Chapter 10: The Last Campaign: the UK's Final European Election

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Introduction

From a British perspective, the European Election of 2019 was an extraordinary event. The campaign took place against a background of an ongoing Brexit related impasse within the House of Commons and resulting domestic political turmoil. That the election happened at all was another manifestation of what seemed an interminable crisis (Vasilopoulou, 2020). Aside from the continuing and often fierce debates between and within those aligned to the so-called 'Leave' and 'Remain' camps, the minority Conservative government led by Theresa May struggled to make any meaningful progress in its negotiations with the European Union over how and when UK membership would cease. Although the 2016 Referendum had endorsed Brexit, the relatively close margin of victory, together with the varied (and subsequent growth in) interpretations over what that result should mean in practice, had only served to intensify a debate that now engulfed British politics.

The background to the Referendum and indeed Brexit itself was linked to surge in support experienced by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). One of UKIP's most notable achievements was to top the poll in the 2014 European Elections (see Chapter 4), and this success further enhanced the profile and influence of its increasingly visible leader Nigel Farage. UKIP secured an eighth of the popular vote in the following year's national election, but this did not prevent the Conservatives from securing a majority government. Fatefully, within a year, David Cameron felt obliged to call the 2016 Referendum in which he belatedly embraced and led the Remain campaign. Opposing him was an official Leave effort spearheaded by Conservative colleagues Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, both of whom subsequently attempted to replace Cameron following his resignation following the public endorsement of Brexit. Theresa May's subsequent installation in Downing Street failed to resolve the ensuing crisis over how and when the UK would leave the EU. Like Cameron in 2016, she made another sudden decision to go to the country in 2017 but this too ultimately began her eventual downfall when her party lost its parliamentary majority following that year's General Election. May's resignation came after two further years of parliamentary impasse with the catalyst being the outcome of the UK's 2019 European elections: that this vote happened at all further underlined the extent of her government's failure in negotiations with the EU to deliver Brexit.

The analysis in this chapter examines the British experience of the European elections, a campaign that foreshadowed the momentous and subsequently definitive outcome of the General Election held later in the year (Prosser, 2021). Because the country was still an EU member in May 2019 Britons were obliged to vote in the elections and while the broadcast media gave obligatory attention to the subsequent campaign, the most fiercely pro-Brexit newspapers failed to muster anything like the kind of enthusiasm they had displayed during the 2016 Referendum. The last-minute announcement that the UK would be participating in these elections also made for a highly unusual race and one where the only meaningful and detailed communications a party could issue were via social media platforms. This study is based on researching the most popular of these, Facebook, a site adjudged to be one of the most important on account of its widespread reach within the UK population. The parent company had also recently become embroiled in a controversy centring on the activities of the Cambridge Analytica consultancy and, more specifically, the firm's perceived efficacy in being able to influence voters including during the 2016 Referendum itself. Regardless of these allegations, there was a widespread belief shared by politicians that Facebook was potentially important as a relatively low-cost method for targeting parts of an electorate who otherwise might not have been reached via the news media or conventional campaign methods.

An Election Like No Other

Such was the uncertainty de facto Deputy Prime Minister David Lidington only confirmed the UK would be participating in the 2019 EU campaign less than three weeks before polling day on 23rd May. While every election is different, none had come about in quite the same circumstances. And if this was dramatic, then so were the dynamics of this short campaign, the immediate aftermath of which saw the resignation of Theresa May as Prime Minister. The

Party	Seats	Share of vote (%)	Popular vote
Brexit Party	29	30.5	5,248,533
Liberal Democrats	16	19.6	3,367,284
Labour Party	10	13.7	2,347,255
Green Party	7	11.8	1,881,306
Conservatives	4	8.8	1,512,809
Change UK	0	3.3	571,486
UKIP	0	3.2	554,463
Other	7	9.1	1,716,565
Total	73	100	17,199,701

Figure 10.01: Results of the 2019 EP election in the United Kingdom

EP elections saw her governing Conservatives slump to fifth place in the poll, having obtained less than a tenth of the available votes and secured only four parliamentary seats. Far from being the beneficiaries of this spectacular collapse, the principal Labour opposition failed to capitalise and performed only marginally better. By contrast it was the Leave supporting Brexit Party which, only a few months after it had been created by former UKIP leader Nigel Farage, claimed 'victory' by gaining the most seats having topped the poll. Farage's success was in part due to his forthright and repeated demand for the House of Commons to accept the result of the 2016 Referendum. Although deeply opposed to the Brexit Party over the European issue among other policies, the Liberal Democrats were similarly able to articulate the kind of case that helped them comfortably secure second place in an election that marked their best national result in nearly a decade. But for others, this election experience was far from beneficial. Significantly the rejuvenation of the LibDems signalled the beginning of the end for the then newly formed anti-Brexit party Change UK.

The very late notice that the UK would participate in the 2019 EU poll meant party strategists had little time to make their respective preparations. Given there had been relatively little journalistic interest in previous elections of this kind, together with the exponential growth in use of social media over the last decade, it was clear that the online campaign would be of some importance. And while Twitter and other platforms may be favoured by the cognoscenti, Facebook remains the platform of choice for most Britons (Ofcom, 2019). Particularly significant here is its dedicated following among older people, who are those more likely to participate in elections than their younger counterparts (Maier and Nai, 2020). Facebook would therefore be an essential tool for parties seeking to mobilise the widest possible number of prospective voters because of a reach and immediacy invaluable in a barely three-week race. Studying this platform also provides understanding of the strategic thinking and persuasive techniques of rival politicians at a moment where

the public at large also had a further opportunity to participate in a nationwide ballot. While the 2019 EU vote might not have been the most electorally significant given the symbolic nature of it, it was nonetheless another in a sequence of political events at the height of the domestic travails that followed both the Referendum and subsequent General Election. This analysis seeks to better understand and analysis this situation through empirical analysis of the election that was never supposed to have been. The project does so having contemporaneously collected material posted by rival parties in the period covering the most intensive weeks of campaigning across the entire EU. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis of this material provides unique insights into the themes, issues, tone, and personalities that defined the campaign in every country.

For this study Facebook postings from the respective party's official page were coded from May 1, during the build-up to the formal election announcement on May 7, to polling day on May 23 and for the 5 days after. All data was retrieved from the publicly available database of material collated by the EU Parliament sponsored European Election Monitoring Centre (EEMC) investigation which had used a crawler managed by a small AI component to undertake daily capture of content (Novelli and Johansson, 2019). In total, 721 posts were collected for the UK aspect of the project with material filtered according to its relevance to the EP elections. Most obviously this material concerned any direct mentions of elections, candidates, and exhortations to participate such as hashtags like #VoteUkip that accompanied postings. Through manual rather than automated coding procedures, care was taken to ensure other political content was filtered out, notably postings relating to the local government campaign which climaxed in early May. Ramley et al (2019) included all Facebook adverts from the political parties they analysed between 5 April and 23 May, and it is highly probable that some of this material was primarily about the Council rather than the EP elections. Even a declining electoral force such as UKIP retained an interest in local campaigning in 2019, defending the gains they made at this level when the respective seats were last contested in 2015.

