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The Long and the Short of it: Local Campaigning at the British 2010 General Election

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Studies of recent British general elections have shown that the amount spent by candidates on their local campaigns is closely linked to the outcome in their constituencies; the more that they spend the better their performance. Such research has been hampered, however, by the short period to which the relevant legislation applied – basically for the month immediately preceding polling day only – although campaigning begins long before then. A change in the law means that the 2010 election is the first for which candidate spending data are available not only for that ‘short campaign’ but also for the preceding ‘long campaign’ period comprising the year’s first three months, when candidates could spend about two-and-one-half times as much as the legal limit for the ‘short campaign’. This paper presents a first analysis of those data, addressing variations in the amount spent across candidates and its impact. In particular it evaluates whether spending on the two campaign periods had separate and independent impacts, finding for the first time that intensive local campaigning – as measured by the amount spent – during the long campaign provides a vote-winning foundation on which short campaign spending then builds.

Much has been learned in recent years about the changing nature, spatially-varying intensity, and impact of constituency campaigns at UK general elections. From a general belief in the 1950s-1960s that these were largely ineffective uses of local party members’ time and other resources, increasingly sophisticated analyses have shown that the more intensive is a party’s local campaign, the better its performance in the constituency. As a consequence, central party organizations became increasingly involved in organizing local campaigns – providing additional resources, for example; coordinating the publication of leaflets and other materials; appointing regional coordinators to oversee campaign activity in groups of constituencies; directing campaign workers to constituencies where their efforts were most needed; organizing visits by senior party members; canvassing electors by telephone to provide databases for local use; and so forth (Denver et al., 2003; Fisher and Denver, 2008).

Much of this research has used a single measure of local campaign intensity – the amount spent by candidates, using the returns of income and expenditure required under the *Representation of the People Act* and subject to local maxima. Although available for virtually all candidates, these returns suffer a number of disadvantages. First, they assume

that every pound spent is equally effective. Secondly, although research has shown strong correlations between spending and other aspects of a local campaign, a constituency party with little money to spend on campaign materials may be able to mobilize a relatively large number of volunteer workers, for example, which may have unmeasurable (or difficult to measure) electoral impacts (Fisher, 2011). Thirdly, increasingly the political parties are organizing and funding aspects of their constituency campaigns from national or regional offices – in polling operations, for example – bypassing the local organisations, many of which are weak, under-resourced and unable to mount effective campaigns. Finally, most of the available data – especially candidates’ spending returns – cover only the very short period between the dissolution of Parliament and polling day. Parties are active – especially in targeted marginal constituencies – over a much longer period (e.g. Cutts, 2006; Johnston and Pattie, 2007, 2010). Such ‘continuous campaigns’ sustain party and candidate visibility, especially though not only for non-incumbents, and provide a foundation for more intensive campaigning as the date of the general election approaches; incumbents’ profiles are more readily kept high in public attention through various media and need less party-generated publicity material accordingly.

The candidate spending data remain the only near-universal, readily-accessible source of information on campaign intensity across all constituencies, however. Their utility has recently been enhanced by the extension of the period during which candidate expenditure is regulated. A 2009 law change means that for the first time analysts of the 2010 UK general election have data not only on the ‘short campaign’ – the period between dissolution and election day – but also for the preceding three months – the ‘long campaign’. These data, analysed here in detail for the first time, thus allow greater insight into both the geography of campaign intensity in the months preceding an election and its electoral impact.

The 2010 general election

Each general election has particular features that are relevant to appreciating the parties’ campaigns and their likely impact. In 2010, Labour had been in power for thirteen years, having won two landslide election victories in 1997 and 2001 and a comfortable majority in 2005. But its popularity had waned fast after 2005 and replacement of one leader (Tony Blair) by another (Gordon Brown) in 2007 achieved no permanent reversal of that situation. The Conservatives led in the opinion polls for most of the period, sometimes with a double-digit advantage over the government, and the Liberal Democrats were attracting more than one-fifth of the support in many polls (Allen, 2010, 5). A Labour defeat was widely expected, but whether the Conservatives would gain a Commons majority was less certain. The UK’s electoral system not only produces disproportional results in the allocation of seats – advantaging the largest party – but also has produced at recent elections a series of biased outcomes, with Labour being more favourably treated in the translation of votes into seats (Johnston and Pattie, 2011a). Thus although the Conservatives were not far behind Labour in 2005, with 32.4 and 35.2 per cent of the votes respectively, the gap in the number of MPs was 58 (the two parties together won 554 of the 646 seats). To gain a bare majority in the House of Commons in 2010, the Conservatives needed to win a further 116 seats, which meant increasing their share of the votes in some constituencies by as much as 12 percentage points.

Much was at stake at the 2010 election, therefore, with almost one-fifth of the 632 constituencies (excluding the 18 in Northern Ireland) needing to switch to the Conservatives if a change of government was to be certain. Labour had little expectation of any gains given its position in the polls, and its election strategy at the constituency level was almost entirely

defensive, seeking to stave off losses to the Conservatives who launched a major target seat offensive in 2007 aimed at winning over support in many of those marginal constituencies (Ashcroft, 2010). Meanwhile the Liberal Democrats hoped to win further seats while defending those that they already held – most of them by relatively small margins.

The parties were not equally prepared across the country's 632 constituencies, however. After a decade of relative plenty, with substantial donations from wealthy individuals and companies as well as the trades unions, Labour's loss of electoral support was reflected in its financial situation (Fisher, 2010), and its organization was weak across much of the country. All constituency parties with either an income or expenditure of £25,000 or more per annum are required to return their annual accounts to the Electoral Commission: in 2009, only 52 local Labour parties crossed that threshold, compared to 385 and 113 local Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties respectively. Labour was poorly-situated to undertake intensive campaigns in the constituencies, and its central organization provided no financial support although the headquarter office's online voter identification system – Contact Creator – was used for telephone canvassing of voters in target seats, creating a database that local parties could access online (over 500 did so) as well as being used for direct mailings targeted on key seats (Fisher, Cutts and Fieldhouse, 2011). More active local parties were allowed more of these free mail shots, and almost all used a central facility for printing their main campaign leaflets. In addition, central office directed volunteers to local constituency parties that would benefit most. The central office's well-crafted defensive target seats campaign informed its strategy for offering support. It involved 145 seats in four categories, according to their marginality in 2005 and the level of party activity there, but its ability to campaign intensively in all them was financially constrained.

The Liberal Democrats pioneered target seat strategies in the UK (Rennard, 2011). Few of their local parties had substantial resources on which to base long-term intensive campaigns, however; of the 113 which returned their accounts to the Electoral Commission in 2009, only 33 had incomes exceeding £50,000 and 15 had reserves exceeding that amount. The central party organization provided small grants (averaging just over £1000) to local parties in target seats (49 in 2007, 52 in 2008, and 62 in 2009 of those that returned their accounts to the Electoral Commission) – both those that the party won in 2005 by small margins and those lost by similar amounts then – but these were much smaller in value than similar Conservative party grants. Like their rivals, the Liberal Democrats operated central telephone canvassing and direct mail centres, which were particularly active during the 2010 long and short campaigns (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010).

The Conservatives' financial situation permitted a much more extensive centrally-organised telephone canvassing and direct mail campaign over several years, focused on target seats whose complement changed with the electoral situation (Ashcroft, 2010; Wilson, 2011). From January 2010 some 16 million items were mailed, along with a further 4 million 'localised' pieces delivered during the 'short campaign' (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010). Central funds were also used for grants to local parties in target seats, totaling around £700,000 in each of 2007 and 2008, and over £1million in 2009 (Johnston and Pattie, 2010); many of these constituency parties also had substantial funds available to spend on campaigning (of the 385 local parties who returned accounts to the Electoral Commission for 2009, for example, 188 had incomes greater than £50,000, 43 in excess of £100,000; 96 had reserves greater than £100,000). In addition, Conservative local parties attracted substantial

donations:¹ in 2007-9, for example, they received £6.5million, compared to £3.2million for Labour and £3.4million for Liberal Democrat local parties, and in the first quarter of 2010, Conservative local parties attracted donations of £1.5million, compared to £0.9million and £0.5million respectively for Labour and Liberal Democrat local parties.

Each party integrated its national and local campaigns, therefore, focusing on carefully-selected target seats. The Conservatives were much better placed centrally to support their local campaigns financially, however, and their local parties were themselves better able to enhance those contributions through their own resources and efforts. Did they spend more money in the places where it could have most impact – and did it have the expected impact?

