ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The 'datafication' of campaigning in British party politics

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Abstract

The practice of political campaigning has evolved over time. Whilst once associated with public rallies and stirring political oratory, more recent campaigns are known for digital communication and targeted messaging. This article revisits the idea of campaign change by examining the idea of the datafication of campaigning. Exploring the dynamics of British party politics it asks why parties are using data, what specific types of data they are gathering and how these data are deployed in practice. Considering these questions, this article interrogates the organisational and democratic implications of campaign datafication. It argues that data have the capacity to change relations between citizens and political actors, creating new inequalities that affect the dynamics of British politics and have consequences for our understanding of electoral competition and democratic practice.

Keywords Data · Elections · Electoral competition · Political parties · Campaigning · Democracy

Introduction

"All serious campaigns are data-driven and probably have been since about 2012, actually". This quote, taken from an interview with a UK party official, sums up much recent orthodoxy about modern campaigning. In the UK and advanced democracies around the world, parties are now routinely seen to collect and analyse data to optimise their campaigns. Data are used to understand the dynamics and preferences of the electorate, to identify and target precise groups of voters, to test campaign messaging and to evaluate, in real time, whether a strategy is working. This trend has been traced in much recent scholarship on data-driven campaigning internationally, but the implications of these practices for electoral politics in the UK specifically have been less extensively discussed.

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In this article, I review why exactly UK parties are using data, what specific types of data they are gathering and how these data are deployed in practice to understand more about the organisational and democratic implications of these trends. To do so I draw on pre-existing literature, insights gathered from interviews with party staff and campaigners over the last four years and close observation of party practices. Taking this approach, I consider the implications of data-driven campaigning or 'datafication' for campaign organisation, and more broadly for the dynamics of contemporary democracy. I discuss data's capacity to change relations between citizens and political actors, to create inequalities between campaign actors and to give power to new actors often not subject to democratic oversight. Each of these outcomes should affect how we think about the dynamics of modern British politics and has consequences for our understanding of electoral competition and democratic practice. In the context of ongoing technological change, and specifically developments in artificial intelligence and computational analysis, I argue there is a pressing need to appreciate the ways in which data can affect our politics, particularly if interested in regulation or reform.

Datafication and data-driven campaigning

In line with the truism that 'information is power', datafication describes the collection and analysis of a vast array of information, meaning that "to datafy a phenomenon is to put it in quantified form so that it can be tabulated and analysed" (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013, p. 78). Whilst a longstanding process, datafication is seen to have advanced rapidly since the advent of social media applications and digital content sharing platforms (Majias and Couldry, 2019), which have made new and more personalised forms of data available for collection and analysis.

The implications of datafication have been explored in a range of different contexts, with studies of the nature and implications of this trend for business (Lycett 2013), health (Ruckenstein and Schüll 2017), education (Jarke and Breiter 2019) and democratic governance (Redden 2018), to name but a few. Within the field of politics, a rich literature has emerged on the topic of 'data-driven campaigning', but the implications of this trend have been less examined, especially in terms of the particular impacts experienced in different national contexts.

The idea of data-driven campaigning has been defined as a "mode of campaigning that seeks to use data to develop and deliver campaign interventions with the goal of producing behavioural or attitudinal change in democratic citizens" (Dommett et al. 2024a, p. 10). In recent years, several studies have helped to reveal more about the precise ways in which data are used in campaigning. Empirical studies have emerged in different contexts, detailing how data are used in the US (Hersh 2015; Baldwin-Philippi, 2017), Germany (Kruschinski & Haller, 2017), Australia (Kefford, 2021), the Netherlands (Kefford et al., 2023) and Canada (Bannerman et al., 2022; McKelvey & Piebiak, 2019; Munroe & Munroe, 2022). This work has shown that the precise manifestation of data-driven campaigning can vary dramatically, with political actors collecting different forms of data and deploying

different types of analytics processes in accordance with specific organisational, regulatory or systemic constraints (Dommett et al. 2024a, Chapter 2). Whilst there has been broad reflection on potential democratic implications of these trends (Borgesius et al. 2018), less attention has been paid to the implications of specific manifestations of data-driven campaigning for the dynamics of electoral democracy in different jurisdictions.