This project focused on posts from selected parties' official Facebook pages. Posts of this nature operate as the public face of the party opposed to paid for ads that tend to be targeted towards specific demographics. This study formulated a coding frame adopted from by the codebook devised for the EEMC project, with the key variables being: the presence of the party, and the individual political actors/ campaigners; the major issues being addressed;

whether content was directly linked to Brexit; if the material was negative and, if so, whom was it rebuking (see also Ritchie et al., 2022). Several variables in the EEMC framework were not adapted because they were irrelevant and these included codes relating to EU phenomena like the so-called 'Spitzenkandidaten'. The codebook was, however, carefully tailored to reflect the particularities of the British experience, most obviously by the insertion of Brexit-related themes to capture the subtlety of related messaging during the campaign.

Taking Sides: Leave, Remain, Other

This study focuses on Facebook content produced by rival parties and whose posts were collected by the EEMC during the campaign: for logistical reasons the project limited the number of parties to a maximum seven in each of the twenty-eight member states. This project therefore includes those that fielded the largest number of candidates throughout the UK which, in practical terms, means the parties that contested all of the seats in Great Britain and collectively won over 90% of the popular vote (see Figure 10.01). For this reason, Northern Irish parties were excluded as were the others that gained seats having only stood candidates in the other devolved nations of Scotland (i.e. Scottish National) and Wales (Plaid Cymru). The Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green, UK Independence, Brexit, and Change UK parties were therefore the seven chosen subjects featured in the EEMC database and in the focus of this analysis. The formation of the latter two were, of course, further evidence of the significant changes in the domestic party system since the previous EP elections of 2014.

Despite experiencing various setbacks approaching the 2019 elections, UKIP maintained a large social media following and its continuing influence was reflected in the relatively high number of shares, comments and likes from their Facebook posts during the EU campaign (Ramley et al., 2019). The once dominant pro-Leave party had lost considerable ground in the aftermath of its 2014 triumph following various internal rows over its ideological direction that culminated with several high-profile defections including 21 of its 24 MEPs, among them former leader Nigel Farage. Farage would leave and found his new organisation, the Brexit Party, in January 2019. This febrile environment also saw the launch of Change UK shortly after, a group established to promote the so-called 'People's Vote' in the form of another referendum on UK membership of the EU with Remain as an option. Like their Brexit Party rivals, Change UK chose not to formally contest local elections in spring 2019. There was some

Image 10.01: UKIP post advocating for the UK to adopt World Trade Organisation rules after the implementation of Brexit. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.
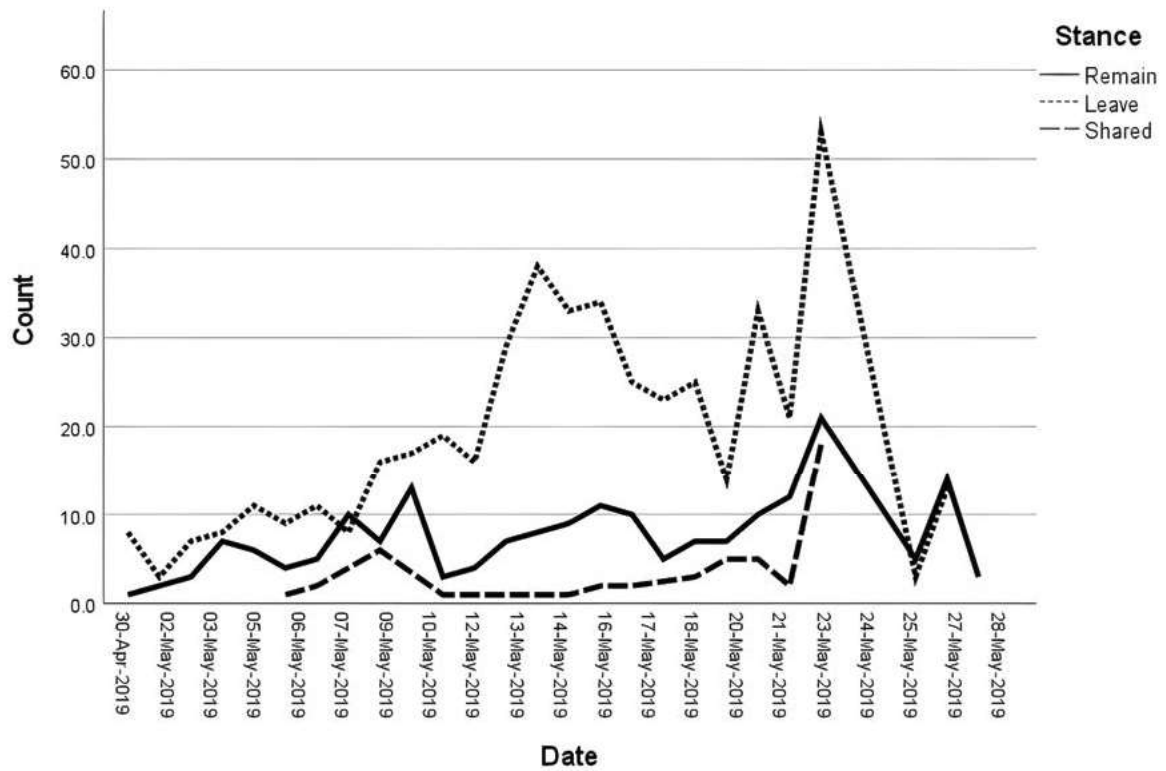

Figure 10.02: Facebook posts: daily variations according to stance on Brexit. Source: Authors own analysis.

speculation over what the presence of these two new, diametrically opposed parties might mean for the highly fractious state of contemporary British politics and beyond. The EP election would afford the opportunity to make their case to the public.

The study distinguishes between the featured parties according to their respective stances over Brexit. The two clear 'Leave' organisations, UKIP and the Brexit Party, defined themselves by their position on the EU issue; both also supported a 'no deal' or exit on 'WTO terms' (Image 10.01). The Liberal Democrats, Greens and Change UK would later participate in a so-called 'Remain Alliance' during December's General Election but were still rivals entering this campaign, in part a reflection of the proportional voting system that benefitted smaller groups. All three advocated for another referendum on EU membership during this campaign, although the LibDems later abandoned this position (in favour of the more controversial revoke policy) in December's General Election. In contrast, the formal positions of the two main parties were ambiguous. While Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn publicly countenanced that Brexit could take place under an incoming Labour government subject to protections of employment and environmental standards, Theresa May struggled to articulate the Conservatives'

position given the parlous state of her government which, when the election was called, was reeling from its latest crisis over her sacking of Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson for a charge of misconduct he vigorously denied. So, although the two main leaders accepted the result of the Referendum, they appeared more reluctant to align themselves with the Remain and Leave sides. Their shared ambiguity positioned Labour and the Conservatives together as the 'other' side in the Brexit debate going in to the 2019 EP election.