Campaign spending at British general elections

Two pieces of legislation regulate candidates' constituency campaign expenditure (Johnston and Pattie, 2011b; Johnston et al., 2011). For the 'short campaign' – beginning either the day after Parliament is dissolved (15 April in 2010) or, if later, when a candidacy is formally announced, and ending on election day (6 May, 2010) – the *Representation of the People Act 1983* limits the amount spent. For the 2010 election, the maxima were:

In a county constituency, £7,150 plus 7p for every entry in the register of electors in the constituency on the due date; and

In a borough/burgh constituency, £7,150 plus 5p for every entry in the register of electors in the constituency on the due date.

Expenditure during the 'long campaign' is regulated by the *Political Parties and Elections Act 2009*. If a Parliament runs for its full term, between the end of the 55th month after a Parliament first sat and the date when Parliament is dissolved the maximum a candidate can spend is:

In a county constituency, £25,000 plus 7p for every entry in the register of electors

In a borough constituency, £25,000 plus 5p for every entry in the register of electors

At the 2010 general election, the median constituency electorate was 70,189: its maximum allowed expenditure for the short campaign was £12,063.23 for a county constituency, and £10,659 for a borough, and the long campaign limits were £29,913.23 and £28,509.45 respectively, giving a maximum possible spend over the two campaigns of £41,976.46 in a rural constituency and £39,168.45 in a city. Given the considerable variation in constituency electorates (from 21,780 to 109,044), however, the maximum for the two campaigns ranged from £35,199.20 to £55,347.36; most constituencies fell within the range £39,000-43,000.

Table 1 summarises the amounts spent in British constituencies (excluding the 18 in Northern Ireland, which has a separate party system, and two others – as they are from all of the analyses here: the Speaker's seat of Buckingham, traditionally not contested by the main parties; and Thirsk & Malton, where the election was delayed by a candidate's death and different spending rules applied when it was held). Returns to the Electoral Commission were virtually complete for the short campaign but there were fewer for the long campaign. In part there was no expenditure in some seats then – especially by minor parties and independents, plus major-party candidates who had not been adopted until late in that period and others who, because they were fighting either a 'very safe' or a 'hopeless' seat, in neither case felt

¹ All individual donations of £1000 or more, or several from the same donor totalling more than £1000 in a single quarter must be reported to the Electoral Commission.

the need to start campaigning early. Additionally, however, in some constituencies it probably reflected candidates' and agents' mis-understandings about the requirements.²

In total, £10,983,374 was reported as spent on the long campaign, by 2135 candidates, averaging £5,145 each: Conservative candidates averaged £8,908, however, compared with £5,488 by Labour candidates and £5,449 by Liberal Democrats. In the short campaign, returns from 3,243 candidates totalled £13,137,840 of expenditure, a mean of £4,051: again, Conservatives on average spent most – £7,845: the means for Labour and the Liberal Democrats were £5,830 and £4,536 respectively.

Most of this money was spent directly promoting the candidate and party (Johnston et al., 2011). In the long campaign, two-thirds was spent on leaflets and similar literature and 8 per cent on other advertising (such as posters), with most of the remainder going on staff and accommodation. Even more was spent on promotional materials during the short campaign, with 70 per cent on leaflets and 15 per cent on advertising; only 13 per cent went on staff and accommodation.

The pattern of spending

Although the three largest parties spent considerable amounts (Table 1), they were only a proportion of the legal limits, especially during the long campaign: the average Conservative candidate spent only 30 per cent of the maximum then, for example, and 69 per cent on the short campaign. If resources are limited the sensible course for a party is to concentrate money-raising and -spending on the constituencies where this might be most effective; there is little point raising money for an intensive campaign that is very unlikely to affect the outcome in a safe or hopeless constituency. That strategy was operated by each of the three parties, as shown in Figures 1-3: the horizontal axes index constituency marginality at the previous (2005) election – positive values indicate constituencies that a party won in 2005 and negative values those it lost;³ the vertical axis indicates the amount spent as a percentage of the local limit. In each, the line showing the overall trend is the lowest best-fit, using 33 per cent of the observations.

For the Conservatives, the best-fit lines show that the more marginal the seat the greater the expenditure. In the long campaign (Figure 1a), less than 20 per cent of the maximum was spent in a large number of seats where the party lost in 2005, a situation repeated in a considerable number where the party won by more than 10 percentage points. The constituencies where it spent most clustered around zero on the horizontal axis, although most were seats where the Conservatives lost in 2005. In the short campaign (Figure 1b),

² In, for example, the Commissions' *Guidance for candidates and agents: the 2010 UK Parliamentary general elections in Great Britain* (available at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/83337/UKPGE-C-and-A-Final-web.pdf <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-those-we-regulate/candidates-and-agents>) and the House of Commons Standard Note SN/PC/4454 on *General election timetables* (available at <http://www.parliament.uk/topics/Parliament-government-and-politics.htm>). See also the Commission's report on the spending regime in 2010: *UK General Election 2010: Campaign Spending Report*, available at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/109388/2010-UKPGE-Campaign-expenditure-report.pdf

³ Because constituencies were changed between 2005 and 2010 in much of Great Britain – the main exception being Scotland where the same constituencies throughout were used at both contests – most of the data on the 2005 outcome used here comprises estimates produced by Rallings and Thrasher (2007) of the probable outcome of the contest then if it had been fought in the new constituencies.

spending was on average much higher relative to the maxima, although again relatively little (less than 40 per cent) was spent in seats where they lost by a wide margin in 2005. High spending was concentrated in the marginal seats, especially those lost by relatively small margins in 2005; the peak of the best-fit line is to the left of the zero value on the marginality scale.

Although the pattern of Labour spending is generally the same as for the Conservatives – much more spent in the marginal constituencies than elsewhere (Figure 2) – there are notable differences. The first is Labour's much lower average expenditure, especially during the long campaign: it exceeded 50 per cent in a small minority of constituencies only. Secondly, whereas Conservative spending was concentrated on constituencies where it lost in 2005, Labour's was concentrated on those where it won. Labour candidates spent very little on the long and short campaigns in seats where they were challenging an incumbent, even where the margin of defeat was small in 2005. Labour's strategy was defensive, seeking to retain seats won in 2005, whereas the Conservatives' was offensive. Even so, Labour spent less than 80 per cent of the short campaign maximum in a considerable number of seats where its majority was small and which it needed to retain if it was to form a government in 2010. The Conservatives, on the other hand, spent over 80 per cent of the maximum in most of those seats (Figure 1b).

Like Labour, the Liberal Democrats spent very little in a large number of constituencies during the long campaign (Figure 3a). During the short campaign (Figure 3b), their candidates' spending shows aggressive and defensive elements. They spent over 80 per cent of the allowed figure in nearly all seats where they came second in 2005 by a margin of less than 10 percentage points, as well as in many of those where their margin of defeat was 10-25 points. But they spent very little in the large number of constituencies where they came a long way behind the winning party in 2005. Their aggression was more focused than that of the Conservatives' (Figure 1b). Regarding the defensive strategy, Figure 3b shows no downturn towards the right of the graph: unlike both Conservative and Labour candidates (Figures 1b and 2b), there was no diminution of campaigning intensity the greater the margin of victory in 2005. This reflects both the relative absence of very safe Liberal Democrat seats compared to the other two (Pattie and Johnston, 2003), and the nature of the 2010 campaign: although the party had hopes of winning more seats it also felt vulnerable in some it held – especially where its incumbent MP was not seeking re-election.

Figures 1-3 indicate that in general the amount spent by each party's candidates reflected the constituency's marginality; there were considerable differences across the three parties, however, reflecting their ability to raise money for local campaigns and the nature of the election. Opinion poll data had for several years indicated that the Conservatives had a (sometimes substantial) lead over Labour; a considerable number of Labour-held seats could be lost if those poll numbers were repeated at the election – hence Labour's defensive campaign focused on Labour-held seats. Most of those won by the Conservatives in 2005 were not under threat – even those won by relatively small margins if the main challenger there was Labour. It could well be, therefore, that the relationships between marginality and spending differed according to the nature of the local context, hence the following analyses look separately at the Conservative-, Labour- and Liberal Democrat-held seats.

