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Learning on the job? Adapting party campaign strategy to changing information on the local political context

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Abstract

An extensive literature demonstrates that local campaign efforts in the UK generally pay electoral dividends for parties. As a result, rational parties focus campaign efforts most in seats where the electoral outcome is not pre-determined, and where a few more votes either way could change the result. An important indicator of where such constituencies can be found is provided by prior election results, and previous research has shown that rational parties tend to focus their campaigns most heavily on those seats where the previous election was close and less in seats where in the past they either lost badly or won comfortably. However, much less attention has been given to how local parties react to new information showing how the competitive situation in their area is changing as a general election approaches. The paper uses data from a rare set of local opinion polls conducted in around a quarter of British constituencies in the run-up to the 2015 UK General Election. Although hampered by their generally small size, limited fund-raising capacity and reliance on volunteers, local parties do respond to new information. Results indicate that parties tended to put more effort into local campaigns in seats where an opinion poll had been carried out than in otherwise similar seats where one had not. And the more competitive the poll suggested their race was, the more resources they devoted to it.

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Election campaigns are fast-moving and unpredictable. For instance, the collapse of Lehman Brothers on the eve of the 2008 US Presidential election was a dramatic signal of worsening economic conditions, shifting the campaign focus on the economy (Scotto et al, 2008). Or consider, a senior politician who might get involved in a televised altercation with a voter, as in 2010 when UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown made unguarded comments about a Labour voter he met when out canvassing support (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010, 173ff). New opinion polls may suggest a dramatic shift in the public mood, as in the last days of the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum. Parties, though they go into elections with carefully crafted campaign strategies, cannot ignore such new developments. They must adapt and react.

Analyses of election campaigns often devote much attention to how well (or badly) national party organisations perform (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016; Heilemann and Halperin 2010; Halperin and Heilemann, 2013). But elections are not just fought through the 'air war' of the national campaign. They also – and increasingly – take place through the 'ground war' of competition between candidates in local electoral districts and constituencies.

These local competitions have measurable electoral impacts. The harder parties campaign locally, the better they do – especially when they are the local challenger rather than the incumbent (Jacobson, 1978, 2006; Johnston, 1987; Denver and Hands, 1997; Pattie et al., 1995; Fisher et al., 2011, 2014). Face-to-face appeals often carry more weight than more impersonal forms of contact (Barton et al., 2013; Green et al., 2016). Yet – unlike national campaigns – we know remarkably little (anecdotal evidence aside) about how (or even if) parties adapt their grassroots election campaigns to take account of changing local circumstances.

The UK's 2015 General Election provides a rare opportunity to analyse how local party organisations reacted to short-term political change in their areas when resourcing their campaigns. In the run-up to and during that election, political commentator Lord Ashcroft commissioned polls in a large number of constituencies throughout the country. Before 2015, constituency polls were rare in the UK (and often confined to by-elections rather than to General Elections) because of both the high costs of such an exercise and media concentration on the national race. Lord Ashcroft's initiative therefore gives an unusual level of insight into how opinion was shifting in a large group of constituencies prior to the election, and hence provides an opportunity to see how local parties react when new information about their constituencies becomes available. The paper exploits this opportunity by comparing parties' local spending patterns in seats where Lord Ashcroft polled and where he did not. We find consistent evidence that British parties did adapt their local campaigns in the light of such new information.

We begin by briefly reviewing what we already know about parties' campaign resource allocation decisions in UK parliamentary elections. We then discuss the Ashcroft polls and our analytical strategy, before presenting our key results.

Learning during campaigns

Participants in election campaigns are bombarded with information regarding key campaign issues, the political context, and so on. Researchers have examined what voters learn during and from campaigns (Lau and Redlawsk, 2006; Hansen and Pedersen, 2014; Henderson, 2014). Particularly relevant for what follows, recent work has shown that voters can be influenced by what they learn from opinion polls, in terms of both how they seek out information and how they might vote (Roy et al., 2015; van der Meer et al., 2016). Part of that learning process concerns the local political context within which voters live. Constituency turnout, for instance, often increases as seats become more marginal (Denver and Hands, 1985; Johnston and Pattie, 2006). What is more, some voters take the local tactical situation into account when deciding whom to vote for (Tsebelis, 1986; Fieldhouse et al., 1996; Johnston and Pattie, 2011).

But can local political parties and candidates also learn about and respond to changing local circumstances? They face several challenges in doing so. One relates to their capacities. Although constituency campaigns are increasingly wrapped into parties' national strategies (Norris, 2000; Fisher and Denver, 2008), there is a clear asymmetry between constituency and national party organisations. Constituency campaigns do not enjoy anything like the same levels of expertise, market research capacity or resourcing as their national counterparts. Rather, they are heavily reliant on local volunteers (few of whom are political professionals) for much of their grassroots organisation and campaigning (Fisher et al, 2013, 2014).

Part of the challenge faced by local campaigners (and academics studying local campaigning) is finding out how the political situation might be changing in each constituency. Few local parties can afford regular – or even occasional – opinion polling within their constituencies. Further, given the rules on candidate expenses (Johnston and Pattie, 2014; Fisher, 2015), they would struggle to conduct such polls even if they could afford them during the five months immediately prior to the election – when expenditure is limited to a maximum of around £40,000 (the actual amount is determined by constituency type – urban or rural – and size of the electorate).

