = Attack on opposition party
6 = Labour-SNP coalition (specific to @Conservatives and @David_Cameron)
7 = Policy promotion
8 = Retweet from public promoting party policy
9 = Party promotion

The preceding graph informs this research about the dates each Twitter account sent a particular message-type. Certain messages were frequently tweeted throughout the campaign. The Conservatives' and Labours' accounts almost consistently attacked the opposition leader. Miliband and Camerons' attacks were sparser, both criticizing the opponent at specific moments of the campaign. The Prime Minister's attacks on the opposition leader occurred towards the campaign-cycle's end, whilst Miliband frequently attacked Cameron. Moreover, @UKLabour and @Conservatives' attacks on the opposition party spanned the entirety of the campaign. Both accounts continuously mentioned their own policies and generally promoted their party. The Conservatives' Twitter handle consistently created messages about the Labour-SNP coalition, whilst the Labour party sporadically mentioned a Conservative-UKIP partnership. It is clear that the Conservative party aimed to continuously promote this message of uncertainty in an effort to attract key, persuadable voters. The results from this graph provide a foundation for an analysis of public opinion polls during the election. It allows this research to understand which Twitter messages may have influenced public opinion beyond those who used the platform.

During the four months leading up to the election, Ipsos Mori, a UK based market researching organization, asked between 1,000 and 2,000 voters: 'Looking ahead to the next General Election, which, if any, issues do you think will be very important to helping you decide which party to vote for?'[144] Healthcare, followed by the economy were consistently thought to be the most important issues. In January 2015, 46% of respondents claimed healthcare was the determining factor in their decision whereas 33% responded that managing the economy was the most important issue. Healthcare remained a vital issue during the election campaign, whilst managing the economy continued to be the second most important policy: 47%: 35%. Ipsos Mori also asked respondents: 'I am going to read out a list of problems facing Britain today. I

[144] Ipsos Mori, 'Importance of Key Issue to Voting' April 20, 2015 https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=54&view=wide accessed February 29, 2016.

would like you to tell me whether you think the Conservative party, the Labour party or the Liberal Democrats has the best policies on each problem.'[145] Thirty-six percent replied that Labour would implement the best healthcare policies compared to 23% who believed the Conservatives would be most successful. Yet, when asked which party was the best at managing the economy: 41% replied the Conservatives, whereas 23% said Labour. Therefore, by constructing a message which argued that a good healthcare service needs a strong economy, the Conservatives linked the party's strongest policy with the issue the public believed to be the most important. This was a successful message tactic as it resonated with persuadable voters. Indeed, an analysis of the election conducted by British Election Study (BES), notes: 'Our findings currently suggest that it was perceptions of responsibility for the economy and leadership which were important drivers of Lib-Dem voters moving to the Conservatives rather than Labour.'[146] Therefore, despite economy being the second most important policy in general, it was clearly a vital issue for persuadable voters.

Surveys conducted both before and during the election campaign suggest that David Cameron was consistently perceived as a better Prime Minister than Ed Miliband. YouGov, a market research firm, conducted a longitudinal study between the 2010 and 2015 General Election. One question asked: 'Which of these would make the best Prime Minister? David Cameron, Ed Miliband, Nick Clegg?'[147] This question was posed twice a month from January to April 2015. Unfailingly, respondents believed that David Cameron would be the best Prime Minister. At the start of the year, 37% of respondents replied that Cameron would be the best, 19% said Miliband, 7% said Clegg and 39% did not know. By April 21st, 16 days before the

[145] Ipsos Mori, 'Best Party on Key Issues: Health Care' April 20, 2015 https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/26/Best-Party-On-Key-Issues-Health-Care.aspx?view=wide accessed March 1, 2015.

[146] The British Election Study Team, 'Learning the right lessons from Labour's 2015 defeat,' *British Election Study* September 17, 2015 http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-impact/learning-the-right-lessons-from-labours-2015-defeat/#.VuGbsTaFDzJ accessed March 1, 2016.

[147] YouGov, 'Leaders Perceptions,' 2015 http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/7rj2tjjm1c/YG-Archives-Pol-Trackers-Leaders-Perceptions-050515.pdf accessed February 29, 2016.