Whatever the margin of defeat or victory in 2005, all three parties spent less in those constituencies where they occupied third place or lower in 2005 than in those where they came first or second. Across both campaigns, the Liberal Democrats averaged only 4 per cent

of the allowed maximum in constituencies where the Conservatives and Labour occupied first and second places, compared to 29 and 23 per cent respectively where they and the Conservatives and they and Labour were in the leading two places. The Conservatives' average expenditure in those constituencies where it came third behind Labour and Liberal Democrat candidates was 17 per cent; where it came either first or second it spent 43 per cent if the main contender was Labour and 50 per cent where it was a Liberal Democrat. Finally, in seats where Labour came third to the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats average spending was only 6 per cent of the maximum, compared to 31 per cent in each of the two categories where it occupied one of the first two places.

One further potential difference in spending between constituencies relates to the candidates fielded. Incumbents who had represented an area for the previous five years (or longer) may see less need to promote themselves through advertising literature, especially during the long campaign, than new candidates for whom extensive advertising might be undertaken to raise their visibility among the electorate. There is also a second type of 'incumbent' – a candidate who contested the seat at the previous election and who remained to fight it again in 2010 (something that was encouraged in both the Conservative and the Liberal Democrat parties in the belief that such a candidate would have a higher profile in the constituency than one newly-adopted – perhaps relatively late in the electoral cycle – and who could benefit accordingly, especially if the continued candidacy was supported by intensive campaigning). Finally, which party came second in 2005 could influence both its and its opponents' spending: the Conservatives might spend more defending a seat against the Liberal Democrats than against Labour, for example, given the polling situation in 2010.

This gives the following hypotheses:

- H1 Candidates spent more on each campaign the more marginal the constituency;
- H2 Candidates spent less in constituencies where they came third or lower in 2005 than in those where they came first or second;
- H3 Incumbent candidates spent less than new candidates in that constituency;
- H4 Candidates who fought in the constituency in 2005, but lost then, spent less than those fighting a constituency for the first time; and
- H5 Candidates spent more when defending a seat where one of the parties came second in 2005 than in those where the other main party came second.

Regression analyses

To test these claims, Tables 2-4 report regressions of the amounts spent by each party in the long and short campaigns, plus the two combined (as percentages of the relevant maxima), according to which party won the seat in 2005. (These analyses omit constituencies where a party made no return of expenditure for either campaign, and those where the Electoral Commission could not calculate the percentage figures; those for which there was a return for the short but not the long campaign were included.) For Conservative-held seats (Table 2) there is a substantial and statistically significant link to marginality, in the expected direction – given that the most marginal seats had the smallest values (as the seats analysed are to the right of the zero value on the horizontal axis in Figure 1), a negative coefficient indicates that the wider the margin the less spent. The larger coefficient for the long rather than the short campaign indicates that spending was more concentrated on marginals the former. For the other two parties, the much larger positive coefficient for the short campaign indicates the same general trend; the narrower the margin the greater the expenditure (i.e. the relationships shown to the left of the 0 point on the horizontal axes in Figure 1). The constant terms also

show major inter-party differences: on average Labour spent only 56 per cent of the maximum on campaigns in Conservative-held seats during the short campaign, for example, compared with 88 per cent by the Liberal Democrats. (Labour spent 81 per cent on average in the constituencies it was defending: Table 3.)

Some of the other results in Table 2 are also consistent with expectations. Conservative incumbents on average spent less than new candidates, especially on the long campaign (15.22 percentage points compared to 5.09 on the short campaign), and Liberal Democrats spent less (7.4 percentage points on the short campaign and 4.85 points overall) where they faced a Conservative incumbent – presumably on the grounds that there was less chance of success there than in constituencies where the Conservatives were fielding a new candidate. The Liberal Democrats also spent more in seats where they came second in 2005 and the Conservatives spent more defending seats where the main challenge was Liberal Democrat.

In Labour-held seats (Table 3), the expected relations with marginality are there in all nine regressions. The Conservatives also spent significantly more contesting a Labour-held seat where the Liberal Democrats were fielding the same candidate as in 2005 (presumably seeing this as a greater threat to their challenge than a new Liberal Democrat candidate). Conservative and Liberal Democrat candidates also spent significantly more where they came second in 2005. Labour spent more defending seats where the Conservatives came second in 2005 – especially in the long campaign – but, surprisingly, significantly less in seats where the Conservatives fielded the same candidate as in 2005.

Finally, Table 4 shows the same set of relationships with marginality in the smaller number of Liberal Democrat-held seats, but these are weaker (two of the three coefficients are significantly different from zero at the 0.05-0.10 level only) for Liberal Democrat spending. Both the Conservatives and Labour spent very substantially more in constituencies where they came second in 2005, especially on the short campaign; the Liberal Democrats spent less on the long campaign where their incumbent was defending the seat, and also where the Conservatives fielded the same candidate.

Overall, therefore, each party spent most where the seat might change hands (the Liberal Democrats were a partial exception, spending as much in their relatively safe as on their more marginal seats). Labour concentrated on defending its marginal seats; the Conservatives focused on seats where victory was needed if they were to form the next government. Parties also varied their spending according to the field of candidates: in general, incumbents spent less on the long campaign, reflecting their higher profiles in the local media than their challengers, for example; and parties spent more when the party holding a seat fielded a new candidate than where it was being defended by an incumbent – believing, it is assumed, that victory was more likely in the former than the latter situation.

Spending and its impact

The pattern of spending by each party's candidates conformed with expectations: did it have an impact on the outcome? A substantial body of research has generated positive answers to that question in recent decades for the short campaign (much of it reviewed in Johnston and Pattie, 2006; see also Johnston and Pattie, 2008; Pattie and Johnston, 2009). What was new in 2010, however, was the additional data on the long campaign. Thus these analyses focus in particular on whether spending then had an additional impact to the spending on the short campaign, whose efficacy is well-established.

To achieve this, four separate models of the impact of each party's spending were fitted in each of the three constituency types; the dependent variable is the relevant party's share of the votes cast in 2010.

I – *The basic model*. The key variable is the party's performance in 2005, since the geography of party support tends to be consistent over time (Johnston et al., 2009). The later models are then testing whether the amount spent causes significant variations from that medium-term trend. This first model also includes dummy variables for whether the defending party's candidate was the incumbent MP (many early analyses found that incumbents performed better in 2010 than non-incumbents), and which party came second in the constituency in 2005. (As exploratory analyses found no significant relationships involving whether the losing parties' candidates had fought the same seat five years previously, these variables were omitted from the final versions reported here.)

II – *The basic model plus long campaign spending*. Spending by each of the three parties (as a percentage of the allowed maximum) is added to Model I, as is spending by Plaid Cymru and the SNP to test whether their expenditure affected the other parties' performance in Wales and Scotland respectively.

III – *The basic model plus short campaign spending* by all five parties.

IV – *The basic model plus long and short campaign spending*. This is the key model, since it tests whether spending on each campaign has a separate impact independent of the other.⁴

As much of the focus during the campaign was on Labour-held seats, we look at them first (Table 5). For all three parties, we see the expected relationship with previous vote – the better their performance in 2005 the better it was again in 2010. Model I shows that Labour's incumbents performed better than its new candidates (by just over two percentage points: Table 5b), but the party performed less well where either the Liberal Democrats (-5.1 percentage points) or the Conservatives (-8.5 points) came second relative to where either the SNP or PC came second in 2005: generally Labour performed less well in England than in Scotland and Wales. Conservative performance was not influenced by whether Labour was fielding an incumbent (Table 5a), but Liberal Democrat performance was negatively affected (Table 5c), reflecting Labour's successful defensive strategy in those seats (mainly in the urban north) where the Liberal Democrats had made substantial advances in 2005 (thanks to protests against the Iraq war and student fees) but were largely unable to capitalize on these further in 2010. Both of the challenging parties performed better when they were doing so from second place.⁵

The significant positive Model II coefficients show that the more each party spent on the long campaign the better its candidate's performance. In addition, both Conservative and Liberal Democrat vote shares were negatively affected by the amount their opponent spent: the more the Conservatives spent the poorer the Liberal Democrat performance, and vice versa. For Labour, spending by three of the other parties negatively impacted on its own candidate's performance (Table 5b), but the more that the SNP spent, the better Labour's performance.

⁴ Considerable collinearity between spending on the two campaigns might have been anticipated. However, this was not the case. The R^2 values for correlations between long and short campaign expenditure were: Conservative – 0.37; Labour – 0.33; Liberal Democrat – 0.56.

