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Article:

Exploring the campaign space of non-party activism in the 2017 and 2019 UK general elections

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A B S T R A C T

In recent years there has been an increase in election-focused activity undertaken by non-party organisations. This activism concerns issues such as political education, cross-party collaboration, voter registration, and voter advice. Using the 2017 and 2019 UK general elections as case studies, we take a strategic action field approach to analyse how this campaign space is developing. We demonstrate the existence of competing logics of activism associated with the fields of social movements, electioneering, and 'civic tech'. This leads to conflicts related to ethos, time, organisational hybridity, activism, funding and regulation, with such issues frequently shaped by the affordances offered by digital technology. Our findings contribute towards better understandings of how these actors operate in, and attempt to influence, the contemporary electoral landscape.

1. Introduction

Non-party organisations (NPOs) – such as trade-unions, lobbyists, professional bodies, charities, think-tanks, and interest groups - have long played a role in elections. However, since the early 2000s, research has identified the rise of 'ever more vocal, organized and individual actors who operate in the campaign environment independently of parties and candidates' (Farrell and Schmitt-Beck, 2008:13). Such political activity has evolved in the context of what Norris (2000) calls the 'postmodern election', which is characterised by two broad processes. Firstly, citizens have 'dealigned' from traditional voting patterns; parties must campaign harder to mobilise supporters and win over 'floating voters' (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). With falling party membership, low turnout, and weak trust in parties (Mair, 2013; Dalton and Weldon, 2005), NPOs offer alternative sources of mobilisation and political information with the potential to influence the outcome. The second process relates to media developments, most recently the impact of digital technology upon political participation, campaigning, organisation, and the news media (Magin et al., 2017; Karpf, 2016, Chadwick, 2017a). The affordances of digital technology lower costs and enable strategic innovation for new types of NPOs to inform and mobilise - or demobilise - potential voters (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2021; Lilleker and Vedel, 2013).

In this paper we analyse how emerging NPOs position themselves in

relation to electoral politics in the UK. This activism concerns political education, open political data access, cross-party collaboration, voter registration, voter advice and information, government transparency, electoral integrity, vote swapping and 'alternative' media as a source of political information (to counter perceived ideological bias of the mainstream). Our focus is not on 'legacy' organisations and their campaigns, but on emerging intermediaries, most of which have digital technology at the core of their operations. In the UK 2017 and 2019 snap General Elections, examples of this NPO activity included: voter advice applications (VAAs) and tactical voting websites with millions of users (Alexander, 2017; Hanretty, 2019); a growth in an online 'alt media' for those disillusioned with the mainstream media coverage (McDowell-Naylor et al., 2021); high profile voter registration campaigns, particularly those aimed at youth demographics (Watts, 2019; Sloam, 2017); and a heightened presence of 'outrider' organisations pushing their own partisan campaigns outside the control of any official party strategy (see Dennis, 2020; Dennis and Hall, 2020; Dommett and Temple, 2018).

The actual growth of activity in this area is hard to quantify. Many campaigns operate on tiny budgets meaning they do not have to register with the Electoral Commission. Compared to political parties, NPOs are not often at the centre of an election and so are overlooked in terms of the wider role they play. Research that has focused on such activism has tended to be 'movement-centric', taking a case-study approach to the highest profile organisations (see Rhodes, 2021, Karpf, 2016). Such

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work has contributed enormously to our understanding of the campaigning and organisational strategy of these actors. However, as Dommett et al. (2021) note, the new politics of the evolving 'digital ecosystem' centred around political parties is increasingly complex and interconnected (and frequently chaotic), with non-party elements having their potential unleashed by digital technology. Yet, we know little about their activity and therefore we argue that recent developments concerning election-focused activism warrants exploration of the political *space* in which these organisations operate. Our insights contribute as an alternative to the movement-centric approach; instead, we use Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) strategic action field (SAF) approach to conceptually map activist understandings, asking, what are the key characteristics of this activism space and what logics are informing its development?

We start by briefly discussing work on electorally-oriented NPOs before detailing the strategic action field approach. We then outline our methodology and introduce the context of our study. Our analysis demonstrates how digital technology plays a key role in the electoral activism space, that the space is what Fligstein and McAdam would call 'emergent', and, that it is emerging in the intersections of three proximate fields - the civic tech SAF, social movement SAF, and electioneering SAF. We go on to demonstrate that, crucially, the logics of these SAFs vary considerably. NPO election-focused activism is therefore rife with tensions that have the potential to cause problems for the consolidation of the space - we outline these in relation to ethos and time, organisational hybridity and activism and funding and regulation. These findings help us better understand how this type of activism, potentially such a vital intermediary in postmodern elections, may struggle to establish and legitimise itself in the electoral landscape.

2. Theoretical framework

Describing the contemporary electoral space in the UK, Dommett et al. (2021) place political parties at the centre of a digital ecosystem before identifying the primary external actors who feed into party activity: NPOs and campaigns; companies; local volunteers and activists; academics and researchers; and sister parties. Dommett et al. (2021) contend that the expanding use and functionality of digital technology increases the porosity of the boundaries between these actors and the relationships that parties can have with them. In this approach the emphasis is on the political party; other actors under consideration feed into campaign activity to improve the electoral outcome of the party. This focus on the party of course reflects the historic dominance of these organisations as electoral actors and comes with an extensive literature. However, campaigning is not exclusively related to parties or even directly to vote-seeking but spans multiple incentives and goals related to influencing the electoral process (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2008).