Within the UK, the study of data-driven campaigning and the process of datafication is well established and far from recent. Over preceding decades scholars have traced the development of party databases (Aron 2015; Coleman 2001; Gibson and Ward 2009; Margetts 2006) and have catalogued the ways in which parties are gathering and recording data via doorstep and phone canvassing (Pattie and Johnston 2003; Johnston et al. 2021), polling (Himmelweit, Humphrey's and Jaeger 1985; Whiteley and Seyd 2003), focus groups (Lees-Marshment 2001; Mattison 2010) and party websites (Margolis et al. 1999). Researchers They have also described the longstanding use of segmentation (Webber 2006) and targeting techniques (Lilleker 2006; Lilleker and Lilleker 2014) to understand and communicate with the electorate. Recent scholarship has built on this work (Anstead, 2017), with Barclay et al. (2024) showing UK parties to be drawing on the above methods, but also utilising social media and digital trace data. Datafication is therefore an established practice observed by scholars, and there is some evidence that it has been widely embraced by political actors, with the campaigners Barclay et al. spoke to contending "anyone who's not looking at data now is just stone age and will not last if there's any kind of good management" (Ibid, p. 12).

Whilst providing a range of insight, what has been less examined and distilled to date are the implications of datafication for party organisation and democratic processes within the UK. To facilitate this discussion, within this article I consider what we know about the dynamics and extent of data use within UK campaigns and reflect on the implications of this trend at these two levels. Such analysis is particularly important in the context of ongoing technological change, and particularly in light of claims that artificial intelligence has the capacity to enhance data collection and analysis capacities (Foos 2024). With the potential for further advances in this space, it is essential to discuss how the dynamics of politics may be affected, in order to consider what response, if any, may be required. To do I begin by considering why campaigners, and specifically political parties, are incentivised to use data, before turning to consider what we know about their actual practices.

Why is there an incentive for parties to use data in campaigns?

The basic rationale of campaigning is simple. Tasked with an objective of either securing electoral victory or maximising vote share, parties—as rational actors—are incentivised to campaign. Previous research has shown that activities such as door-knocking, telephone canvassing and even leafleting can have consequential effects on electoral outcomes by mobilising and or persuading electors to turn out (Fieldhouse et al. 2014; Foos and de Rooij 2017; Gerber & Green 2000; Townsley 2018; Townsley and Cutts 2022). As Foos and Johns have argued, the principal goal

of this activity is not to 'increase turnout across the board. Instead, their principal goal is to affect the outcome of an election in their favor *(sic)*' (2018, p. 283). In pursuing this outcome UK parties confront several challenges—specifically relating to personnel, financial resource, electoral dynamics and effective communication—that data can help to tackle.

At a very basic level, not all parties have the organisational infrastructure to campaign. In the UK, there are notable examples of parties with a history of grassroots activism—namely Labour and the Liberal Democrats. However, party membership is at a historic low (Burton and Tunicliffe 2022; see also Bennie 2015), many members are not active campaigners (Bale et al. 2019) and they are not evenly distributed across the electoral geography (Scott and Wills 2017)—meaning that parties often find it hard to establish and finance a local campaign (Pattie and Johnston 2016). Similar challenges are encountered in parties' ability to mobilise supporters, as this group displays different degrees of propensity to engage in different forms of activism dependent on party (Webb et al. 2017, p. 68). Parties do not therefore have even access to local resource, making it vital for them to know where they need to target efforts and focus available resource.

In addition, in the UK—unlike in the US—parties are subject to strict financial limits which regulate what it is possible to spend on a campaign within the regulated election campaign period (Electoral Commission 2022; Power 2020). Whilst the limit has recently been raised from a maximum of around £19.5 million to around £35 million, parties do not have unlimited resource, meaning they have to make choices about where to invest. These choices are particularly acute for parties less able to raise funds, hence tools that enable parties to identify the most suited targets and evaluate the effectiveness of chosen interventions are highly valued (Dommett et al. 2024b; Gibson & McAllister 2015; Nassmacher 2009).