⁵ This meant that the polarisation of the electorate into three types of seat where two of the three main parties were the main contenders and the other came a poor third was exacerbated: England does not now have a three-party system across all of its constituencies but rather three two-party systems (Johnston and Pattie, 2011b)

This apparently perverse finding reflects the situation in Scotland, where Labour and the SNP were the strongest parties: Labour won 42.0 per cent of the votes (2.5 percentage points more than in 2005) and the SNP 19.9 per cent (an increase of 1.9 points). Where the SNP campaigned intensively the Conservatives suffered substantially (a negative coefficient of -0.33 indicating that for every 3 percentage point increase in SNP spending the Conservative vote share fell on average by one percentage point). Very similar patterns are repeated for the impact of short campaign spending – although in this case the Scottish factor was not as severe for the Conservatives (Table 5a, Model III).

The Model IV coefficients, meanwhile, indicate that the two campaigns had separately identifiable impacts, in particular with regard to a party's own expenditure: each has a positive and statistically significant regression coefficient for both its long campaign and its short campaign expenditure. On average, a high level of long campaign expenditure increased a party's vote share in 2010 relative to its 2005 position, and a further high level of expenditure in the final weeks of the campaign boosted that impact. For Labour, in addition, the more that its opponents spent on both campaigns the poorer its 2010 outcome.

Whereas the Labour-held seats were key to the outcome of the 2010 election, those held by the Conservatives were of less importance. Labour was expected to make few if any gains there – and spent little money seeking them (Figure 2) – so the only likelihood of major changes was in those seats where there was a strong Liberal Democrat challenge. The results in Table 6 reflect this. In general, Conservative incumbents performed better than candidates defending the seat for the first time; for both, their performance was boosted by high levels of spending in the long campaign but not the short, whereas the more that their Liberal Democrat challengers spent, the poorer the Conservative result in 2010 (Table 7a). For the Liberal Democrats (Table 6c), the more that they spent on both campaigns the better their performance, and the more that their opponents spent the smaller on average the Liberal Democrat vote share. Labour spending in both campaigns also boosted its candidate's performance (Table 6b: in general it spent very little in most of those constituencies, however – Figure 2). It had no impact on the outcome for its Conservative opponent – as in the seats it held (Table 5) – but it did on the outcome for the Liberal Democrats: among the two 'challengers' to Conservative incumbency how much each spent, especially on the long campaign when the candidates were establishing themselves, significantly impacted on their final performance.

Finally in the small number of Liberal Democrat-held seats – most of which were contested hard by at least one of the other parties – its incumbents performed very much better (by about 7 percentage points) than new candidates (Table 7c), which also had a substantial, though smaller, negative impact on Conservative candidates' vote-winning (Table 7a); incumbents were largely able to prevent major Conservative advances in the Liberal Democrat heartlands.⁶ Conservative spending, especially during the short campaign, helped their candidates' cause but the amount spent by the Liberal Democrats neither helped their cause nor impacted on their Conservative opponents' – although Liberal Democrat long campaign spending did have a negative impact on Labour opponents (as did Conservative spending on the short campaign).

⁶ Incumbent effects have been observed in previous election results – especially first-time incumbent effects – so they are not new in 2010. Their size and generality for both Labour and the Liberal Democrats then is important, however, as they probably prevented the Conservatives getting an overall majority in the House of Commons.

Conclusions

Local campaigns matter – a conclusion now widely accepted by British political parties as well as academic commentators. And within that conclusion, the amount of money spent on those campaigns matters: in general, the more candidates spend on campaigning in their constituencies, the greater their share of the votes.

Many analyses of recent UK general elections have reached those conclusions. Those of the 2010 campaign reported here have extended them substantially, however, because for the first time data are available that enable a broader perspective than earlier studies constrained by the absence of spending data for other than the ‘short campaign’ between Parliament’s dissolution and polling day. The addition of data on spending for the preceding three months – the ‘long campaign’ – for the great majority of candidates has allowed new insights into how active parties are, and where, during that crucial run-up period preceding the formal campaign. As anticipated – and as with the analyses of short campaign spending – parties varied in the amounts that they spent during those months, but all focused their activities on the marginal constituencies, with the Conservatives spending most in the marginal seats they needed to win and Labour and the Liberal Democrats on those that they feared losing.

Most importantly, however, these analyses have shown that spending on the long and short campaigns had separate and independent effects. Thus, for example, the more that the Conservatives spent between January and April in Labour-held seats the greater their share of the vote – a relationship repeated during the three-week ‘short campaign’ that followed; in addition the more that the Conservative candidate spent during that second period the poorer the Labour candidate’s performance. The long campaign, it seems, was when the parties strengthened their baseline support and the short campaign was when they eroded their opponents’. Money was crucial in this, and the parties varied in their amounts that they had to spend. The Conservatives outspent Labour by £1.3million (almost one-third more than Labour: Table 1), but – as the regression coefficients show – Labour got a greater return from each pound spent on its campaigning than did its wealthier opponent. Precise targeting of funds was thus necessary if Labour were to maximize the benefits from its expenditure; if it had been able to raise more money in more constituencies, it might have fared better.

Money wasn’t the only important factor. Local Labour parties lacking financial resources but able to mobilize members and others to canvass on their behalf – assisted by some of those volunteers being directed to target seats by the central party – were able to boost their electoral support (Fisher et al., 2006).⁷ Money matters – but so do people to drive home the message carried by the leaflets, posters and other media on which the money is spent. And so, undoubtedly, does telephone canvassing from central call centres but no data are available on how many were contacted in which constituencies (although the effort was concentrated on the marginal seats, where more on average was spent).

Most campaigning activity is concentrated in the months and weeks immediately preceding a general election, but increasingly parties initiate their target seat strategies many months, if not years, before the next anticipated general election. Money matters in those continuous campaigns too and the party with most to invest in them during 2007-8 – the Conservatives –

⁷ Analyses which add data on the number of campaign workers Labour mobilized in each constituency – to be reported in a subsequent paper – show that these had an impact additional to that of spending. The more campaign workers there were on the ground, the better Labour’s performance.

gained a considerable boost to their electoral prospects in 2010, which was enhanced by the intensity of their activity during the ‘long’ and ‘short campaigns’.

As yet, the amount of available data on both ‘pre-long campaign’ spending and other activity and on the mobilization of volunteers and other non-financial resources is slight compared to that which is readily-accessible on spending during the two ‘official’ campaign periods. As those various sources are extended, however, so the appreciation of the extent, intensity and impact of local campaigning is increased. We know that it matters; increasingly we know how much it matters, when, and how it is delivered. But the exact nature of the relationship between spending and voter behaviour has not been uncovered. The money is spent on making contact with voters – mainly indirectly, through leaflets, but also through telephone polling and other contacts; and British Election Study survey data show that more was spent in constituencies where many voters were contacted. (The Conservatives, for example, spent on average only 23 per cent of the maximum during the long campaign in constituencies where no contact during the six months prior to the short campaign was reported, compared to 43 per cent in those where there was contact; the comparable percentages for Labour were 22 and 39 and for the Liberal Democrats 9 and 32. There were similar differences in the short campaign.) The parties and their candidates put a great deal of resources and effort into their local campaigns. Aggregate analyses, such as those reported here, show that this pays dividends; further research can uncover exactly how.

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Table 1. Spending in the long and short campaigns by all British parties with more than 50 candidates making long campaign returns, plus Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party

Campaign Party	C	Long		Short	
		Returns	Spend(£)	Returns	Spend(£)
Conservative	630	558	4,970,701	622	4,879,627
Labour	630	525	2,881,285	615	3,585,599
Liberal Democrats	630	427	2,326,556	594	2,694,289
UKIP	540	226	237,111	426	567,068
Green*	324	135	111,944	247	222,176
BNP	315	69	55,655	255	159,388
Plaid Cymru	40	27	101,963	38	148,946
Scottish National Party	59	44	98,429	59	291,876
Others		124	200,150	387	588,871

C – number of constituencies; * - includes the Scottish Green Party.

