This is a repository copy of *A 'Climate Election'?:The Environment and the Greens in the 2019 UK General Election*.

Article:

A 'Climate Election'? The Environment and the Greens in the 2019 UK General Election

Neil Carter* and Mitya Pearson**

* University of York

**University of Cambridge

Corresponding author: Neil Carter: Neil.Carter@york.ac.uk

Introduction

In the UK general election of 12 December 2019 the environment and climate change gained much greater prominence compared to previous elections, yet ultimately they were of marginal importance during the campaign and exerted limited impact on voting behaviour. The Green Party performed slightly better than in 2017, but apart from the re-election of Caroline Lucas as its sole MP, it was a very long way from winning another seat.

A Climate Election?

A series of high-profile events during the months leading up to the official launch of the election campaign in early November, including the Extinction Rebellion protests and the school climate strikes, had contributed to increased public concern about climate change. Consequently, there was considerable media discussion about whether this election would be the first in which the environment generally, and climate change specifically, would play a major role and perhaps shape the final result. By examining three areas - issue salience, prominence and politicisation - it becomes clear that environmental issues were a more significant part of the campaign than in any previous UK general election, although some of the initial hype was overblown.

The issue salience of climate change rose sharply in the UK during 2019, with the result that the election took place in the context of record levels of concern about the environment. Throughout the campaign YouGov tracker polls showed that at least 25% of the public identified the environment as one of the top three issues facing the country (albeit a long way behind Brexit and health policy). This higher issue salience – perhaps alongside growing recognition among all parties of the urgency of the climate crisis – resulted in an extraordinary transformation in the parties' policy offers and positioning; the two main political parties in Britain had never taken such a radical approach to climate change at any previous general election.

This development was evident in the parties' commitments to deliver 'net zero' emissions, with ambitious targets included in most of the manifestos. The Conservatives stuck with their existing 2050 target, set by Theresa May, which matched the recommendation of the independent Committee on Climate Change, but the opposition parties were even more ambitious: the Liberal Democrats promised net zero carbon emissions by 2045, with the bulk achieved in the next decade; the Scottish National Party (SNP) said 2040; Labour promised the 'substantial majority of our emissions reductions by 2030'; while the Greens trumped everyone with an (almost certainly unachievable) 2030 target date. All the manifestos recognized that the state needs to play an active role in planning the low-carbon transition, with a plethora of proposals for new laws, ministries and committees, and innovative regulations ensuring local authorities and businesses embrace low-carbon strategies.

To give substance to these far-reaching plans for a low-carbon transition, all the main opposition parties proposed some version of a 'Green Industrial Revolution' - a fundamental transformation of industry, energy, transport, agriculture and buildings. Although the 'Green New Deal' presented by Labour and the Greens represented the most radical programme, there was considerable overlap among several parties' policy proposals, such as the promise of major infrastructure investment in household energy efficiency, renewable energy and transport. There was also extensive discussion of the need for a 'just transition'. By contrast, the Conservative manifesto was, in general, relatively vague on its policy commitments and the environment was no exception.

Tree-planting was a surprising source of party competition: the Conservatives pledged to plant 30 million trees annually; the Liberal Democrats and SNP doubled this to 60 million per year; and the Greens promised 70 million a year. Having made no specific commitment in the manifesto, Labour swiftly corrected this with an extraordinary promise to plant 2 billion trees by 2040, which represented 100 million a year, or three trees planted every second. The strength and depth of Labour's overall programme led Friends of the Earth to cause a stir in the campaign by putting Labour, ahead of the Greens, at the top of their climate and nature manifesto league table.

Despite the initial noise about the environment and climate change, and their prominence in the party manifestos, they did not become defining themes of the media narrative or the subject of major party disputes within the campaign. The first ever party leaders' debate on the climate on Channel 4 descended into farce as Boris Johnson declined to attend. Environment Secretary Michael Gove arrived at the television studio demanding to take his place, but this was refused with the Prime Minister's place taken by a melting ice sculpture.

