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

Abstract

   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 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. This paper 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 it focuses on are: 1) matched targeting, the US style of micro targeting, which requires high levels of spending and access to an individual's data: 2) saturation targeting, which uses social media tools to focus on an individual's demographics and unique interests; and 3) peer-to-peer targeting, which relies on social media users to disperse a campaign's message through their own social networks. By looking at these three methods of voter targeting, this paper provides insights into both campaigns' social media strategy. Analysis is based on elite interviews and a examination of Twitter messages.

Introduction

 Since the early 2000s, US political campaigns have focused heavily on data analytics to micro target individual voters with personalized messages. This method allows campaigns to predict accurately an individual's voting behavior and deliver to them the most appropriate message. In 2008 and 2012, the Obama campaign purchased personal information from data-gathering companies and supplemented it 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. The 2015 UK General Election aimed to build on this foundation of targeted political campaigns. The Conservative Party used targeting techniques to deliver highly personal messages to key members of the electorate. Labour, however, relied on engaging with the party's core supporters, focusing on issues which did not translate beyond that base. Ultimately this contributed to their defeat.

   Many political analysts predicted that 2015 would be the first election year British parties would incorporate micro targeting methods into their campaigns. Yet the UK has structural obstacles which prevent campaigns from fully 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 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 decided this 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.

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). 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 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. For Labour, that meant promoting its party in Scotland in the face of the SNP's threat, as well as appealing to disillusioned Liberal Democrat supporters through economic and welfare issues. For the Conservatives, emphasizing the threat of a Labour-SNP coalition was vital. Moreover, promoting their economic achievements whilst highlighting past Labour governments' poor economic record.

Social media use alone does not determine the outcome of an election, yet it is increasingly becoming a fundamental component of campaign strategy. Many believe that British campaigns' discourse is still dominated by the mainstream media. 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.

Social Media and Targeting

This paper's analysis derives from a three-part classification of social media targeting techniques. **Matched targeting** mirrors the US style of microtargeting. This technique requires access to individual level data. This can either be commercial data or voter records. Using this data, a campaign can accurately target people with a message which specifically relates to them. For example, if a campaign wishes to persuade a group of people on a certain issue, it can use this data to decide which people will receive its message; these people will have already expressed an interest in the issue, or may be directly affected by it. The accuracy of this technique allows for a more successful campaign as the people it targets are either invested, or impacted by the issue it promotes.

Saturation targeting uses social media to locate individuals. This is not as precise as matched targeting as it does not use individual level data. Rather, it focuses on an individual's demographics and interests which they display on social media. This method can also be used to make affinity or lookalike audiences. For example, if a campaign wishes to target a certain demographic, it may use social media to create an audience which looks like that demographic. Thus, the campaign is not precisely targeting the individuals it wishes to talk to, but it is promoting its message to an audience with characteristics which mirror its target audience.

Lastly, **peer-to-peer targeting** relies on social media users to promote the campaign's message. For this technique, campaigns create shareable content, with the purpose of being widely distributed online. This method may be successful for campaigns which aim to talk mainly to its supporters, as they are the users who are most likely to share a campaign's message. These techniques are not mutually exclusive. But they are distinct, and campaigns have a choice on which ones, singly and in combination, they will use. These choices are constrained by national laws regarding the availability of data, among other factors.

US vs UK

Obama's success in 2008 inspired political campaigns across the world to replicate his digital style of campaigning. Yet, Obama's micro targeting techniques cannot be precisely replicated in other countries. In the US, far more electorate information is public. This information allows political campaigns to understand precisely who to target with particular messages. Due to data protection laws, Britain simply does not have such a wealth of individual information publically available. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) describes personal data as: 'data which relate to a living individual who can be identified from those data.' It outlines in its Guidance on Political Campaigning that an organization can only use an individual's data if the individual provides consent. Therefore, a campaign cannot use individual level data unless explicitly expressed. A major difference between UK and US political campaigns is their length. British General Election campaigns last for 38 days. This is far shorter than campaigns in the US, which impacts the amount of time a party can spend to focus on key members of the electorate.

Comparisons between British political parties in 2010 and Obama's 2008 campaign suggest that despite claims of the UK embracing more American style campaigns, the Internet was used to promote parties and maintain partisan support rather than as a hub for fundraising and as a platform to bypass mainstream media. This is a critical distinction between the 2008 Obama campaign and the 2010 UK general election campaign. The Obama campaign used digital media to target 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. This was a key strategy missing from the 2010 campaign. Preaching to the partisans did not decide the 2015 General Election; rather, success was achieved by converting persuadable voters into supporters.