Table 2. Determinants of spending in Conservative-held seats

Campaign	Long	Short	Combined
<i>Conservative spending</i>			
Constant	47.1	88.8	58.9
Conservative Margin 2005	-0.91	-0.54	-0.80
Conservative incumbent	-15.22	-5.09	-12.39
Labour same candidate	0.66	-2.58	-0.01
LibDem same candidate	-4.17	3.43	-1.93
LibDem second 2005	9.36	5.26	8.39
N	201	201	201
R ²	0.28	0.15	0.31
<i>Labour spending</i>			
Constant	14.6	56.1	26.3
Labour Margin 2005	0.38	1.31	0.64
Conservative incumbent	-0.43	1.60	0.11
Labour same candidate	-2.24	1.73	-1.06
LibDem same candidate	-1.65	0.51	-1.00
Labour second 2005	-1.30	-3.34	-1.92
N	194	194	194
R ²	0.12	0.41	0.29
<i>Liberal Democrat spending</i>			
Constant	31.8	88.2	47.9
LibDem Margin 2005	0.90	1.98	1.21
Conservative incumbent	-3.85	-7.40	-4.85
Labour same candidate	-3.08	-9.68	-4.81
LibDem same candidate	2.06	5.26	3.00
LibDem Second 2005	3.26	10.43	5.44
N	194	194	194
R ²	0.37	0.55	0.53

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels.

Table 3. Determinants of spending in Labour-held seats

Campaign	Long	Short	Combined
<i>Conservative spending</i>			
Constant	49.89	89.27	60.90
Conservative Margin 2005	1.18	1.55	1.28
Labour incumbent	1.01	2.53	1.41
Conservative same candidate	-0.53	-3.76	-1.33
LibDem same candidate	6.22	5.89	6.08
Conservative second 2005	<i>5.30</i>	8.78	6.27
N	343	343	343
R ²	0.48	0.66	0.61
<i>Labour spending</i>			
Constant	35.02	81.09	48.04
Labour Margin 2005	-0.81	-0.61	-0.76
Labour incumbent	-2.90	2.83	-1.36
Conservative same candidate	-6.05	-10.16	-7.10
LibDem same candidate	1.95	-0.42	1.25
Conservative second 2005	9.98	2.88	7.86
LibDem second 2005	7.23	-0.11	4.89
N	347	347	343
R ²	0.29	0.16	0.30
<i>Liberal Democrat spending</i>			
Constant	38.52	73.76	48.17
LibDem Margin 2005	0.93	1.67	1.13
Labour incumbent	<i>-3.61</i>	-0.45	-2.76
Conservative same candidate	-4.24	-4.97	-4.41
LibDem same candidate	2.63	4.47	3.11
Conservative second 2005	-3.97	0.57	-2.66
LibDem second 2005	10.20	18.47	12.43
N	328	328	328
R ²	0.38	0.46	0.46

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels.

Table 4. Determinants of spending in Liberal Democrat-held seats

Campaign	Long	Short	Combined
<i>Conservative spending</i>			
Constant	75.2	82.1	77.2
Conservative Margin 2005	1.55	0.99	1.40
LibDem incumbent	-15.15	-4.62	-12.21
Conservative same candidate	5.69	-4.09	2.83
Labour same candidate	-7.55	4.09	-4.33
Conservative second 2005	<i>14.36</i>	20.63	16.15
N	60	60	60
R ²	0.58	0.51	0.61
<i>Labour spending</i>			
Constant	21.1	51.8	29.9
Labour Margin 2005	0.66	0.83	0.71
Libdem incumbent	2.66	-8.50	-0.55
Conservative same candidate	-6.31	-8.58	-7.05
Labour same candidate	3.90	10.60	5.75
Labour Second 2005	<i>10.89</i>	24.05	14.33
N	57	57	57
R ²	0.34	0.61	0.48
<i>Liberal Democrat spending</i>			
Constant	72.3	92.2	77.7
LibDem Margin 2005	-1.16	-0.27	-0.92
Libdem incumbent	-15.83	-2.41	-12.02
Conservative same candidate	-25.62	-6.15	-20.46
Labour same candidate	<i>14.72</i>	2.04	<i>11.14</i>
Conservative Second 2005	8.40	2.57	7.04
N	60	60	60
R ²	0.46	0.04	0.47

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels.

Table 5a. The impact of spending in Labour-held seats: Conservative vote % 2010

Model	I	II	III	IV
Constant	1.12	2.51	3.47	3.81
Conservative % 2005	1.03	0.99	0.96	0.95
Labour incumbent	-0.24	-0.43	-0.33	-0.47
Conservative Second 2005	2.69	2.21	1.47	1.31
LibDem Second 2005	1.68	1.69	0.89	0.91
<i>Long campaign spending</i>				
Conservative		0.03		0.02
Labour		-0.01		-0.01
LibDem		-0.02		-0.02
Plaid Cymru		0.05		-0.06
SNP		-0.33		-0.22
<i>Short Campaign Spending</i>				
Conservative			0.03	0.02
Labour			-0.01	-0.01
LibDem			-0.02	-0.01
Plaid Cymru			0.01	-0.01
SNP			-0.05	-0.04
N	348	348	348	348
R ²	0.93	0.93	0.93	0.93

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels. * = variable excluded.

Table 5b. The impact of spending in Labour-held seats: Labour vote % 2010

	I	II	III	IV
Constant	13.12	12.96	12.77	11.43
Labour % 2005	0.72	0.69	0.66	0.67
Labour incumbent	2.29	2.26	2.24	2.22
Conservative Second 2005	-8.50	-6.88	-5.16	-5.22
LibDem Second 2005	-5.11	-3.41	-2.36	-2.26
<i>Long campaign spending</i>				
Conservative		-0.04		0.03
Labour		0.05		0.05
LibDem		-0.06		-0.06
Plaid Cymru		-0.14		-0.04
SNP		0.61		0.25
<i>Short Campaign Spending</i>				
Conservative			-0.04	-0.03
Labour			0.04	0.04
LibDem			-0.01	-0.01
Plaid Cymru			-0.07	-0.07
SNP			0.07	0.07
N	348	348	348	348
R ²	0.59	0.64	0.65	0.66

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels. * = variable excluded.

Table 5c. The impact of spending in Labour-held seats: Liberal Democrat vote % 2010

	I	II	III	IV
Constant	1.13	4.83	6.30	6.68
LibDem % 2005	0.76	0.55	0.49	0.45
Labour incumbent	-1.43	-0.89	-1.18	-0.98
Conservative second 2005	4.29	4.31	3.60	4.05
LibDem Second 2005	5.95	4.95	4.51	4.41
<i>Long campaign spending</i>				
Conservative		<i>-0.02</i>		<i>-0.02</i>
Labour		<i>-0.02</i>		<i>-0.02</i>
LibDem		0.13		0.08
Plaid Cymru		0.01		-0.06
SNP		-0.34		-0.07
<i>Short Campaign Spending</i>				
Conservative			-0.03	-0.01
Labour			0.00	0.00
LibDem			0.09	0.06
Plaid Cymru			0.01	0.02
SNP			-0.06	-0.05
N	348	348	348	348
R ²	0.66	0.76	0.77	0.79

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels. * = variable excluded.

Table 6a. The impact of spending in Conservative-held seats: Conservative vote % 2010

	I	II	III	IV
Constant	13.87	15.92	18.33	18.32
Conservative % 2005	0.76	0.71	0.69	0.68
Conservative incumbent	1.48	1.80	1.34	1.80
LibDem Second 2005	0.66	1.29	1.16	1.27
<i>Long campaign spending</i>				
Conservative		0.03		0.04
Labour		-0.2		-0.01
LibDem		-0.07		-0.07
Plaid Cymru		-0.35		-0.02
SNP		-0.77		-0.75
<i>Short Campaign Spending</i>				
Conservative			-0.04	-0.01
Labour			-0.01	-0.01
LibDem			-0.02	-0.01
Plaid Cymru			-0.04	-0.02
SNP			-0.20	*
N	208	208	208	208
R ²	0.61	0.65	0.62	0.65

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels. * = variable excluded.

Table 6b. The impact of spending in Conservative-held seats: Labour vote % 2010

	I	II	III	IV
Constant	-0.14	0.02	3.36	2.13
Labour % 2005	0.68	0.59	0.54	0.52
Conservative incumbent	-0.12	0.08	-0.34	-0.12
LibDem Second 2005	<i>-1.27</i>	-1.52	-1.50	-1.61
<i>Long campaign spending</i>				
Conservative		<i>0.02</i>		<i>0.02</i>
Labour		0.12		0.08
LibDem		-0.04		-0.04
Plaid Cymru		0.17		<i>-2.01</i>
SNP		1.09		1.02
<i>Short Campaign Spending</i>				
Conservative			-0.01	-0.03
Labour			0.08	0.04
LibDem			-0.02	-0.01
Plaid Cymru			-0.02	-0.07
SNP			0.37	0.07
N	208	208	208	208
R ²	0.82	0.86	0.86	0.87

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels. * = variable excluded.