Even if parties can build campaign organisation and capacity, the UK electoral system creates further challenging dynamics for parties. Specifically, the first-past-the-post system renders certain electoral constituencies and groups of voters—namely undecided or swing voters—more electorally significant (Johnston et al. 2021). Parties therefore need to be able to identify and focus their campaign activities upon these groups if they are attempting to exert maximal impact.

Finally, parties also encounter challenges around communication. Even if able to identify a target audience, there is no guarantee that campaigners will be able to effectively engage that group (i.e. gain attention) or present a message that resonates and improves electoral fortunes (Phillips et al. 2010, pp. 311–12). Once again, parties' ability to identify which communication channels are the most valuable and how to best frame and present an electoral message is not guaranteed, making it challenging for them to know how best to design and orchestrate their campaign.

Cumulatively, this discussion shows that parties face a range of challenges in building, designing and executing a campaign. The collection and analysis of information can help parties to not only understand who they need to contact, what resonates and how effective campaign interventions are, it can also help parties understand and monitor the activity of local party organisations to build effective campaign organisation and capacity. In other words, data—when gathered in the right form and subject to appropriate analysis—offer a range of advantages.

Evidencing the potential power of data, scholars has shown how data and testing can be used to maximise the desired impact of an electoral message (Chu et al. 2023; Hewitt et al. 2023; Lavigne 2021; Zarouali et al. 2022), and they have shown how data can be used to refine and target specific audiences, helping to optimise parties' resource (Harker, 2020). These findings incentivise the use of data, revealing why many parties have turned to this approach in their efforts to secure electoral success.

In noting the appeal of data it is, however, important to recognise that data's capacity to deliver electoral success is not necessarily guaranteed. Indeed, in recent UK politics there have been examples of campaigns which professed to rely on data but which did not secure electoral success. In the case of the Conservative Party in 2017, there were even claims that the party's reliance on data harmed its electoral fortunes, as the information used for strategic decision-making was out of date and not informative (Wallace 2017). Data are therefore not guaranteed to deliver electoral success, but its capacity to help tackle the challenges parties confront has rendered it of increasing interest to political parties.

What do we know about the practice of datafication in UK parties?

Previous work on data-driven campaigning in the UK has suggested that whilst increasingly in evidence, parties have not all embraced 'datafication' in the same way or to the same degree. Indeed, Anstead has suggested that '[d]ata capabilities are distributed very unevenly among UK political parties', with smaller parties having limited capacities and being reliant on simple technologies (2017, p. 307; p. 302). There is also evidence that only some UK campaigns possess sophisticated data insights or engage in complex analytics or targeting (Anstead 2017; Dommett et al. 2024a). Noting these possibilities, I reflect on what we know about the data and analytics practices of different campaigners within the UK. Looking first at data, I examine the data that UK parties hold about voters, as opposed to data on activists, members or party activities, before turning to discuss the data analytics practices of different parties.

Data collection

When asking campaigners across UK parties about the information they utilise, a range of different data sources tend to be cited that range from the well established to the more novel. At the core of voter data collection in the UK is information contained within the electoral register. This is made freely available to political parties, who can then buy access to the marked register. These sources provide parties with a list of every person registered to vote, the age at which they become eligible to vote, whether they have a postal vote and—via the marked register—if they voted at different elections (not who they voted for). It can also be combined with other data to help parties understand which houses do not contain registered voters (and where they accordingly might wish to target voter registration efforts).

On this foundation parties append different types of information according to their own organisation and approach. As outlined in Dommett, Barclay and Gibson (2024), voter data can include public data (such as national election studies and census data), canvassing data, purchased data (i.e. polling, third party datasets), social media data, digital trace data and modelled data. Each party gathers subtly different information via each source (i.e. there is variance in the canvassing scripts each party uses), but there is also variation in the precise mix (in terms of type and amount) that each party collects.