General Election, 40% believed Cameron would be the best Prime Minister, 26% thought Miliband, 6% said Clegg and 27% did not know.[148] Although the respondents' favorable perception of Miliband increased, he was 14 percentage points behind Cameron on the survey's final date. Notably, the percentage of respondents who did not know which leader would make the best Prime Minister decreased from the start of the year to the last date of the survey. Moreover, the results show that the Conservatives' narrative worked. Portraying Ed Miliband as a weak Prime Minister influenced the public's perception of him. Voters believed in Cameron's leadership qualities and Labour did not create a message to counteract this sentiment. Opinion Research Business (ORB) conducted a similar poll during the election, in which the organization surveyed respondents' attitudes towards Ed Miliband and David Cameron. ORB broke down its results by partisan alignment. When asked: 'Who do you think will make a better Prime Minister, Ed Miliband or David Cameron?' Fifty-eight percent of respondents who identified as Liberal Democrats replied David Cameron, whilst 42% answered Ed Miliband.[149] This result supports the paper's argument that the Conservatives understood the need to appeal to Liberal Democrat voters who felt disillusioned with their existing party. Thus, the party implemented message strategies which would gain the target audience's appeal, such as juxtaposing Miliband with the strong leadership skills of David Cameron.

The Conservatives gained 27 constituencies from the Liberal Democrats in 2015.[150] It seems surprising that traditionally left wing voters would switch their allegiance to the right. Yet as Nick Thornsby, a Liberal Democrat activist, notes: Liberal Democrat voters made their decision to

[148] Ibid.
[149] Opinion Research Business, 'Opinion Poll Survey' April 22 – 23, 2015 http://www.opinion.co.uk/perch/resources/omopinion-poll.pdf 2 accessed February 29, 2016.
[150] Gareth Piggott, 'The 2015 election – the numbers behind the result,' *London DataStore* May 19, 2015 http://data.london.gov.uk/blog/the-2015-election-the-numbers-behind-the-result/ accessed January 29, 2016.

vote Conservative for fear of a Labour-SNP coalition.[151] In January 2015, ORB conducted an online poll about the public's sentiment towards the major political parties. The polling organization asked respondents to rate the following statement from somewhat agree to strongly disagree: 'If the Labour party did a deal and shared power with the SNP after the next election, it would make the United Kingdom LESS stable.'[152] The results show that most respondents agreed that the coalition would make the UK less stable: 26% somewhat agreed, 48% agreed and 22% strongly agreed, whilst 19% somewhat agreed, 33% disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed. In April, during the election campaign, ORB conducted another online survey. It asked: 'Recently there has been a lot of talk about Ed Miliband and the Labour party potentially doing some sort of deal with the SNP with the aim of forming a minority government. Does the prospect of a potential deal between Labour and the SNP make you…?'[153] Respondents were asked to weigh their responses from much more likely to vote for the Labour party to much less likely to vote for the Labour party. Twenty-five percent replied that they were either somewhat less likely or much less likely to vote Labour whereas only 16% responded that this potential coalition would influence them to vote for Labour. Moreover, a breakdown of each respondent's partisanship suggests that 27% of self-identified Liberal Democrats replied that they would vote against Labour should this partnership occur, whilst only 13% said they would vote for Labour.[154] These findings support this paper's hypothesis that the Conservatives won largely due to the party's ability to persuade dissatisfied Liberal Democrats, who were fearful of a Labour-SNP coalition. Furthermore, the survey results during the campaign were consistent

[151] Nick Thornsby, 'Lib Dem/Tory waverers wanted continuity, but they voted Conservative to achieve it,' *Liberal Democrat Voice* May 29, 2015 http://www.libdemvoice.org/lib-demtory-waverers-wanted-continuity-but-they-voted-conservative-to-achieve-it-45857.html accessed January 30, 2016.
[152] Opinion Research Business, 'Opinion Poll Survey' 4 accessed January 29, 2016.
[153] Ibid., 5.
[154] Ibid., 6.

with those before the cycle, thus suggesting that the Conservatives' negative message about a Labour-SNP coalition worked as it primed the issue in the public's mind.

R3) Labour's use of Twitter to mobilize core supporters

Table 10
Directly Tweeting at a Named Supporter

	@UKLabour	@Ed_Miliband	@Conservatives	@David_Cameron
	(N)	(N)	(N)	(N)
Tweeting Supporter	87	5	8	0

N = number times account tweeted and retweeted a supporter's account

Luke Waterfield explains that @UKLabour was a supporter-facing channel aimed to enthuse partisan voters.[155] Indeed, Labour directly tweeted members of the public far more than the Conservatives. This supports this paper's claim that it used social media to mobilize core supporters rather than to target persuadable voters. Such messages incorporated retweets from supporters as well as directly tweeting people's handles, thanking them for their support. Moreover, Labour retweeted volunteers on the ground, which suggests that the party blurred the distinction between online and offline campaigning. Tweets such as these include: '@katieronaldo7 You've helped make a real difference to this campaign so thanks for getting out and volunteering!' This reaffirms the idea that Labour focused its efforts on its core supporters. Luke notes that Labour sold merchandise to supporters, a tactic which proved to be extremely successful. The party's handle retweeted a number of supporters who posted about t-shirts they purchased from the party. For example, 'RT @louisabooth: Love my new @UKLabour tshirt *(sic)*. Will wear with pride. #GE2015 #VoteLabour http://t.co/GEX29hBwfx.'