Some information on local political context is readily available to local party organisations and is used in deciding on campaign strategies. Past general election results give an indication of how competitive the party is in each seat. . It is in the most marginal constituencies, those where a few votes either way can affect the outcome, that local parties raise most money and campaign hardest (Pattie and Johnston, 2003; Johnston and Pattie, 2006).

But such information is not always terribly up to date and much can happen between elections. The results of the previous general election in a seat are a good first approximation of the state of political opinion there (the correlation between a party's constituency vote at one election and its share at the next is generally very strong). But first approximations can be misleading. What is more, the results of the previous election give little or no information about how party support might have changed within the constituency since then, and hence cannot help parties finesse their local campaigns.

Local parties have other means to assess public opinion. Council elections provide regular information on levels of party support at the sub-constituency scale of local government wards. But local issues matter in such contests even if some voters use them to express their

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opinion (usually negative) on the national government's performance. And turnout tends to be lower than in national elections. Parties which rely on local election results to guide their planning for national contests might be misled if they are not careful (Rallings and Thrasher, 1997).

Party members and volunteers contact voters within the constituency (often by knocking on their doors) and try to ascertain which party they support. From this information they can gain some sense of local opinion and can begin to target campaign efforts. For most local parties, these canvass returns are a valuable resource. However, the data they provide is imperfect. Canvassing rarely achieves 100% coverage of a constituency electorate. Nor is it systematic or scientific. The information is gathered by volunteers, who may mis-record or misinterpret what they are told (on which see Barwell, 2016). Voters on the doorstep may not always give an accurate account of their political leanings to canvassers. And canvassing is very labour-intensive: parties find it hard to update their canvassing databases frequently. What is more, there are significant variations from constituency to constituency, even within the same party, in how well (or badly) local activists canvass. Both the quantity and quality of the information produced can be highly variable.

Compared to their national party organisations, therefore, local parties face substantial uncertainty regarding changing local opinion, especially as an election nears. Even so, there is some evidence, from individual constituency campaigns, that local parties do try to react to what is happening in their area in the run-up to and during an election, and do adapt their campaigning accordingly (Cutts, 2006; Smith, 2011; Barwell, 2016). But these are isolated case studies of individual constituency campaigns by particular parties. While they offer insights into the detail of local campaigning, it is hard to know whether the degree of flexibility in local campaign activity they reveal can be generalised to other seats. To find out, we need more systematic evidence across many seats and parties.

But here we face a problem. How can we know – across a range of constituencies – just what sorts of changing local conditions the various campaigns face? We could, like the parties, fall back on past general or local election results. But the same issues would confront us in using such information that confronts the parties themselves.

Nor can we fall back on evidence from parties' own local opinion polling (where such polls are conducted) and canvassing records. These data are politically sensitive and confidential. We need some other means of assessing the local climate of opinion in a range of constituencies as an election approaches. In the remainder of this paper, we therefore turn to data from a rare series of constituency opinion polls, which were conducted and released publicly in the months before the UK's 2015 General Election (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2015, 234).

Lord Ashcroft's constituency polls
The constituency polls were commissioned by Lord Michael Ashcroft, a multi-millionaire businessman and former Deputy Chair and Treasurer of the Conservative party, who since 2010 has become a prominent pollster and political commentator (Ashcroft 2005, 2010, 2015). The polls were conducted in constituencies throughout Britain: details of each were released publicly via his website[1], and the polls were often reported by both the national and local press. By the time of the 2015 election, Lord Ashcroft had commissioned and published

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[1] http://lordashcroftpolls.com

details of polls in 167 seats, just over a quarter of all British constituencies (none were conducted in Northern Ireland's 18 constituencies).[2] Of those constituencies, 103 were polled just once, 46 were polled twice, 16 were polled three times, and 2 were polled on four separate occasions. (See Appendix 1 for a list of all the constituencies polled and how often.) The first of his constituency polls were carried out in May 2014, a year before the election, and the final ones took place in April 2015, virtually on the eve of the election itself. The majority of the Ashcroft polls took place at some point between December 2014 and the end of April 2015. In 30% of the Ashcroft poll constituencies, the final pre-election poll took place in April 2015.

One important caveat of the polling data is that Ashcroft did not randomly sample constituencies. Instead, we assume that decisions about whom to poll were chosen with an eye to potentially dramatic stories, and the data support this assumption. For instance, polled constituencies were more marginal, on average, than were seats where polls were not conducted. The average margin of victory for the winning party in 2010 was 10.5% in seats where polls were conducted, but it was 21.3% in the 465 seats where no poll was carried out ($t_{(280)} = 11.04$, $p < 0.001$). But not all seats polled were marginal, and not all marginals were polled. While 78% of those seats with a 2010 majority of 5% points or smaller were polled, 22% were not. The percentage of those polled dropped steeply thereafter, to 39% of those seats held with majorities of between 5% and 10%, 26% of those where the majority was in the range 10-15%, down to just 4% of those where the majority was in the range 25-30%. But 13% of those with majorities of over 30% points were polled (almost all of which, for reasons discussed below, were in Scotland).