Table 6c. The impact of spending in Conservative-held seats: Liberal Democrat vote % 2010

	I	II	III	IV
Constant	8.18	11.51	10.90	12.28
LibDem % 2005	0.75	0.59	0.54	0.48
Conservative incumbent	-0.64	-0.58	0.03	-0.24
LibDem Second 2005	0.40	0.52	0.52	0.59
<i>Long campaign spending</i>				
Conservative		-0.03		-0.03
Labour		-0.06		<i>-0.04</i>
LibDem		0.14		0.12
Plaid Cymru		-0.62		-0.21
SNP		<i>-0.77</i>		-0.97
<i>Short Campaign Spending</i>				
Conservative			0.00	0.01
Labour			-0.04	<i>-0.02</i>
LibDem			0.07	0.04
Plaid Cymru			0.00	-0.02
SNP			<i>-0.34</i>	*
N	208	208	208	208
R ²	0.75	0.81	0.79	0.83

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels. * = variable excluded.

Table 7a. The impact of spending in Liberal Democrat-held seats: Conservative vote % 2010

	I	II	III	IV
Constant	9.85	10.49	10.13	11.01
Conservative % 2005	0.89	0.56	0.70	0.58
Libdem incumbent	-4.92	-2.75	-4.36	-3.14
Conservative Second 2005	1.07	4.73	0.09	2.45
<i>Long campaign spending</i>				
Conservative		0.05		0.01
Labour		-0.02		-0.02
LibDem		0.06		0.06
Plaid Cymru		-0.09		-0.73
SNP		-0.49		-0.26
<i>Short Campaign Spending</i>				
Conservative			0.08	0.07
Labour			-0.02	-0.01
LibDem			-0.01	-0.03
Plaid Cymru			-0.01	0.42
SNP			-0.09	-0.06
N	60	60	60	60
R ²	0.86	0.87	0.88	0.89

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels. * = variable excluded.

Table 7b. The impact of spending in Liberal Democrat-held seats: Labour vote % 2010

	I	II	III	IV
Constant	-2.53	7.01	1.89	4.76
Labour % 2005	0.83	0.67	0.86	0.75
LibDem incumbent	0.03	-2.17	-0.39	-1.92
Labour Second 2005	3.34	1.79	-2.10	-0.85
<i>Long campaign spending</i>				
Conservative		-0.06		-0.03
Labour		0.08		0.09
LibDem		-0.04		-0.04
Plaid Cymru		-0.08		-0.06
SNP		0.50		0.18
<i>Short Campaign Spending</i>				
Conservative			-0.09	-0.05
Labour			0.02	-0.02
LibDem			0.03	0.03
Plaid Cymru			-0.08	-0.03
SNP			0.12	0.10
N	57	57	57	57
R ²	0.84	0.89	0.89	0.90

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels. * = variable excluded.

Table 7c. The impact of spending in Liberal Democrat-held seats: Liberal Democrat vote % 2010

	I	II	III	IV
Constant	23.75	21.11	29.32	21.58
LibDem % 2005	0.33	0.35	0.22	0.34
Libdem incumbent	6.17	7.15	6.26	7.30
Conservative second 2005	2.22	1.10	-1.00	-1.34
<i>Long campaign spending</i>				
Conservative		0.03		<i>0.06</i>
Labour		-0.02		-0.11
LibDem		0.02		-0.02
Plaid Cymru		0.13		0.86
SNP		-0.64		-0.01
<i>Short Campaign Spending</i>				
Conservative			-0.03	-0.08
Labour			-0.07	0.01
LibDem			0.08	<i>0.11</i>
Plaid Cymru			-0.04	-0.55
SNP			-0.15	-0.15
N	60	60	60	60
R ²	0.21	0.26	0.36	0.47

Coefficients shown in bold are significant at the 0.05 level or better: those shown in italics are significant at the 0.05-0.10 levels. * = variable excluded.

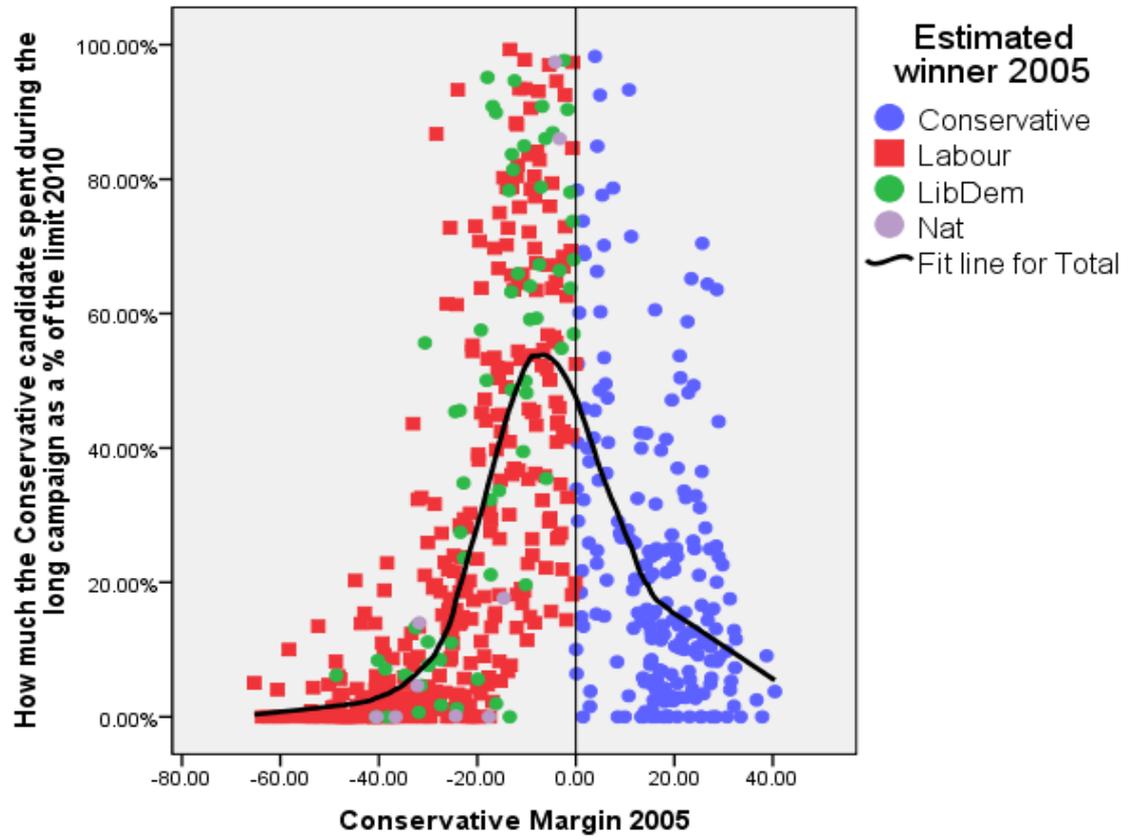


Figure 1a. The pattern of spending by Conservative candidates in the long campaign.