At one end of the spectrum, well-resourced, mainstream parties collect and combine multiple forms of information. As one campaigner from the Labour Party described:

'the first thing is, probably, the marked register and turnout data. It's, obviously, really key to the party in making decisions around who we target. On top of that, data from canvassing sessions, you know, data that indicates how somebody intends to vote, what they've told us on the doorstep. Generally, that's fairly restricted to the party and whether they're going to vote or not. We wouldn't tend to use any… the local party might collect other data at that level on issues that people care about but we generally weren't too bothered about that. Other data that we would then use is the British Election Study… we'd often use British Election Study data for modelling purposes. There are lots of questions in there, there's all kind of information, as you know, on voter intention, things like left-right and authoritarian-libertarian dimensions and then using data such as that to produce model data for individuals... We then, obviously, used polling data. The questions we included in that depended, really, on how much budget we had and what we were interested in asking at that particular time. But often, that would be voter intention and past vote was quite key. We often quite liked mapping people's voter movement over time to look at how kind of demographics were changing…the only other kind of data source is census data so, at the geographical level. And, obviously, geographical boundary data, I guess, of things like shapefiles which, obviously, ward level data's absolutely awful to work with. But we would create datasets at constituency level and ward level and, obviously, things like Scottish Parliament and Welsh Parliament at constituency level and things like that of aggregated geographical data from the census, sometimes from other sources and sometimes aggregated from our own individual level data, as well, if we wanted to do particular types of analysis' (Labour party interviewee).

At the other end of the spectrum, many parties rely on fewer data sources and curate smaller datasets. Parties such as the Greens or smaller, national parties such as the Scottish National Party therefore tend to rely on publicly available data (i.e. the electoral roll and national election studies) and purchase only small amounts of information—most commonly through be that polling.

To appreciate the unevenness of data collection practices across UK parties, it is useful to look at public expenditure data on party spending at the 2019 general election campaign. These data provide a snapshot of all parties at a specific point in time, providing a comparable dataset through which to explore in which to examine

parties' data collection practices. Exploring these data, it is useful to examine one form of data collection—hence I focus on polling. Coding these data, we identified invoices containing references to 'surveys', 'polling' or specific polling techniques, such as MRP models—leading us to identify the companies in Table 1 as offering such services (for more see: Dommett et al. 2024b). Reporting data from the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Labour and Reform UK, Table 1 shows parties to be devoting vastly different sums to polling work. The Conservatives appear to have spent far more on polling than other parties. Even removing data from CTF Partners Limited (who did not *just* perform polling), £9,22,427.64 was spent with other polling or survey companies, just under double what the Liberal Democrats spent, and significantly higher than Labour's spend in the period. Reform UK had significantly lower expenditure, and whilst not reported here we found that neither the Greens or Scottish National Party reported polling spending within this period. Whilst the reasons for parties' use of polling companies may vary, these data show that the extent to which the same types of data are used by parties differs.

The invoices also reveal further differences between parties. Looking at the activities described within invoices, we can see the Conservatives paying for more sophisticated forms of polling, with invoices from Focal Data recording spend on an MRP Vote Intention model (Electoral Commission 2019a; Hanratty 2020). In contrast, the Liberal Democrats mainly spent on simpler polling methods, such as localised (phone) surveys (Electoral Commission, 2019b). These data accordingly reveal divergence in the amount of data different political actors were collecting, but also in the precise form that data took.

Similar differences are also evident in terms of the data parties gather from commercial sources. The Information Commissioners' Office has shown that parties can purchase household and individual level data on estimated 'employment status; income; presence or absence of children in the household age; family structure; level of educational achievement; and onomastic data, which identified a person's gender based on their first name' (2020, pp. 10–11). In their investigation into data analytics, however, they revealed that only the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats had purchased such data from commercial providers, whilst minor parties had not. This claim is supported once again by data from the 2019 invoices, which show these three parties engaging Experian, Populus Data Solutions or Data Sciences Inc, but does not show other parties paying for commercial data services. In interviews with staff within smaller parties, this outcome is most commonly attributed to a relative lack of financial and staffing resource and expertise compared to major parties.