Research taking activist NPOs as the key unit of analysis tends to fall somewhere between political communication and social movement studies, whilst nowadays inevitably drawing on digital media analysis as well (see Karpf, 2019). The nature of this research has generally been 'movement-centric', emphasising particular campaigns such as Avaaz, MoveOn, 38Degrees, and The People's Assembly Against Austerity (examples include Rhodes, 2021; Chadwick, 2017a; Karpf, 2012; Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2008, and for discussions of this approach see Kolers, 2016:582–583; Walder, 2009; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012:31; Downey and Rohlinger, 2008; Beyers et al., 2008).

Such work has contributed to our understanding of NPO types, functions, strategies, and behaviour, and there is not the space here to summarise all these aspects. Instead, we draw attention to a key theme underpinning leading work in this area: the increased complexity and hybridity of these campaign environments, especially in relation to the growing presence of digital technology (Mathieu, 2021;; Fraussen and Halpin, 2018;; Mercea et al., 2016). Hybridity is a somewhat intuitive idea although hard to pin down in any definitive way. It refers to flux, in-betweenness, non-linearity, and intermingling, with an attempt to

avoid either/or thinking and replace it with 'not only, but also' thinking (Chadwick, 2017b; Kraidy, 2005). Organisations are no longer clear-cut types but chimaeras, drawing strategies from political parties, interest groups, and social movements, aided by digital technology (Karpf, 2019; van Stekelenburg et al., 2013; Chadwick, 2017a; della Porta and Diani, 2014). Accordingly, research on organisational behaviour has begun to look not just at what happens inside an organisation but consider more seriously the interactions *between* them, and the way these are sustained or shaped by wider logics (Chadwick, 2017b: 14), with logics defined as 'bundles of technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organisational forms' (Tunç, 2018: 149).

For this reason, whilst we take the individual characteristics, dynamics, and strategies of organisations seriously, they are not at the forefront of our analysis. Our study steps back to assess the wider logics that shape the geographies in which they operate. In sum, rather than taking a movement-centric approach and focusing on a particular organisation or campaign, in this paper we analyse the *space* that they are operating in (Mathieu, 2021). To do this we take a 'field' approach.

2.1. Field theory

A field refers to a particular *space* of activity, such as politics, journalism, art, or education. A field is said to exist when 'a set of analytic elements are aligned in such a way that it is parsimonious to describe their current state in terms of position vis-à-vis one another' (Martin, 2003:41–42). To analyse a field is to consider the 'social topography' (Bourdieu, 1985:723) actors are embedded in, navigate, and, crucially, help to construct, therefore emphasising issues of relationality between actors and context (Crossley and Diani, 2019; Bourdieu, 1992).

As Mathieu (2021) outlines, there have been numerous ways such spaces have been conceptualised, including 'sectors' (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), 'communities' (Staggenborg, 1998), 'habitats' (Katzenstein, 1998), and 'ecologies' (Treré, 2012). Whatever the term used, the general tendency of such analysis has been to explore established, coherent, and highly institutionalised fields (Martin, 2003: 33, 41), with less emphasis on emerging fields and the interaction between them (Fligstein McAdam, 2012: 49). As our research was sparked by observing the emergence and increased presence, vitality, and interaction of NPOs engaging in UK elections, we use Fligstein & McAdam's 'strategic action field' approach, which is highly suited to this particular context.

2.2. Strategic action fields

Fligstein & McAdam's theory of strategic action fields (SAFs) seeks to synthesise conceptual thinking from social movement studies and organisational theory. They argue that regardless of the actor being analysed - a social movement, business, government agency, etc. - at root we are interested in the same phenomenon: collective strategic action. We are looking at 'the efforts of collective actors to vie for strategic advantage in and through interaction with other groups in what can be seen as meso-level social orders' (Fligstein and MacAdam, 2011: 2). Strategic action itself is defined as 'the attempt by social actors to create and maintain stable social worlds by securing the cooperation of others' (Fligstein and MacAdam, 2011: 7). This distinction breaks from highly rationalistic or Marxist-inspired approaches that focus primarily on power, preference, or economic rationality, and instead utilises less zero-sum notions of empathy and *meaning-making* (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012:17-18; Jasper, 2004: 6).

SAFs are understood as nested and scalar; an office is a SAF inside a company which is in an SAF with its competitors. Within a SAF actors engage with other actors who share some common (although by no means settled, and often diffuse) understandings of the logics of the field. Furthermore, no field, even a highly institutionalised and longstanding one, is completely static. In relation to our research interest, we draw attention to three particular elements of the SAF framework: the social skills of actors, actor roles, and field emergence.

Social skills are defined as 'the ability to induce cooperation by appealing to and helping to create shared meanings and collective identities' (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012:46). The social skills possessed by actors, and their effectiveness and ability to wield them, is key to the SAF approach with such skills at a premium when fields are unorganised or developing. In a stable SAF skills will likely be put to use supporting a status quo and drawing from established, taken-for-granted frames of reference. However, in developing or unstable spaces such skills may need to be more 'entrepreneurial' in nature, linking groups and generating persuasive appeals to common identities and interests (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012:17). A SAF approach then requires understanding social skill in context, exploring not just what is being done, but to what purpose. In this way exploring social skills and their usage is a way to illuminate wider logics in a field, as such acts feed into attempts at meaning-making.

Actor roles are classified as incumbent, challenger, or governance unit. Incumbents exist in a privileged position, wield disproportionate influence, and usually have more access to resources. Their primary aim is the advantageous reproduction of the field (which is not necessarily the same as a slavish protection of the status quo). Challengers will be in (usually) smaller niches in the field. They often recognise this - and so have a somewhat shared understanding of the field as incumbents - but will seek to challenge the system. As Fligstein and McAdam (2012:12) note, this does not mean fields are in a constant case of open rebellion (although they can be); in most cases challengers conform to the prevailing order, but 'grudgingly'. Finally, a SAF may have a governance unit which seeks to enforce compliance with SAF rules, and therefore field reproduction. They should not be understood as the external state structure *per se* but will likely be an organisation that holds a relationship with the state, such as a trade association, and they therefore often straddle a field border. In our case study, this role is arguably conducted by the Electoral Commission; however, as we explain, this is not straightforward.