Persuasion vs Mobilization Strategies

Targeting voters who are invested in a particular issue and providing them with personalized messages about it is a vital strategy for electoral success. In 2015, the key

voters were persuadable. These voters were largely in southwest England, in Liberal Democrat seats, disillusioned with their party and against the rise of the SNP. Moreover, such voters were concerned about the economy. The Conservative campaign understood this and its strategy capitalized on it. This involved concentrating on the threat of a Labour and SNP coalition and the economy. Labour, however, focused purely on the National Health Service (NHS). This message unfailingly appealed to Labour party's base – those who are against privatization and welfare cuts. However, the economy is a complex and a contentious issue which lends itself to persuasive appeals. Although Labour sought to mobilize its core voters, the Conservatives understood which issues would sway target voters. 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.

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. 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.

The Conservative campaign's digital team focused on the target audience: persuadable voters.[1] This was a stark turn from the Conservative's strategy in 2010, where the party appealed exclusively to the typical Tory voter and not the wider electorate. In 2015, the Conservative campaign focused on Liberal Democrat marginal seats in southwest England. Having defined these constituencies as key, the campaign used social media to target persuadable voters on online platforms with a great degree of precision.   The campaign's accuracy was enabled by the plethora of information social media users upload about themselves. Using this information to target key voters was undoubtedly an effective social media strategy.

Twitter is evolving as a popular sphere of political communication. However, there is considerable debate about the types 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 re-tweets. 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 one platform of overlapping 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.

Some argue that Twitter users are disparate and communicate in distinct left and right wing spheres. Therefore, political candidates should 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

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[1] 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.

or the other. While persuadable voters may not actively follow a campaign on Twitter, they do not avoid any messages which may appear on their newsfeeds. This counter-argument suggests that campaigns can use Twitter to implement peer-to-peer targeting as campaigns rely on the heterogeneous nature of Twitter to indirectly communicate with persuadable voters through its immediate network.

   In previous electoral campaigns, Labour and the Conservatives did not use digital media to engage with their audience. 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. The rest of this paper examines the methods used by parties to target persuadable voters and suggest how social media strategies may be used effectively in future UK campaigns.

2015 UK General Election

   The Conservatives used 'Facebook mash' to identify an individual based on their email address and social media account. Facebook mash provides a campaign with access to the voter's basic information such as location, age and interests. This form of saturation targeting allowed Conservative campaign strategists to make an assessment on whether or not the voter was persuadable. Targeted emails and Facebook and Twitter adverts allowed the campaign to enrich the voter's profile whilst delivering the appropriate message. In 2015, 72% of adult Internet users in the UK had a social media profile. Therefore, although this method did not capture the entire electorate, it hae the potential to reach a wide number of potential voters. Whilst the Conservative campaign did not precisely emulate the US style of micro targeting, it used online saturation targeting to capture key voters.

   By contrast, the senior social media manager for the Labour campaign, Luke Waterfield, was more cautious. He explained that although David Cameron's Facebook page grew its following exponentially, its audience was primarily from countries outside the UK. 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.

   Jessica Toale, a member of the Fabian Society, a socialist organization in the UK, suggested that Labour reached leader Ed Miliband's goal of engaging in conversation with four million people. 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. Unlike in the US, where the electorate directly votes for the president, the British public votes for local parliamentary candidates. Door knocking enables campaign staff and volunteers to understand which houses to re-visit and which to leave. Simon Kitchen noted 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. Luke Waterfield agreed 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.

Most of the interviewees contributing to this paper agreed that the UK saw a blend of online and offline campaigning in 2015. Jessica Toale called 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.' Merging online and offline was evident in the Conservative party's campaign. University Professor Matt Wall noted: '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.' These seats were targeted through social media. Other interviewees believe that online targeting enables campaigns to gain more precise goals. University Professor Nick Anstead observed: '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.' Richard Royal, a Conservative candidate in 2015, went 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.

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, who worked for Nation Builder, noted: 'the Tories did put a lot of focus on social media and they did win.' 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.

Message Strategy

Having defined the different classifications of social media, as well as the differences between targeting in the UK and the US, and established that both UK parties took social media seriously, albeit with different strategies, this paper now turns to the social media message content of both parties. In particular, it aims to understand whether concentrating on certain messages that appealed to persuadable voters contributed to Conservative's success and if Labour's defeat lay in its focus on talking purely to its current supporters. Luke Waterfield noted that the top topics of the 2015 election mirrored those of 2010 and were the economy, welfare and immigration. The Conservative party developed a stronger message than Labour as its strategists 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.

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 systematic examination of campaign social media message strategy. Moreover, it examines whether the Twitter strategy was cohesive across the leader's and their party's accounts. After analyzing both parties' message strategies through their tweets, this paper examines the number of retweets each account received to understand which messages were most successful in terms of reach.