Judging by the parties' combined Facebook posts, the campaign was somewhat uneven. Following the official announcement that the election was going to happen there was a flurry of material, but this content did not increase and develop uniformly during the ensuing campaign. Rather posts fell away during the initial part of the final running up to polling day after heightened activity from May 13-17 (Figure 10.02). More generally there appears to have been a relatively modest amount of posting in this campaign, particularly when UKIP material is discounted: this reflects how certain parties appeared unprepared or, in the case of Labour and the Conservatives, unsure over their messaging on Brexit. This scale of activity also reflected what was expected to be a low turnout of the kind normally associated
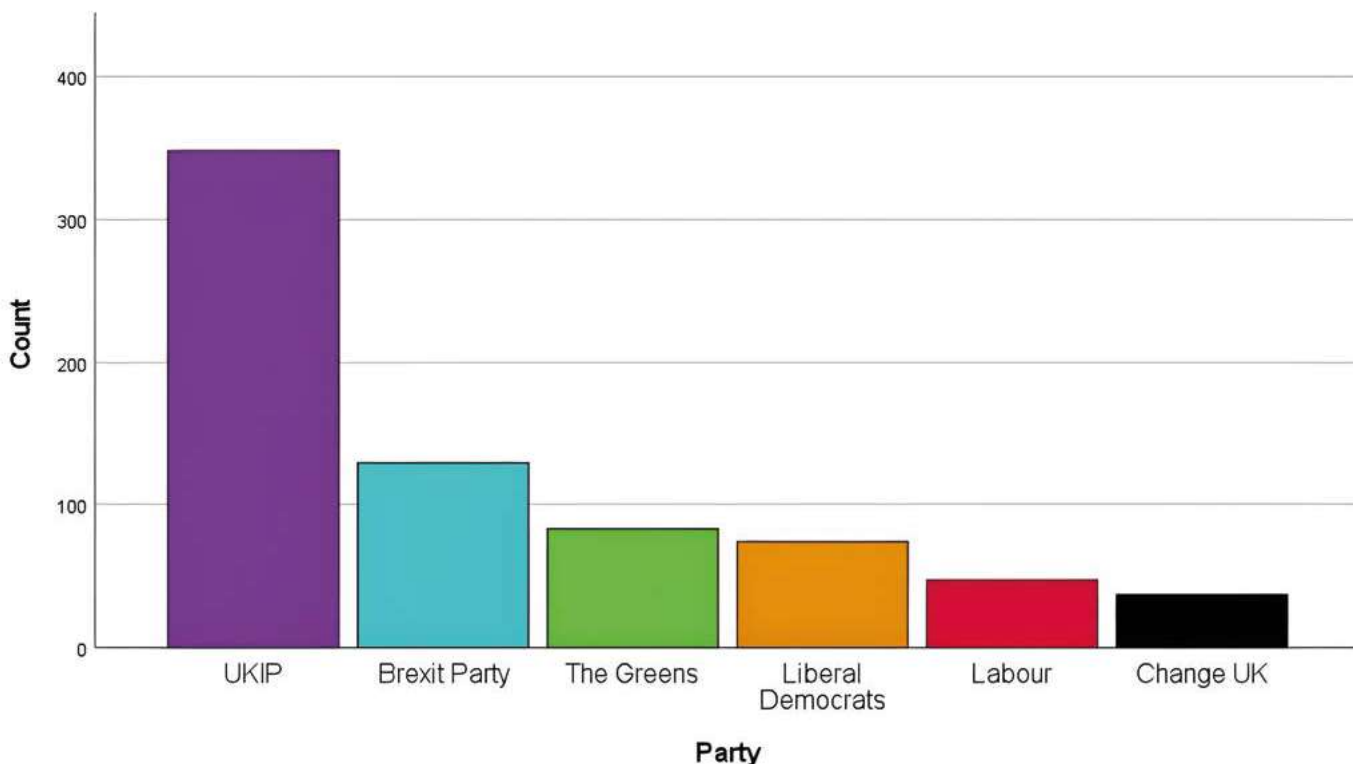

Figure 10.03: Facebook posts: total number by each party, May 1-28. Source: Authors own analysis.

with a second order election: at 37% of the registered electorate this was approximately half of those who voted in the General Election later in the year.

Figure 10.03: demonstrates the extent to which content from the two most avowedly pro-Leave parties exceeded that of their rivals. UKIP were by far and some way the most active party on Facebook with 348 postings, nearly half (48.3%) of the total sample, and typically these were about topical campaign issues, the government's alleged mishandling of EU negotiations, and material relating to their MEP candidates. A likely reason for this was that the party, devoid of funds, was not able to sustain the kind of paid advertising efforts that its opponents could. The Brexit Party, for instance, did spend on Facebook ads while simultaneously maintaining a notable presence with the second largest number of posts on the platform. Many of these 129 postings (17.9%) were predictably highly critical of the government, claiming they had ill served democracy in betraying the Referendum result.

On the Remain side, the Greens were the most active party with their relative lack of financial resources and full-time personnel no barrier to them being able to disseminate posts via social media platforms including Facebook. The Liberal Democrats posted almost as much but, as will be demonstrated,

tended to focused this messaging on future UK-EU relations and the prospect for another referendum on British membership. The other pro-Remain grouping, Change UK, maintained a comparatively low profile on their official Facebook page as it did on other social media platforms. Despite having been launched to expressly campaign against Brexit, the party appeared wholly inadequately prepared to offer either coherent or consistent messaging regarding its position. The Labour and Conservative MPs who had defected to Change UK did not capitalise on the initial publicity they had generated over the months preceding the EP election. During this campaign they failed to make an electoral breakthrough having disseminated relatively little content. CUK's Facebook postings were less frequent than those of Labour, a party divided over whether to press for a second referendum. But if the official opposition was somewhat muted, this was nothing compared to the virtual anonymity of the Conservatives on Facebook throughout this campaign. The incumbent government's failure to articulate or even defend its policies in this way reflected the chaos engulfing Downing Street during a period that turned out to be the closing weeks of Theresa May's premiership.
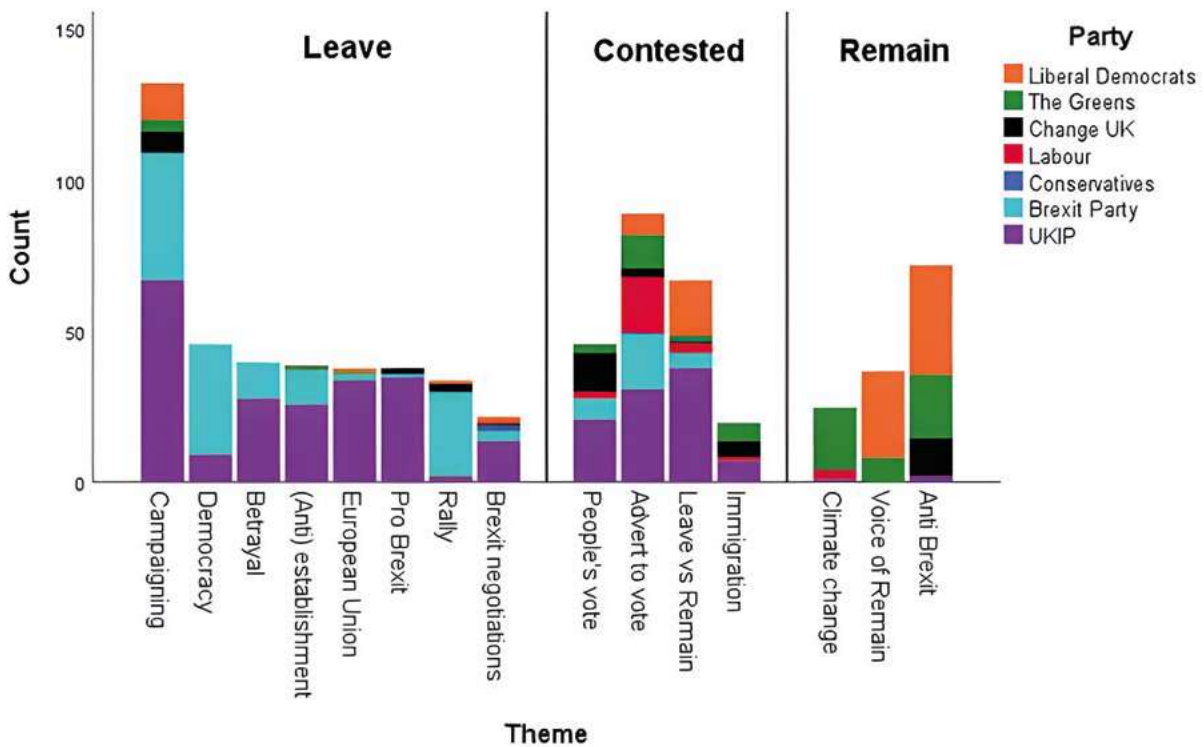