Field emergence, and general change in fields, is conceptualised as occurring in two interlinked ways. The first is because of the actions of internal actors. The second is that since actors in fields (especially dominant, but also challenger) tend to reproduce a somewhat rigid structure, change is prompted by an external crisis. Fligstein and McAdam (2012:85) see these views as complementary, noting that there is 'always a great deal of dynamism involved in holding an order together'.

For the present study, we draw attention to emerging fields, and the way that actors generate these and seek to stabilise them. New fields come about when two or more groups 'seek to occupy previously unorganised social space' (p.109). Group actions are orientated to each other, and, using their social skills, they will seek to develop order and subsequently generate a shared understanding of what is at stake in the field, what the 'rules' are, and what role is being played by the other actors in the field. This is all crucial in the 'initial settlement' (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012:88).

In the conclusion we contribute a critical reflection on elements of this approach, in particular the notion of settling unorganised space, as well as the incumbent/challenger typology.

3. Methodological approach

Recent work on electioneering has highlighted the need for appropriate methodology to make sense of its growing complexity (Dommett and Power, 2021; McDowell-Naylor, 2020; Karpf et al., 2015). Whilst we draw primarily from thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and forefront activists' own words, we complement this with detailed or 'thick' description (Ponterotto, 2016) informed by two sources. Firstly, we recorded diary notes and reflections at two networking events organised by one of our interviewed organisations. These took place in September 2019 and January 2020 and featured presentations from multiple different campaign groups (others were planned but disrupted by Covid). Secondly, we developed extensive familiarisation with

related website materials, social media activity, public WhatsApp groups, and mailing lists related to democracy campaigns. This was not holistic ethnographic data, but it was invaluable in giving us a robust understanding of who the key actors were, how things operated, interactions between campaigns, and subsequently an ability to better conceptualise the wider logics of the space.

The fast-moving and embryonic nature of this space meant it was difficult to know any sampling parameters in advance - therefore we started by scoping out just what organisations were active. We initially sampled NPOs we had seen campaigning online during the 2017 election. The sample was expanded by 'snowballing' and asking interviewees for suggestions of who we might speak to, as well as identifying relevant actors from attending events and observing online interactions. As the work developed and we got a feel for the field, we designed our sample to be purposely diverse. In total, 22 semi-structured interviews were carried out with representatives from 21 organisations and Table 1 provides a list and description of each organisation's primary activity. We received ethical approval from our universities and present all data here in anonymous form.

Whilst our approach generated key insights into the logics shaping the SAF and how it is developing, we cannot argue we have fully representative data in the study. Most importantly, we had limited access to organisations on the Right of the political spectrum, something we return to when suggesting future research.

3.1. Case study

Despite the increasing usage of data, digital tools, and social media, the 2015 General Election has been described as far from an internet election (Jackson and Thorsen, 2015). In contrast, following in the wake of Jeremy Corbyn's successful Labour leadership campaign and the 2016 EU referendum, by 2017 the election environment was more conducive than ever before to NPOs getting involved, bolstered by digital technology (Alexander, 2017, Sloam, 2017, Dommett and Temple, 2018). Many of the progressive Left connections were built from the rubble of the loosely-networked Remain campaign which had developed an online-focused and tech-heavy approach to campaigning that continued into 2017. As 2019 was another snap election called only two years later, the electoral cycle was unusually compressed, meaning that the momentum developed in 2017 was still around. This justified a focus on both election events for our study.

Notably, we wondered if Corbyn might play a key role in our discussions with activists, as he had become something of a 'star figure' for the more radical side of the Labour Party and amongst younger voters (Page, 2019). However, whilst he certainly motivated some interviewees, he was not central enough in our data to draw out a thematic focus.

Table 1
List of interviewed organisations and their primary campaign focus.

#	Focus of organisation		
1	Voter advice app and campaign	12	Cross-party collaboration
2	Political literacy	13	Democratic infrastructure
3	Youth political literacy	14	Digital campaigning tools
4	Online democracy tools	15	Civil rights campaign group
5	New media - digital newspaper focusing on progressive politics	16	Digital politics consultancy
6	New media - blog focusing on progressive politics	17	Fact-checking and public education
7	Voter advice and campaign	18	Political literacy and participation
8	Democracy and representation activism	19	Democratic infrastructure and data
9	Progressive politics campaign organisation	20	Vote swapping and political participation
10	Media information campaign	21	Democratic infrastructure
11	Political technology and civil society		

4. Conceptualising an emerging field

As this space has not been conceptually mapped before, in this first analytical section we outline three defining features of the SAF: 1) digital technology plays a major role in how it operates, 2) it can be understood as emergent in nature, and 3) its emergent position is within the intersections of three established spaces - the electoral SAF, social movement SAF, and civic tech SAF.

We start by noting that activists saw their SAF as small:

"It's not very big…you know, many people know each other across the campaigning space. They move on from one organisation. They go to another. They bring certain people with them. People are moving around similar roles across different organisations, so it's not a very massive network to begin with." (14)

As this quote eludes, the small space is also dynamic and multi-layered, or, as another activist put it, 'noisy' and 'loud' (19). To further illustrate this, we describe the dynamics we witnessed when exploring the field; a think-tank works with a progressive digital consultancy agency who are themselves part of a co-operative network. The agency draws upon the network for skills they do not have in-house, such as building video material. The agency also manages the membership system of a different think-tank which is loosely affiliated with multiple campaigns promoting tactical voting. This tactical voting network overlaps with *another* network that campaigns more broadly to scrap the first-past-the-post electoral system. Both networks support initiatives to boost voter turnout. Much of this organising occurs in private Facebook groups or messages, but there are also numerous mailing lists and public WhatsApp groups in which general discussions on these issues take place, and a shared Google Doc that acts as a directory for organisations.