Summary Table of Messages Tweeted By All Four Twitter Accounts[2]

N= number of times each message was Tweeted

	@UKLabour		@Ed_Miliband		@Conservatives		@David_Cameron	
	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)	(N)	(%)
Explicitly promoted policy	550	38%	87	59%	592	27%	62	50%
Explicitly attacked opposition party policy	334	23%	24	16%	324	15%	8	6%
General party promotion	206	14%	19	13%	360	16%	29	23%
Fear of coalition with third party	31	2%	0		417	19%	20	16%
Negative attacks on opposition leader	263	18%	16	10%	358	16%	3	2%
Negative attacks on named opposition member	47	3%	1	6%	138	6%	2	1%
Total	1,431		147		2,189		124	

The Conservative Party Social Media Messaging Strategy

<u>Issues</u>

On Twitter, the Conservative Party concentrated on its economic achievements during its previous five years in office and attacked the last Labour government for its apparent economic failures. Richard Royal noted that: '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.' The Conservatives understood that Labour's NHS legacy was strong, yet rather than ignoring this issue, the party linked it with its most successful policy. According to Simon Kitchen, all Conservative candidates were briefed about emphasizing this message. 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.

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. Jessica Toale explains: '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.'

<u>General Party Promotion</u>
The Conservatives mentioned the words 'brighter' and 'secure future' most often (34 and 26 times respectively). The latter played on the party's narrative which stressed the

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importance of a stable economy. The majority of such tweets emphasized the party's achievements in government, urging voters that Britain must continue on the same path. For example; '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 hinted at the fact the party inherited a failing economy under Labour, whilst promoting its own progress. Luke Waterfield explained that voters are typically conservative in their political decision-making. By stressing the party's success in government, the Tories encouraged voters to stick to the *status quo*.

Personal Attacks

Emphasizing the negative consequences of a Labour-SNP coalition was a clear tactic employed by the Conservatives. Following policy promotions, most of the party's tweets concerned Labour's reliance on the SNP to govern. Jessica Toale highlighted 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.'

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; '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.' Nick Anstead noted 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?"

The Conservatives undoubtedly accentuated the argument that Ed Miliband was a weak leader. Matt Wall suggested: 'the attacks on Miliband were a key plank of the Conservatives' campaign strategy.' Jessica Toale agreed, noting that: 'Ed Miliband had a particular poor public persona and was particularly open to this type of attack.' Of the 358 negative tweets about Ed Miliband, the majority mentioned policy – particularly Ed Miliband's handling of the economy during his Treasury position in the last Labour government. Accentuating Miliband's apparent economic incapability further strengthened the Conservatives' argument that it was the only party with a trustworthy economic reputation.

The party's Twitter handle also compared Miliband to David Cameron. Richard Royal argued that: 'many people considered David Cameron to be more Prime Ministerial than Ed Miliband.' The Conservatives' tweets evidently played on this belief. For example, the party retweeted after an episode of the political talk show BBC Question Time: 'RT @CCHQPress: One thing is clear from tonight: David Cameron has a plan for the country, Ed Miliband is weak #Securetherecovery #BBCQT.' This tweet referred 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 summarized this point: 'The Conservatives had a consistent lead in the polls on leader and economic competence. History shows that you cannot win an election unless you have a lead on these two issues.' Surveys conducted both before and during the

election campaign suggest that David Cameron was consistently perceived as a better Prime Minister than Ed Miliband.

@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. Following Ed Balls, Shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham was negatively tweeted the most. In such tweets, the Conservatives directly tied Burnham to the Conservative message that a good NHS needs a strong economy.

Labour's Social Media Messaging Strategy

Issues

Labour's key policy was the NHS and the party mentioned this issue more so than any others on Twitter. Its emphasis on the party's commitment to public health care catered to its core supporters. Its appeal did not extend outside of this partisan group. As Luke Waterfield said: 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. Jessica Toale emphasized 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.'

The Labour party tweeted about immigration most frequently after the NHS. 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. The non-dom policy is a loophole which allows wealthy people to claim non-domiciled status to reduce their tax liability. 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.

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. 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.

Personal Attack on the Opposition

Like the Conservatives, Labour tweeted to raise concerns about a potential political partnership. Although the party's tweets were far less frequent, the party highlighted the negative consequences of a coalition between the Conservatives and the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Such messages undoubtedly resonated with Labour's core supporters: UKIP's leader Nigel Farage was anti-immigration and anti-NHS.