Figure 10.04: Key campaign themes: according to party and divided by whether dominated by supporters of Leave, Remain or both (i.e., Contested). Source: Authors own analysis.

Image 10.02: Brexit Party post advertising one of leader Nigel Farage's public campaign rallies. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

Image 10.03: Brexit Party ad referencing the need to support it and ensure the 2016 Referendum outcome is honoured. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

Image 10.04: Liberal Democrat ad reinforcing the party's continuing opposition to Brexit. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

Image 10.05: Party messaging adopts Sex Pistols' iconography and slogan from the 1970s to make its point. European Election Monitoring Center.
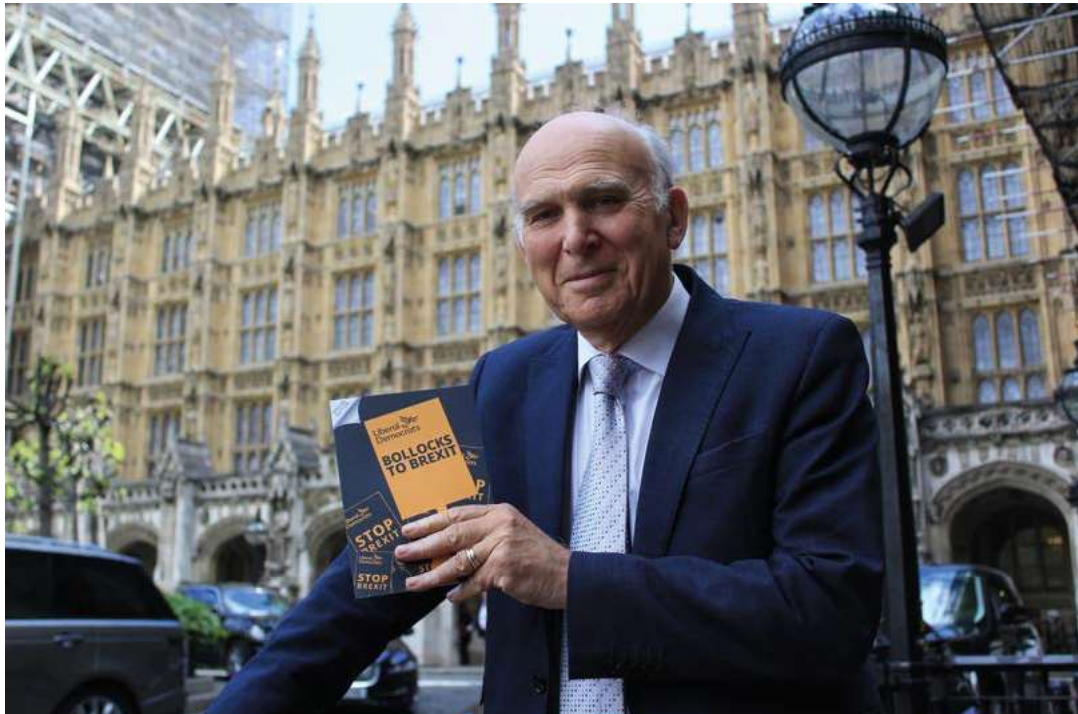

Image 10.06: Leader Vince Cable endorses his party's colourful 'Bollocks to Brexit' strapline. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

A Brexit Campaign? Themes and Issues

This was a campaign indelibly linked to the issue of Brexit but it was about more than the merits or otherwise of the alternative proposals that had been formulated and promoted since the Referendum. That said, where the parties' Facebook posts explicitly referenced the election, their support for Leave or Remain was a noticeable factor in shaping most of their posted content. Figure 10.04 reviews the major issues of the campaign and it is evident there was a degree of polarisation between the pro- and anti-EU sides. It is, however, noteworthy that the two camps intervened over some common concerns: where each was responsible for at least a quarter of the postings on any given subject these were categorised as Contested. Foremost here were so-called process items like 'People's Vote' although there was 'Immigration' related material. Non-policy messaging predominated throughout this campaign regardless of whether the posts originated from the Remain or Leave side. The latter camp, in particular, were responsible for the generic theme of 'Campaigning', the single largest topic. Typical content of this kind featured images and video of politicians and/or their supporters meeting voters, canvassing or on their campaign bus. The Brexit Party was characteristically strategic in its use of professionally made and edited film content, with footage of Nigel Farage in front of crowds, on board fishing boats, or visiting Brexit supporting communities in the once Labour Northeast heartlands of places like Sunderland and Hartlepool.

The Brexit Party leader addressing members of the public at campaign rallies became a recurrent image as highlights of these events were relayed via Twitter and YouTube as well as Facebook. The feed for what were supposedly live streams was often delayed by 5-10 minutes, a fact promoted by some highly self-conscious apologising for the inconvenience caused to waiting viewers. Brexit Party content providers explained the delays had been caused by the exceptional numbers of supporters seeking access to the venue in question. The subsequent reference to the size of attendance at events, and the resulting problems caused, became a marked feature of the campaign's presentational strategy. The related imagery helped amplify the core message that Farage and his colleagues had seemingly won the support of 'the people', a contention supported by continuous visual evidence of crowds, many of whom could be clearly seen embracing Brexit Party placards. Footage from gatherings like this was routinely edited into two- or three-minute vignettes before being posted. In one typical video of this kind, Farage finished his speech to a rally in Lancashire by declaring his intention to 'change politics for good' before the camera panned out behind him as he pointed to an audience giving their unanimous support by holding up the party's now ubiquitous light blue signs.

