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Post-modern asset or misfiring problem? The UK Conservative Party's constituency election campaign, 1997–2024

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Abstract

The British Conservatives are one of the most successful election-winning parties in the world. But for many years their constituency campaigns formed a weak link in their armoury. Campaigning was often poorly targeted, with the greatest effort expended in the party's safest seats, amassing large majorities but not winning more MPs. And the party's grassroots membership tends to be older and less active in campaigns than its rivals'. Internal party reforms since the early 2000s have sought to address some of these shortcomings. But to what effect? In this paper, we look at the efficiency and effectiveness of the Conservatives' constituency campaigns over the quarter century from the 1997 to the 2024 UK General Elections. We show that, over time, the party has become a more focussed and efficient campaigner. But anomalies remain and the modern Conservatives still face challenges in how to organise and run their local campaign operations.

Keywords Conservative party · Election campaigning · Electoral geography

Britain's Conservatives are the country's (and possibly the world's) oldest and most successful political party. By 2024, they had been in government for around 55% of the period since their establishment in 1834, and for two-thirds of the time since the 1918 General Election (when the franchise extended to include most women voters). Given that record, one might expect the party to have a well-honed and successful

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grassroots campaigning organisation. Yet, it has often performed less well in this arena than its main modern rivals, Labour and the Liberals (and their successors, the Liberal-SDP Alliance and the Liberal Democrats: Denver and Hands 1997; Denver et al. 1998; Pattie and Johnston 2003).

Since the late 1990s, the party has reformed its internal structure and operations, in part to improve its campaign effectiveness. How far that has been effective remains an open question, however. In the 2001, 2005 and 2010 general elections, the electoral system remained substantially biased against the party and in favour of its main rival, Labour (Johnston et al. 2021). At the 2015 election, things worked more in the Conservatives' favour, as David Cameron parlayed a relatively modest national vote share into a narrow parliamentary majority. Two years later, Theresa May increased the party's vote share substantially, but lost that majority. Two years on again, her successor Boris Johnson further increased the Conservatives' vote share (though only modestly) and was rewarded by the party's largest parliamentary majority since 1987. But when the Conservatives went back to the country in 2024, they suffered their worst-ever election defeat, even worse than their landslide defeat in 1997: their vote share fell by almost 20 percentage points to just 23.7% and only 121 Conservative MPs were elected. While this electoral volatility has many causes (Fieldhouse et al. 2020a, b), the party's constituency campaign strategy has a part to play. But how that role varies from election to election remains relatively understudied: most existing studies of constituency campaigning focus either on individual elections or look at several elections in isolation from each other. There is still much to learn about parties' abilities to adapt their campaigns to changing circumstances. In this paper, we add to a small but growing literature which studies how and why parties' constituency campaign activities and their effects vary from election to election (see e.g. Fieldhouse et al. 2020a, b; Fisher et al. 2023; Pattie et al. 2019) by analysing the Conservatives' changing campaign fortunes over the period from the 1997 to the 2024 UK General Elections. Over that period, how consistent were they in focussing their efforts in the right places, and how effectively did they convert those efforts into more votes? In doing so, we examine the extent to which the party's constituency campaign efforts have been affected by the interaction between the party's attempts at internal reform, particularly to its constituency structure (aimed in part at achieving greater central control over its local campaign strategy) and the changing external political environment. We also provide one of the first analyses of the Conservatives' 2024 constituency campaign. We begin by briefly outlining the literature on constituency campaigning in the UK. We then discuss the Conservatives' changing approach to their campaign strategy, before presenting analyses of how that changing strategy played out on the ground, and with what effect.

Constituency campaigning

That parties' constituency campaign efforts matter in UK elections is now well established. Where a party is trying to unseat the local incumbent, the more effort it exerts on its campaign the better it tends to do. But it is often the case that in seats where it is the incumbent, the harder it campaigns the poorer its

performance, as incumbents generally campaign hardest when facing a strong challenge from a viable rival (Johnston 1987; Denver and Hands 1997; Pattie et al. 1995; Pattie et al. 2017; Fisher et al. 2011).

More recently, the focus of research into campaign effects has shifted to investigating why they may vary from one election to another. The closer the national competition, other things being equal, the greater the marginal returns to constituency campaigning tend to be (Fisher et al. 2019). Similarly, challenger parties receive a greater return to their local campaign efforts in seats where they start out only narrowly behind the incumbent party than in seats where they lag far behind and would need an unlikely rise in their local vote share to take the seat (Pattie et al. 2019). In addition, the specifics and vagaries of individual elections might either enhance or undermine the effectiveness of a party's constituency campaign. For instance, while the Conservatives launched their 2017 UK General Election campaign well ahead in the opinion polls and confident of achieving a substantial parliamentary majority, their national 'air war' campaign quickly ran into serious difficulties, not least when their leader and Prime Minister Theresa May performed a very public and embarrassing mid-campaign U-turn on a core policy (on social care), denied that any U-turn had occurred and proved a wooden campaigner. The problems this caused for the party's national 'air war' may well have had adverse consequences for how effective its constituency-level 'ground war' might have been, irrespective of how well that ground war was conducted. It is important, therefore, to examine constituency campaigning not in the abstract, but in the wider context of each election.

All of this has implications for how we might expect the Conservative Party to structure its constituency campaign strategy at any given election, and for how effective that strategy might be. Under the first past the post system used in Westminster elections, many seats are not normally in competition because one party holds the seat by such a substantial margin that it is unlikely to be defeated. In such constituencies, it is seldom rational for the party which holds the seat, or for its rivals, to expend much more than token resources on the constituency campaign there, as the result is rarely in question. But other seats are held by only narrow margins, and it is here that a rational party (if, going into the election, it is in either first or second place locally) might feel it should focus its effort, as the margins between success and failure are very close indeed.

Where a party places its campaign emphasis among all the marginal seats in which it is in contention might be expected to depend on the party's position before the election, and what it hopes or fears most from the upcoming contest. When a party is the main national opposition going into an election, its primary goal is usually to win seats it does not currently hold, in the hope of replacing the incumbent government. This is most likely achieved in those marginal constituencies where the party is only narrowly behind the incumbent party prior to the election. Hence, a party in this position overall might be expected to concentrate its greatest campaign efforts on these marginals and to place less emphasis on marginals it currently holds. The Conservatives found themselves in such a position in the 2001, 2005 and 2010 UK general elections, when they were the main challengers to an incumbent Labour government. So if its constituency campaign was rationally organised then,

we would expect it to focus most on the marginal constituencies it did not currently hold.

In elections where it is the incumbent party of government defending a parliamentary majority but faces strong opposition and is under pressure in pre-election polls, it might feel its greatest risk is losing seats (and potentially power) to its rivals. Its campaign focus might therefore be on those marginals it currently holds but could lose to a determined opponent, rather than on marginals where it is in second place to a rival party but has less chance of winning or in seats it either holds securely or where it is out of realistic contention. The Conservatives were in this position at the 1997 and 2024 elections. Prior to both contests, they had been in government for a prolonged period (since 1979 in 1997, and 2010 in 2024), but were struggling badly in opinion polls, by-elections and local government elections, and seemed likely to lose the upcoming election badly. In both election years, a major source of the Conservative government's loss of support could be traced to widespread and persistent dissatisfaction with how it had handled major crises (the 1992 ERM crisis, and the combined effects of the COVID pandemic and Liz Truss and Kwasi Kwarteng's 2022 mini-budget, respectively: Sanders 1996, 1999; Green et al 2025; Prosser 2025).

Things get more complicated for a party which prior to a general election is in power either as part of a coalition or as a minority government. Here, the party has two potentially conflicting campaign aims. First, like any incumbent government, it wants to stem potential losses to its opposition rivals and so might focus its campaign on those marginals it currently holds. But it also might entertain another aim, to win more seats and swap its minority/coalition partner status for that of a majority government. To do that requires winning new seats and concentrating campaign effort on those marginal seats it does not currently hold.

Which of those two strategies dominates in any given election for a governing party without its own majority may depend on the wider context of the election itself. Where the minority government or coalition is unpopular, the greater risk might be losing seats, and hence the more sensible strategy is to focus mainly on defending its own marginals. But if pre-election polls suggest support for the party is increasing (especially if its national support is well ahead of its nearest rival), a party in such a position might be tempted to neglect, relatively, the defence of its own marginals and to focus more on campaigning in marginals where it could unseat the incumbent, hence gaining more seats and increasing its chances of becoming a majority government. The Conservatives found themselves in just this situation in both the 2015 and (especially) the 2019 elections. If the party is the major partner in a coalition, as the Conservatives were between 2010 and 2015, they might also be tempted to target not only seats held by the main opposition party, but also those where their junior coalition partner—the Liberal Democrats in 2015—were the incumbents: junior partners in coalitions often suffer more at subsequent elections than their larger coalition partners, making this a potentially attractive option for the larger party (Klüver and Spoon 2020).[1] But getting it wrong carries risks:

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[1] This strategy was not open to the Conservatives in 2019, as their minority government was supported by the Ulster-based Democratic Unionist Party. The arrangement with the DUP did not constitute a formal coalition and, more importantly for the strategy, the Conservatives do not contest Northern Irish

neglecting marginals one holds in favour of campaigning in marginals one needs to win risks unexpected losses of one's own seats to one's rivals (in the 2015 election, for instance, the Conservatives lost more seats to Labour than they gained from that party).

A final strategic possibility also exists. A party might be an incumbent government with a majority to defend but might find itself much more popular in pre-election polls than its main political rival. Faced with this prospect, the party of government's strategists might see the prospect of increasing its majority. For the Conservatives, this prospect seemed to beckon at the 2017 election. Before the campaign started, polls suggested a very large Conservative lead over Labour, which suffered internal battles over its direction under its new leader, Jeremy Corbyn (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018). Here, party strategists might suggest a focus on those marginals (and even some less marginal seats) the party does not currently hold. But that once again comes at the potential risk of leaving marginals currently held by the party more vulnerable to one's rivals.

At both the 2017 and 2019 elections, the fallout from the Brexit referendum gave the incumbent Conservative government a further incentive to go on the offensive in the campaign by targeting seats held by its opponents (especially Labour) rather than focussing on a defensive strategy of focussing on its own marginal constituencies. At the 2016 Referendum, support for Brexit had been high in many 'Red Wall' Labour seats, especially in the industrial Midlands and North. With delivering Brexit the party's key promise in both contests, the Conservatives hoped to win over large numbers of Brexit-supporting Labour voters in these seats, in sufficient numbers to (they hoped) win many of them.

Taken together, this suggests several hypotheses:

H1: Conservative constituency campaign effort will focus more on marginal than on safe seats.