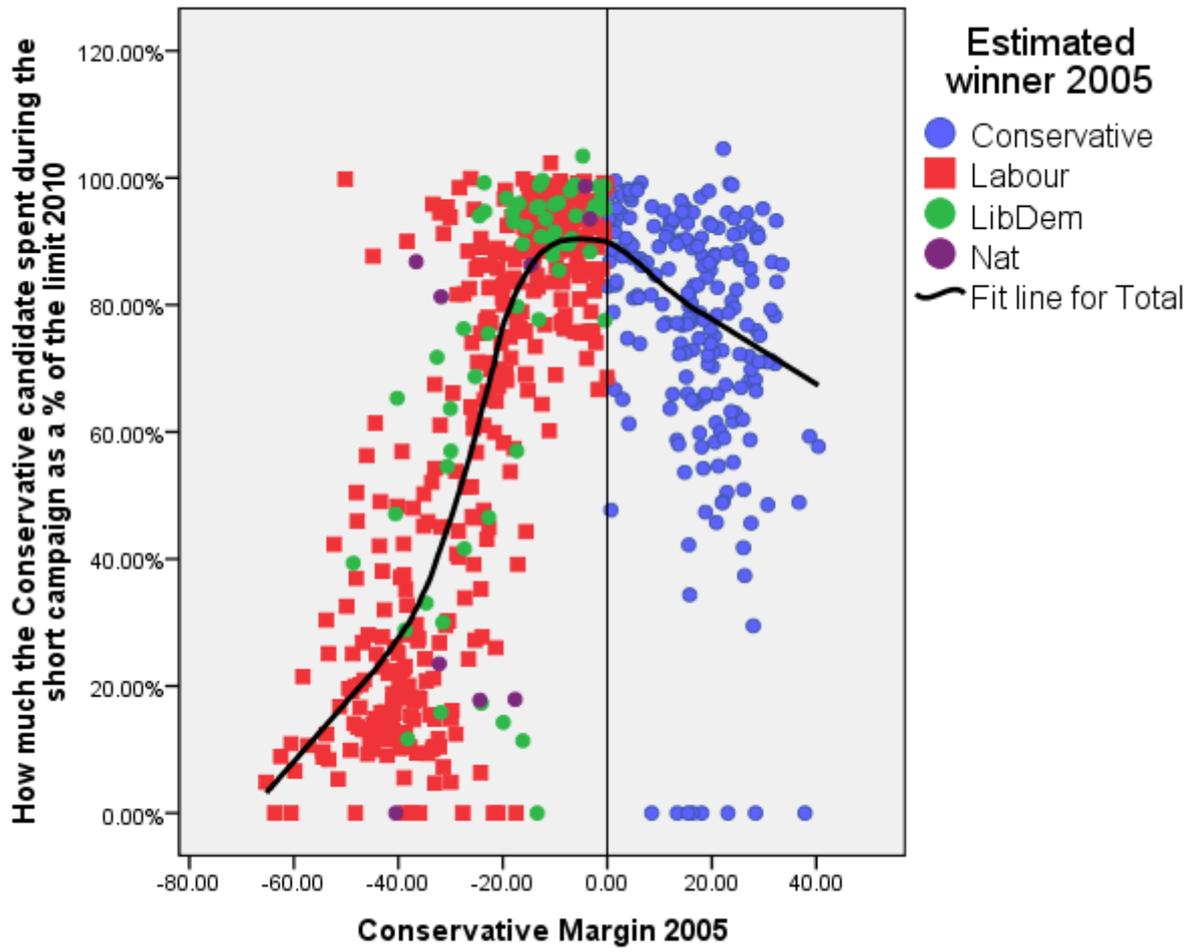


Figure 1b. The pattern of spending by Conservative candidates during the short campaign.

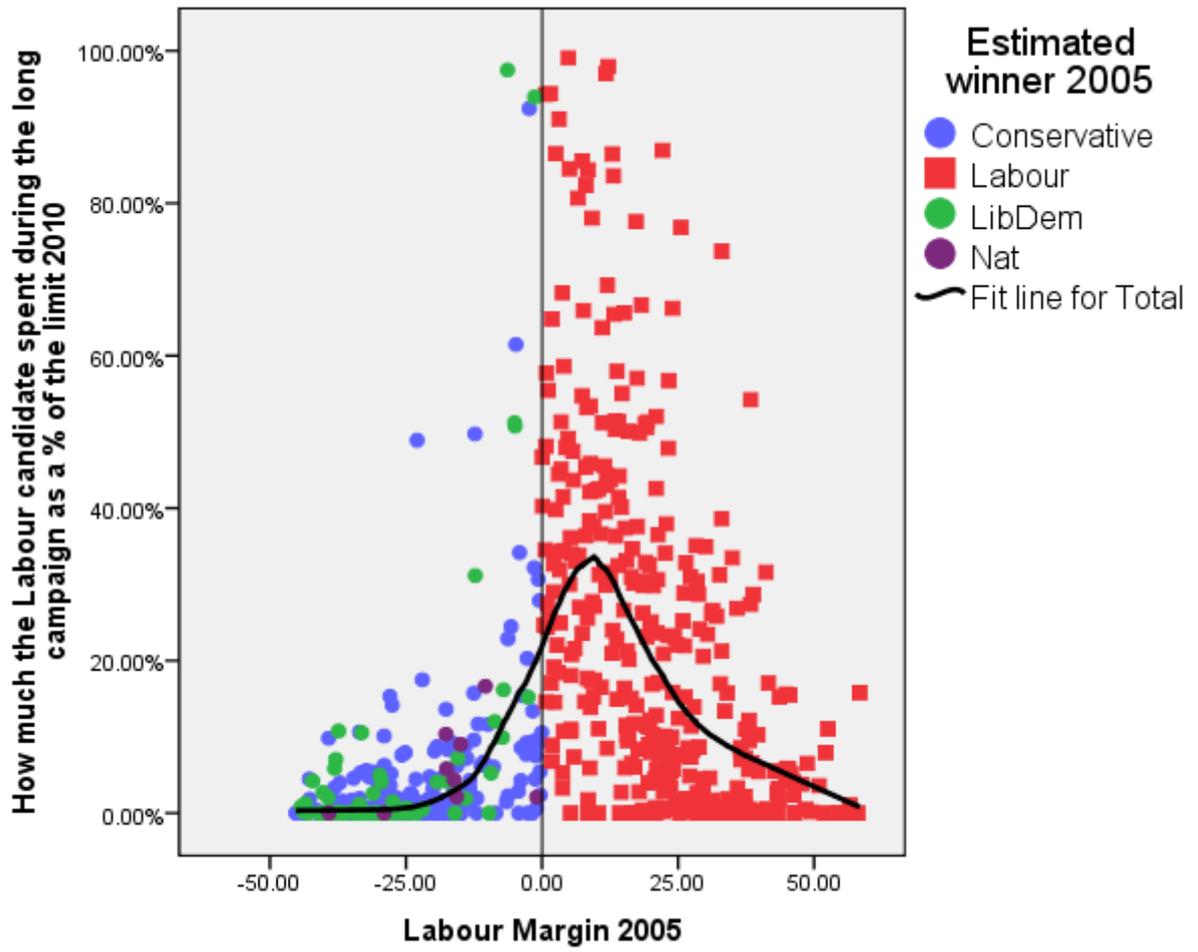


Figure 2a. The pattern of spending by Labour candidates during the long campaign.

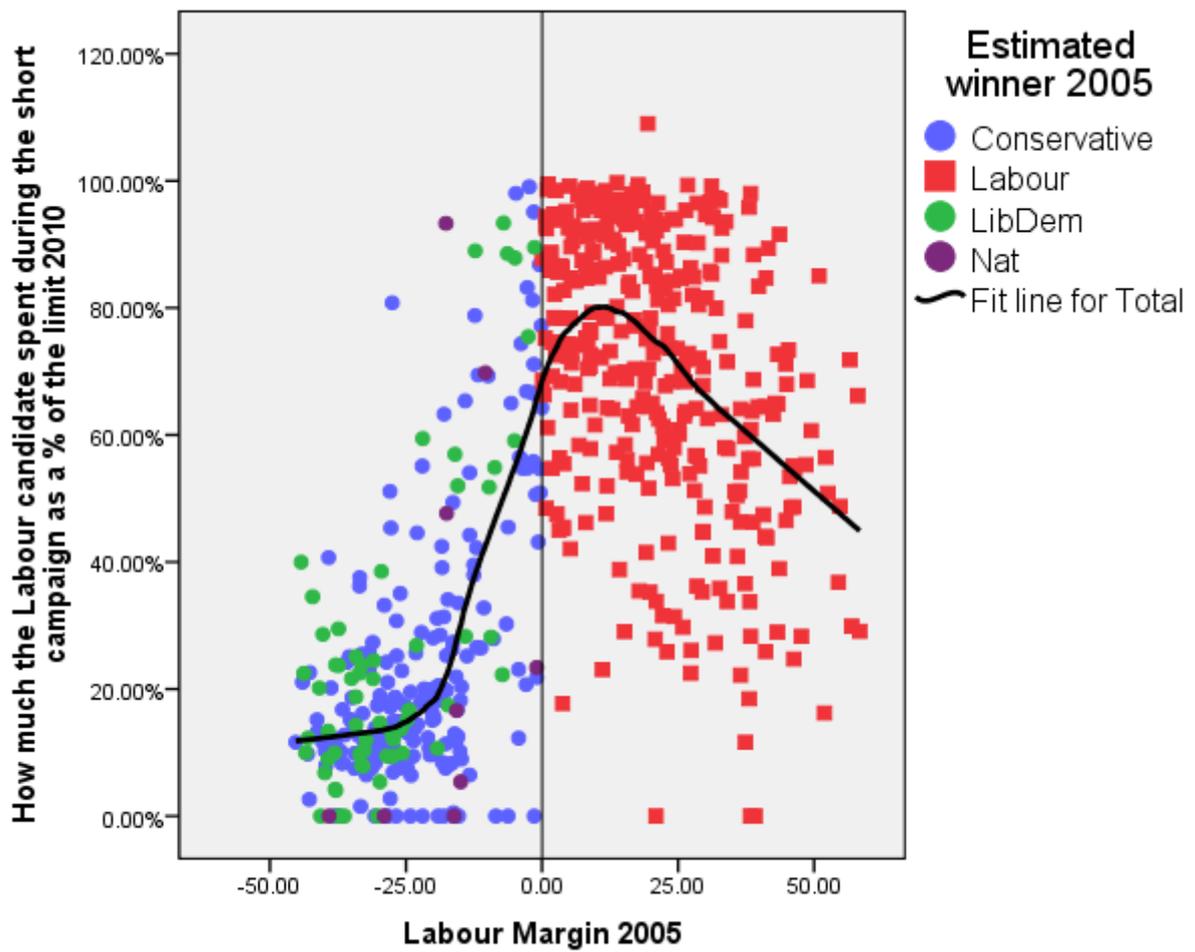


Figure 2b. The pattern of spending by Labour candidates during the short campaign.