Repeated claims to be representative of 'the will of the people' was the Brexit Party's core message and explains why four-fifths of their posts could be categorised under the 'Democracy', the second most important theme for the party and one it also dominated (see Figure 10.04). Linked to this, party representatives referred to a 'Westminster elite' and a 'political class' deemed 'out of touch' and Nigel Farage was quoted as believing 'the establishment aren't scared of us… they are absolutely terrified' (Image 10.02). The national flag also featured prominently in party messaging (e.g., Image 10.03). In a series of talking head style videos, party candidates promoted accountability, rather than UK departure from the EU per se, as their primary motive for standing in the election. This contention was linked to the supposed crisis of accountability in British politics with one clip challenged viewers with the question: 'Ask yourself, do you really live in a democracy?'. On the eve of polling day, the party circulated an animation featuring an image of Westminster to further amplify this message. The accompanying slogan offered a stark warning: 'British Democracy is at 1 minute to midnight. Tomorrow is your chance to save it'. Several of the Brexit Party's less familiar representatives were prominent in this messaging with one, Robert Rowland, speaking in alarmist tones when contending: 'There may not be tanks on the streets but make no mistake this is a coup against democracy' (23 May). Similarly, fellow candidate Laura Kevehazi spoke of the election as 'our battle of Britain', invoking the memory of her parents who had been shot by the Nazis during the Second World War.

The Brexit Party formula was part of a successful campaign if judged by the election outcome as well as the success with which this still very new political force was able to quickly establish itself as the most credible voice for Leave. Inevitably it did share some of the concerns of its Eurosceptic rival UKIP, albeit promoting them with greater message discipline. One issue common to both was the so-called 'Betrayal', a theme articulated by ex-Conservative minister Ann Widdecombe who claimed her former party had failed the 17.4 million people who had supported Leave by wilfully refusing to carry out what she termed a 'proper Brexit'. This was complemented by a video compilation featuring Remain supporters describing the 2016 ballot as 'a once in a lifetime' vote. The film then showed the same politicians advocating a second referendum accompanied by the tagline 'They lied to you'. Although it made postings about this and other similar issues, UKIP did so more frequently and in characteristically more provocative ways. That said, it was also the only party

Image 10.07: Green Party ad material positioning itself against its principal rivals for left of centre voters' support. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

Image 10.8. Green party ad material depicting a hot air balloon emblazoned with the Green Party emblem rising above two jagged rocks representing the colours of Lib Dems and Labour. Source: European Election Monitoring Center

Image 10.09: Green Party material challenged the Liberal Democrats' claim to be the leading Remain party. Source: European Election Monitoring Center

that seriously engaged with the European Union as an entity, albeit through interventions that were predictably highly antagonistic towards the institution.

Perhaps realising their previous criticisms of the European Union had already convinced enough prospective supporters, the Leave parties did not excessively promote the supposed benefits of Brexit. The case for leaving the EU did not actually feature in the Brexit Party postings. The same was the case with both the Labour and Conservative campaign albeit for different reasons relating to the paucity of their Facebook postings: while the former exhorted supporters to vote and offered some comments on more generic policy concerns, the latter barely issued any election related material at all. By contrast the Remain camp, notably the Liberal Democrats, frequently posted content and in its case much of this was anti-Leave (Image 10.04). Energised by success in the recent local government elections, they were keen to promote themselves as 'Biggest Remain party'. The LibDems popularised the slogan 'Bollocks to Brexit' in homage to pop group The Sex Pistols' iconic 1970s album cover and in doing so caused further controversy (Image 10.05), particularly after BBC presenter Andrew Marr felt obliged to apologise to viewers when leader Vince Cable used the phrase in an interview with him (see also Image 10.06). The memorable phrase and related imagery helped position the party as a more maverick force seeking to challenge pro-Leave orthodoxy. Although the term proved popular among sympathisers and anti-Brexit campaigners, most of the LibDem's Facebook postings were stylistically less aggressive and did not make much use of it.

Campaigning for a second referendum the Greens also made it clear its preference for Remain being on a further ballot: to underline this position their 'No to Brexit' webcards were adorned with the image of the EU flag. The party devoted some Facebook postings to attacking its principal rivals for the anti-Brexit vote, calling out the Liberal Democrats for their role in the Coalition government between 2010-15 and particularly their support for austerity and tuition fee rises. The Greens cautioned voting for the party 'could be dangerous' (Image 10.07). In related imagery, a traffic light device was used to extol the merits of the party (and its colour) while warning voters against supporting the Liberal Democrats (amber) or Labour (red). Another illustration contained a similar message, this time with a Green hot air balloon charting a course between two jagged rocks representing each of the aforementioned rivals (image 10.08). Nevertheless, the party devoted considerable efforts and posts to substantive policy issues. Conscious of appealing to younger people, the Greens promoted their traditional raison d'être

of the environment and, more specifically, the issue of climate change which made up over 25% of their Facebook content and an overwhelming majority of all posts on the topic. Significantly, as previously noted in reference their candidate Majid Majid, they party promoted immigration, an issue linked to the Brexit debate and more often associated with Eurosceptic politicians who were comparatively muted on the subject in this election. The issue was also one of the few to attract comment from Change UK in what was a notable intervention in an otherwise somewhat low-profile campaign of posts by them.

Although they managed to fund a reasonably well-resourced advertising campaign via Facebook, the lack of Change UK self-generated content on their official page was illustrative of the wider problems that had engulfed the party since its initial launch. The lack of content bore out media coverage about the organisation's lack of strategic direction that these reports linked to uncertainty over the party's leadership and the absence of a coherent vision. The *Mail* reported some influential figures in the group believed they should position themselves to challenge and even replace the Liberal Democrats (Ellicott, 2019). This plan, and its hostile intention, was distinct from the Social Democratic Party experiment in the early 1980s (see Chapter 4) although it was permissible that the EP elections' proportional voting system could have afforded the new party a potentially invaluable opportunity. But the subsequent campaign proved to be the beginning of the end for CUK after various public embarrassments, including their lead Scottish candidate endorsing the Liberal Democrats.