Most of this activity is enabled by digital technology. All organisations were heavy users of digital technology to organise and campaign, whether in mundane ways (emails, spreadsheets, etc.) or more innovative ways (designing apps, video games). Not all had online campaigning as their central priority - some organised events in schools for instance - however, digital technology suffuses the space. Indeed, from these campaigns and organisations there has sprung up a plethora of websites, social media accounts, email lists, apps, blogs, Facebook groups, crowd-sourced documents, WhatsApp groups, and databases. Some initiatives spin-out into new organisations or campaigns but many fade away, leaving a cluttered digital landscape of broken links, lapsed websites, out-of-date voter advice applications, and abandoned Twitter and Facebook feeds.[1] Outside of election time it can be difficult to tell if a campaign or organisation remains active; the same campaign may have gone quiet on Facebook or its own webpage, but turns out to still be active on Twitter or 'on the ground'.

This description is not relevant for every organisation we spoke to; some ran campaigns essentially on their own, happy as small teams that saw no need to network further. In one case the 'organisation' was, for the majority of the time, just one individual who would reach out for support as and when it was needed. The meshing of the field is therefore not uniform. For even digital-heavy campaigns there were occasional moments when members from multiple organisations might physically work together in the same room - general elections were of course key crunch points, but to a lesser extent also local elections, by-elections, or high-profile political events.

The space then is small yet complex, in a state of flux and underpinned by the affordances of digital technology. Our interviewees clearly saw it in this light as they would frequently and strongly emphasise the need to 'build a community' to settle the space. Many we spoke to were acutely aware the space had this uneven, transient, and fluctuating nature, and were seeking to try and solidify it. Consequently,

community building featured in many interviews as being a crucial activity. Here we provide illustrative examples of what was raised explicitly or implicitly across many of our conversations:

"…a lot of what we've been doing the past year has kind of been community building and trying to get that community function and building it as a kind of, as a movement." (14)
"I mean I always thought that it was the kind of project that could be something that people would, other developers, we could build a community of developers around, and perhaps make it quite a lot better through doing that" (20)
"…we intentionally create spaces for us [civil society] to come together to talk about what's going on" (13)
"You know, what I am trying to do primarily is build a sort of research and practice community that creates knowledge as a community." (11)

This was also a key topic of debate at the events we attended - these were structured around making connections and trying to corral what community existed to communicate better, especially to avoid duplication. We find it constructive to interpret this community building as the pursuit of a 'meaning making project', as Fligstein and McAdam (2012: 47-49, 53-54) describe it, needed to reproduce and stabilise the emergent space.

The final characteristic is that the emergence of the field is occurring in the interstices of three proximate fields: the social movement SAF, the 'civic tech' SAF, and the electoral SAF. It was beyond the scope of this project to also conduct in-depth research into these SAFs - each of course has its own detailed research history. Indeed, we would stress that field analysis greatly increases in complexity when interest lies in emergence and interrelation between SAFs. However, drawing from our interviews and the literature, we sketch summary characteristics of these proximate fields:

● *Social movement SAF*: movement building; seeks lasting and far-reaching change; progressive; community focused; emotive; inspired by democratic values; emphasises collaboration, voice, and empowerment (Snow et al., 2019; della Porta and Diani, 2014; van Stekelenburg et al., 2013).
● *Civic tech SAF:* seeks to crack a challenge ('hackathons'); emphasises problem-solving; values open-source approaches, transparency, speed, and crowdsourcing; inspired by behaviourist, rational, and sometimes libertarian/anarchic ideals; values code and quantitative data; often technocratic (Gibson, 2020; Postill, 2018).
● *Electoral SAF*: driven by the aim to win votes for preferred party(ies); values an informed and active citizenry; seeks to boost registration and turnout; emphasises tactical voting and innovation in campaigning; frequently tribal and ideological (Fisher et al., 2018; Arzheimer et al., 2017).

Our analysis now turns to demonstrating how these proximate fields feed differing logics into the emerging election-focused SAF. We focus on three thematic areas drawn primarily from our interview data: ethos and time; organisational hybridity and activism; and funding and regulation. Throughout, we elaborate on the role that digital technology frequently plays in exacerbating these logics.

5. Differing logics

5.1. Ethos and time

The civic tech and social movement SAFs hold what can be described as a 'non-zero-sum' ethos towards strategic action, with key ideals being resource sharing, collaboration, transparency, and openness. This is especially the case when the issue at hand relates to the notion of an informed *citizen* in a democratic context. In contrast, in the electoral SAF whilst the democratic citizen still matters to these activists - in terms of

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[1] The site civictech.guide/graveyard collects demised examples of campaigns.

knowledge, access to information, voter registration, and turnout - the unavoidable difference is that the citizen is now fundamentally a *voter*. As an interviewee effectively summarised:

"…the right to vote, you know, the nonpartisan civic right to vote, is inseparable from the possibility of using it in a partisan way." (20)

The shared meanings and rules in the electoral arena are therefore primarily zero-sum, heightened by the logic of the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system. One organisation noted this issue clearly; they were seeking to make digital campaign tools and we asked about whether they would be made open for all potential parties to use:

"…everything we've done so far has been, like, open source so it's all on an open GitHub. It's all on open Google Docs and that's something we're really open about. So, there's nothing that would stop another party using it. And again, that's a contradiction that we're probably going to have to work out how to resolve. Because at the moment we're, we're quite small, so nobody really knows about us. So, we're kind of quite relaxed, but I imagine if we got bigger or if we did something, we'd have to think much more formally about that." (14)

This contradiction came about as activists established themselves as progressive but faced concerns about the use of their open-source tools by the political Right for an electoral advantage. This is a difficult tension to navigate long-term. Which set of values take priority? Is it possible (normatively and practically) to uphold different values when fighting an election? Whilst attending events we noted more than one activist describing the need to do a lot of 'soul-searching' before allowing their digital tool to be used by just anyone. This tension helps explain why so many activists in this field - evidenced by our conversations but also WhatsApp groups and social media narratives - seek electoral reform to replace the UK's electoral system with a form of proportional representation. In theory, this offers a way to reduce the zero-sum element of voting and make the values of the proximate fields better align within the democracy activism space.[2]

However, whilst they share a more non-zero-sum ethos, the social movement and civic tech SAFs are not without conflict. A key sticking point was summarised by one interviewee:

"Like, one tool to rule them all that comes out quite a lot from companies developing tools for democracy, for democratic purposes. It's kind of like the idea that this one tool will save democracy. Like you kind of get that impression sometimes, when the reality is a lot more complex." (13)

Indeed, at an event, an activist watching the presentations with us from the back of the room shared the same idea with us, lamenting that, 'People love developing beautiful widgets rather than worrying about reach.'

This emphasis on innovation and fixes is often found in civic tech circles, highlighted by the idea that a 'hackathon' (a short, sometimes competitive, sometimes collaborative, event where coders either create a new piece of tech, or debug and fix an existing one) can be turned to a democratic issue. At its most technocratic, the civic tech SAF conceptualises voters and citizens as rational agents, or as predictable actors in a behaviourist vein, who, with just the right technological intervention, can be 'nudged' to consume the 'correct' information and vote 'smarter'. This does not align especially well with tribal, emotional, psychosocial, or political identity models found in social movement approaches and electoral campaigning.

This blunt version of a civic tech approach was not the only one we witnessed. Many we spoke to were aware of the limitations and complexities of digital technology in this space. Furthermore, there were plenty of discussions where digital innovations and automated processes

were used in highly efficient ways to support the work the organisation was doing - for instance, fact checking processes - and conceptualised as just one tool and strategy to help strengthen democracy, not *the key* to fixing it.

Nonetheless, if this 'singular fix' ethos was negotiated there is a second difference concerning logics of *time*. The following quote is presented in full to outline this tension in the interviewee's own words:

"… the digital sort of development world, engineering world, has quite a different sort of way of working in sort of experimental, proto-typey build it, ship it, quick, quick, make mistakes as you go. And that was quite a different world for us…I think one tension that we've probably had is just, and this is just another example, is between thinking about, the difficulty in thinking about the long-term and telling a story about where we'll be in five to ten years which is sort of the antithesis of a developer mindset, which is, 'Well, I … all I can do is tell you where I'll be in two weeks.' But if you're a funder or if you're trying to give a talk to politicians or if you're trying to sell a vision, but it's necessary to raise the money then you need to be able to talk in a sort of three to five, ten-year timeframes." (19)

The civic tech SAF is somewhat fragmentary, transient, and works in quick bursts, whereas social movements are often seeking to build momentum for long-term change. Here, the interviewee directly identifies the way these two very different attitudes can stymie the ability to 'tell a story' (i.e., generate shared meanings and frames of reference) for both political influence and funding success. This quote also touches upon the 'experimental' mindset of the civic tech SAF, a risky attitude unlikely to gain traction in an electoral campaign where mistakes could damage chances of winning.

If social movement time is somewhat slow, and civic tech is quick and scattergun, the electoral arena is highly compressed. This is heightened in our analysis as 2017 and 2019 were snap elections. However, an interviewee from an organisation which was active in 2015 still noted this general issue:

"I mean, frankly, everything with [our campaign] is always, each of the three elections, it's always been a right scramble to get things going." (20)

This 'scramble' was noted by a number of those we spoke to. For those organisations where elections were central, it was very difficult to manage time. Many organisers, for whom their campaign was not their day job, spoke about taking all their annual leave to work on their projects. The election was then extremely pressurised. This broad electoral cycle has powerful - and hard to manage - rhythms that make continual and long-term engagement difficult (see Karpf, 2020). As one interview put it:

"…it's really important to keep a community of people going if they've got those skills and trying to understand how, *outside of election time,* those people can continue to work together. (14, our emphasis)

5.2. Organisational hybridity & activism

Chadwick's (2007) notion of hybridity outlines how the internet and digital technology allows for hybrid forms of organisation and campaigning to develop; these can draw from (or switch between) repertoires from across different types of actors such as social movements, parties, interest groups, etc. It is not necessarily a weakness for a field to contain a degree of hybridity when it comes to the organisations that constitute it; few, if any, fields or organisations are not hybridised in contemporary societies. However, being influenced by organisational approaches from *three* fields has led to a considerable array of organisational approaches in the electorally-orientated SAF, making the formation of a cohesive field very difficult. This also consistently defied our attempts to construct any kind of comprehensive or insightful typology

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[2] Although there is a pragmatic and tactical angle at play as well, as FPTP in the UK is argued to split the progressive vote.

of organisations we spoke to. This can be contrasted to political parties in the electoral SAF, especially in the UK. Even allowing for single-issue parties, digital developments, and debates over party representativeness, the party-centred ecosystem of the electoral SAF still demonstrates relative homogeneity and stability in terms of organisational structures.