Some of the polled constituencies were chosen because they were particularly newsworthy. For instance, Thanet South, polled four times by Ashcroft, was the seat contested by Ukip leader Nigel Farage. The possibility of a successful Ukip insurgency was one of the stories of the campaign, and this was a high-profile battleground (Ford and Goodwin, 2014; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; Cutts et al., 2017). Sheffield Hallam, meanwhile, was polled on three occasions. The incumbent MP, Nick Clegg, was the leader of the Liberal Democrats and Deputy Prime Minister in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government between 2010 and 2015. His party had suffered badly in the polls as a result of joining the coalition, and much of the opprobrium this attracted was focussed on Mr Clegg himself. Although his seat was ostensibly safe (in 2010 he enjoyed a 15,284 vote majority – around 30 percentage points – over the Conservative candidate, with Labour in third place), he faced a strong challenge from Labour in 2015: his majority was cut to just 2,353 votes, or a 4-point margin, with Labour in second place. And, anticipating the possibility of an SNP surge (Johns and Mitchell, 2016), Scottish constituencies were over-represented among those polled: whereas 9% of all constituencies are in that country, 17% of those polled by Lord Ashcroft were – and, as noted above, most of these were ostensibly very safe Labour seats at the time (of course in hindsight, none of Labour's seats were safe: all bar one of Labour's erstwhile Scottish strongholds were won by the SNP in 2015).

Measuring the effect of local polls on campaign activity
In the remainder of the paper, we focus on whether there is an association between the extra information on the electoral contest locally provided by an Ashcroft constituency poll and the resource a local party devotes to its campaign. There are good grounds for suspecting that

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[2] The vote intention results from each constituency poll were published on the Ashcroft website during the campaign via image files (.png format). After the election, we scraped the entire Ashcroft website for all .png files and extracted the poll results for analysis.

parties in constituencies polled by Lord Ashcroft reacted to what his polls showed. The unusually large number of constituency polls conducted in 2015, and the coverage they received, meant they 'clearly had the potential for impact on the election agenda' (Mortimore and Wells, 2017, p. 26)

The Conservative MP for ultra-marginal Croydon South has described how his 2015 re-election campaign strategy was affected by the publication of three 'Ashcroft polls' for his constituency (Barwell, 2016). The first two polls (conducted in October 2014 and March 2015) both suggested he was losing to the Labour candidate. As a result, his campaign micro-targeted particular groups of voters who they felt could be persuaded to swing to the Conservatives – activities that called for more funds, with an additional £90,000 being raised. For each targeted group, particular campaign messages were developed and were disseminated through bespoke leaflets and election material. Some relief came in the final Ashcroft poll in his seat, conducted during April 2015, which suggested he had pulled ahead of his rival by a reasonable margin. Although he was anxious that the apparent turnaround in his constituency might make his voters complacent and therefore risked reducing his vote if some stayed at home assuming the result was already settled (Barwell, 2016, 213ff), the poll was a harbinger of what was to come in the actual election: Mr Barwell was successfully re-elected (though by a notably narrower margin than the final Ashcroft poll suggested).[3]

Local trends suggested by the Ashcroft polls also influenced where national parties directed some of their campaign resources and personnel to help with local battles:

> Some polls showing a close race in Sheffield Hallam, where Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg was defending his seat, may have diverted Labour resource from some defensive constituencies. Indeed, a tweet from influential campaigning Labour MP Tom Watson suggests Lord Ashcroft's polls were certainly being taken notice of: "A wet day for my fourth visit to Sheffield Hallam as @LordAshcroft puts a spring in our step. theguardian.com/politics/2015" (Mludzinski and Peacock, 2017, p 74).

But was the Croydon Central MP unusual in reacting to an Ashcroft poll? Or did other local parties adjust their strategies based upon the availability of local Ashcroft poll data? We are unable to get into the fine detail of issues such as micro-targeting in most seats. But we can get some idea by looking at the resources candidates put into their election campaigns. Other things being equal, we anticipate that local parties will up their campaign game (i.e., devote more resources to it) in seats where an Ashcroft poll has been conducted than they will in seats where one has not been carried out (and the extra information it might supply is therefore not available). What is more, we hypothesise that, the closer the contest between the lead parties implied by these polls, the more resources they will put into their campaigns.

To do this, we need a consistent measure of campaign activity. As in previous research, we employ candidates' reported expenditures on their campaigns. These data are publicly available and cover (almost) every constituency campaign in the country, as all candidates in British elections are legally required to make a declaration of their campaign spending for

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[3] Eventually, just before the short campaign began in in April, the Conservative party headquarters added Croydon Central to its list of targeted marginal seats; no additional money was provided but the constituency was added to those whose electors were canvassed from the national/regional call centres, activists from outside the constituency were encouraged to move there and campaign, and ministerial visits to support the candidate were scheduled.

two designated periods: the four months before the election is formally called (the so-called 'long campaign'), and the normally four week period between the official launch of the election campaign (which begins when Parliament is prorogued) and polling day itself. Although not a perfect measure of campaign activity, campaign spending does correlate very strongly with other independent measures of campaign intensity (Pattie et al., 1994; Denver and Hands, 1997, 246ff; Johnston and Pattie, 2006, 199ff). It has the further advantage over other measures of being ubiquitous.

In the following analyses, our dependent variables are the amounts each party spent per constituency on the 2015 short campaign as a percentage of the legally permitted maximum there.[4][5] We examine constituency campaign spending by the three British parties with the best-developed constituency organisations across the country: the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats. We exclude the Northern Irish constituencies, where a very different party system pertains and no polls were conducted.

On average, the Conservatives spent the most on their short campaigns as a percentage of the legal limit; the median spend is 61.6%. Labour had a median spend of 49.7%, followed by the Liberal Democrats at just 10.7%.