In more recent elections, there is also evidence of inequality in regard to other data sources. One important new source of data has been made available from social media platforms and advertising companies. Rather than being 'owned' by parties, payment can be made to these platforms to access certain target audiences, providing not only data but also an important means of communication. On Meta's ad creator, for example, parties are able to select attributes of Meta product users, including basic demographic criteria such as age and gender, and personalised criteria such as whether someone is 'newly engaged', working in 'education and libraries' or in 'food and restaurants', whether they are interested in 'art and music' or 'current

Table 1 Party spending on polling as declared in the 2019 General Election spending returns

Conservative party		Liberal democrats		Labour party		Reform UK	
Supplier	Expenditure	Supplier	Expenditure	Supplier	Expenditure	Supplier	Expenditure
CTF Partners Limited	£624,000.00	Mango Direct Marketing Ltd	£163,238.40	Walnut Unlimited	£73,728.00	COR Research	£72,000.00
Blue Telecoms	£399,866.40	YouGov plc	£118,500.96	YouGov UK	£62,519.99		
Return Research Limited	£187,128.00	Deltapoll	£18,600.00	Survation	£20,160.00		
FocalData	£181,766.40	Survation Ltd	£109,334.40	Election Data	£15,840.00		
Populus Limited	£69,408.00	BMG Research Ltd	£36,240.00	Moonlight Research	£11,999.99		
Adetiq	£56,608.42	Populus	£29,544.00				
Abacus Data & Mailing Ltd	£10,229.11	Sheffield Liberal Democrats	£2,269.06				
Research Interactive	£17,421.31	Psilocybin Evangelion	£1,492.17				
		Philip Myers	£1,147.50				
		Josh Day	£1,108.40				
		Eastern Region Calls & Print Ltd	£603.91				
		Kingprint	£282.86				
Total	£1,546,427.64		£482,361.66		£184,247.98		£72,000.00

events (politics)', or whether they are 'commuters' or 'ex-pats'. Alternatively, parties can upload their own lists of emails and ask for 'lookalike audiences' to be identified—allowing parties to contact people similar to those they already have information about within their own databases. Usefully, Meta provides information about what parties' spend on their services in real time. Looking at data from the 2024 general election, we can see vast differences in the amounts expended by different parties. Between May 22nd and July 4th, political parties spent £8,476,841 on Meta adverts, with Labour the highest spending party at £3,937,572, followed by the Conservatives who spent £2,061,683, with—the next highest spending party—Reform UK spending £623,193 (Who Targets Me, no date).

In terms of access to data, therefore, UK parties do not seem to be using data to the same extent, nor are they relying on exactly the same types of data—suggesting that the process of datafication is uneven. Similar differences can also be found when looking at what we know about data analysis.

Data analysis

The process of datafication and data-driven campaigning in particular speaks to the use of analytics methods to interrogate and generate meaning and insight from chosen data sources. Previous research has detailed parties' use of segmentation, targeting and testing and has shown that each of these functions can be conducted in more or less sophisticated ways (Dommett et al. 2024a, Chapter 4).

Segmentation is perhaps the most longstanding technique used by parties and is essentially the process of identifying groups or 'segments' within the electorate. Often associated with 'Mosaic' categories that identify certain types of voter such as 'Cared-for pensioners', 'Ex-industry legacy', 'Corporate chieftains' or 'Greenbelt guardians' (Webber 2006, p. 245), data can be used to find communities of likeminded or similar citizens. Previous work has shown that all UK parties employ relatively simple segmentation methods (such as isolating one type of voter, such as postal voters), but that some are starting to employ more complex modelling (combining multiple demographic, attitudinal and behavioural data points). Indeed, the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats have made significant investment in these activities, either appointing staff dedicated to data and analytics or hiring external expertise. As one interviewee within the Labour Party described, they routinely used data analytics to produce "a lot of kind of predicted data on individuals ranging from how likely they were to vote for Labour, various other parties, how likely they were to switch, potentially in different directions, how likely they were to care about particular issues… And various other things like that which we could then use to target those individuals" (Labour Party interviewee). Similarly, the Conservative Party database produces scores that estimates how strong a Conservative the person is likely to be, and how likely someone is to turnout to vote. Interestingly, this more sophisticated analytics activity tends to be conducted by staff within central party offices or by centrally commissioned external experts, creating incentives to centralise data and leading to a top-down approach to data analysis.