Labour's interaction with core supporters does show a difference between the party's social media tactics in 2010 and 2015. No longer did Labour only broadcast its message, but it used

[155] Luke Waterfield.

Twitter to directly engage with partisans. Yet, as Richard Royal notes, it is not enough to concentrate on mobilizing the base: 'I think parties should always concentrate on persuading voters who are tempted elsewhere or 'floating.'[156] Jessica Toale believes that only concentrating on mobilizing the base proved damaging for Miliband's party: 'Labour has been criticized for only talking to supporters and in the process deluding themselves into believe that they had more support than they did in reality.'[157]

[156] Richard Royal.
[157] Jessica Toale.

Discussion

Unlike US political campaigns, which have access to a wealth of data resources, UK political parties can only currently rely on information available through social media. Therefore, matched targeting is unique to the US. However, the interviewees suggest that the Conservative party made a concerted effort to use social media to target persuadable voters. The Conservatives also incorporated online targeting methods with offline campaigning. Yet, the accuracy of this type of targeting is limited. Moreover, social media targeting does not capture the entire electorate. Therefore, building a profile on voters through the campaign's ground game is critical. Indeed, the Conservatives' success lay in both gathering voter information from online targeting and communicating with the electorate offline.

When asked about their thoughts about the future of UK elections and campaign strategies, the majority of interviewees replied that they believe campaigns will increase the use of digital media, yet continue to use ground game tactics. Alex Masters-Waage notes: 'In my opinion you can't run a campaign that employs only one type of campaigning.'[158] He continues by saying:

> I think we're going to inevitably see a significant increase in the use of technology in the UK ... I think it will very much be a UK-orientated form of digital campaign strategy. There is a very different campaign cycle and limitations on data that will force campaigns to use tech in a very unique way. My prediction is that there'll be a heavy focus on social media as a tool for engagement, and in building and maintaining sophisticated digital supporter databases.[159]

This response encapsulates the fact that the UK simply cannot implement US style micro targeting tactics in its political campaigns. Yet, as the Conservative party's attempts in 2015 suggest, campaigns can continue to use technology to target key, persuadable voters. Many interviewees believe that future British electoral campaigns will build on the Conservatives' effective use of social media targeting. Jessica Toale notes that: 'Social media will continue to

[158] Alex Masters-Waage.
[159] Ibid.

play a large role in UK campaign strategies … [yet] it hasn't yet reached the levels of sophistication we have seen in the US.'[160] Alex Masters-Waage agrees, claiming that social media use is: 'still evolving and I personally don't think that we've scratched the surface of what it can do.'[161] Technologies change, and campaigns must be able to adapt to use them most effectively.

A campaign's message is crucial in determining its success. The content analysis suggests that the two major UK parties used Twitter to emphasize their policies more so than to attack the opposition. This supports Hillygus and Shields' argument that persuadable voters are those who typically turnout to vote and who are influenced by a campaign's stance on issues pertinent to them. Moreover, it adheres to Bode and her colleagues' research which claims that parties use Twitter to promote policies rather than to attack the opposition. When the campaigns did negatively attack the opposition, they often did so whilst promoting their own policies. Indeed, most of the Conservatives' attacks on the opposition mentioned economic policies and most of Labour's attacks on the Conservative party discussed the NHS. Maarten C.W. Janssen and Mariya Teteryanikova note that this is effective as: 'it demonstrates that negative campaigning provides politicians with incentives to disclose their policies in a way that allows voters to deduce correctly which of the parties they like best and vote according.'[162] This also supporters Fridkin and Kenney's research, which finds that negative attacks on the opposition about policy issues are significantly more likely to have a positive effect on voter choice than personality attacks. Therefore, this method is especially crucial to attract persuadable voters who make their decisions based on policy preferences.

[160] Jessica Toale.
[161] Alex Masters-Waage.
[162] Maarten C.W. Janssen and Mariya Teteryanikova, 'On the Positive Role of Negative Political Campaigning,' *Vienna Economic Paper* (May, 2015) http://econpapers.repec.org/paper/vieviennp/1506.htm accessed March 1, 2106.