Baseline models
We begin by building baseline models to take into account some of the longer-term influences on levels of constituency campaigning, as well as provide a benchmark against which to assess the effects of the Ashcroft polls. Four explanatory variables are included in these baseline models. All four factors reflect conditions in each constituency at the previous General Election in 2010, on the grounds that past behaviour is likely to be a good guide to future behaviour, both for us and for local parties deciding on their campaign strategies, and the 2010 election gives a recent time point for which common data are available for all seats. The results of these baseline models are given in table 1. All three models provide reasonable fits, with R^2 values ranging from 0.55 (for Conservative short campaign spending in 2015) to 0.71 (for the Liberal Democrats).

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[4] Candidates' spending on their constituency campaigns in UK General Elections is subject to tight legal limits, set by whether a seat is an urban (or 'borough') or more rural (or 'county') constituency, and by how many registered electors live in the seat. At the 2015 General election, the 'long campaign' legal limit for a candidate was £30,700 plus 9p per elector in county seats and 6p per elector in a borough seat. During the 'short campaign', the limit was set at £8,700 plus 9p (for county) or 6p (if borough) per elector. The data are available on the Electoral Commission's website, at http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/uk-general-elections/candidate-election-spending.

[5] One oddity with the 2015 campaign data is that missing returns have been entered as £0 expenditure, which means that we cannot discern whether these values reflect actual non-spending in a constituency or missing values. These £0 returns affect less than 6% of Labour and Conservative cases, and 16.6% of Liberal Democrat returns. It is worth noting that many of the candidates recorded as spending nothing in 2015 contest the same seats, which also tend to clustered in the same local authorities. Since so many of these 'zero returns' cluster in this way, we suspect that we are picking up a breakdown of communication between local returning officers (local government employees who are responsible for the conduct of elections in their areas, and to whom candidates are legally required to report their campaign spending) and the Electoral Commission, to which body returning officers are expected (but not obliged) to send on the data. There is anecdotal evidence that this may be a consequence of increasing pressure on local authority budgets as a result of government-enforced austerity measures after 2010. As we cannot be sure whether £0 spending returns in the Electoral Commission's 2015 candidate spending files really reflect a non-existent local campaign, we err on the side of caution and only focus on those campaigns where some spending is recorded. For the same reason, we focus on spending during the short, and not the long campaign (as we have more cases to work with in the former case).

The first explanatory variable is a time-lagged version of the dependent variable: how much the party spent (as a percentage of the legally permitted maximum) in each constituency at the previous 2010 General Election. This captures any tendency towards long term stability in local campaign spending decisions. As most local spending is based on local fund raising, richer and more successful parties are liable always to allocate more resources to their local campaigns than are poorer and less successful parties.

In fact, this stability is exactly what we find. The correlation between 2010 and 2015 short campaign spending is quite high: 0.68 for the Conservatives, 0.72 for Labour, and 0.66 for the Liberal Democrats. These strong correlations also suggest that spending disparities among the parties were evident in 2010 (as in 2015): The median short spend for the Conservatives was 76.8%; it was 54.2% for Labour and just 22.9% for the Liberal Democrats.

Consistent with that expectation of underlying stability, in all three models the coefficient for 2010 campaign spending is both positive and significant. The more a party spent on its constituency 'short' campaign in 2010, the more it spent in 2015. What is more, past spending decisions play an important role. Analyses with 2010 spending as the sole explanatory variable (not reported here but available on request from the authors) show that, alone, it accounts for 40% to 50% of the variation between constituencies in 2015 campaign spending.

Before moving on, it is worth also noting that controlling for campaign spending levels in 2010 has a helpful side-effect for our subsequent discussions. It means the model coefficients for other explanatory variables now tell us how much, on average, they contributed to changing parties' campaign resource allocation decisions.

The second explanatory factor in our baseline models is a dummy variable recording whether a party was fighting in a seat it already held (having won it in 2010: these seats were coded 1), or in a seat where it was the challenger (coded 0).[6] We expect parties in government nationally (in 2015, the coalition: the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) to expend more effort on those seats they already hold (in order to minimise losses to opposition parties) and less in seats where they are in second place or worse (as few incumbent governments expect to increase their haul of seats).[7] Rational opposition parties, meanwhile, need to increase their number of MPs if they are to stand any chance of entering government. So we might expect them – in this case Labour – to spend more on their campaigns in seats where they are not currently the incumbent than in seats they already hold.

As expected, and other things being equal, Conservative and Liberal Democrat constituency parties spent significantly more during the 2015 short campaign, on average, in those seats they were defending in 2015 than where they were challenging. Conservative short campaign spending in 2015 was 14 percentage points higher on average where they were defending a

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[6] Election results from 2010 and 2015 were taken from the British Election Study Constituency Results linked data file provided by Jennifer van Heerde-Hudson. The linked data file is available from http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/data-objects/linked-data/.

[7] One exception to this is that during the last weeks of the campaign the Conservative party focused a great deal of effort (much of it directed from central office rather than organised locally) on trying to unseat Liberal Democrat MPs, seeing that as a possibly easier way of winning additional seats (by arguing that election of Liberal Democrat MPs could result in a Labour minority government sustained by the Scottish National Party) than by seeking to unseat Labour incumbents: on the impact of such campaigning in one constituency, see Laws (2016).

seat than where they were challenging. In seats defended by the Liberal Democrats, spending was an average of 50 percentage points higher than was the case where they were challengers.