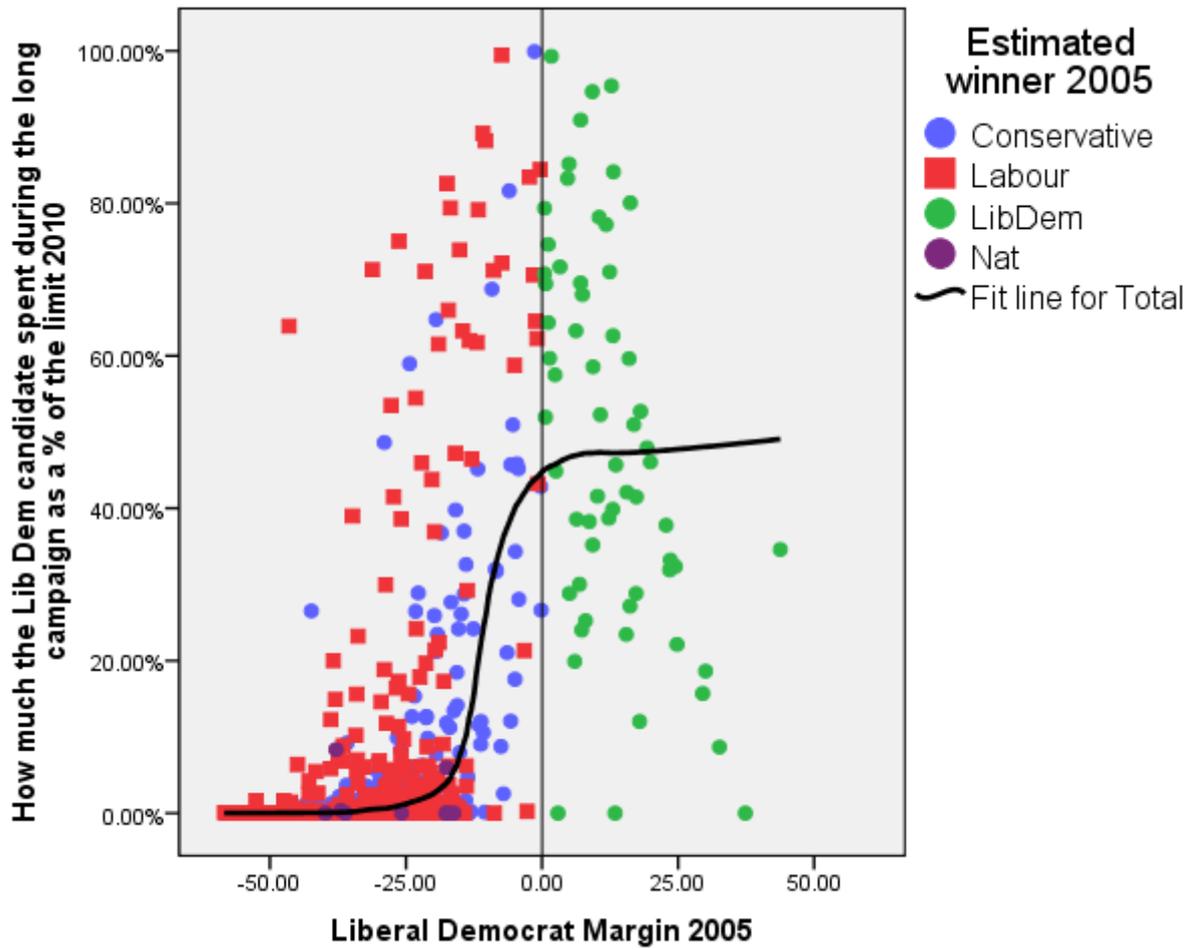


Figure 3a. The pattern of spending by Liberal Democrat candidates during the long campaign.

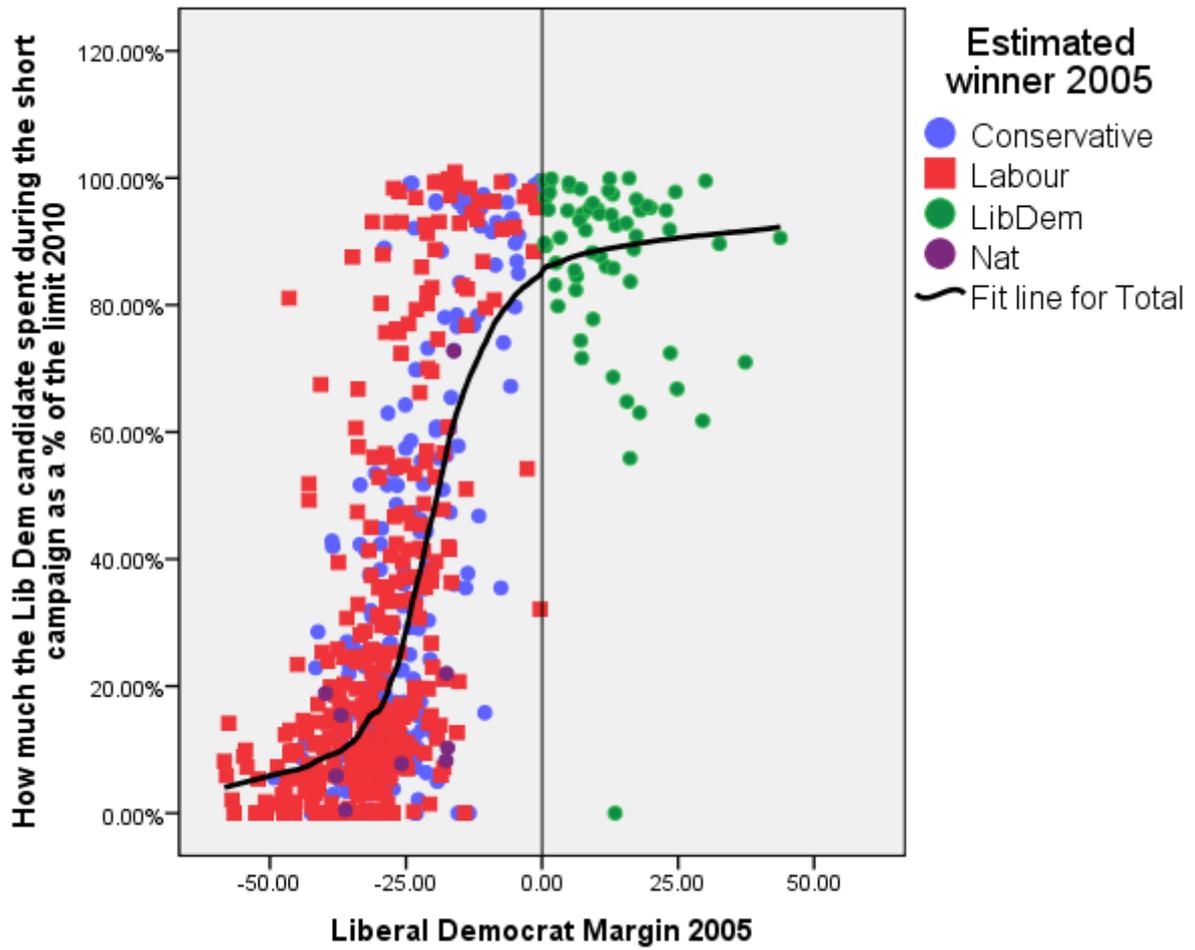


Figure 3b. The pattern of spending by Liberal democrat candidates during the short campaign.