In contrast, the organisations in the election-focused SAF are amorphous, diverse, and open to rapid change. We found a key allusion to this made by our interviewees: a struggle to *find the language* to describe not just other organisations in the space, but quite frequently *their own organisation*, which they might have even set-up. They often mixed and matched terminology from social movements with civic tech. This was common to even those more long-standing in the field:

> "I'm never quite sure what the definition is, you know? So it's a, it's a small platform, but it is, but it is a platform, I think." / "…we both worked full-time on the project in like January 2016 as part of a sort of social tech incubator thing…I think it is now more of a sort of data infrastructure thing." (20)
> "But really, like, I think we're a bit too young to really be anything yet." (11)
> "And, you know, yeah, [the organisation] is a, I sometimes think of it as a, a studio, you know, for trying to innovate useful interventions around democracy, particularly using digital technology, but also, you know, also in community, in art, in culture." (21)
> "So, it [the organisation] kind of fits in all these different spaces. There's lot of little bits of overlap." (12)
> "I don't - not to be this person - but I don't really know of another organisation that does exactly what we do. And that's because we're so multi-disciplinary." (16)
> "So, we do quite a lot of the different chunks of things that maybe one organisation would just have as a core function…we do a little bit of think tankery, but we also run around and do projects and, like, do some experimentation and stuff, and … I think maybe that. I think it's just like this mix of stuff that we're doing…it's honestly becoming really messy though". (13)

This presents a barrier to the development of shared frames of reference. Fligstein and McAdam talk frequently of the importance of a shared understanding of the 'rules of the game' and 'meaning making' in a SAF. Indeed, it was picked up by one interviewee explicitly:

> "You know, first things I discovered, no one talks to each other or has any idea what anyone else is doing. There's very little unified vocabulary." (11).

This lack of a clear or unified vocabulary comes from emerging in the interstices of other fields and, we argue, weakens the ability to generate shared meaning. Communication, reaching out, linking up, are all made more difficult when each organisation is so substantially different to the last. Actors must spend considerable resources understanding other organisations and what they do:

> "…when you're being a small start-up and you're trying to build relationships with people, it's hard to, it's hard to find time to work out how to collaborate with people who are close to you but doing different things". (8)

Across the different activities such organisations might pursue - campaigning, networking, mobilising, etc - there is no obvious blueprint for how an organisation might structure them. Again, we might return to our contrast with the SAF of political parties. This is a relative point and not to suggest parties are simple - far from it. However, in the decisions they make about key organisational issues such as membership or funding models, parties generally pick from a much narrower set of options than NPOs. This is shaped by the shared fundamental aim of political parties - accrue votes and gain office. For NPOs in the electorally-orientated SAF, their aims circle around everything related to the electoral process *except* gaining office themselves (Schmitt-Beck and Farrell, 2008). In this respect, parties *know where they stand* in

relation to each other and the field they're in. This felt a much more difficult thing to assess in the NPO SAF.

We can further see the varying influences of hybridity (and time and ethos) when it comes to *activism*. Fligstein and McAdam (2012) emphasise the importance of social skills and the field clearly appealed to highly skilled people. However, often the social skills presented by people - or described in others - were highly specific types. For instance, we tended to interview the campaigners / activists (the longer-term movement makers) who would describe to us the skills of civic technologists who worked with them (the short-term 'proto-typers'). Aside from the occasional self-taught coder, rarely would these skill sets appear in the same person.

This on its own is not necessarily a problem (we would expect few people to have such versatile and wide skillsets) if these resources were continuously and reliably available. However, the dynamics from the proximate SAFs discussed so far continually undermine such a set-up. The social movement, volunteering, and political party literatures have all identified the rise of civic actors in these fields who - whilst committed to normative causes - are less connected to specific organisations and understand participation through more personal, rather than collective, terms (Bennett, 2012). Regarding political parties, Scarrow (2014) uses the term 'multi-speed membership', an organisational approach that allows for a far wider array of participation options, appealing to those who are 'doers' and not so much 'joiners'.

Across the SAF a sizable contingent of activists moved in and out of roles and across campaigns, undertaking what can be called 'micro-actions' or 'microvolunteering': niche, specific, and small-scale contributions (Ilten, 2015). As one interviewee explained for their organisation, which was primarily online and organised in a private Facebook group, people 'drop in and out' and 'might write one article, they might stay for longer', adding that 'obviously some are more active than others' (18). Another described similar dynamics even with physical meet-ups:

> "So, there was a room somewhere in Central London where there was 10–15 of us sort of floating in and out and doing things and being in touch with people on the ground in various marginal constituencies and also reaching out to the media and to lots of voters for tactical voting." (9)

Few organisations had membership structures to provide a stable pool to draw upon and even core activists in some organisations would also be working across multiple projects elsewhere, with such behaviour greatly facilitated by digital technology and necessary due to funding dynamics (we return to these issues below). Such transient dynamics compound the difficulties faced by activists in generating a clear meaning-making project for the SAF.

Finally, emphasis on digital technology is unsurprisingly core to the civic tech SAF, and activists from this space have high levels of digital literacy. In comparison, emphasis and literacy was mixed amongst activists more closely aligned with the other spaces. Either way however, a notable concern regarding digital technology and campaigning relates to *impact*. As an illustrative example, one interviewee noted that in the run up to the 2017 General Election their website had 3.5 million hits. However, they went on to add:

> "It sounds impressive, right? But you never really know. My frustration has always been you don't really know to what extent people are just clicking on the things, like here in Facebook and Google, and how much they actually need that information. What would happen if that information didn't exist?" (19)

It was obvious from our conversations and observations that impact, and the inability to really measure it in a tangible or quantifiable way, was a major frustration. For many we spoke to, especially those who were primarily online, counting website hits was the only real metric available to them. Without user survey data it is extremely difficult to get any kind of sense of two very important issues: who is using the data

and for what purpose? Tech-centric and primarily online organisations, who do not have members or run events 'on the ground', struggled with capturing any effect they might ultimately be having.