Almost certainly, this reflects the parties' rather different underlying positions. The Conservatives, both nationally and at the grassroots level, have considerably greater resources on which to draw than do the Liberal Democrats. Conservative challengers often had reasonable levels of resourcing to draw on, narrowing the spending gap between them and Conservatives defending seats for the party. Liberal Democrat challengers had far fewer resources, hence the larger spending gap between them and Liberal Democrat candidates defending the party's 2010 seats. What is more, the 'costs' of being involved in the coalition fell asymmetrically on the two partners: while polls showed that within the coalition Conservative support had largely held up, Liberal Democrat support had collapsed, and the latter party feared it might lose many of its MPs in 2015 (as proved to be the case). It therefore abandoned any hopes of increasing its number of MPs and moved into damage limitation, trying to protect its existing seats as much as it could. So the Liberal Democrats, with less cash than their coalition partners and facing greater threats to their smaller number of sitting MPs, seem to have concentrated on raising what limited resources they could in 2015 on trying to hold on where they could, while their richer and less threatened coalition partners could (and had the ability to) raise campaign resources on a much wider scale, including to some challenger candidates in races where the Conservatives might make gains.

As the main opposition party going into the 2015 election, Labour's primary goal was to elect more MPs. Other things being equal, it concentrated more on raising and spending campaign resources where it was the challenger rather than in seats which it was defending. Its 2015 short campaign spend was on average 18 percentage points lower on the latter group of seats than in the former.

Our third 'baseline' explanatory variable is how marginal constituencies were for each party going into the 2015 election. We measure this taking the absolute value of the difference between each party's 2010 vote share in a constituency and (where the party won the seat in 2010) the party in second place, or (where the party lost) the winning party. The smaller the marginality score, therefore, the more competitive the seat was for a party. Our expectation, that parties spend most in seats where their margin of victory at the preceding election was close than in seats where their position was less competitive (either because they were already well ahead of their nearest rival or because they were far behind the winning party), is confirmed for all three parties. The more competitive the race (and hence the smaller the marginality score), the more the party spent.

Our final 'baseline' indicator is the interaction between how marginal a seat was for a party in 2010 and whether the party won the seat in 2010. This captures the possibility that the relationship between past marginality and current 2015 campaign resource allocations might be different in seats where a party is challenging than in seats which it is defending. The interaction terms were not significant for the Conservative campaign spending model, suggesting that the rate at which spending fell as seats became safer was much the same in those seats where the party was the incumbent as in seats where it was the challenger. But for Labour and the Liberal Democrats the interaction term was significant and positive. In other words, the fall-off in spending with declining marginality was steeper in seats where the parties were challenging than where they were the incumbents.

On the whole, these results echo the findings of previous research on British campaign spending (Pattie and Johnston, 2003; Johnston and Pattie, 2006), but it is worth noting that the 2015 election confirms that the Conservatives have modernised their constituency campaign operation. Up until the mid-2000s, local Conservative Associations were technically independent of the national party organisation. This meant that the wealthiest and safest Conservative constituencies tended to raise and spend most on their local campaigns, and their members were reluctant to be sent to canvass support elsewhere in more marginal seats. But party reforms in the mid-2000s brought the local Associations into the wider party structure, making co-ordination easier, while the so-called 'Ashcroft money' scheme helped the party focus more on its marginal battles than on its safest seats. Dividends from this, in the form of a greater focus of resources in marginals, were already evident in 2010: in 2015 we find evidence that this trend has continued.

The presence or absence of new information: the effect of an Ashcroft poll
Did the Ashcroft polls conducted over the year before the 2015 General Election affect campaign resource allocation decisions? Our first step to answering this question is to compare 2015 short campaign spending in seats where at least one Ashcroft poll was conducted with spending in seats where no such poll occurred. We therefore add a dummy variable, measuring whether or not at least one Ashcroft poll had occurred in a constituency, to the baseline models (table 2).

To account for the changing electoral landscape from 2010 to 2015, we also include a measure of party support from Wave 1 of the British Election Study Internet Panel.[8] This dataset is particularly useful because it 1) contains a large number of survey respondents (N = 30,239), 2) has geolocation information (including UK Parliamentary Constituency, and, 3) was conducted between February and March 2014, prior to any Ashcroft polling. For each party, we calculated the proportion of respondents in a given constituency that intended to vote for the party using the following question: "And if there were a UK General Election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?"[9] This contextual variable is important because it helps control for the possibility that spending differences between elections might simply be the result of changing electoral conditions on the ground well before any Ashcroft polls were reported.

Since the baseline models already control for the tactical situation in the seat in 2010, we take into account the tendency for Ashcroft polls to be focussed on more 'interesting' and marginal seats than in more predictable and safer ones.[10] This matters, as we might otherwise mistake parties' tendency to focus resources on marginal races for an 'Ashcroft poll' effect. In our model, any evidence of party campaign spending being influenced by the presence of a poll is net of this general tendency to focus on marginals. What is more (as noted above), because our baseline models contain a lagged dependent variable, in the form of the 2010 short campaign expenditure in each seat, the coefficients for the Ashcroft poll dummies indicate how much short campaign spending is changed by the presence of a constituency

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[8] The data is available at http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/data-object/2015-bes-internet-panel-wave-1/.
[9] The weighted survey data were used to construct the vote intention measures, and the mean number of respondents per constituency is 48.
[10] By using the 2010 election results locally as the baseline here, we cannot take into account any general shifts in opinion between 2010 and 2015, such as the Liberal Democrats' precipitous decline in the polls. However, such 'national' shifts in the polls were precisely that: national. They affect the parties' standing equally in all seats. This does not, therefore, invalidate our concern here with local shifts in opinion as evidenced by the Ashcroft polls.

poll and controlling for prior levels of party support. This is equivalent to comparing two seats which in 2010 had the same marginalities, campaign spending levels and incumbency (and where we might expect, other things being equal, a party to spend similar amounts on its 2015 campaign). If an Ashcroft poll had been conducted in one of these seats but not in the other, the coefficient for the 'Ashcroft poll' dummy variable in each model would indicate how much more (or less) that party might spend in the presence of the poll.