H1a: In elections where the Conservatives are the main party of opposition (as in 2001, 2005 and 2010), their constituency campaign will be most focused on marginal seats where they are the main challenger, and less on seats which they either already hold or where they are a more distant challenger.

H1b: In elections where the Conservatives are an incumbent party of government and are faced by a strong opposition (as was the case in 1997 and 2024), their campaign will be focused most heavily on marginals they currently hold, and less on seats they either hold safely or where they are not the incumbent.

H1c: In elections where the Conservatives are an incumbent party of government and are faced by an apparently weak opposition (as in 2015, 2017 and 2019) their campaign effort will be most focused on marginal seats where they are the main challenger, and less on seats which they either already hold or where they are a more distant challenger.

Footnote 1 (continued)

constituencies. Hence a tactic of targeting their minor party allies' vulnerable seats was not available to the Conservatives in 2019.

H2: Other things being equal, in elections after the 2016 EU Referendum, the higher the support for Brexit in constituencies not held by the Conservatives, the greater the campaign effort the Conservatives will devote to these seats.
H3a: Other things being equal, the harder the party campaigns in seats where it is the local challenger, the greater the increase in its vote share.
H3b: Other things being equal, in seats where the party is an incumbent the effect of campaign effort on vote share will be either negligible or negative.

These theoretical expectations depend on an assumption that the Conservatives' constituency campaign strategy is rational and effective and that the party is able to follow it through. But how reasonable is that assumption, and has the situation changed over time? We explore these questions further in the following sections.

Reforming the Conservative campaign

In the past, the Conservatives' constituency campaigns often yielded poorer dividends for the party than its main rivals enjoyed from their local campaigns (Denver and Hands 1996). One reason for this underperformance was the party's structure. Traditionally (and unlike their major rivals), the Conservatives' grassroots organisation consisted of local clubs of Conservative supporters, technically independent of the national party. Individuals joined these local associations, not the national party (Ball 1994). Because the associations were formally independent, it was difficult for the national party to co-ordinate its constituency campaign efforts efficiently (Seyd and Whiteley 1996). Local associations both generated and used their own campaign resources in their own constituencies (Johnston and Pattie 2014). The best-resourced local associations tended (unsurprisingly) to be in places where the Conservatives were most popular, and where the party did not face any realistic risk of losing. Running their strongest campaigns in such seats helped generate large majorities for safe Conservative incumbents who would have won anyway, but did not contribute to winning seats the party did not already hold. The national party struggled to curb excessive campaign effort in these ultra-safe seats, or to move resources to more marginal (and hence vulnerable) seats, where extra campaign effort might make a difference between winning and losing (Denver et al. 2003; 2004; Pattie and Johnston 2003).

Given the Conservatives' longstanding electoral success, such inefficiencies in their constituency campaigning were likely seen in the party hierarchy as relatively unimportant. After all, for most of the period from 1918 to 1997, they had seldom been out of office for more than a few years at a time and had on several occasions remained in power over consecutive election cycles. New Labour's 1997 election landslide removed the grounds for such complacency, however. The Conservatives went on to lose the next two general elections and were out of office for 13 years, their longest period in opposition since the start of the twentieth century.

New Labour's success in the 1997, 2001 and 2005 elections rested on many factors, some internal to the party (its 'Third Way' electoral strategy appealed to middle class, middle England voters: Heath et al. 2001) and some external (for instance,

Labour was helped substantially in 1997 by the Conservatives' loss of their reputation for economic competence following the 1992 ERM crisis: Sanders 1996, 1999). But the scale of Labour's wins was also enhanced, especially in 1997 and 2001, by its modernised election campaigning operation (Gould 1998). In a textbook example of 'post-modern campaigning' (Norris 2010, 137ff.), the party ensured all party spokespeople were 'on message', carefully tested its campaign messaging via focus groups and polls, and coordinated its national and local campaign strategies to focus its appeal on swing voters living in the marginal seats Labour needed to win (in 1997) or hold (in 2001 and 2005) power. Between 1992 and 2005, the UK's first past the post electoral system was substantially biased in Labour's favour and against the Conservatives, largely because of the considerably greater efficiency of Labour's vote distribution across seats (Johnston et al. 2021). That was in part a consequence of the party's constituency campaign strategy, not amassing large but unproductive majorities in seats it already held or substantial votes in seats it could not win, but focussing instead on those marginals it needed in order to become the government.

As part of their efforts to recover after their 1997 (and subsequent) defeats, therefore, Conservative leaders sought to modernise their party and to develop its own 'postmodern campaign' capabilities. A key reform introduced by party leader William Hague in 1998 made the local associations part of the official party structure, giving the national party greater control over its constituency campaign (Kelly 2003). Although this did not produce immediate results, there were signs post-1997 that the Conservatives were closing the campaign gap on Labour and becoming more efficient in their targeting of resources (Fisher and Denver 2009). Under Michael Howard's leadership, the Conservatives brought in political consultant Lynton Crosby to oversee their 2005 election campaign, embarked on a heavily focussed marginal seats strategy and used the 'Voter Vault' campaign software—combining consumer marketing, socio-economic and party voting intention data—to tailor campaign messages to specific typologies of individual voters in these key seats (Cowley and Green 2005). From 2007 onwards, under the stewardship of Conservative Deputy Chairman Lord Michael Ashcroft, the party implemented a target seat programme in key battleground constituencies, costing several million pounds (Cutts et al. 2012). A unit within Conservative Central Office worked with local parties in these marginals to promote the local Conservative candidate and build and fund a local team which would embark on intensive party activism over a sustained period outside of the election campaign. Like Lord Ashcroft's support for Conservative constituency parties in the 2005 general election through his company Bearwood Services Ltd (Johnston and Pattie 2007), this target seat programme helped the Conservatives win battleground constituencies in the 2010 general election (Cutts et al. 2012).

As the Conservatives narrowed Labour's 'campaign advantage', the party's electoral fortunes began to revive. They emerged as the largest party at the 2010 election (though short of an overall majority), and remained so in 2015, 2017 and 2019. The electoral system's pro-Labour bias was substantially reduced in 2010 and was replaced at each of the three subsequent elections by a pro-Conservative bias, largely through a considerably increased efficiency in its vote spread relative to Labour's (Johnston et al. 2021).

But to what extent was the party's constituency campaign a factor in its electoral recovery? Much of the hard work of constituency campaigning is conducted by local party members' and supporters' voluntary efforts (Fisher et al. 2014a, b; Fisher et al. 2014a, b). On that front, the Conservatives have for many years faced difficulties. Compared to their counterparts in other major parties, Conservative Party members are relatively old and disinclined to take an active part in campaign work (Whiteley et al. 1994; Pattie and Johnston 2009; Bale et al. 2019).[2]

And even a modernised campaign structure can go wrong. When Theresa May called the 2017 General Election (only two years after the 2015 contest, at which her party gained a slim Commons majority), her prospects seemed exceptionally good (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018; Bale 2023, p. 43). The Conservatives enjoyed a very substantial and sustained opinion poll lead over Labour, and the party had raised much more money than its rivals. In the event, however, Labour support grew rapidly throughout the campaign, closing the gap with the Conservatives. To Mrs May's humiliation, far from substantially increasing her party's parliamentary majority, she lost it and her minority government subsequently had to rely on the support of the Democratic Unionist Party.

Yet, in another respect, the Conservatives' 2017 result was a success (even though few in or out of the party would see it that way). At 42%, they achieved their highest share of the national vote since 1992, and their biggest increase in vote share (a 5.5 percentage point rise) since 1979 (when Mrs Thatcher increased it by 8.1 percentage points). So what went wrong? Why did a substantial rise in the party's vote share lead to fewer MPs and a lost majority? In part, the vagaries of the UK's plurality electoral system were responsible, as there is no automatic link between a party's vote share and its haul of seats. It is perfectly possible for a party to increase its vote share substantially yet come away with fewer MPs than before. Two things matter: how well one's rivals do in the election (if their vote shares increase too, that complicates things), and where one's vote improves. Rising support in seats one already holds just amasses larger and larger majorities without gaining any new MPs, for instance. Again, focussing on the right voters in the right seats is crucial: the campaign matters.

The Conservatives' 2017 campaign suffered from "severe organizational shortcomings" (Bale 2023, 43ff). Not only were the party's constituency efforts hampered by the perennial problem of relatively inactive grassroots members, but the local information on which it campaigned was, according to some insiders, inadequate. The party used computer modelling to guide where and who its members should canvass during the election. But, Bale notes, that modelling was based on questionable assumptions, sending the party's canvassers out to contact the wrong voters (many of whom apparently told canvassers they would never consider voting

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[2] From 2015-17, the average Conservative party member was aged 57 compared to 53 and 52 for Labour and the Liberal Democrats, respectively (Bale et al. 2019: 34ff). Yet, the averages hide rather different underlying distributions with the Conservative membership skewed noticeably older than their rivals (38% were 66 or over in 2017 in contrast to 28% of Labour and 24% of Liberal Democrat members). In the 2017 election, Conservative party members were substantially less active in the campaign than were their Labour or Liberal Democrat counterparts (p.95ff).

Conservative) in the wrong target seats. As this example suggests, a postmodern campaign strategy, wrongly directed, may contribute to disappointing results.

Two years later, the Conservatives called another general election, but this time their campaign planning seemed better (in light of lessons learned in 2017). The pre-election signs looked good for the party: once again, they enjoyed large poll leads and faced an apparently unpopular leader of the opposition. But this time:

> they were taking nothing for granted and leaving nothing to chance. They had overhauled their party machine, built up a war chest and …knew exactly what their campaign would be about and … who would be running it. They also had a pretty good idea of where they stood their best chance of winning seats. Their list of targets included not only familiar marginals but also Labour held constituencies (…the Red Wall…) …vulnerable to a Tory challenge. (Bale 2023, p. 130)

This time, the Conservatives' gamble of calling an early election paid off. Their vote share rose to 43.6%, not as large an increase as that achieved in 2017. But the number of Conservative MPs elected rose by 48, giving the party a substantial overall majority in the House of Commons.

In the aftermath of their 2019 victory, some commentary suggested the Conservatives had built a new, and potentially unbeatable, election coalition of middle-class economic liberals and working-class Brexit voters. The sheer scale of the party's success in 2019, and the nature of that success (taking seats not only in traditional Conservative heartlands, but also in former Labour seats in the so-called Red Wall) left the party with something of a campaign headache. The new Conservative coalition forged in 2019 pulled together disparate peoples and places, with divergent hopes and goals, a realignment catalysed in part by the fallout from the 2016 Brexit referendum (Fieldhouse et al. 2020a, b). That coalition was a difficult one to hold together, however, and was at risk of unravelling quickly, creating further challenges for Conservative strategists trying to decide where to focus their campaign and what line to push in it. Should they focus on defending the party's 2019 gains in the former Red Wall (where 'levelling up' and social authoritarianism might be issues) or in 'Blue Wall' traditional strongholds (where economic and social liberalism might have more appeal)? Either way, an unravelling of this coalition led to serious electoral reversals for the party.