5.3. Funding & regulation

A perennial issue for civil society organisations is funding and this was acute for most organisations we spoke to, as one summarised:

> "We're never secure for more than six months ahead, and we always need to find some additional money to continue to operate at the level that we're at. And that's the same for many organisations who are in this kind of sphere." (9)

The funding model chosen by an organisation is a highly normative decision since having fee-paying members requires different considerations than selling services or seeking grants from funders (Nevile, 2010). Our interviewees drew attention to these general issues and also placed them specifically in the context of their election-focused activism; it was quite clear that the way that this activism SAF overlaps with partisan politics posed a difficulty. This worked in a couple of ways. An organisation with political, yet not necessarily partisan, aims (such as cross-party collaboration) cannot register as a charity (12, 19). And, despite their best efforts, voter literacy organisations felt they were perceived as too close to partisan politics, which limited funding opportunities:

> "This space, I mean the democratic engagement space, is incredibly underfunded. There are very few grants and hardly any support specifically around this topic, and even more specifically around the subject of political literacy. It can be seen as controversial and there are a lot more easier things to fund." (3)
>
> "Because we're not party political or issue political i.e. taking a stance on the referendum, we don't tend to attract a lot of donations in the same way that those kind of causes do…it can be difficult as a party neutral, politically neutral organisation to attract that funding…when you're kind of asking people for donations, like if you're a man in the street and you're like,"well why should I donate to you? You're not advocating for the view I want," it can be difficult to attract just like everyday funders, never mind the big ones, I would say.'" (19)

Many organisations were legally set-up as social enterprises or non-for-profit community interest companies (CICs). Decisions to officially register in this way were often prompted by the need to meet the criteria of a grant. Generally, grants were scarce, although Facebook and Google were cited as funders for organisations which had more of a technology angle. In some cases, funding came from the pocket of the activist or was almost non-existent:

> "I'm still spending a fortune on servers but I'm subsidising those by doing other bits of consultancy work here and there because the business model basically doesn't work…finding business models for democracy and civic participation is tough." (8)
>
> "…during a year where there wasn't an election, so, we had literally like £5 going through the books." (18)

As the second quote notes, funding issues are compounded by the waning general interest in citizen literacy during lulls in the electoral cycle. Even being successful in grant capture did not guarantee financial security. The following quote highlights the complexity of providing and generating data related to elections:

> "… we were sort of funded by philanthropic foundations to prove the value of a thing. We've proved the value of a thing. The philanthropic foundations are now leaving because they can't provide this forever and they recognise that it must be the state or some sort of public body that has access to taxpayers' funding only that will have a sort of sustainable long-term capacity to do this." (19)

Here the activist raises an interesting point in relation to electoral data such as the location of polling stations or the details of candidates; this information was argued to be the responsibility of the state. Or, if not the state directly, then the suggested provider was the Electoral Commission. This was arguably the actor in this SAF who most resembles Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) 'governance unit', an actor that seeks to enforce compliance with SAF rules, and therefore field reproduction. Interviewees frequently suggested that, when it came to informing citizens about issues such as voter registration, candidate profiles, locations of polling stations, historical results etc., this was ultimately the role of the state, not campaigners. Yet it might be noted that some of the innovative digital data collection methods pursued by these organisations, especially volunteer crowdsourcing, are arguably less likely to be engaged with by citizens if run by the state.

A related issue concerns just how to conceptualise the governance unit in this space. Although the powers of the Electoral Commission have recently been critiqued for not having 'teeth', and not keeping up with developments in digital campaigning (Dommett and Power, 2020), UK elections can still be considered highly regulated affairs with tight spending limits. In contrast, in the wider social movement SAF the governance unit is less clear. The Charity Commission and the Office of the Regulator of Community Interest Companies determine the legal status of organisations and whether they can register as charities, community interest companies, social enterprises etc., however, they do not regulate the parameters of spending and campaign strategy in the same way the Electoral Commission does. When it comes to civic tech, any notion of a governance unit is even more diffuse.

This means a full range of regulatory logics - from highly institutionalised and formal through to entirely informal - feeds into the SAF. Inexperienced organisations are likely to struggle to comprehend the complex regulation framework upheld by the Electoral Commission and lack the resources to navigate it. Indeed, following the 2017 and 2019 elections the Commission conducted a number of investigations into non-party campaigners, in some cases resulting in fines.[3] Whilst recognising the importance of restricting the influence of money in electoral campaigning, one interviewee went on to describe the rules as 'impenetrable', fearing a resulting 'arms race' of powers being given to the Commission. They added:

> "And if you are a new entity coming into politics and you don't have that kind of expertise and you don't have the money to pay a lawyer to check all these things for you, you're going to end up deciding against it because of the risks associated to the rules set by the Electoral Commission and the fines you might incur if you do something wrong that you don't understand.
>
> And when politics ends up being a legal game more than anything else, then I think we've done something very wrong. We're completely missing the point of what democracy is supposed to be." (9)

6. Discussion and conclusions

Drawing on new empirical material collected from the 2017 and 2019 UK General Elections, this research advances our understanding of the complex developments presented by the increased presence of NPOs promoting electoral engagement. Utilising an innovative framework - the strategic action field approach - we complement, and expand upon, previous studies that have been movement-centric in nature. By triangulating digital and event analysis with interview material from multiple organisations we argue that deep ambivalences shape this strategic action field due to its development in the interstices of three existing fields - social movement, civic tech, and the electoral. We interpret

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[3] See electoralcommission.org.uk/who-we-are-and-what-we-do/our-enforcement-work/investigations last accessed 14/10/2022.

interviewee's emphasis on community building as the need to generate shared-meaning in the field, but demonstrate that such attempts to settle a coherent and stable space of NPO electoral activism will face difficulties when it comes to generating these rules of the game and reference points, as they so frequently pull in different directions and are informed by very different logics. Many of these logics are shaped, or at least exacerbated by, the heavy presence of digital technology.