The pro- and anti-Brexit parties may have been diametrically opposed on the European issue, but they did share some common, albeit 'Contested' concerns in this campaign. UKIP and the Liberal Democrats, for instance, tended to frame the election as 'Leave versus Remain' as distinct from a traditional, purely party-political affair (see Figure 10.04). Similarly, the so-called 'People's Vote' label appeared in UKIP as well as Change UK material, although for entirely different reasons. CUK promoted the concept in just over a third of their posts and in so doing made it the core message of their meagre campaign. The proportion of posts making some reference to Brexit varied according to party. Just over half of this material mentioned the word itself, with this including items that used any of the interminable and growing range of related jargon that had become commonplace since the Referendum. This covered phrases like 'People's Vote', 'Remainer', 'Brexiteer' and more esoteric fare such as 'WTO Brexit'. Posts that did not explicitly use the word were nevertheless routinely framed in relation
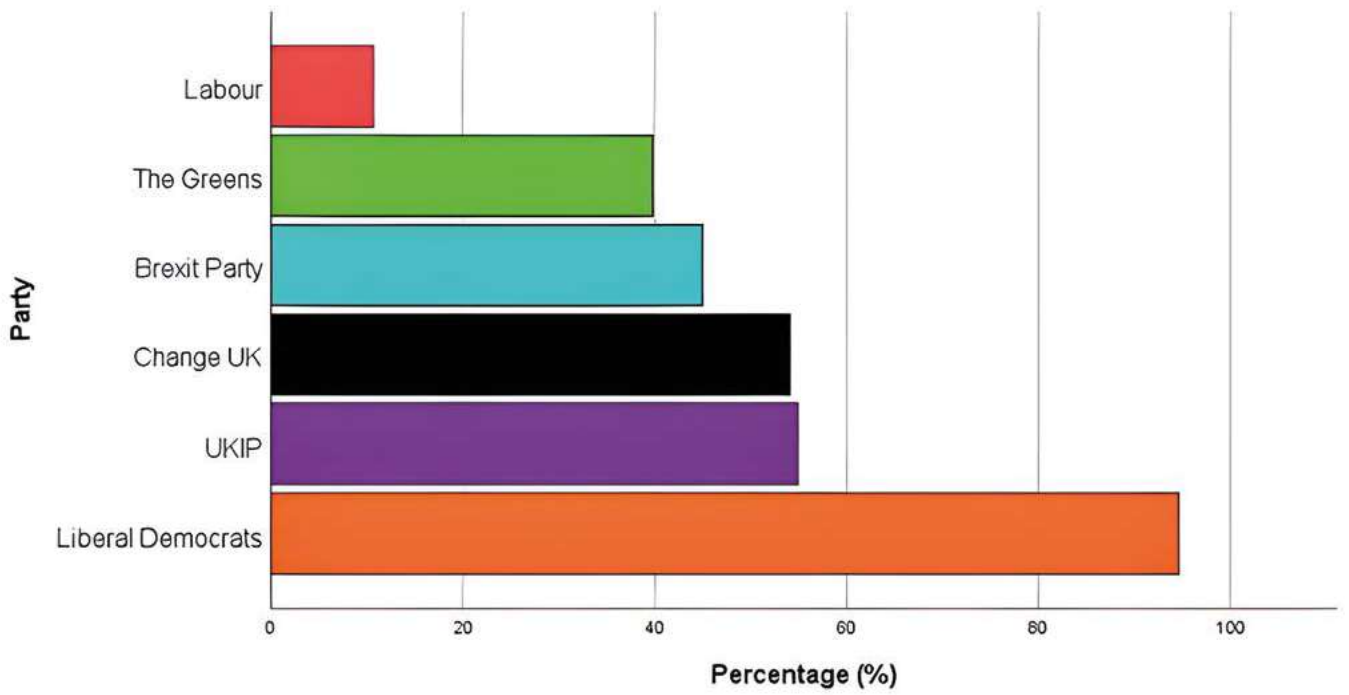
Figure 10.05: Facebook posts: percentage of each party's mentioning 'Brexit'. Source: Authors own analysis.
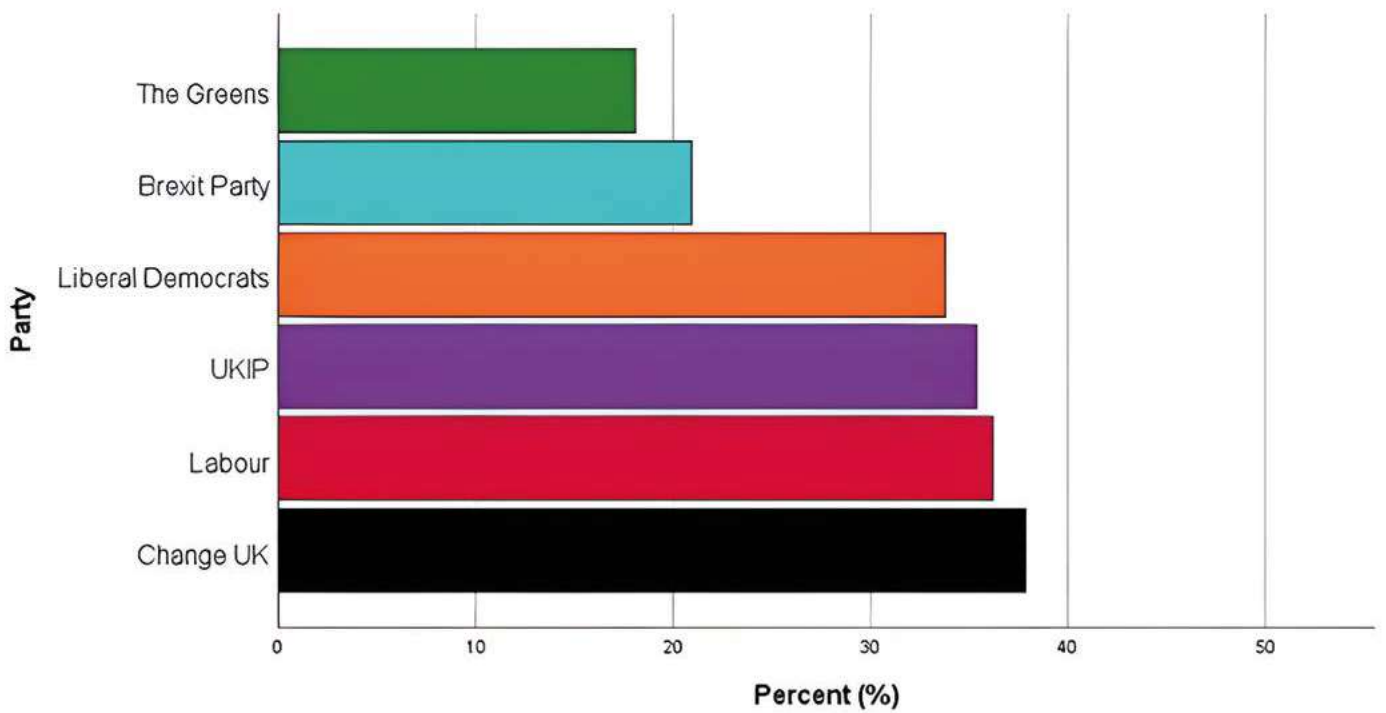