Nor was the Conservatives' 2019 majority a sure protection against more difficult political times for the party, which arrived in the second half of the 2019–2024 Parliament. Damaged by the partygate scandal which followed the COVID pandemic and by the economic turmoil caused by the 2022 mini-budget (Green et al. 2025; Prosser 2025), the Conservatives' poll ratings slumped badly and did not recover. A heavy defeat in the next election seemed increasingly likely. And that encouraged a highly defensive campaign strategy aimed at stemming losses and focussed on saving not only Conservative-held marginals but also on constituencies that would normally be considered moderately safe Conservative seats but which might prove vulnerable to a large anti-Conservative swing.

But in 2024 even such a defensive strategy faced serious challenges. A long-overdue constituency redistricting exercise (Johnston et al. 2021) had led to many

seats changing very substantially, making accurate campaign targeting more diffi-cult (though not impossible: Pattie et al. 2012). In total, 82 incumbent Conservative MPs, anticipating both potentially difficult battles for reselection in the new seats and a high likelihood of losing their seat in the coming election, decided to stand down at the election rather than face defeat. And, following a series of large by-election defeats in previously safe seats in 2023, senior Conservative strategists once again bemoaned the relatively advanced age and the reluctance to campaign of their local party members and activists when compared to their rival parties.

The Conservatives' own election post-mortems in 2017 and 2019 (as outlined in Bale 2023) suggested that though both elections were fought using professionalised and 'post-modern' campaign strategies, success was not guaranteed. While the 2017 campaign was thought to have misfired, the 2019 campaign was felt to have worked well. The party's 2024 campaign, meanwhile, might seem an abject failure in the light of the party's exceptional losses then.

But to what extent is this all a function of hindsight? After the event, it is easy to blame disappointing election results on poor campaigns, and triumphs on strong campaigns. However, a party could fight an excellent campaign yet still suffer an electoral setback if other conditions work against it. Equally, if circumstances gener-ally favour a party, it might still gain considerable electoral dividends even though its campaign is ineffective. Whether the Conservatives' constituency campaigns have become more effective over time as the party has modernised remains a moot point, as does the question of whether its 2017 and 2019 campaigns were, respec-tively, a flop and a success.

To find out, the remainder of the paper analyses the Conservatives' constituency campaign efforts in the seven general elections of the quarter century from 1997 to 2024. Over that time, as we have seen, the party took steps to modernise (and post-modernise) its campaign strategy. And it faced very different electoral prospects and achieved very different electoral outcomes in those elections: losing four (in 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2024), gaining majorities in two (in 2015 and 2019) and emerg-ing as the largest party but without an overall majority in two (in 2010 and 2017). Across time, did the party's targeting of its campaign efforts improve (was it focus-sing on the right places)? And were its efforts effective in gaining it more support?

Measuring the local campaign

We measure campaign effort in each seat using candidate spending during the 'short campaign', the (roughly) four-week period from the start of the official election campaign to polling day. Every election candidate in the UK is legally required to return a report detailing their spending on their constituency campaign. The amount each can spend on their constituency campaign is subject to a legal limit (a function of both the size of the constituency electorate and whether the seat is a borough—urban—or county—more rural—seat). Comparisons of the spending data with other independent measures of campaign activity from (variously) surveys of election agents, party members and voters show that it is a good proxy for campaign effort (Fieldhouse and Cutts 2009; Pattie et al 1994). It also has the distinct advantage that

(unlike other measures) it is available, in a comparable format, for almost every candidate in almost every seat. To provide a comparable metric for campaign spending over time and over different constituencies, we calculate each Conservative candidate's campaign expenditure in each seat at each election between 1997 and 2024 as a percentage of the legal maximum permitted spending in that seat and in that election.[3]

The analyses reported below are conducted on a dataset comprising both election results and campaign expenditure in each British constituency (excluding Northern Ireland due to its different party system) at each general election from 1997 to 2024. For each constituency, the data set contains information on the Conservatives' vote share and candidate campaign expenditure at each election, on whether the party was the incumbent or a challenger in the seat, and its vote share there at the previous election. Because constituency boundaries were changed (often very substantially) before the 1997, 2010 (2005 in Scotland) and 2024 elections, the information on the electoral situation preceding these contests are based on authoritative estimates of the 1992, 2001/2005 and 2019 election results had those contests been fought in the constituencies in place for the 1997, 2005/2010 and 2024 elections.[4] We estimate separate models for each election year.

We also include a range of further control variables in our analyses below. Some controls take into account each seat's socio-economic make-up, using Census data

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[3] An alternative strategy would have been to use voters' self-reported experiences of being contacted by a party's campaign, and to have aggregated that information to the constituency level. The British Election Study (BES), for instance, has for many years asked respondents about their exposure to the party campaigns. While that approach has merit, we do not employ it here, for several reasons. First, even with the larger samples offered by the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) data between 2014 and 2024, there are on average only around 50 respondents per constituency in any given election. The actual number in some constituencies is much smaller, even with BESIP. And for elections before 2015, we would have to use BES datasets with much smaller overall samples than the BESIP, and surveying in many fewer constituencies. Hence, the confidence intervals around constituency-level estimates of campaign intensity using the BESIP data are liable to be large. Second, self-reported exposure to party campaigns risks systematic recall biases. Survey respondents who are more political engaged are more likely to recall being contacted than are those who are less engaged: for instance, while only 24% of BESIP respondents who a month before the 2019 election (in Wave 17 of the survey) said they paid no attention to politics reported immediately after the election (in Wave 19) being contacted by any party during the campaign, this rose to 63% of those who before the campaign reported paying a great deal of attention to politics. Third, by far the most common form of campaign contact reported by BES respondents was the delivery of campaign leaflets: in 2019, 92% of all those who reported being contacted by the Conservatives in that election campaign said they had received a leaflet from the party. Printing costs—mainly for the production of local leaflets—is by far the largest item in candidates' election expenses returns. According to candidate returns to the Electoral Commission, in 2019, printing 'unsolicited materials' accounted for 65% of the average Conservative candidate's reported spending in 2019 (and the proportion goes up to 77% on average if we include spending on 'advertising', much of which is accounted for by printed posters). Not surprisingly, therefore, the correlation between the proportion of BESIP respondents in a constituency who report being contacted by a party and that party's campaign spending as a proportion of the maximum permitted in the seat tends to be quite high: for the Conservatives, that correlation was 0.711 in 2019. Hence, we have used the reported spending data rather than survey respondent self-reported contact data from the BES, partly because of the measurement issues involved with the latter, but also because the two measures largely reflect the same campaign activities.

[4] The estimates were produced for the main news organisations in the UK, the BBC, ITN and the Press Association.

from 2001 (for the 1997 and 2005 elections), 2011 (for the elections between 2010 and 2019) and 2021 (for the 2024 election): the percentage of households which were owner-occupied; the percentage of the population aged over 65; the percentage from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds; the percent reporting a long-term illness, the percent with no educational qualifications, and the percent employed in professional and managerial occupations. In addition, for the constituencies in use from 2010 till 2024, we also have an estimate of the percentage of votes cast in the seat to leave the EU at the 2016 EU Referendum.[5] These controls attempt to capture other possible influences on both the Conservatives' decisions regarding their constituency campaign strategy and their support.

Where did the Conservatives campaign?

In this section, we evaluate H1, H1a, H1b and H1c by looking more closely at where the Conservative constituency campaign was focussed, and at how this changed over time. A first cut at this is provided in Fig. 1, which presents smoothed lowess regression curves for candidate spending as a function of how marginal the seat was for the party at the previous election. In this figure, marginality is defined as the Conservative vote share at the preceding election in the seat minus the equivalent vote share for the second-placed party in the seat (where the Conservatives were the incumbent in each election) or for the winning party in the seat (where the Conservatives were the challenger). As such, the 'previous marginality' measure is negative in seats where the Conservatives were challengers and positive where they were incumbents. The more negative the marginality, the further behind the local winner the Conservative candidate was: the more positive, the further ahead the Conservatives were of their main local rival. And the closer the marginality score is to zero, the more marginal the seat is for the Conservatives.

Overall, the patterns revealed in the figure support the hypotheses. In every election year studied here, Conservative spending was lowest, on average, in seats where at the preceding election the party had been a long way behind the local winner. As seats became more marginal for Conservative challengers, the party's campaign spending tended to increase, towards 100% of the legally permitted maximum. And in most election years (but not, notably, in 1997, 2001 or 2024), there is also a visible downturn in average spending in seats being defended by the party (to the right of 0 on the horizontal axis). As H1 suggested, the party expended most effort on campaigns in the most marginal seats, and less in seats it either already held securely or (even more so) where it was far behind the defending party. Where the party was the challenger, this is partly due to rational decision-making on where to put in effort. But it also reflects the simple effect of party strength: most of the resourcing for local campaigns (both money and voluntary activity) is locally raised, so where the Conservative were electorally weak, they lacked resources (Johnston and Pattie 2014). More striking in that regard is the tendency from 2005 to 2019 inclusive for

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[5] The constituency-level 'Leave' vote was estimated by Professor Chris Hanretty.
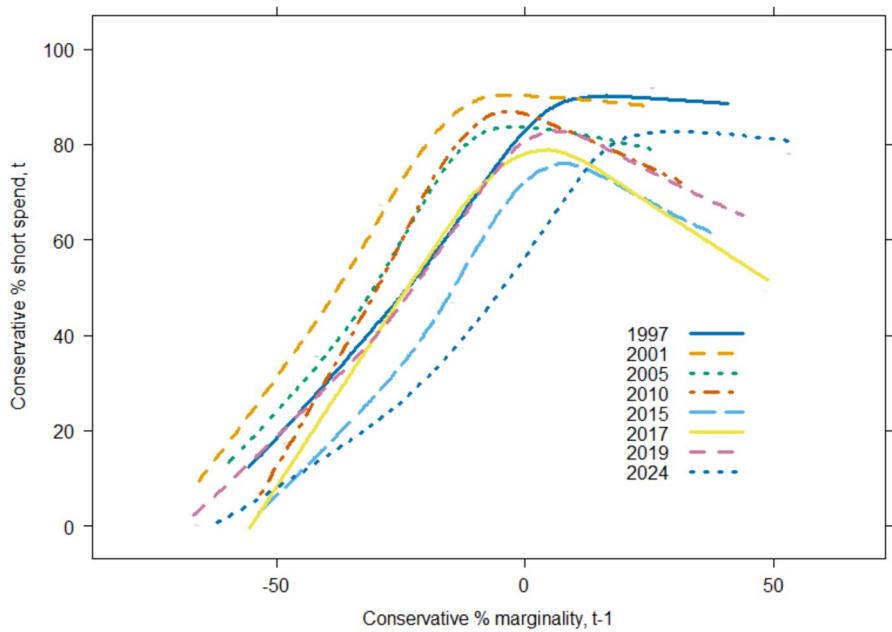
Fig. 1 Conservative constituency campaign spending and constituency marginality: lowess regression curves

the party to expend less effort, on average, in seats it held securely than in those it held by only narrow margins.