Not all parties are, however, able to engage in this more sophisticated work, leading them to rely on simpler forms of analytics.

Targeting describes the process of focussing contact or communications on certain groups of voters. Whilst there has been concern about the potential for fine-grained and divisive microtargeting (Borgesius et al. 2018, p. 87), emerging evidence suggests that parties tend to target broad groups of voters with inclusive messaging (Kefford et al. 2023; Votta et al., 2024). When speaking to activists in UK parties—whether at the local or national level—targeting is seen to be essential to electoral success. Local activists, for example, often speak about the importance of targeted mails sent to first time voters reminding them to vote, or door-knocking activity focussed on intermittent voters (i.e. people who don't vote at every election). Meanwhile central party staff recalled using algorithms to determine "whether certain streets or certain individuals in certain streets would be targeted on certain campaign activities, depending on where you were in the campaign cycle, depending on when you last visited those individuals in that street, depending on things like the Labour propensity and turnout propensity and things like that" (Labour Party Interviewee). Targeting can occur through a variety of different media, informing ground campaign activity such as door knocking, telephone contact and direct mail. It can also involve digital technologies, with programmatic or social media advertising often targeted at specific local areas or demographics (Power and Mason 2023; Stuckelberger and Koedam 2022). It is therefore common, for example, to see parties advertising on local news websites during by-elections or marginal seats (something done by Reform UK in early 2024), or directing Facebook ads towards certain demographic groups, such as men between 40 and 65. Parties also use media with certain demographic bases to target content at particular audiences, or engage with new platforms, such as TikTok to gain mainstream media attentionce media coverage. Looking at practice in the UK therefore, it appears that targeting is a well-established and common feature, but once again, it often appears in simpler forms—with more complex analysis conducted largely by central staff or external consultants in larger parties.

Finally, in terms of data use, parties can also engage in testing. As part of efforts to trial and evaluate alternative strategies and to assess whether their campaign efforts are delivering desired effects, testing can be integrated into all aspects of campaign activity (Haenschen et al. 2023). Within the UK, evidence of this approach is, however, somewhat limited. Some antecedents of this practice can be found in the use of focus groups. UK parties have an established tradition of using this practice to test and evaluate different courses of action. This method continues to be used by parties, but there are signs that some are also using other forms of testing, such as monitoring email open rates, A/B testing to optimise financial donations (Walker and Nowlin 2021) or online advertising design. For most UK parties, testing is used only intermittently—as even in the best resources parties, it is not common to evaluate all elements of activity, but in some areas—such as designing and launching voter communications—this is more commonplace. Whilst resource has historically limited smaller parties' or local activists' ability to use these methods, technological developments such as Meta's advertising service has made testing easier, as their ad designer contains inbuilt capacity to test different iterations of ads. For parties

without their own dedicated expertise, it is therefore possible to engage in some manner of testing. And yet, when compared to the US where randomised controlled trials are conducted and testing is done to evaluate a wealth of campaign activity, UK parties also conduct less testing themselves. Some fill this gap by draw on best practice expertise disseminated by organisations such as the Analyst Institute, which conducts field experiments and meta-analyses to generate evidence on 'what works'. Access to such expertise is not, however, uniform, as the Analyst institute is open to only progressive campaigners. It is also the case that parties are not always equipped to implement the insights they gain from testing or best practice guidelines due to a lack of resource. When it comes to testing, therefore, even the largest parties appear to be using this tool less extensively than might be the case.

Within UK parties' data analytics methods are therefore being utilised, but they are not always deployed in their most sophisticated forms, nor are they utilised across party organisation—with central party staff or external companies tending to be the source of the most sophisticated forms of analytics. Interestingly, some scholars have also shown that attitudes towards the value of data analytics can also vary, with some political leaders embracing the value of these techniques, and others more sceptical and cautious (Dommett et al. 2024a). This suggests that parties' approach to data can vary in line with the attributes of a party at a specific point in time.