Figure 10.06: Facebook posts: percentage issued that were negative by party. Source: Authors own analysis.
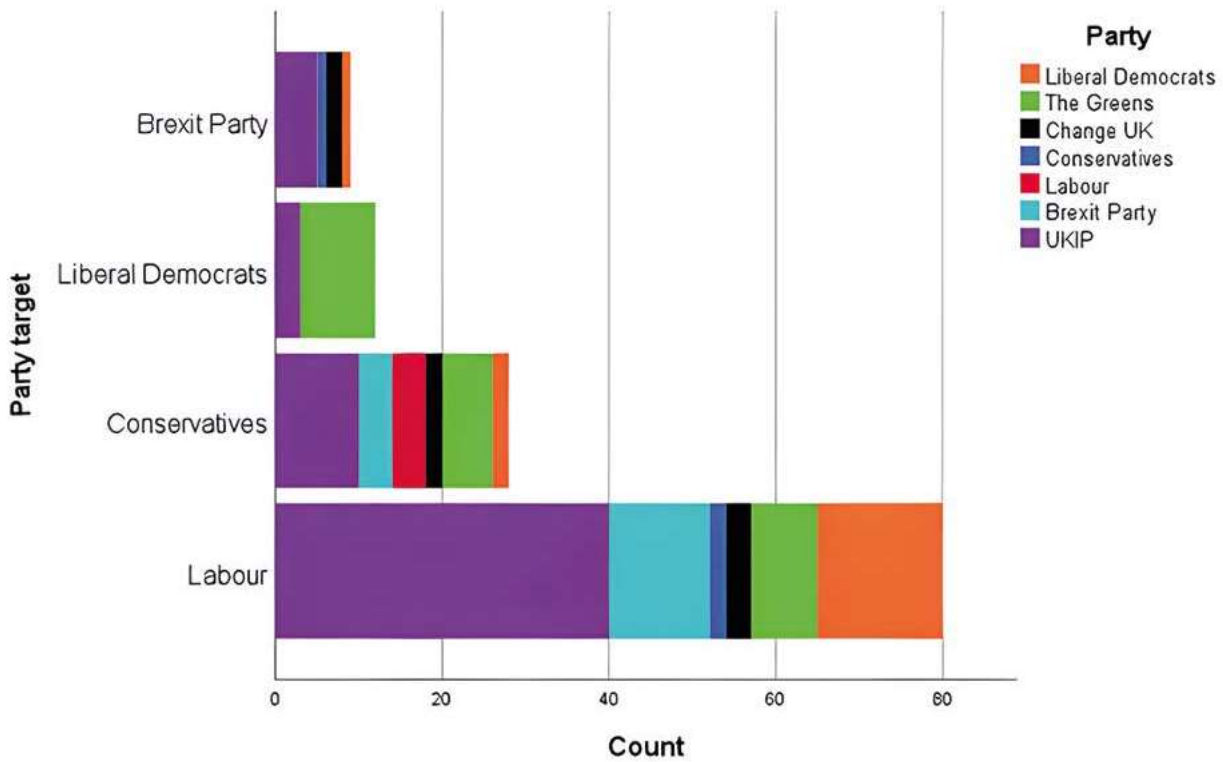
Figure 10.07: Facebook postings: numbers of posts by party, and their intended target. Source: Authors own analysis.
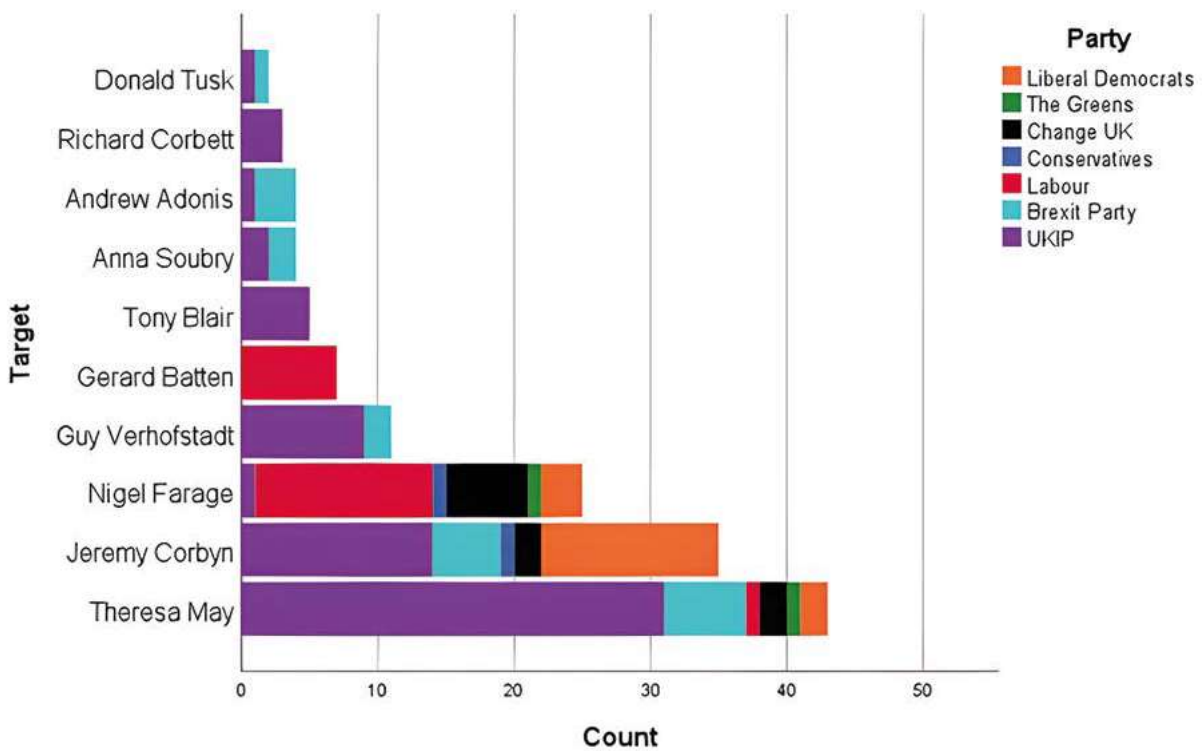

Figure 10.08: Facebook Targets: Most prominent politicians in rival parties' content. Source: Authors own analysis

to it, i.e., a desire to leave the common fisheries policy or, conversely, to continue working closely with the EU over action on climate change.

Figure 10.05 demonstrates that it was the Liberal Democrats, more than any rival, who were most likely to use 'Brexit', as the term appeared in virtually all their campaign content: only four of their posts did not. It has already been acknowledged how some of this material included the 'Bollocks' mantra'. But while this profanity attracted attention and even rebukes, the slogan was one more noticeable manifestation of the party's strategy of single-mindedly focusing on the general cause rather than the specific benefits of continued UK membership of the EU. Despite Nigel Farage's party bearing its name, the term Brexit was mentioned in just under a half of all its campaign postings. This was a similar level to the Greens, two-fifths of whose content also featured the word. As previously noted, the Greens favoured messaging on policy rather than process-related material. Furthermore, their volume of posts meant they outstripped Labour, their most obvious rivals for left leaning votes. Despite being the official Opposition, the party issued comparatively little content and 90% of what did appear was conspicuous for the absence of Brexit as an issue. Rather, Labour preferred to concentrate its content on highlighting issues such as the economy, environment, and workers' rights.

Going on the Offensive

Negative campaign content was a feature of this election, with the UK ranking highest on this score when measured against the other 27 member states (EEMC, 2019). While this may reflect British political culture in general, it was also linked to the highly fraught ongoing debate within the country that provided the backdrop to this campaign. Four criteria determined whether any messaging was negative in nature: (1) was content directly critical of identified opponents on either personal or policy-related grounds? (2) did the material call out a particular elite, e.g., 'the establishment', 'Westminster', the main two-parties/system, or similar? (3) was any post explicitly disputing the merits of a Leave or Remain perspective, e.g., mentioning 'Remaniacs', 'Remoaners', 'Brextremist' and other such epithets? (4) was ideological terminology deployed to denounce a rival politician/party, e.g. 'Marxist', 'far-right', etc? Here the limits of dichotomous coding should be acknowledged. The designating of content as not/negative did not necessarily capture its intensity nor reflect the tone of a particular individual message.

Just under a third (31%) of all campaign related content was negative according to the four identified criteria described above. UKIP was responsible for over half of all this material, but this was only because they generated more Facebook posts than any of its six rivals. Consequently, Table 5 examines the degree to which each party's content was negative (NB with only three campaign related posts, the Conservatives were excluded). By this measure Change UK devoted more of its content (14 or 38.9% of its total) to criticising opponents than its rivals, with Labour not far behind (17 or 36.2%). Overall, the Remain parties (CUK, LibDems and Greens) were slightly more likely to issue attacks (30.2%) than their Leave counterparts (28.5%), with the Brexit Party decidedly more positive in this respect when directly compared with UKIP.