The 1997, 2001 and 2024 contests are partial exceptions to this overall pattern, however. In all three contests, there is very little difference in those seats the Conservatives were defending in how hard the campaigned between seats the party held only narrowly and those they held securely. In these elections, local Conservative associations in 'safe' Conservative seats were in effect wasting campaign effort on contests the party was going to win anyway. As noted above, the 1997 election was the last in which local Associations were independent of the national party, while the 2001 election took pace only shortly after Hague's reforms. Thereafter, the tendency became more pronounced for campaign effort to decline as seats the party already held became safer, with the pattern for the 2005 election taking an intermediate position between the 'waste' of the 1997 and 2001 contests, and the greater efficiency in the distribution of campaign effort seen in later elections. To that extent, the party reforms begun by William Hague seem to have helped the Conservatives better target their local campaign efforts. The 2024 election, meanwhile, was (as discussed above) a widely anticipated landslide defeat for the Conservatives, the potential scale of which threatened even Conservative seats which would normally be considered moderately safe. Strikingly, in that contest, the pattern of campaign spending reverted to that seen in 1997 and 2001: campaign effort was high in all seats defended by the Conservatives, with little diminution as the seat became (on paper at least) progressively safer for the party. Whereas in 1997 and 2001, this

could in part be put down to the independence of the local associations that was no longer true in 2024, and probably reflects the party's apparently dire prospects then.

Further insight (and a first take at assessing H1a, H1b and H1c) can be gained by looking more closely at where the lowess curve for each election year 'peaks' (indicating the seats where on average the Conservatives expended their greatest energies). When that peak is to the left of seats with a marginality score of 0 (the most marginal constituencies of all), the party is placing its greatest efforts in those marginals where it is the local challenger. When the peak is to the right of 0 marginality, the party places its greatest effort in seats it is defending. In elections where the Conservatives were the main opposition and needed more seats to form a government (2001, 2005 and 2010), their peak spending, as predicted by H1a, occurs in those seats they lost by narrow margins at the previous election. And (in line with H1b) in 1997 and 2024, when the party was the incumbent government and feared a substantial defeat in the election, its maximum campaign effort, on average, focussed on seats it already held. It is also striking that the 'peak' of the spending curve is further right in 2024 than at any of the other elections considered here including 1997, suggesting the party had begun to abandon some of its most marginal seats, and was putting most effort into trying to retain seats that normally would not be at risk. Intriguingly, however (and contrary to H1c), there is little clear sign that in 2015 and 2019 (elections which the Conservatives entered as an incumbent government hoping to move from minority to majority control in Westminster) the party was expending its largest campaign efforts in those marginals where it was the challenger: the peak still occurred in marginals being defended by the party. At the 2017 contest, meanwhile, the party's local campaign activity peaked, on average, very close to the point of maximum marginality, suggesting that in an election where it was both defending a narrow parliamentary majority and was also initially hoping to make further gains, it placed equal emphasis on defending its existing seats and attacking in seats where it was a strong challenger.

Formal regression analyses of Conservative constituency spending, confirm these patterns (Table 1). We estimate nine models, one for each election year. As the dependent variable in each model, the Conservatives' per cent expenditure on the constituency campaign, is constrained between 0 and 100% (and in some constituencies approaches these bounds) conventional OLS models risk the predicted values of Y exceeding these lower or upper bounds, and inferences based on the normality assumption, particularly if the dependent variable is skewed and where there is heteroscedasticity, which can generate inaccurate parameter estimates (Paolino 2001). We therefore employ beta regression as the proposed model assumes that the dependent variable is bounded and is beta distributed (Ferrari and Cribari-Neto 2004; Fieldhouse et al. 2020a, b; Kieschnick and McCullough 2003).[6] As beta regression requires that the dependent variable ranges from 0 to 1, we have divided the per cent spending variable by 100, making it a measure of the proportion—as opposed to the percentage—of the legal maximum spent.

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[6] All models were estimated in R, using the betareg package (R Core Team 2021; Cribari-Neto and Zeileis, 2010).

Table 1 Modelling Conservative constituency short campaign spending, 1997–2024 (beta regressions)

	Y =Conservative constituency campaign spending as % of legal maximum (rescaled)			
	b	SE	b	SE
Election:	1997		2001	
Constant	2.542	0.826**	2.283	0.833**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.050	0.004**	0.065	0.004**
Conservative incumbent, t-1	0.658	0.132**	− 0.838	0.161**
Marginality*incumbent	− 0.039	0.007**	− 0.056	0.011**
Census: % owner-occupiers	− 0.014	0.004**	0.003	0.004
Census: % pensioners	0.025	0.019	0.016	0.020
Census: % BAME	− 0.002	0.004	0.011	0.004**
Census: % with long-term illness	0.018	0.024	0.044	0.025
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.036	0.012**	− 0.033	0.013**
Census: % professional & managerial	0.006	0.013	0.001	0.013
AIC	− 997.137		− 952.224	
BIC	− 948.095		− 903.286	
Pseudo-R^2	0.559		0.610	
N	638		632	
Election	2005		2010	
Constant	2.621	0.635**	2.300	0.689**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.059	0.004**	0.065	0.004**
Conservative incumbent, t-1	− 0.558	0.172**	− 0.630	0.159**
Marginality*incumbent	− 0.041	0.010**	− 0.032	0.008**
Census: % owner-occupiers	− 0.016	0.004**	− 0.014	0.006*
Census: % pensioners	0.049	0.017**	0.048	0.016**
Census: % BAME	0.008	0.004*	0.004	0.004
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.031	0.021	− 0.098	0.046*
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.011	0.010	0.002	0.017
Census: % professional & managerial	0.018	0.009	0.011	0.011
AIC	− 693.548		− 639.530	
BIC	− 644.803		− 591.000	
Pseudo-R^2	0.590		0.513	
N	621		609	
Election	2015		2017	
Constant	1.731	0.723*	1.752	0.685*
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.052	0.004**	0.071	0.004**
Conservative incumbent, t-1	0.548	0.145**	− 0.341	0.154*
Marginality*incumbent	− 0.021	0.007**	− 0.037	0.006**
Census: % owner-occupiers	− 0.021	0.006**	− 0.011	0.006
Census: % pensioners	0.040	0.017*	0.045	0.016**
Census: % BAME	0.002	0.004	0.006	0.004
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.086	0.049	− 0.153	0.046**
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.003	0..018	0.021	0.016

Table 1 (continued)

	Y =Conservative constituency campaign spending as % of legal maximum (rescaled)			
	b	SE	b	SE
Census: % professional & managerial	0.008	0.012	0.002	0.011
AIC	− 362.738		− 410.318	
BIC	− 314.445		− 361.486	
Pseudo-R^2	0.456		0.483	
N	596		626	
Election	2019		2024	
Constant	1.379	0.722**	0.702	0.743
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.044	0.004**	0.030	0.004**
Conservative incumbent, t-1	0.503	0.144**	1.500	0.148**
Marginality*incumbent	− 0.013	0.007**	− 0.032	0.007**
Census: % owner-occupiers	− 0.009	0.006	− 0.017	0.007*
Census: % pensioners	0.068	0.017**	0.055	0.014**
Census: % BAME	0.014	0.004**	0.011	0.005*
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.063	0.053	− 0.030	0.067
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.028	0.018	− 0.052	0.025*
Census: % professional & managerial	− 0.002	0.011	− 0.000	0.011
AIC	− 433.797		− 635.093	
BIC	− 385.160		− 586.527	
Pseudo-R^2	0.458		0.582	
N	615		611	

$*p<0.05; **p<0.01$

In the models, the main independent variable is how marginal the constituency was for the Conservatives at the preceding general election, defined in a 'folded' form. Where the Conservatives were the local challenger, marginality is estimated as above, but where they were the incumbents, it is calculated by subtracting the Conservative vote share at the preceding election from that of the party on second place. Hence, this form of marginality is a negative number in both 'challenger' and 'incumbent' seats. The more negative the marginality score, the less marginal the seat: the closer to zero the score, the more marginal it is. A rational distribution of campaign resources would result, therefore, in a positive relationship between marginality and Conservative constituency spending in both challenger and incumbent seats. The models also include a dummy variable for whether the seat was one defended by the Conservatives in an election, coded 1 if the Conservatives were the incumbent party in the seat at the relevant election and 0 if they were the challenger. In addition, the models contain the two-way interaction between incumbency and marginality, to assess whether campaign resources are utilised as 'rationally' in seats the party holds as in seats where it is the challenger. To control for other possible influences on the Conservatives' decisions

on where to focus their campaign, the models also include the 2001, 2011 and 2021 Census variables discussed above. As these are not the central focus of our analysis, however, we do not comment further on them below.

All the coefficients involving marginality and incumbency are significant in all eight models (Table 1). The main effects for marginality are positive, confirming that the more marginal the constituency for Conservative challengers, the greater their campaign effort locally. On average, too, the party's campaign was more intense in seats it was defending than in seats where it was the challenger (as demonstrated by positive coefficients for incumbency). But the interaction terms between marginality and incumbency are negative, indicating that in each election year, the difference in campaign intensity between the least and the most marginal Conservative seats was smaller in seats the party was defending than in those where it was challenging.