There is clear evidence that both Labour and the Conservatives expended more resources on their short campaigns in seats where a poll took place than in seats where there was no poll (table 2). For both parties, the Ashcroft poll dummy variable is both statistically significant and positive, even when we control for past spending, marginality incumbency, and vote intentions. What is more, the effect sizes are large. Other things being equal, the Conservatives increased their 2015 short campaign spending by more than 20 percentage points on average in seats where they had information from an Ashcroft poll. Meanwhile, Labour's 2015 short campaign expenditure was 11 percentage points higher, on average, where a poll had taken place than where it had not, ceteris paribus.

The Liberal Democrats, however, did not react in the same way. Their Ashcroft poll coefficient was small, negative, and not significant. Whether a poll took place in a seat made little or no difference to how much the party expended on its 2015 short campaign. In part this discrepancy between the Liberal Democrats and their two main rivals may be a function of the considerably more limited resources available to the former party compared to the latter two. The Liberal Democrats may have been at full stretch to meet their existing campaign commitments, and hence unable to raise further resources late in the day.

In part, too, it may reflect the fact that in seats where polls were conducted (as in all seats) Labour and Conservative candidates were more likely to be in first or second place at the 2010 election than were Liberal Democrat candidates. In 80% of the seats where an Ashcroft poll was conducted, a Conservative was first or second in 2010, and in 75% a Labour candidate had been in one of the top two positions then. A Liberal Democrat was first or second in 2010 in only 35% of the 'Ashcroft poll' constituencies. What is more, the polls themselves confirmed the Liberal Democrats' parlous state on the eve of the 2015 election. In the last Ashcroft poll conducted in each constituency, the Liberal Democrats were predicted as the winners in just 11% of the seats polled and were placed second in a further 14%. In three-quarters of the seats polled by Lord Ashcroft, therefore, his data put the Liberal Democrats in third place or worse. By contrast, the Conservatives and Labour were each in one or other of the top two positions in the final Ashcroft poll in 71% of the seats polled. While both Labour and the Conservatives stood to gain in a sizeable number of seats by campaigning more where an Ashcroft poll had been conducted, therefore, the polls merely confirmed what the Liberal Democrats already knew: they had to focus on damage limitation in the seats they already held.

It is worth noting that in all three models, our constituency-level vote intention controls are statistically significant. For the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats campaigns, they recognised the local sentiment and spent more in constituencies that where vote intentions were higher. For instance, a 10-point increase in the proportion of respondents who said they intended to vote for the party led to a 1.6-point increase in short spending for the Conservatives and a 3-point increase for the Liberal Democrats. However, Labour spent less in constituencies where they had a higher proportion of stated support: a 10-point increase in

the proportion of those who intended to vote for Labour led to a 2.2-point decrease in short spending.

Does the poll margin matter?

The final analyses examine whether parties responded to the tactical situation depicted by an Ashcroft poll. For instance, if a poll indicated that a party faced a tighter-than-expected race in a constituency, we might expect it to devote more campaign resources to that race. But parties might decide to expend fewer campaign resources than they had intended in seats where polls indicated they were pulling further ahead of their nearest rivals, or were falling further out of contention.

These analyses focus only on constituencies where Ashcroft polls were conducted. We use the last poll carried out in each seat before the election, as this represents the most up-to-date polling information on local conditions (outside parties' own canvassing data) available in the run-up to and during the short campaign. As with the 2010 marginality measure, we constructed a measure of the absolute percentage point difference in the Ashcroft poll between each party and (where it was the poll leader) the second-placed party or (where it was not shown as in the lead) the party which did lead locally in the poll. Our primary expectation is that, other things being equal, the closer the Ashcroft poll suggests a race is for a party, the more resources that party will put into its local campaign.

As the results in table 3 control for the 2010 tactical situation in each seat and changing electoral context, we can rule out the possibility that the Ashcroft polls merely re-iterate the information available to all parties from the preceding general election. The coefficients for the Ashcroft marginality measure tells us how much spending changed in response to the local tactical situation indicated by the poll results.

Conservative local candidates in the polled seats paid attention not just to how marginal the seat was for them in 2010 (the relevant coefficient remains significant and correctly signed) but also to the margin indicated by the Ashcroft poll. The closer the poll suggested their fight in the seat was (and hence the smaller the poll margin variable), the more they increased their short campaign expenditure. Every percentage point closer the final Ashcroft poll in their area suggested the race was becoming for them increased their short campaign expenditure by 0.55 percentage points over and above what we might have assumed it would be given the party's efforts in the seat in 2010 and the results of that election there.

For Labour, meanwhile, the situation in the seats that Lord Ashcroft polled was very different. As we have already seen, the party focussed its short campaign most heavily on those seats where it was the challenger after 2010, and where its 2010 margin was closer (table 1); other things being equal, it spent more than expected in seats where an Ashcroft poll had been conducted than in seats where none were (table 2). But how close the final poll suggested the race was becoming in a seat increased their short campaign expenditure by 0.67 percentage points. Over and above the decision to 'invest' more in seats where a poll had taken place, therefore, local Labour party decisions on where to raise and spend more were guided by how marginal the seat appeared to be based on the Ashcroft poll results. Note, however, that Labour did not appear to expend resources based on the vote intention contextual measure.

The Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, though they did not increase local campaign spending in a seat just because an Ashcroft poll had been conducted there, do seem to have been

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responsive, in those seats where a poll did take place, to the messages it carried. In the Ashcroft poll constituencies for which we have data on the Liberal Democrats 2015 short campaign expenditure, the party spent more, other things being equal, the more competitive the seat seemed to be for them (as indicated by the significant, negative, coefficient for Ashcroft poll margin in the Liberal Democrat model). In fact, the Liberal Democrats seemed most responsive to the marginality suggested by the Ashcroft polling information: for every percentage point tighter the race became, the party increased their short campaign expenditure by 0.77 percentage points. Like Labour, the changing electoral conditions do not seem to impact short spending in this model.

Conclusions
Despite their relatively limited resources, both financial and in personnel, Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat constituency parties proved flexible in their capacity to respond to new information about local conditions. As in previous elections, they utilised past election results to focus their 2015 constituency campaign efforts on those seats of most value to them in terms of potentially altering their representation in Parliament. All three parties focused on more marginal races: the parties from the incumbent government especially concentrating on those marginals which they already held, and the main opposition party on those they needed to win to increase their haul of MPs.

But, more than that, where new and more recent information was available in the form of publicly disseminated constituency polls, local parties responded. By and large, the presence of a constituency poll elicited even greater campaign efforts from parties, especially where the poll suggested the race was even closer for them than the previous election result might have suggested. Their restricted resources notwithstanding, local parties were able to respond to new information.

That said, there are some clear differences between the parties in exactly how this played out. While both Labour and the Conservatives campaigned more than expected in seats where an Ashcroft poll had taken place than in seats where one was not conducted, the Liberal Democrats did not. Yet, the Liberal Democrat did increase short spending by 0.77 percentage points when the Ashcroft poll suggested the race was becoming closer for them, and this was the largest effect of all three parties. As we speculate in the paper, this is consistent both with the rather different tactical challenges and resource constraints facing each party. As the least well-resourced of the three and the most likely to lose heavily in the election, the Liberal Democrats probably had little choice but to focus their efforts on defending seats where the polls suggested they remained ahead, but by narrow margins.

One limitation of our analyses, however, is that the patterns we reveal are ecological in nature. We can show that local parties faced with extra information in the form of a poll put more effort into their constituency campaigns than local parties without this extra stimulus. But we cannot say with certainty that it was the poll itself which generated the reaction. It is possible that the poll only made public trends that were already evident to the local party through its own information networks (including its canvassing efforts). If so, our general argument – that constituency parties do routinely react to changing circumstances – still holds, even if the exact means by which they find out remains opaque.

But that said, there are grounds for thinking the Ashcroft polls themselves were consequential in local parties' decision-making. First, as noted in the paper, we do have anecdotal evidence from at least one constituency campaign on how it responded to Ashcroft polls in its area

(Barwell, 2016). What is more, as we note above, our analyses control for the longer-term tactical situation in each seat. Hence, when we compare seats where a poll did take place with those which were not polled, we are, in an important sense, comparing like with like. And we do pick up 'poll effects'. It is possible, of course, that Lord Ashcroft was canny enough to pick only those constituencies for his polls where local opinion really was shifting compared to 2010. But (while some judgement must be involved) it would be a lucky – or quite remarkably skilful – pollster indeed who managed to do so time after time. It is very unlikely that there were not similar late shifts in local opinion in many of the seats which were not polled as we see in those which were. And yet the parties reacted in the polled seats in a different way to how they behaved in the un-polled. This does suggest, therefore, that Lord Ashcroft's polls did have an influence on how these local battles were fought. Local parties do learn and adapt, therefore – and it seems they (like the rest of us) pay attention to the polls.

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Table 1: The effect of prior information on 2015 short campaign constituency spending (baseline models)

	Y = 2015 short campaign spend as % of limit (y ≠ 0)		
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
2010 short spending (%)	0.39***	0.36***	0.21***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)
2010 marginality (%)	-0.70***	-1.20***	-0.57***
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Incumbency (1 = yes)	13.84***	-18.23***	50.09***
	(3.11)	(3.00)	(4.15)
2010 marginality X incumbency	0.25	1.02***	0.50*
	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.25)
Constant	35.28***	59.71***	24.14***
	(4.02)	(3.77)	(3.28)
R^2	0.55	0.63	0.71
N	595	593	525

Notes: Cell entries unstandardized regression coefficients from a linear model; standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests.

Table 2: The effect of Ashcroft polling on 2015 short campaign constituency spending

	Y = 2015 short campaign spend as % of limit (y ≠ 0)		
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
2010 short spending (%)	0.35***	0.36***	0.21***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)
2010 marginality (%)	-0.63***	-1.09***	-0.55***
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Incumbency (1 = yes)	4.64	-10.81***	49.18***
	(2.98)	(3.25)	(4.42)
2010 marginality X incumbency	0.68***	0.98***	0.45
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.25)
2014 vote intention (%)	0.16*	-0.22**	0.30*
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.12)
2015 Ashcroft poll (1 = yes)	**20.48***	**11.00***	**-0.90**
	(1.96)	**(2.03)**	**(1.78)**
Constant	27.69***	58.06***	22.35***
	(4.14)	(4.77)	(3.52)
R^2	0.63	0.65	0.70
N	595	593	525

Notes: Cell entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from a linear model; standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests.