Summary

This review of the actual practice of data-driven campaigning in the UK suggests that across the political spectrum parties have embarked on some degree of datafication, with the collection and analysis of data a routine and established component of campaigning. And yet, it also appears that the precise manifestation of datafication is far from uniform, with variation in the precise amount and type of data collected and the analytics techniques used.

The implications of datafication

Having cast more light on the practice of datafication in UK parties' campaign activities I am now able to reflect on the potential implications of these trends for British politics. This analysis is important both for highlighting areas of change and evolution of likely interest to scholars, but more broadly to foreground societal implications that may be deemed in need of response. Focussing first on organisational implications and second on electoral democracy, I suggest that current trends pose challenges for established principles of electoral competition and representation that have important consequences for the future study of British Politics. Moreover, I suggest that as new technologies advance, these challenges are likely to intensify, making it vital to identify these developments and consider possible reforms.

Organisational implications

At the simplest level, the datafication of electoral campaigns has a range of organisational implications for how campaigns are conducted that are important for scholars of party organisation and elections to appreciate. As data collection and analysis become established components of party campaigning, certain shifts in party organisation and management may be expected to occur.

One potential outcome is centralisation. As discussed above, datafication creates an incentivise to centralise campaign infrastructure, both in terms of data collection and analysis. Whilst most UK parties already have national data storage systems, this is by no means uniform, with parties such as the Greens retaining a localised organisational approach in line with their decentralised party structure (Dennison 2016). Datafication incentivises centralisation and investment in central databases, but it also encourages investment in central party staff or consultancy to conduct sophisticated analytics. For some parties this may lead to shifts in existing campaign organisation, with more investment made in central data activity and/or greater central oversight of data systems made available to local parties in a stratarchical organisational configuration (Bolleyer 2012). The other alternative is investment is data expertise and capacity at a local level, seeking to facilitate local activists to engage with and utilise data in their campaigns.

Whichever organisational strategy is pursued, datafication also has implications for our understanding of the role and activity of party members, staff and politicians. In a datafied system there is a need for high-quality data, and yet previous research has revealed that many activists (and even elites) lack an understanding of the value of data and qualities of data collection (Nielsen, 2012). If pursuing higher quality data then campaign activity involving a conversational, personalised approach can raise challenges when compared to more standardised interactions. To illustrate this point, a doorstep conversation which focuses on an electors' most important local issue may lead an activist to make assumptions about political views and voting intentions, whereas a conversation focussed explicitly on these questions can produce more reliable and consistent data insights. Datafication can therefore have implications for our understanding of party activism and the ways in which citizens can expect to be engaged within campaigns.

The reliance on data also has more mundane implications for party infrastructure and resource. If pursuing a datafied approach to campaigning parties need to continually invest in and improve their data infrastructure and data collection activity. As the Conservatives learned to their cost in 2015, voter data quickly becomes redundant and needs to be regularly refreshed to maintain its value (Wallace 2017). The financial and organisational resource required to build, maintain and furnish databases is considerable, placing significant pressures on parties that are by no means resource rich (either financially or in terms of activists). This raises questions about parties' ability to invest in this work and about the degree to which data will replace other areas of investment and activity.

Democratic implications

Beyond these organisational implications, there are a range of other implications that have wider societal significance. Datafication not only affects parties' internal activity, it also has implications for democracy by challenging a number of principles core to the UK's system of electoral democracy. Specifically, I suggest that it raises questions about the degree to which parties can engage in equitable competition, about the type of representation parties are offering and about the sufficiency of existing accountability systems.

First, the above analysis has made clear that the process of datafication is by no means uniform across political parties. Indeed, it appears there are significant inequalities in data access and expertise amongst UK political parties, resulting in different types and extents of data collection and alternative modes of data analysis. Whilst not entirely related to financial resource—as available expertise can also play a role—money allows certain parties to curate, analyse and maintain data in ways that others are unable to. The result of these dynamics is material differences in the ability of different parties to understand electoral dynamics, develop evidence-based strategies and optimise their campaign activity. Looking back to the incentives to use data outlined earlier in this article, it appears that some parties have greater ability to overcome challenges than others—raising questions about the degree to which parties are operating on a level playing field.