Figure 2 further clarifies the story by visualising the models reported in Table 1: it shows the predicted relationships between how marginal a seat was for the Conservatives and how much the party spent on its campaign there for both incumbents and challengers. In every election year, there is a significant positive association between how marginal the Conservatives' position was in seats where they were challengers and how much the party spent on its local campaign: the closer the race for challenger candidates, the more active they became. The trends in the figure also show that the precise nature of this relationship varied across elections. The
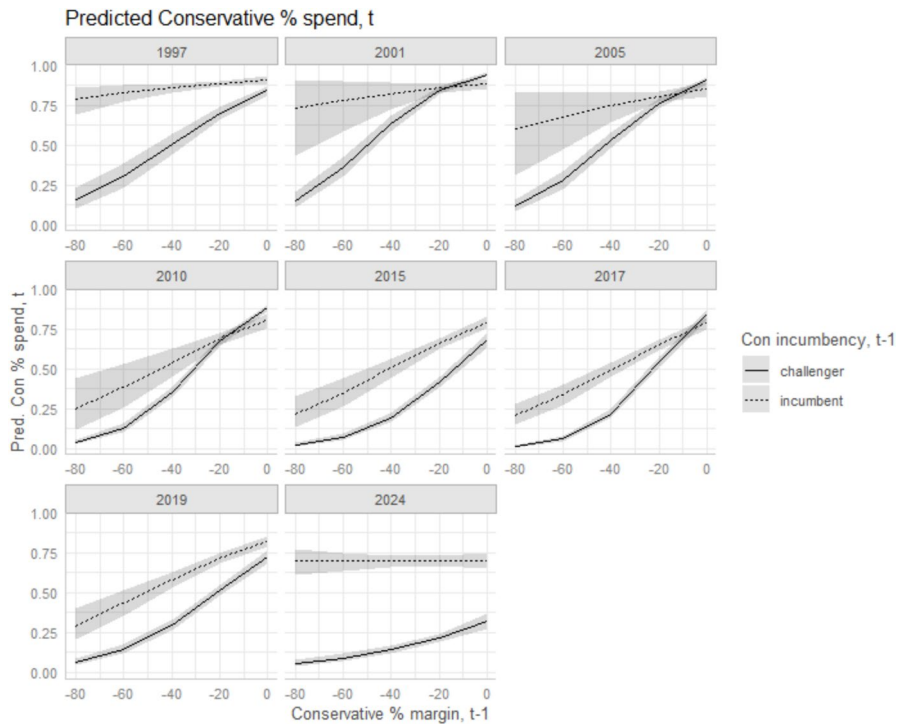

Fig. 2 Conservative campaign spending as a function of previous marginality, election year and challenger/incumbent status: visualising the interaction effects

'challenger' slopes are steeper in the 2001, 2005, 2010 and 2017 contests than in the 1997, 2015, 2019 or 2024 contests. This suggests a greater differential in campaign effort across seats which were not being defended by the party between those constituencies seats which presented the least and the most promising prospects for the party in the former group of election years (all contests where the Conservative were either out of power or were the party of government, but without an overall majority, and hence contests in which the primary campaign objective might have been to win seat not previously held) than in the latter (all contests in which the Conservatives were the party of government, defending their own majority and may have prioritised retaining seats they already held).

In the 'incumbent' seats which the party was defending, as illustrated in Fig. 2, in 1997, 2001 and 2024 (and to an extent in 2005 as well), how hard the party campaigned locally was not affected by how under threat it was in the seat. In each of these election years, Conservative campaign spending was predicted to be high in all of the party's 'incumbent' seats, with no real difference between seats where marginality was low compared to the most marginal seats. Between 2010 and 2019, however, the party's incumbent seat campaigns became much more focussed on the most than on the least marginal seats (as indicated by the clear and significant positive slopes for 'incumbents'). But that shift aside, there were fewer signs after 2010 of the differentiation of campaign intensity between the least and the most marginal incumbent seats changing from year to year: the relevant regression slopes are broadly parallel. And in all election years, Conservative incumbents in all but the most marginal constituencies spent more than challengers in seats of a comparable marginality. The gap was particularly large when we look at the least marginal seats of all, on the left-hand side of each graph—those seats where either Conservative incumbents were very unlikely to lose, and those where the party was very unlikely to win. Simply put, the party's candidates spent considerably more in the former than in the latter seats.

In many ways, however, it is the 2024 Conservative constituency campaign that really stands out. The increasing focus on incumbents' campaign efforts on the most marginal Conservative seats, evident between 2010 and 2019, came to an abrupt end. As noted above, faced with the fear of a major electoral collapse, Conservative incumbents in the party's apparently safest seats expended as much effort on their campaigns as their counterparts in the most marginal seats defended by the party—a return to the pattern seen in the previous Conservative landslide defeat in 1997. Even more striking is the pattern for Conservative challengers' campaign efforts in 2024. As in previous years, the 'challenger' curve is positive, showing that Conservative challengers' campaign efforts increased as the seat became notionally more marginal for the party. But the curve followed a much shallower trajectory in 2024 than at earlier elections. And even in the most marginal seats for Conservative challengers, they spent much less on average on their campaigns in 2024 than in previous contests. The implication is that in 2024, the Conservatives had largely abandoned seats where they would previously have made some effort to win, even in bad years for the party such as 1997.

These analyses have been repeated for the elections from 2010 onwards, adding a further constituency-level control for the percentage voting to leave the EU

at the 2016 Brexit referendum. As outlined in H2, we anticipate that, especially after the referendum, the Conservatives are likely to have seen potential electoral opportunities in pro-Brexit seats and hence may have directed campaign resources to those areas. The results are shown in Table 2 and the marginality–incumbency interaction effects are visualised in Fig. 3.

As anticipated, the 2016 Brexit vote did have a significant positive effect on how much Conservative candidates spent on their constituency campaigns at the 2017 and 2019 elections, but had an insignificant effect at the 2010 and 2015 contests (suggesting that extra resources were devoted to more pro-Brexit areas after the referendum, and confirming H2). Once again, 2024 stands out. Contrary to the earlier contests, Conservative campaign spending then was negatively related to support for Brexit in 2016. The more locals favoured leaving the EU, the less Conservative candidates spent on their constituency campaigns in 2024, other things being equal, suggesting that some of the seats being abandoned by the party in 2024 were precisely the 'Red Wall' seats where the Brexit issue had paid the Conservatives such dividends in 2019. But our basic conclusions regarding the effects of marginality and incumbency on Conservative campaign spending are only slightly changed. The gaps between the predicted spending trend lines for incumbents and challenger tend to be smaller than before, but they follow the same basic pattern.

Signs here, then, of the Conservatives improving the targeting of their constituency campaign efforts after 2010 (at least insofar as they were no longer wasting quite as much effort in seats they were almost certain to hold). This confirms H1 in all election years for seats where the Conservatives were challengers and in most election years (from 2010 onwards) where the party was the incumbent. In line with H1a, Fig. 2 also confirms that in 2001, 2005 and 2010, the party spent more, on average, where it was a challenger and the seat was highly marginal than in highly marginal seats where it was the incumbent. In all three election years, the 'challenger' trend line goes above that for incumbents at the most marginal, right-hand, side of the graph: the gap is small, but the relevant confidence intervals do not overlap. In 1997, 2015, 2019 and 2024, however (and in line with H1b and H1c), the trend lines for incumbent spending remain higher than those for challenger spending across the board, suggesting that in all four contests, the Conservatives on average put more effort into their most marginal 'incumbent' seats' than into their best prospects among those seats where they were the challenger. In this group of elections, they were an incumbent party of government trying to avoid defeat, so this was rational. But they also went into the 2015 and 2019 contests without a parliamentary majority so might reasonably have hoped to gain some seats they did not already hold, which might have suggested greater effort in marginal 'challenger' seats—a possible strategy that might have seemed particularly promising given the party's large lead in pre-election polls. In the latter contest, the fear of repeating 2017 might have persuaded the party's campaigners to curb their enthusiasm and put 'safety first' by making every effort to keep those vulnerable seats already held. Strikingly, of all seven elections studied here, it is only in 2017 that the Conservatives seem to have put much the same effort into all highly marginal seats, whether they were being defended by the party or were seats the party might hope to take

Table 2 Modelling Conservative constituency short campaign spending, 2010–2024 (beta regressions)—controlling for 2016 Brexit vote

	Y = Conservative constituency campaign spending as % of legal maximum (rescaled)			
Election:	2010		2015	
	b	SE	b	SE
Constant	1.698	0.760**	1.914	0.819*
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.063	0.004**	0.054	0.005**
Conservative incumbent, t-1	− 0.632	0.159**	0.542	0.146**
Marginality*Incumbent	− 0.028	0.009**	− 0.024	0.008**
Census: % Owner-occupiers	− 0.017	0.006**	− 0.020	0.006**
Census: % pensioners	0.052	0.017**	0.039	0.017*
Census: % BAME	0.005	0.004	0.001	0.004
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.095	0.046*	− 0.085	0.049
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.003	0.017	− 0.000	0.018
Census: % Professional & managerial	0.021	0.012	− 0.005	0.013
% voting to leave EU, 2016 Referendum	0.010	0.006	− 0.003	0.007
AIC	− 640.560		− 360.983	
BIC	− 587.618		− 308.300	
Pseudo-R^2	0.515		0.456	
N	609		596	
Election	2017		2019	
	b	SE	b	SE
Constant	− 0.162	0.733	− 1.109	0.764**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.066	0.004**	0.042	0.004**
Conservative incumbent, t-1	− 0.465	0.152**	0.426	0.142**
Marginality*Incumbent	− 0.026	0.007**	− 0.001	0.007
Census: % Owner-occupiers	− 0.024	0.006**	− 0.025	0.006**
Census: % pensioners	0.057	0.016**	0.085	0.017**
Census: % BAME	0.005	0.004	0.013	0.004**
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.154	0.045**	− 0.069	0.051
Census: % with no qualifications	0.004	0.016	− 0.040	0.017*
Census: % Professional & managerial	0.041	0.012**	0.045	0.012**
% voting to leave EU, 2016 Referendum	0.036	0.006**	0.043	0.006**
AIC	− 449.134		− 489.575	
BIC	− 395.862		− 436.515	
Pseudo-R^2	0.512		0.498	
N	626		615	
	2024			
	b	SE		
Constant	1.873	0.914*		
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.037	0.005**		
Conservative incumbent, t-1	1.501	0.148**		
Marginality*incumbent	− 0.042	0.008**		
Census: % owner-occupiers	− 0.014	0.007		

Table 2 (continued)

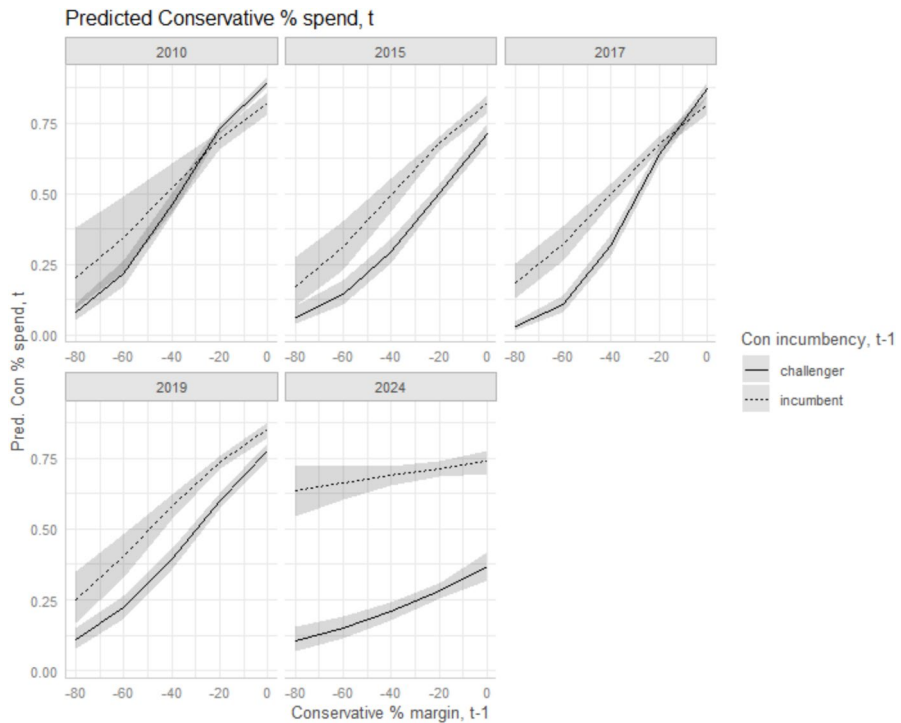|	Y = Conservative constituency campaign spending as % of legal maximum (rescaled)	
Census: % pensioners	0.044	0.015**
Census: % BAME	0.009	0.005
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.044	0.067
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.031	0.026
Census: % professional & managerial	− 0.014	0.013
% voting to leave EU, 2016 referendum	− 0.020	0.009*
AIC	− 637.787	
BIC	− 584.806	
Pseudo-R^2	0.584	
N	611	

$*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$

Fig. 3 Conservative campaign spending as a function of previous marginality, election year and challenger/incumbent status: visualising the interaction effects (controlling for Brexit vote)

from an opponent. And that, of course, was the election in which Mrs May's hopes of a parliamentary majority evaporated.