The contrasting approaches indicate that the opposition parties did try to promote debate about climate change during the campaign. An analysis of Twitter data from the main party and leader accounts (between 18 November and 11 December inclusive) covering original tweets (not retweets) show that the environment was the second most popular theme for tweets for Labour (12%), the Liberal Democrats (10%) and Plaid Cymru (12%), and by far the most popular for Green Party (46%) tweets, suggesting that all these parties were trying hard to compete with the Conservatives on this issue. However, the Conservatives ran a disciplined campaign focused on Brexit and spending commitments for the NHS, schools and police; whereas almost half of Conservative tweets concerned Brexit, just 2% were about the environment (Deacon et al. 2019).

The Johnson mantra 'Get Brexit Done' helped ensure that Brexit dominated mainstream media coverage. During the five-week campaign, the environment received only 3% of total media coverage (4% of television and 2% of press coverage), a figure that hardly fluctuated during the campaign, making it only the tenth-ranked issue (Deacon et al. 2019). Although more prominent than in 2017, when the environment received just 1% of coverage, it would probably have been much higher if the Conservatives had not been so successful in making the campaign about Brexit.

How all of this translated into the public's perceptions of the parties' positions on the environment is a little ambiguous. YouGov's (2019a) polling shows a similar pattern throughout the final six months of 2019: roughly 30-35% of people thought the government were handling the environment well and 50-55% thought they were handling it badly, which might have encouraged opposition parties to treat it more seriously. Another poll asking the public which party had the best policies on the environment found Labour and the Conservatives were neck-and-neck at 16% and 15% respectively, while 31% chose the Greens. In this poll, the environment was the only issue where the public had a low level of confidence in both the two main parties and neither of them had a significant advantage over the other (Ipsos MORI, 2019). Finally, the public do not appear to have perceived the

environment as core parts of the main two parties' campaigns. When asked to name the main policies each of the parties included in their manifestos, less than 1% listed environmental issues for the Conservatives and only 5% listed 'Green Deal / Environment / Planting more trees' for Labour (YouGov 2019b).

The Green Party

The Greens entered the election with some reasons to be hopeful. In several other countries the increased salience of the environment had helped green parties to make notable advances in recent elections. In May 2019 the UK Greens made huge gains at the local elections, more than doubling their number of councillors to 362. The party was very much part of the 'Green Wave' in the European elections, returning 7 MEPs (an increase of 4) to come fourth ahead of the Conservatives. In short, the salience of the environment had increased and the Greens were identified by the public as the party with the best environmental policies. While, in the past, the two major parties in Britain have been reluctant to engage with the issue in part because they feared the likely beneficiary would be other parties, notably the Greens, they were now showing a greater willingness to do so. However, at the 2017 general election the Corbyn-led Labour Party had presented an anti-austerity programme that reduced the space for the Greens to present themselves as a radical left-libertarian alternative to Labour. This fundamental issue was still there in 2019.

Part of the Greens' adjustment to the Corbyn effect in 2017 had been a renewed focus on the environment and this was carried through to the 2019 general election. They launched their campaign stating that this 'must be the climate election', proposing to invest £100 billion in climate action each year and appoint a carbon chancellor. The Greens stood 497 candidates, compared to 467 in 2017 and 573 in 2015. The Greens unilaterally stood down candidates in 24 seats at the 2017 general election as part of an attempted Progressive Alliance which saw the Liberal Democrats reciprocate in a handful of seats, but this had no material impact on the overall election result and brought little tangible benefit to the Greens. In 2019 a larger and more formal 'Unite to Remain' pact between the Greens, the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru was announced in England and Wales; the Greens were allowed a free run at 10 seats and stood aside in another 50.