Table 3: The effect of Ashcroft poll marginality on 2015 short campaign constituency spending

	Y = 2015 short campaign spend as % of limit (y ≠ 0)		
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
2010 short spending (%)	0.23***	0.17*	0.11
	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.06)
2010 marginality (%)	-0.88***	-1.25***	-0.44*
	(0.16)	(0.21)	(0.20)
Incumbency (1 = yes)	-6.36*	-6.12	38.75***
	(3.10)	(5.76)	(5.74)
2010 marginality X incumbency	1.07***	1.07***	0.66
	(0.28)	(0.28)	(0.36)
2014 vote intention (%)	0.25*	0.06	0.19
	(0.12)	(0.16)	(0.20)
2015 Ashcroft marginality (%)	**-0.55****	**-0.67****	**-0.77*****
	(0.18)	**(0.20)**	**(0.19)**
Constant	70.45***	82.65***	48.98***
	(7.43)	(9.00)	(7.35)
R^2	0.78	0.65	0.85
N	163	160	148

Notes: Cell entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from a linear model; standard errors are in parentheses. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; significance levels are based upon two-tailed hypothesis tests.

Supplementary Appendix: UK Parliamentary constituencies polled by Lord Ashcroft prior to the 2015 General Election

Constituency Name	Number of 'Ashcroft polls' conducted in seat
West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine	1
Airdrie and Shotts	1
Amber Valley	2
Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock	1
South Basildon and East Thurrock	1
Battersea	1
Bedford	1
Bermondsey and Old Southwark	1
Berwick-upon-Tweed	1
Berwickshire, Roxborough and Selkirk	1
Birmingham, Edgbaston	2
Birmingham, Yardley	1
Blackpool North and Cleveleys	2
Bolton West	2
Boston and Skegness	1
Bradford East	1
Brecon and Radnorshire	1
Brent Central	1
Brentford and Isleworth	1
Brighton, Kemptown	1
Brighton, Pavilion	2
Bristol North West	1
Bristol West	1
Broxtowe	2
Burnley	1
Bury North	1
Camborne and Redruth	2
Cambridge	2
North East Cambridgeshire	1
Cannock Chase	2
Cardiff Central	1
Cardiff North	2
Carlisle	1
Carmarthen West and Pembrokeshire South	1
Carshalton and Wallington	1
Castle Point	2
Cheadle	2

Cheltenham	1
City of Chester	2
Chippenham	2
Cleethorpes	1
Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill	1
Colchester	1
Colne Valley	2
Corby	1
North Cornwall	4
Crewe and Nantwich	1
Croydon Central	3
Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East	1
Derby North	1
North Devon	2
Dewsbury	1
Doncaster North	1
Mid Dorset and North Poole	2
Dover	1
Dudley North	2
Dudley South	1
Dumfries and Galloway	1
Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale	3
East Dunbartonshire	1
West Dunbartonshire	1
Dundee West	1
Ealing Central and Acton	1
Eastbourne	1
Eastleigh	2
Edinburgh North and Leith	1
Edinburgh South	1
Edinburgh South West	1
Elmet and Rothwell	1
Enfield North	1
Erewash	1
North East Fife	1
Finchley and Golders Green	1
Glasgow Central	1
Glasgow East	1
Glasgow North	1
Glasgow North East	1

Glasgow North West	1
Glasgow South	1
Glasgow South West	2
Gloucester	2
Gordon	1
Great Grimsby	3
Great Yarmouth	3
Halesowen and Rowley Regis	2
Halifax	1
Hampstead and Kilburn	2
Harlow	1
Harrogate and Knaresborough	1
Harrow East	2
Hastings and Rye	1
Hazel Grove	1
Hendon	2
High Peak	2
Hornsey and Wood Green	1
Hove	2
Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey	1
Ipswich	1
Keighley	1
Kingston and Surbiton	1
Kingswood	2
Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath	1
Lancaster and Fleetwood	2
Lewes	1
Lincoln	1
Loughborough	2
Manchester, Withington	1
Milton Keynes South	1
Morecambe and Lunesdale	3
Morley and Outwood	1
Motherwell and Wishaw	1
Newton Abbot	1
Northampton North	1
Norwich North	2
Norwich South	1
Nuneaton	2
Oxford West and Abingdon	2

Paisley and Renfrewshire South	2
Pendle	2
Peterborough	1
Plymouth, Moor View	1
Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport	1
Portsmouth South	1
Pudsey	3
Redcar	1
East Renfrewshire	3
South Ribble	1
Rochester and Strood	1
Ross, Skye and Lochaber	2
Rossendale and Darwen	1
Rother Valley	1
St Austell and Newquay	3
St Ives	3
Sheffield, Hallam	3
Sherwood	2
Solihull	2
North East Somerset	1
Somerton and Frome	2
Southampton, Itchen	3
Southport	1
Stevenage	1
Stockton South	3
Stourbridge	1
Stroud	1
Sutton and Cheam	2
South Swindon	3
Taunton Deane	1
Telford	1
South Thanet	4
Thornbury and Yate	1
Thurrock	3
Torbay	2
Truro and Falmouth	1
Vale of Glamorgan	1
Walsall North	1
Warrington South	1
Warwick and Leamington	1

North Warwickshire	2
Watford	3
Waveney	2
Weaver Vale	1
Wells	2
Wirral South	1
Wirral West	3
Wolverhampton South West	2
Worcester	2
Wyre Forest	1