Campaigning and vote shares

But how effective were the Conservatives' local campaign efforts? In this section, we test H3a and H3b by examining the impact on the party's constituency share of the electorate in each election. We run two sets of beta regressions for Conservative constituency electorate share at each election (rescaled to range from 0 to 1, and hence showing the proportion of the vote taken by the party). For each election year, one set of regressions is for seats where the party was a challenger, and the other is for seats where it was the incumbent. We control for marginality using the 'folded' marginality measure described above. This takes into account both how competitive each seat was and how successful the Conservatives had been there in the past, and hence captures many factors associated with the geography of Conservative support which are not explicitly modelled here. Our main independent variable is Conservative campaign spending in each seat at the current election, as a percentage of the legal maximum permitted there. And once again, we control for socio-economic conditions in each seat which might have independent effects on Conservative fortunes there (using the same Census variables as in the earlier analyses). The results of the models are reported in Table 3.

How marginal the constituency was for the Conservatives was significantly related to the party's vote share in the seat, positively so in seats where the Conservatives were the challengers locally (columns two and three in Table 3), and negatively where they were the incumbents (the last two columns in the table). The more marginal the seat for the Conservatives, the better the vote share obtained by Conservative challengers and the worse the vote share obtained by Conservative incumbents. This is not surprising as a party's marginality in a seat is related to its past electoral strength there. For Conservative challengers, the more marginal the party's position in the seat they were contesting, the better it had done in the past, while for Conservative incumbents, the less marginal their seat, the better the party's past performance. Hence for both incumbents and challengers, the better the Conservatives did in a seat in the past, the better they do there now.

Of more interest to us are the coefficients for Conservative campaign spending. And in all challenger models, they are significant and positive, largely confirming H3a. Conservative challengers' campaign efforts benefitted them, in terms of improved vote shares. H3b is also confirmed for most election years: for Conservative incumbents, their campaign efforts had either no significant effect on their vote shares (in 2005, 2010, 2015 and 2017), or it was negatively related to vote share (in 2019). The 1997, 2001 and 2024 elections are exceptions, however. At those contests, the harder the Conservatives campaigned in a seat, the more votes they accrued both where they were a local challenger (in line with H3a) and also where they were the incumbent party (contrary to H3b). The implication is that, in the dire straits the Conservatives found themselves in at the 1997 and 2024 contests, fighting

Table 3 Modelling Conservative constituency vote share as % of electorate, 1997–2024 (beta regressions)

	Y = Conservative % of electorate			
	Conservative challengers		Conservative incumbents	
	b	SE	b	SE
Election: 1997				
Constant	− 1.933	0.313**	− 2.273	0.225**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.025	0.002**	− 0.008	0.001*
Conservative % spend, t	0.002	0.001**	0.002	0.001*
Census: % owner-occupiers	0.009	0.002**	0.008	0.001**
Census: % pensioners	0.002	0.008	0.024	0.004**
Census: % BAME	0.002	0.001	− 0.003	0.001**
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.002	0.009	− 0.030	0.007**
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.001	0.004	0.007	0.003*
Census: % professional & managerial	− 0.005	0.005	0.011	0.003**
AIC	− 1360.312		− 1485.546	
BIC	− 1323.476		− 1447.140	
Pseudo-R^2	0.809		0.661	
N	294		344	
Election: 2001				
Constant	− 2.626	0.286**	− 2.182	0.435**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.017	0.002**	− 0.003	0.002
Conservative % spend, t	0.006	0.001*	0.003	0.001**
Census: % owner-occupiers	0.012	0.002**	0.012	0.002**
Census: % pensioners	0.014	0.007	0.020	0.008**
Census: % BAME	0.002	0.001	− 0.003	0.005
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.019	0.008*	− 0.022	0.014
Census: % with no qualifications	0.009	0.004*	− 0.002	0.007
Census: % professional & managerial	− 0.001	0.004	0.001	0.007
AIC	− 1945.600		− 657.608	
BIC	− 1904.201		− 626.368	
Pseudo-R^2	0.807		0.336	
N	464		168	
Election: 2005				
Constant	− 3.693	0.218**	− 1.505	0.337**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.021	0.001**	− 0.005	0.001**
Conservative % spend, t	0.004	0.001*	0.000	0.001
Census: % owner-occupiers	0.010	0.001**	0.004	0.002*
Census: % pensioners	0.012	0.006*	0.026	0.006**
Census: % BAME	− 0.001	0.001	− 0.008	0.003*
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.022	0.007**	− 0.040	0.010**
Census: % with no qualifications	0.030	0.003**	0.009	0.005
Census: % professional & managerial	0.033	0.003**	0.009	0.005
AIC	− 1996.909		− 719.011	

Table 3 (continued)

	Y = Conservative % of electorate			
	Conservative challengers		Conservative incumbents	
	b	SE	b	SE
BIC	− 1955.662		− 688.012	
Pseudo-R^2	0.856		0.388	
N	457		164	
Election: 2010				
Constant	− 1.934	0.233**	− 1.167	0.260**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.020	0.002**	− 0.006	0.001**
Conservative % spend, t	0.006	0.001**	0.001	0.001
Census: % owner-occupiers	0.012	0.002**	0.003	0.002
Census: % pensioners	0.003	0.006	0.002	0.004
Census: % BAME	0.002	0.001	− 0.004	0.002*
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.030	0.015*	− 0.088	0.020**
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.004	0.005	0.005	0.006
Census: % professional & managerial	− 0.005	0.004	0.009	0.004*
AIC	− 1572.873		− 832.070	
BIC	− 1532.785		− 98.988	
Pseudo-R^2	0.799		0.560	
N	407		202	
Election: 2015				
Constant	− 2.093	0.268**	− 1.066	0.151**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.024	0.002**	− 0.005	0.001**
Conservative % spend, t	0.005	0.001**	0.000	0.000
Census: % owner-occupiers	0.003	0.002	0.003	0.001*
Census: % pensioners	0.036	0.008**	0.012	0.002**
Census: % BAME	0.005	0.001**	− 0.003	0.001**
Census: % with long-term illness	0.016	0.017	− 0.087	0.011**
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.016	0.006*	− 0.005	0.004
Census: % professional & managerial	0.004	0.004	0.009	0.002**
AIC	− 1170.787		− 1395.448	
BIC	− 1133.816		− 1358.477	
Pseudo-R^2	0.793		0.786	
N	298		298	
Election: 2017				
Constant	− 2.063	0.226**	− 1.470	0.118**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.013	0.001**	− 0.009	0.001**
Conservative % spend, t	0.005	0.001**	0.000	0.000
Census: % owner-occupiers	0.008	0.002**	0.007	0.001**
Census: % pensioners	0.016	0.007*	0.003	0.002
Census: % BAME	0.002	0.001	− 0.003	0.001**
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.050	0.013**	− 0.066	0.009**
Census: % with no qualifications	0.010	0.005*	0.016	0.003**

Table 3 (continued)

	Y = Conservative % of electorate			
	Conservative challengers		Conservative incumbents	
	b	SE	b	SE
Census: % professional & managerial	− 0.001	0.004	0.004	0.002*
AIC	− 1184.738		− 1615.495	
BIC	− 1147.801		− 1577.535	
Pseudo-R²	0.781		0.851	
N	297		329	
Election: 2019				
Constant	− 1.903	0.277**	− 0.661	0.153**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.007	0.001**	− 0.011	0.001**
Conservative % spend, t	0.009	0.001**	− 0.001	0.001
Census: % owner-occupiers	0.014	0.002**	0.008	0.001**
Census: % pensioners	0.008	0.009	− 0.002	0.002
Census: % BAME	0.004	0.002*	0.000	0.001
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.021	0.019	0.006	0.012
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.011	0.007	− 0.005	0.003
Census: % professional & managerial	− 0.015	0.004**	− 0.013	0.002**
AIC	− 1040.661		− 1040.407	
BIC	− 1003.556		− 1372.945	
Pseudo-R²	0.709		0.716	
N	302		313	
Election: 2024				
Constant	− 2.224	0.298**	− 2.362	0.247**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.024	0.002**	− 0.008	0.001**
Conservative % spend, t	0.005	0.001**	0.002	0.001**
Census: % owner-occupiers	− 0.004	0.003	0.002	0.002
Census: % pensioners	0.017	0.010	0.022	0.003**
Census: % BAME	0.010	0.002**	0.008	0.001**
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.071	0.031*	− 0.051	0.018**
Census: % with no qualifications	0.001	0.011	− 0.016	0.007*
Census: % professional & managerial	0.003	0.004	0.008	0.004*
AIC	− 1229.987		− 1650.064	
BIC	− 1195.139		− 1610.929	
Pseudo-R²	0.725		0.690	
N	241		370	

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

as hard as they could on the ground helped them reduce their losses, even in seats they already held.