Result

The election result was mixed for the Greens. On the positive side, by securing 865,715 votes, or 2.7% of the UK vote (3.0% in England), the party reversed the decline in its vote between 2015 and 2017, when it had slumped to 525,435 votes, or 1.6% of UK vote. Caroline Lucas, the only Green MP, strengthened her hold on Brighton Pavilion with a majority of almost 20,000 and 57.2% of the vote. The Greens came second in two seats, Bristol West and Dulwich & West Norwood (where the co-leader, Jonathan Bartley, was candidate), where there were massive Labour majorities of 28,219 and 27,310 respectively. The Unite to Remain pact had no impact on the overall outcome of the election: nine candidates from the three parties were elected in the 60 target seats, which represented one gain and one loss compared to the 2017 results. However, it did have some limited tangible benefits for Green candidates: in eight of the nine seats where the Liberal Democrats stood down (including both Bristol West and Dulwich) the absolute Green vote increased by more than the Liberal Democrat vote in 2017, and the vote share rose significantly by between 4.6% and 14.0% (the Liberal Democrats had not contested Brighton Pavilion in 2017). Only in the Isle of Wight did the Green vote actually decline. Although the party was, by exceeding 5% of the vote, able to save its £500 deposits in all the ten pact seats, it managed to save a total of just 31 deposits (compared to 131 saved in

2015). Put differently, the Green Party lost 466 deposits meaning it forfeited £233,000, a significant sum for a small party with no major benefactors in a polity without state funding for parties (House of Commons Library 2020, p.20).

Conclusion and Prospects

The Green Party remains a well-established but marginal actor in British party politics. The high public concern about the environment and widespread discontent with Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party helped the Greens to regain some lost ground. However, the Green Party has suffered something of a double blow. Jeremy Corbyn successfully nullified the Greens' positioning as a left-libertarian alternative to Labour in the 2017 general election, and then expanded into natural green territory – the environment – in 2019. The Green Party looks no more likely to win further seats in Westminster than it did before the election. Indeed, the permanent loss, post-Brexit, of its contingent of MEPs will make it even harder for the Greens to attract media coverage. For now, the Greens must continue to keep working hard locally to build up pockets of strength in the hope that eventually the Brighton experience can be emulated with further parliamentary seats. In the short term, its best hope is the slim chance that the Labour Party may at the next election be open to a broad electoral pact between progressive opposition parties.

To some extent, the election was a missed opportunity for the Greens and environmental campaigners as Brexit and the NHS largely crowded out other issues. Nonetheless, the high salience of the environment remained a persistent feature of the general election campaign. In a poll conducted shortly before election day, 11% of respondents selected 'protecting the environment/climate change' as one of the issues that would be 'very important' to their vote, 9% higher than an equivalent poll at a similar point in the 2017 election campaign (Ipsos MORI, 2019). The greater significance of the 2019 election is the extent to which all party manifestos – including the Conservatives – embraced comprehensive and far-reaching environmental policies, particularly on climate change. Given the threat from Brexit to UK environment standards and the potential for some dismantling of existing policies, the opposition parties are likely to see the environment as an issue on which to hold the Conservative government to account. It is too early to predict the medium-term impact of the Covid-19 crisis, but the experience of the financial and economic crisis suggests that we could see reduced resources for environment and climate policies matched by declining issue salience and political attention for environmental issues.

References

Deacon, D., Goode, J., Smith, D., Wring, D., Downey, J., and Vaccari, C., 2019. *General Election: Report 5*, Loughborough University: Centre for Research in Communication and Culture [online] https://www.lboro.ac.uk/news-events/general-election/report-5/

House of Commons Library, 2020. *General Election 2019: Results and Analysis*, Briefing Paper CBP 8749, 28 January. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8749/

Ipsos MORI, 2019 https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-12/political-monitor-6-dec-2019-tables.pdf

YouGov, 2019a https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/12/11/political-trackers-9-10-dec-update

YouGov 2019b https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/3zj8nshlzk/Internal_Manifestos_191202.pdf