Labour's tweets about David Cameron were slightly more general than policy focused. Many negative tweets about David Cameron focused on voting him out of government. These messages may have resonated with a Labour supporter, yet they did 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. Highlighting Cameron's NHS policies was important. As Alex Masters-Waage suggested: 'People certainly were concerned about the Conservatives' actions on the NHS and other core services.' 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.
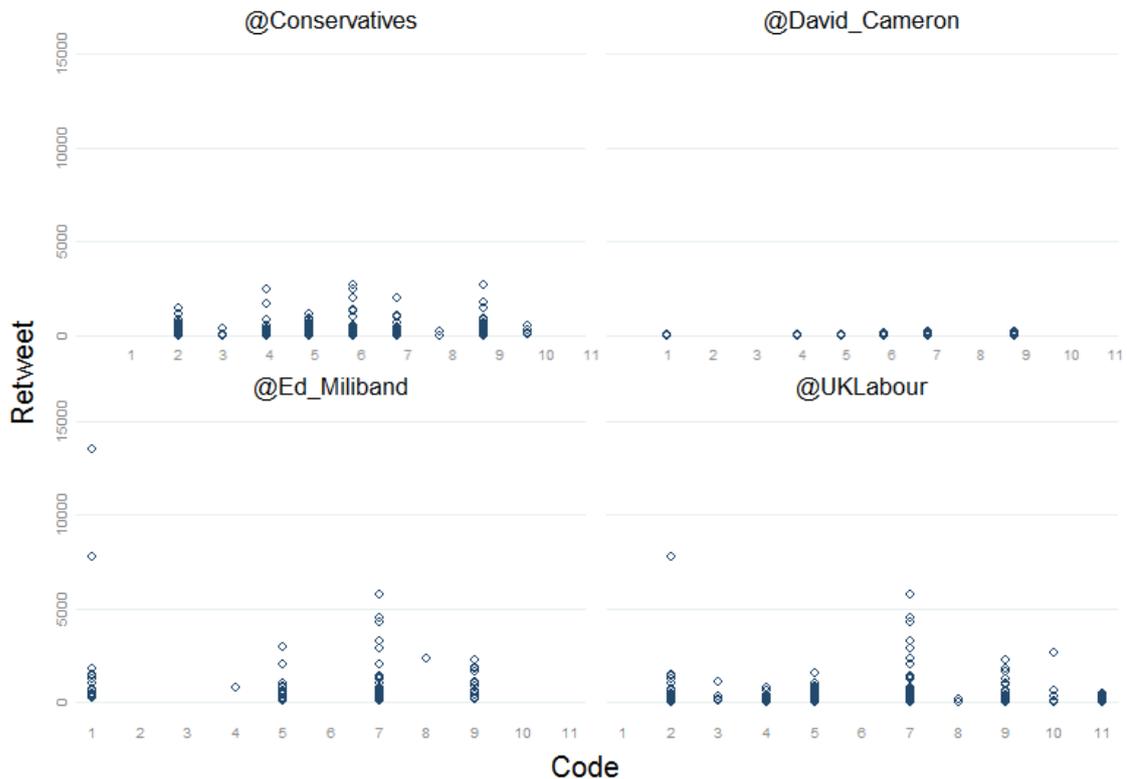
Over half of Labour's negative attacks on a named opposition member were directed at Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne. This suggests that Labour aimed to criticize the Tories' economic policy – despite it being the party's most favorable issue. Interestingly, Labour only negatively attacked Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt once: '@UKLabour: Q: How will you pay for this promise? Jeremy Hunt:¯_(ツ)_/¯ https://t.co/MsFsGyFmPu' 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.

This paper's analysis of the party and leaders' Twitter handles finds 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 agreed: 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 occurred 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 stated: 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.

Message Success

An examination of the frequency of retweets from each account provides insight into the use of peer-to-peer targeting online. Although they are a vanity metric, they show which message-type transcended beyond an account's immediate online following which is an indicator for message success.

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 observed that the Labour campaign used Twitter around a 'big political moment.' 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.'

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.

Labour's high levels of retweets suggest the party focused on peer-to-peer targeting more so than the Tories. The party as concerned about appealing to its core audience and so it encouraged this group to share Labour's message with their peers on social media. 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.' Luke Waterfield noted 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.' This was a far cry from the Conservative party's strategy which targeted specific persuadable voters with specific messages. Ultimately, according to those interviewed, it was these voters who decided the election.

Conclusion

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.

This paper has paved the way for further research on the use of Twitter in British campaigns. In 2016, voters were again asked to go to the polls to vote for or against the 'Brexit.' The campaign was fought on similar issues to those during the 2015 General

Election: the economy and immigration. An analysis of each campaign's message strategies on social media may give an insight into why the Leave vote won.