But did the size of the boost Conservative challengers could expect from their campaign efforts change from election to election—did the party get more electoral
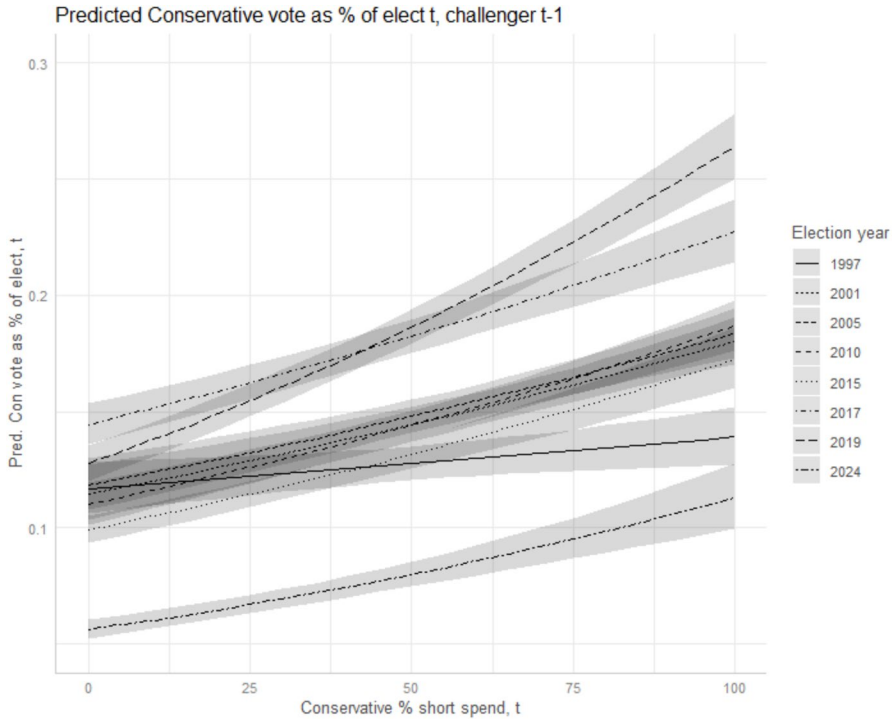
Fig. 4 Conservative % share of electorate 1997–2024 as a function of campaign spending, previous marginality and election year in seats where the conservatives were challengers: visualising the interaction effects

bang for its campaign buck as time went on? To explore this, we use the regression models in Table 3 and visualise the relationship between campaign spending and predicted vote share in Fig. 4 (for seats where the Conservatives were local challengers) and Fig. 5 (where they were the local incumbents). Each graph plots the Conservative's predicted constituency vote share at a given election (on the vertical axis) as a function of how much the party spent on its constituency campaign as a percentage of the maximum allowed (on the horizontal axis): in all graphs, seat marginality and the Census variables are set to their averages.

Where the Conservatives were challengers, campaign effort was positively related to the party's vote share in most election years (Fig. 4). But the effect of increased spending in such seats was larger from 2001 onwards than it was in 1997 and it was particularly strong at the 2017 and 2019 elections. Three phases are evident in the graph. In 1997, Conservative challengers gained only a small electoral advantage from their campaigns. Between 2001 and 2015, and in 2024, more campaigning yielded more votes, but the effect was similar across each election (the trend lines for each election in this period are more or less parallel with each other and in several cases the relevant confidence intervals overlap substantially). At the 2017 and 2019 elections, meanwhile, the slopes are not
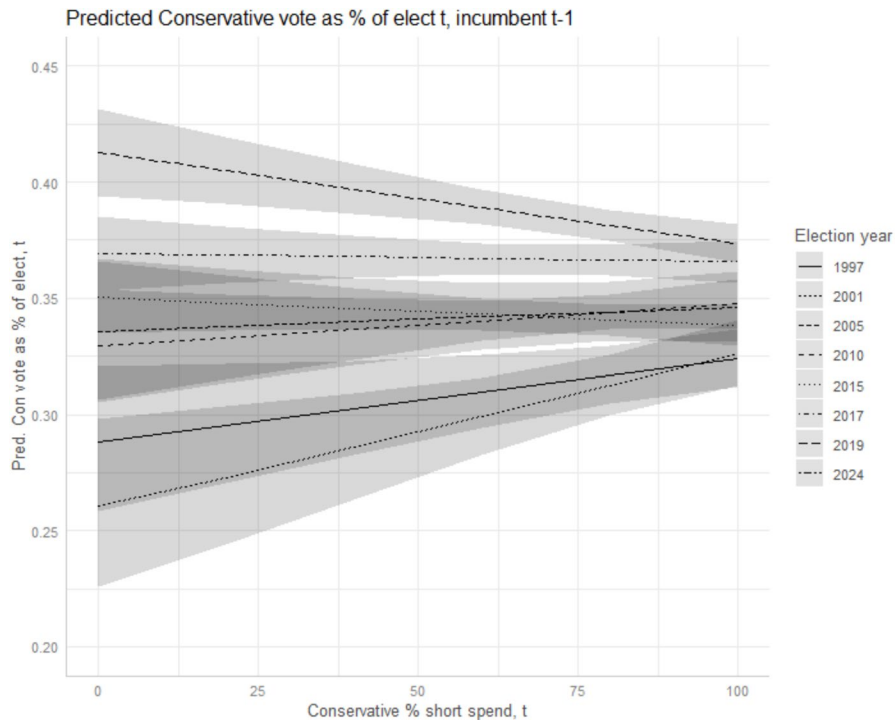
Predicted Conservative vote as % of elect t, incumbent t-1

Fig. 5 Conservative % share of electorate 1997–2024 as a function of campaign spending, previous marginality and election year in seats where the conservatives were incumbents: visualising the interaction effects

only positive (indicating better returns for increased effort) but are also significantly steeper than in previous contests. And the 2019 slope is markedly steeper than that for 2017. Over time, therefore, Conservative challengers were getting increasing marginal returns to their campaign efforts. The party was achieving a greater electoral bang for that campaign buck. Not only was it spreading its resources more carefully, but it was also getting a better return on those resources.

The picture is very different in seats the Conservatives were defending, however (Fig. 5). The impact of Conservative campaign effort on the party's vote share is in most years non-existent (the latter indicated by flat trend lines) or negative (the harder the party campaigned in seats it already held, the worse it did). In most election years, H2b is confirmed: where the Conservatives were incumbents, their campaign efforts did not help them. That said, in the 1997, 2001 and 2024 campaigns, Conservative incumbents do seem to have benefited from their campaign work, with vote shares rising as campaign spending rose.

As in the analyses of campaign spending, we have repeated these vote models for the elections from 2010 to 2024, adding the further control of local support for Brexit in the 2016 referendum (Table 4 and Figs. 6 and 7). As before, this does not substantially affect our conclusions regarding how the effectiveness of

Table 4 Modelling Conservative constituency vote share as % of electorate, 2010–2024 (beta regressions)—controlling for 2016 Brexit vote

	Y = Conservative % of electorate			
	Conservative challengers		Conservative incumbents	
	b	SE	b	SE
Election: 2010				
Constant	− 3.292	0.194**	− 1.680	0.290**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.016	0.001**	− 0.004	0.001**
Conservative % spend, t	0.005	0.001**	0.000	0.001
Census: % owner-occupiers	0.003	0.002	0.000	0.002
Census: % pensioners	0.016	0.004**	0.007	0.004
Census: % BAME	0.005	0.001**	− 0.003	0.002
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.018	0.011	− 0.087	0.020**
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.019	0.004**	− 0.003	0.006
Census: % professional & managerial	0.021	0.003**	0.017	0.004**
% voting to leave EU, 2016 Referendum	0.024	0.001**	0.010	0.003**
AIC	− 1806.837		− 842.614	
BIC	− 1762.71		− 806.223	
Pseudo-R^2	0.893		0.587	
N	407		201	
Election: 2015				
Constant	− 3.049	0.261**	− 1.164	0.185**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.017	0.002**	− 0.005	0.001**
Conservative % spend, t	0.005	0.001**	0.000	0.000
Census: % owner-occupiers	− 0.002	0.002	0.003	0.001*
Census: % pensioners	0.035	0.007**	0.012	0.002**
Census: % BAME	0.006	0.001**	− 0.003	0.001**
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.002	0.015	− 0.085	0.011**
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.028	0.006**	− 0.007	0.004
Census: % professional & managerial	0.022	0.004**	0.010	0.003**
% voting to leave EU, 2016 referendum	0.020	0.002**	0.002	0.002
AIC	− 1250.201		− 1394.284	
BIC	− 1209.533		− 1353.616	
Pseudo-R^2	0.836		0.787	
N	298		298	
Election: 2017				
Constant	− 2.819	0.203**	− 1.821	0.133**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.012	0.001**	− 0.008	0.001**
Conservative % spend, t	0.004	0.000**	0.000	0.000
Census: % owner-occupiers	0.003	0.002	0.004	0.001**
Census: % pensioners	0.015	0.006**	0.008	0.002**
Census: % BAME	0.001	0.001	− 0.003	0.001**
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.064	0.011**	− 0.066	0.009**
Census: % with no qualifications	0.006	0.004	0.008	0.003**

Table 4 (continued)

	Y = Conservative % of electorate			
	Conservative challengers		Conservative incumbents	
	b	SE	b	SE
Census: % professional & managerial	0.017	0.003**	0.010	0.002**
% voting to leave EU, 2016 referendum	0.016	0.001**	0.008	0.002**
AIC	− 1290.526		− 1638.848	
BIC	− 1249.895		− 1597.091	
Pseudo-R^2	0.853		0.861	
N	297		329	
Election: 2019				
Constant	− 3.070	0.211**	− 1.777	0.140**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.009	0.001**	− 0.006	0.001**
Conservative % spend, t	0.004	0.001**	0.000	0.000
Census: % owner-occupiers	0.004	0.002*	0.003	0.001**
Census: % pensioners	0.017	0.006**	0.009	0.002**
Census: % BAME	0.005	0.001**	− 0.002	0.001
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.015	0.014	− 0.021	0.009*
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.025	0.005**	− 0.010	0.003**
Census: % professional & managerial	0.014	0.004**	0.005	0.002*
% voting to leave EU, 2016 referendum	0.028	0.002**	0.017	0.001**
AIC	− 1252.943		− 1575.606	
BIC	− 1212.128		− 1534.397	
Pseudo-R^2	0.864		0.836	
N	302		313	
Election: 2024				
Constant	− 2.858	0.372**	− 1.896	0.291**
Conservative marginality, t-1	0.022	0.002**	− 0.010	0.001**
Conservative % spend, t	0.005	0.001**	0.002	0.001**
Census: % owner-occupiers	− 0.004	0.003	0.006	0.002*
Census: % pensioners	0.022	0.010*	0.017	0.003**
Census: % BAME	0.012	0.002**	0.008	0.001**
Census: % with long-term illness	− 0.055	0.031	− 0.046	0.018*
Census: % with no qualifications	− 0.010	0.012	− 0.010	0.007
Census: % professional & managerial	0.010	0.005*	0.001	0.004
% voting to leave EU, 2016 referendum	0.009	0.003**	− 0.009	0.003**
AIC	− 1234.908		− 1656.350	
BIC	− 1196.576		− 1613.301	
Pseudo-R^2	0.742		0.697	
N	241		370	