In terms of message success on Twitter, the Labour party gained the highest number of retweets. This suggests that Labour focused on peer-to-peer targeting through its supporters' social networks. Its policy messages, which largely focused on the NHS, were retweeted the most. This result is unsurprising, as the message catered towards the party's core supporters, who were most likely to engage with it. An interesting finding is that Miliband's most retweeted message (which was also the most retweeted message across all four accounts) was a direct attack on David Cameron. This negates other results of the content analysis as well as scholarly literature which claims that voters are not persuaded by negative messages. The public engaged with Miliband when he criticized Cameron's commitment to leadership. His tweet also challenges claims by the opposition that he was weak. Perhaps if the Labour party juxtaposed its leader with David Cameron more frequently, the public would have engaged more often with its tweets and the message would have appealed to a broader electorate. However, despite this message being the most retweeted, it did not translate to positive public opinion of Miliband in the polls. Throughout the campaign cycle, the public continued to perceive Cameron as the strongest leader. Labour simply did not have a strong enough narrative to refute such claims.

The content analysis results also show that the Conservatives employed a consistent message, which resonated with voters beyond the partisan base, whilst Labour continued to enthuse its own supporters. Labour engaged with the party's enthusiasts overwhelmingly more so than the Conservatives did. Meanwhile, the Conservatives continuously coupled its most successful policy with Labour's key issue. An analysis of polling data suggests that this was a successful tactic. Although voters placed the importance of the economy second to healthcare, BES notes that the Conservatives appealed to persuadable voters by connecting the issues together.

Indubitably, emphasizing the potential Labour-SNP coalition contributed to the Conservatives' success among persuadable voters. As well as being retweeted most frequently, this message clearly influenced public opinion in the polls. Indeed, as the campaign cycle continued, the majority of survey respondents claimed that this potential coalition would influence them to vote against Labour. The wide success of this message tactic suggests that by consistently highlighting the negative aspects of this political partnership, the Tories were able to set the campaign's agenda.

Jessica Toale believes that: 'The clarity of message … is the most important signifier of campaign success.'[163] It is evident that the Conservative party developed a clearer message than Labour. The Conservatives' victory lay in the party's ability to target key persuadable voters with messages that resonated with them. Whilst Labour used social media to engage directly with its core supporters, its messages did not reach voters beyond this group. Although the party received a high number of retweets, this is not an accurate metric to analyze success. Polling data consistently showed that the Conservative party's message influenced broader public opinion.

[163] Jessica Toale.

Conclusion

The technology used in US political campaigns is unparalleled across western democracies. The ability to produce specific targeted messages to key voters is the result of a wealth of individual-level data, from consumer statistics to voter records. As this paper suggests, such micro targeting capabilities are not currently possible in the UK. Collecting data is expensive. Unlike in the US, British political campaign spending is restricted, thus prohibiting parties from using data companies as resources. Moreover, the UK simply does not have as much individual data publically available. Therefore, the accuracy of data is limited.

The use of social media targeting tools in British election campaigns is still new. Although it is clear that both major parties understand that using digital technology to target voters is vital for success, the 2015 campaign shows that the accuracy of targeting through social media is restricted. The next election campaign may see parties gaining individual data through an amalgamation of the ground game and more accurate digital targeting tools. In 2015, the Tories were successful as they understood who the persuadable voters were, where they were and what consistent message might appeal to them. Labour did not use digital technology to target key voters. The Labour party has an opportunity in 2020 to learn from its mistakes in 2015 to build a successful campaign. It must create a cohesive message which does not simply cater towards its core supporters. As argued throughout this paper, it is the persuadable voters who ultimately decide an election. Therefore, Labour should construct a narrative which appeals to this group and persuades them online to support the party offline. The use of digital technology as targeting tools in political election campaigns will continue to exist and grow. A political campaign must understand how to use such tools to maximize its electoral success.

Finally, this paper chose to study the Conservative and Labour parties' messages on Twitter as social media is becoming more regularly used in British election campaigns. Yet, UK political

parties use other methods to communicate with the electorate – in particular the mainstream news. Thus, further research may consider an analysis of the parties' messages across traditional and social media platforms and examine whether message patterns are cohesive across the different media and which was more influential in persuading voters in 2015. Moreover, the research methodology developed here to investigate how parties' social media strategies influence voters can be replicated in future studies. It enables a comparative analysis of parties' Twitter narratives during the 2015 campaign with those they will adopt in 2020, as social media becomes increasingly influential in British General Elections.

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Appendices

Interviewees

Adam Gilbert, PB Political Consulting

Alex Masters-Waage, Nation Builder

Jessica Toale, Fabian Society

Luke Waterfield, Senior Social Media Manager for Labour's 2015 campaign

Dr. Matt Wall, Political and Cultural Studies, Swansea University

Professor Rachel Gibson, Political Science, Manchester University

Dr. Rhys Jones, Digital Media, Swansea University

Richard Royal, Conservative Parliamentary Candidate

Simon Kitchen, Conservative Parliamentary Candidate

Dr. Nick Anstead, Political Communication, London School of Economics