This conclusion begs two questions. Firstly, does this activity warrant being considered as a strategic action field at all? We suggest it does. Despite the tensions, this SAF is different to each of those it draws from and is linked by a recognisable intention of engaging with electoral activity. Secondly, is the field too dysfunctional to settle? This is difficult to assess - the outlined tensions certainly run deep and make long-term planning, and meaning-making, difficult. It is easy to imagine the field stuck in an embryonic form, with the feel of disparate 'pop-up' campaigns run by 'start up' organisations unable to consolidate long term.[4]

One possible response to this is to take ownership of this 'dysfunction' and instead cast it as a frame of reference. Democracy is an essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1956) and so explicitly characterising electoral engagement as one of enormous organisational and normative diversity could in fact act as a key part of the meaning-making project. However, this comes with something of a paradox. A frame that emphasises this hybridity still remains a difficult one upon which to pursue long-term community-building, stability, and institutionalisation. It is possible to envisage the scenario that the more settled and established the SAF is, the *less* it itself embodies the pluralistic norms it values. There is a hard choice here for activists to navigate.

6.1. Methodological reflection

The SAF framework proved highly useful in navigating a complex area. As noted however, it brings challenges when the space is embryonic and fed into by other more established SAFs, something we would argue is surely the case for *all* emergent fields. More specifically, we wish to provoke reflection in this area in two ways.

Firstly, in this case study we found Fligstein and McAdam's terminology of incumbent and challenger actors difficult to operationalize. In our reading of their approach there is an unacknowledged expectation underpinning these labels: that strategic behaviour will initially seek an advantage over others. Fligstein and McAdam certainly accept a field can be shaped by strategic cooperative action, yet still conceptualise other actors in the field as *opposition* or *challengers*, which presupposes an underlying combative worldview. Their more detailed proposition on whether actors in SAFs pursue hierarchical dominance or cooperative coalition building rests on resource distribution; a more unequal allocation of resources will lead to a more hierarchical field (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 89). Therefore, they implicitly posit the collaborative approach as a *fallback scenario*, developing from a stalemate when there is no clear way an organisation can seek an edge because there are no obvious resource advantages or strategies open to achieving a dominant incumbency. The collaborative approach is therefore presented as coming about via a rational (but unwished for) compromise, *not* as a proactive normative decision. However, the normative viewpoint of the SAF studied here, as embryonic, incoherent and problematic as it is, and as buffered as it is by competing logics, still retained a sense of democratic pluralism. There was no real sense of competition amongst organisations, perhaps because digital technology and social media offer such reductions in resource costs, but also likely because values skewed so progressive in the space. Potentially then, in an emergent space, the presence of such pluralistic normative values can upset the challenger/incumbent typology. There is a question whether these challenger/incumbent roles develop and come into focus over time. Tracking such developments would likely be a fruitful avenue of further research.

Secondly, we offer a note of caution regarding the terminology of emergent fields. Fligstein and McAdam (2012:87) acknowledge, but do not address in detail, the notion that fields develop 'in the interstices of existing fields'. For our study we put this notion central and have demonstrated how an embryonic field emerges from a bricolage of influences drawn from proximate, established fields. If we're not careful the language and notions of 'unorganised social space' and 'initial settlement' can bring to mind empty territory upon which to build afresh. But of course, all actors and their social skills are *already embedded* in an existing context and so in many ways are (re)constructing and stabilising a reoriented set of relations, not setting up camp on terra incognita. And, indeed, it is the 'baggage' of proximate fields that we emphasise here as having considerable influence over the way a field emerges.

6.2. Future research

Our case study featured two snap elections; it remains to be seen how NPOs will act should the UK return to a more predictable electoral cycle. As noted, tracking the development of this space over time will therefore offer further insights into the influence of context on field emergence. And, as always, comparative analysis with NPO election-focused activism in other contexts is paramount, whether in other countries, or at other scales, for instance for local elections. We would expect to see quite different dynamics under alternative electoral systems and legal contexts (especially in relation to funding and regulation).

Thinking further about the organisation of SAF spaces, it would be of interest to explore in more detail how the dynamics outlined here manifest materially. We found that the heightened use of digital technology gave the impression of an online campaign space frequently decoupled from physical space, aside from the more obvious (although sporadic) meet-ups. Of course, this obscures the constant interplay between material and digital geographies - consideration of which is a ripe topic for further analysis.

Finally, we only accessed organisations on the progressive and centre Left and so work on the political Right is required.[5] It is also clear that the NPOs we spoke to ultimately sought through their activism to strengthen democracy. There is plenty of evidence that NPOs seeking to *undermine* democracy and the legitimacy of elections are also flourishing with the affordances of digital technology (Garnett and James, 2020). Such actors possibly are expected to have a strategic advantage as they are unlikely to be held back by the 'soul searching' aspect when it comes to juggling any competing logics, and lack transparency in terms of funding and potential 'dark money'. Such behaviour will make them far less accessible to researchers. Future research on this type of campaigning will be crucial, but potentially very difficult indeed.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Luke Temple: Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Funding acquisition. **Ana I. Langer:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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[4] A participant at one of networking events suggested this language to us.

[5] We did have a positive response from the one right-leaning NPO we identified, but unfortunately ran out of time to conduct the interview.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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