Notably, this inequality is not currently addressed by systems of electoral oversight. Although there are limits in place to curtail public spending, with a recent increase to around £35 million, the spending ceiling for larger, better resourced parties has been substantially expanded to a level smaller parties can only imagine reaching. As such, the potential gap in parties' ability to acquire and sustain datafication is likely to grow. This raises important questions about the nature of democratic competition, suggesting that action may be needed to equalise party's financial capacity or ensure a degree of uniformity in their data activities.

In addition, the datafication of campaigns also raises questions about the relationship between citizens and political actors in regard to representation. The collection and analysis of data potentially creates an information asymmetry between political actors and voters, with campaigners having more information available about citizens' preferences than in the past (these data can also be held without citizens' knowledge or understanding). The availability of these data raises questions about how campaigns formulate agendas and interact with citizens, and particularly in terms of whether they are engaging in preference accommodation as opposed to preference shaping (Hay 1997). In essence, data make it possible to understand more about what citizens may want, prompting politicians and parties to take a more responsive approach to message formulation.

Historically discussions of data use and particularly focus groups have criticised parties' tendency to follow public views, with claims that this approach leads parties to compromise their principles to achieve electoral success (Wring 2007). The use of data does not automatically inspire this kind of approach, but it makes it possible for campaigners to engage in this type of activity. Such possibilities are important as they raise questions about the durability and authenticity of campaigners'

electoral messages, potentially leading citizens to question whether parties are communicating genuine opinions or whether they are making promises that they do not intend to keep. Whilst the use of data does not automatically lead to this outcome, this possibility raises questions about the acceptability of this form of activity and our collective understanding of the reliability of campaign promises.

Finally, when it comes to other societal implications of the datafication of political campaigning, it is notable that this trend places significant power in the hands of those who curate or provide access to the data politicians seek. In recent years, this has been most clearly illustrated in the case of social media companies who have provided parties with a new set of data and means of communication. Whilst in many ways valuable, these actors are not subject to current democratic accountability systems, meaning we have limited power to hold these actors in check. Due to a lack of publicly available information about their practices (de Vreese and Tromble 2023), it is not currently possible to determine whether these actors are providing equitable and reliable data services. Some studies have suggested that there may be reasons for concern, with research revealing biases in platform's ad delivery processes (Ali et al. 2019) and others highlighting frequent changes (and limitations to) the way platforms provide data (Barrett and Kreiss 2019). This suggests that commercial actors are exercising consequential power over data access, and yet this power is currently under-scrutinised and not held to account.

Collectively, these implications are important for scholars' attempts to understand contemporary British politics, suggesting that data have implications not only for how we understand and study party organisation, but also for how we think about the dynamics of electoral competition. Appreciating these emerging dynamics is important because they reveal areas for scrutiny and possible reform—be that regarding reducing financial inequalities between parties, holding parties to account for electoral promises or strengthening oversight of new actors, such as social media companies. Directing attention to these implications is particularly important in the context of the continually evolving nature of technology as new developments are likely to compound and extend such considerations. Developments in artificial intelligence, for example, have the capacity to unleash new, more accessible forms of data analytics and targeting, affecting the type of campaigning techniques available to political actors. These tools may create further inequalities or raise new concerns about the integrity of the democratic system, making it important to identify and consider the need for a response.

Conclusion

Data are now an established part of election campaigning and party organisation in the UK. Whilst each party collects, analyses and employs data in subtly different ways, the idea that data are an integral component of campaign practice is now widely established. In reviewing what we know about the datafication of UK parties' electoral campaigns, I have considered what we know about the incentives for and actual practice of data-driven campaigning. Revealing significant differences in the

capacities of different parties and shifts in the dynamics of party activity, I have spotlighted a range of organisational and democratic implications that need to be acknowledged by scholars and wider society. With datafication likely to continue to be a feature of British politics in coming years, it is essential to consider the consequences of this trend for scholarship and society.

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