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$

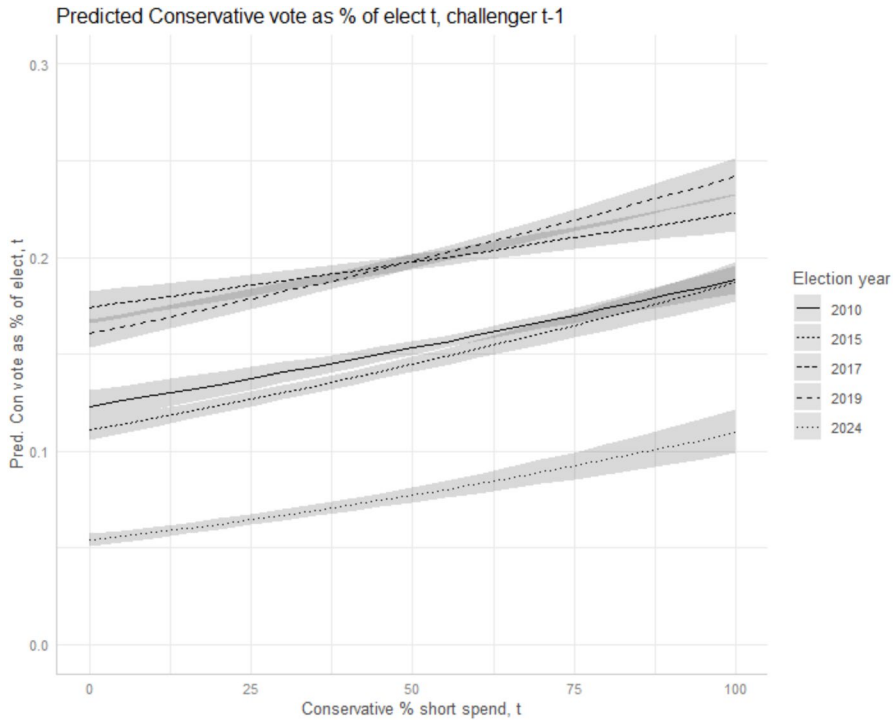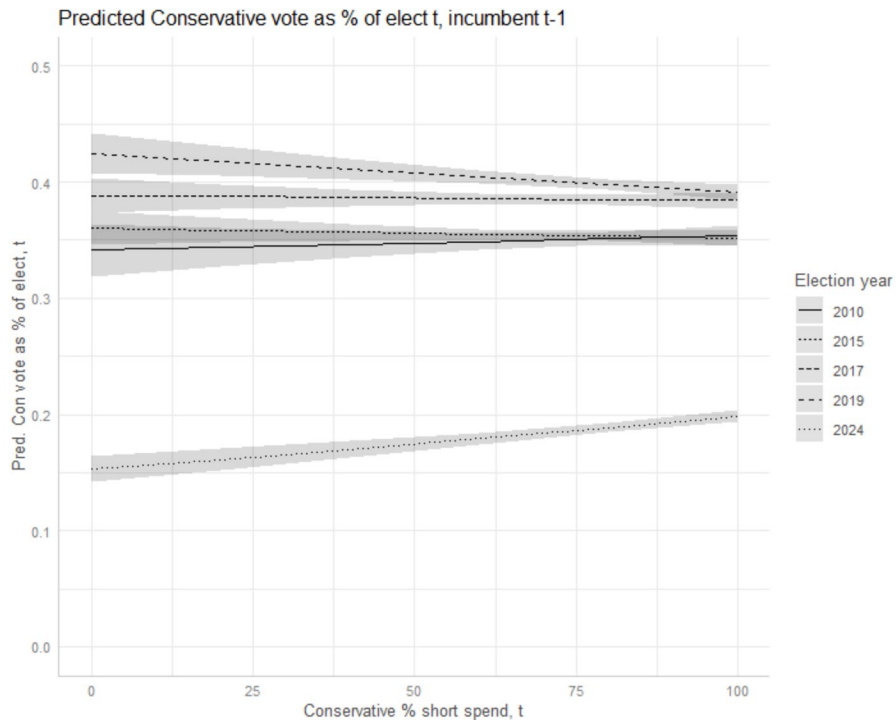Predicted Conservative vote as % of elect t, challenger t-1

Fig. 6 Conservative % share of electorate 2010–2024 as a function of campaign spending, previous marginality and election year in seats where the Conservatives were challengers: visualising the interaction effects. controlling for 2016 Brexit vote

the Conservatives' constituency campaign evolved over the period, however. The basic patterns revealed are similar to those shown in the models which did not include a control for the Leave vote.

Conclusions

Three key stories emerge. First, at the 1997 and (to a lesser extent) 2001 elections, the Conservatives' constituency campaign strategy was problematic. Second, this situation improved markedly after 2001, following internal reforms. Third, however, there were some striking anomalies to the overall narrative. As we detail below, the Conservatives' 2017 election campaign stands out in this regard. The Conservatives' difficulties in that contest were reflective of wider campaign failings, and our findings back up existing analyses of what went wrong.

First, and as past research on the Conservatives' constituency campaigning has shown, in 1997 and to some extent in 2001 the party's campaign strategy was inefficient, ineffective and irrational. The party's targeting of campaign efforts was problematic. Its most intense campaigning efforts in 1997 tended to be in seats it already

Predicted Conservative vote as % of elect t, incumbent t-1

Fig. 7 Fig. 4: Conservative % share of electorate, 2010–2024 as a function of campaign spending, previous marginality and election year in seats where the Conservatives were incumbents: visualising the interaction effects (controlling for 2016 Brexit vote)

held by often wide margins. There were some signs, by 2001, that the Conservatives were doing better at targeting marginal seats where they were the challengers, and their greatest campaign efforts in that contest were focussed on these seats, and not in seats they already held. This is an early sign of the reforms instituted by William Hague beginning to bear fruit, but it also a likely consequence of the Conservatives' landslide loss in 1997, which meant it started from a lower floor in the 2001 campaign, seeking to win back many seats it had previously held and where it still retained some local party infrastructure and resource. But at both elections, there was little sign of a tapering-off of campaign effort in seats where it was the incumbent as the seats became safer: the reforms still had a way to go.

While the Conservative campaign was poorly targeted in 1997 and 2001, it did help the party gain votes where the party was the local challenger. The harder the Conservatives campaigned in such seats, the greater their vote share. This reinforces the interpretation that the Conservatives' constituency campaign was less efficient in 1997 and 2001 (and again probably also reflects the party's poor position after its heavy 1997 defeat).

Second, from the 2005 election till the 2019 contest, there were clear signs of improvements in the targeting and effectiveness of the Conservatives'

constituency campaign, as internal reforms began to take greater effect. They did better on place-based targeting, and on targeting particular groups of voters using profiling and micro-targeting to tailor their message to key voters in key places. This paid dividends for the party. Its campaign effort increasingly was focussed on the marginal seats it most needed to target (those it needed to win in the 2005 and 2010 elections, and those it needed to defend in 2015 and 2019). Compared to 1997 and 2001, less effort went into seats the party already held comfortably. Where Conservatives were challengers, greater marginal returns than in previous years came from their campaign efforts. Where the party was the local incumbent, meanwhile, campaign efforts after 2005 had little impact on its vote share (in line with expectations). Put simply, this indicates more efficient and effective Conservative campaigning.

Third, however, this transition from less to more efficient and effective campaigning was not entirely smooth. The 2017 election stands out clearly. Previous accounts of that campaign's failings (e.g. Bale 2023) are borne out in our analysis, which suggests a scatter-gun approach to the 2017 constituency campaign. Of the eight elections we study here, 2017 is the only one in which the Conservatives put the same effort into all its most marginal constituencies, irrespective of whether the party was the local challenger or incumbent. In seats where they were attacking, the Conservatives increased their spending in the most marginal but also in the most hopeless seats, wasting not only votes but also resources.

In addition, our analysis of the Conservatives' 2015 campaign suggests the party was perhaps overly defensive. Its peak spending came in marginals it already held—rational for a party of government, but something of a lost opportunity for a governing party without an overall majority of its own and in need of more seats to provide that majority. While the Conservatives did achieve that overall majority in 2015, they might have increased it further had they put more emphasis on those marginals where they were the local challenger. The party faced a similar scenario in 2019, as a minority government seeking to both defend its existing seats and to win seats it did not currently hold. But in that election, a more cautious stance was arguably justified given the failures of the 2017 campaign, when the party had anticipated a landslide which patently did not happen. In 2015, by contrast, the omens were actually good for the party. While they were an incumbent party of government, support for their coalition partners the Liberal Democrats was collapsing, while there was solid polling evidence before and throughout the campaign that they were ahead of Labour, their main rival. Given that situation, it is surprising that their 2015 campaign was so relatively defensive. Perhaps it reflected a dual strategy, to be more defensive where Labour was their local challenger in the vast majority of the marginals they were defending, and to run a more offensive campaign in marginals where they were the main challengers to a Liberal Democrat incumbent.

At the 2019 election, the Conservatives had obtained a large majority and had defeated Labour so comprehensively that many expected their chances of losing the next election would be very small. But by 2023, following the Covid pandemic and a series of scandals (such as the so-called 'partygate' affair), the fall-out from Brexit, a severe cost of living crisis, and the economic turmoil unleashed following serious policy mistakes enacted by the short-lived Truss administration, their fortunes were

in steep decline. Commentary turned from the inevitability of a further Conservative victory to the likely scale of an apparently unavoidable Conservative defeat (with a landslide loss similar in size to that of 1997 looking possible). Unsurprisingly, the Conservatives reverted to a highly defensive strategy in 2024 (with candidate-led activism maximising the personal local vote) in an attempt to limit their losses as much as possible.

The cumulative effect was a catastrophic loss of support for the party (its vote share dropped in 2024 to just 23.7%), by far its worst general election result. Under such circumstances, a campaign strategy increasingly focussed on supposedly marginal constituencies risked being overwhelmed as many normally safe seats for the party came into play too. The Conservatives' campaigns had become much more efficient and effective in the years since 2001. But the 2024 debacle shows the limits of such a strategy. Many seats where incumbent Conservative candidates might have expected support for a vigorous campaign of defence were in effect abandoned by the party as it scrambled to save seats it would normally expect to hold comfortably. Efficient allocation of campaign effort to a few battleground seats may be rational in normal electoral times, when only a relatively few seats change hands. But when an electoral tsunami hits (as it did for the Conservatives in 2024), campaign efficiency might actually backfire badly, as the electoral wave outflanks a party's campaign defences.

Declarations

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