The debate around the value of negative campaigning to gain votes is still very much ongoing (Goerres, 2007). Gerbaudo et al (2019) analysed the Labour and Conservative party Facebook campaigns during the 2017 General Election. They found that Corbyn and Labour's positive postings attracted far higher user engagement than the more negative posts by May and Conservatives. This suggests a more complex picture than previously thought about negative electioneering becoming more prominent in recent years and that the rise of social media has led to more negative campaigning.

If parties were prone to issuing negative content, it is also important to identify the principal targets of their ire (see Figure 10.07). Symbolically important was the way a notable proportion of this material criticised opponents by consciously adopting and using their rivals' own traditional colours. Labour was the recipient of far more adverse comments than any of its rivals, receiving 80 such posts or 62.1% of the total. The party's strategic ambiguity over its Brexit policy had left it open to attacks from both the Leave and Remain sides as various rival parties took the opportunity to call out the official Opposition from their respective vantage points. While UKIP denounced Labour for being 'Marxist' as well as denouncing the cross-party talks between them and the governing Conservatives, the Brexit Party took a more subtle approach through promoting content featuring clips of now deceased veteran anti-EU left-wing stalwarts Tony Benn and Peter Shore. Benn and Shore were Labour Cabinet ministers who had forcefully led the campaign against joining the then European Economic Community during the 1970s and would likely have been familiar to older people. If this kind of messaging targeted the party's Leave voters, the Liberal Democrats focused on appealing to the larger group of Labour supporters who were more inclined towards Remain and might be persuaded to use the election as a chance to send a message on Brexit. A fifth of all LibDem content (fifteen posts) were critical of Labour.

If the Conservatives were virtually anony-

Image 10.10: UKIP ad uses Disney imagery to mock the Prime Minister. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

Image 10.11: Brexit Party ad adapts an (in)famous image of the Prime Minister dancing on stage prior to her keynote address to her party's 2018 annual conference. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

Image 10.12: Brexit Party ad contrasting a statement by one of its leading candidate Claire Fox with comments from pro-EU Labour politician Lord Adonis. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

mous in terms of their own Facebook activity, others more than made up for their lack of self-promotional presence by calling out and thereby reminding voters about the party. Aside from UKIP, energetic on this as it was on other subjects, the other five parties devoted Facebook content to attacking the incumbent government. It is, however, noteworthy that Liberal Democrat and Brexit Party were less preoccupied with the Conservatives than they were with Labour. Despite their strong showing in the polls, the Brexit Party were not subjected to many Facebook attacks and most material of this kind came from its Leave rivals UKIP. The former also studiously ignored the latter, perhaps confident it had succeeded in replacing it as the leading anti-EU force and could now turn its attention to converting the voters of the larger parties (Cutts et al, 2019). For its part, UKIP looked like a fast-declining electoral force as tensions within were played out on their Facebook page during the campaign with leader Gerard Batten and his deputy Mike Hookem rarely pictured together on the way to defeat. As previously noted, and departing from its reputation for positive campaigning, the Greens criticised the Liberal Democrats in several postings having initially sought an alliance with their fellow Remainers for their role in the Coalition government.

Frustration at Theresa May for 'betraying the people' was prevalent in the Leave parties' campaign with a total of 88.1% of posts targeting May coming from UKIP and Brexit Party (Figure 10.08). UKIP repeatedly called on May to resign, echoing the calls of many in her own party. In one of these, for instance, Theresa May was portrayed as the Evil Queen from Disney's animated classic Snow White, holding out an apple representing her putative Brexit deal (Image 10.10). This was one of the more memorable postings from a campaign characterised by its rather scattergun, unfocused approach. The Brexit Party critiques of May were more humorous but no less cutting in their portrayal as a failed leader (Image 10.10). Aside from domestic targets, Leave parties also targeted key EU figures such as Donald Tusk and Guy Verhofstadt. UKIP were incensed by what it claimed was a provocative appearance by Verhofstadt in London where he declared support for the Lib Dems, a sister organisation of his own in the European Parliament (10th May). Labour Remainers were also targeted by the Leave parties. Comments made by the former Cabinet minister turned anti-Brexit peer Andrew Adonis in an interview with LBC stating that Leave voters should no longer support his party were recycled in a series of edited videos produced by Farage's now self-styled 'people's party' (7th May). Adonis was identified with a so-called 'political class' that had defied the demo-

cratic will (10th May) (Image 10.12).

After Theresa May, Jeremy Corbyn was the most targeted politician but unlike his rival he was attacked from both sides of the Brexit divide. Portrayed as a Brexiteer by the Liberal Democrats, they were responsible for 37.2% of all posts that called out the Labour leader. An archival clip of Corbyn from his time as a backbench MP denouncing the EU as undemocratic was edited into a video designed to highlight his previous hostility towards Brussels. UKIP labelled the Labour leader a 'Marxist' and associated him with the hammer and sickle flag (Image 10.13). The Brexit Party once again took a more subtle approach, calling out Corbyn over alleged inconsistencies in his party's position. One post contrasted a quote from Corbyn stating that Article 50 should be invoked without delay next to another in which he ostensibly supports a second referendum. Labour responded with a series attacking Farage for his devotion to Margaret Thatcher (Image 10.14) and past statements on topics such as Islam and sought to associate him with his former colleague and successor as UKIP leader Gerard Batten as well as Batten's ally Tommy Robinson, founder of the English Defence League and now an independent candidate in this election (Image 10.15).

Conclusion

Although his new venture went by the name of the Brexit Party, leader Nigel Farage ensured their campaign was not solely consumed by further debate over the specific terms of British withdrawal. For a party that had only existed for six months the results of this strategy were impressive. That the Brexit Party made such an impressive breakthrough in the EP Election, its first such test, reflected its unity of purpose and a focused message that appealed far beyond those who had previously supported Farage when he led UKIP. The campaign was co-ordinated, sleek, and combined a celebrity appeal with emotive messaging about accountability but without familiar topics such as immigration. The analysis presented here has detailed the various ways in which the Brexit Party promoted its self-styled defence of democracy against an allegedly elitist, out of touch establishment that was accused of wanting to thwart the 2016 Referendum and, thereby, the will of the public. The party's success, or more especially the failures of its much larger rivals, underscored the significance and importance of a 2019 EP Election that the UK had only been obliged to participate in because of the government's failure to deliver Brexit.

The UK's last EP Election was about more than machinations on the Leave side, and the Brexit Party far from the only one to make polit-

Image 10.13: UKIP post attacks Labour by focusing on party leader Jeremy Corbyn. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

Image 10.14: Labour party post depicts Nigel Farage holding a mug adorned with an image of Margaret Thatcher. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

Image 10.15: Labour party post depicts Nigel Farage, Gerard Batten and Tommy Robinson alongside the statement 'Don't let fear win here'. Source: European Election Monitoring Center.

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ical advances. Pro-EU forces were emboldened by an election that enabled them to restate their opposition to British withdrawal and this led to subsequent co-operation between the Liberal Democrats and Greens as part of the so-called 'Remain Alliance' during the General Election held later that year. Both also eclipsed Change UK, the new anti-Brexit group, which became a minor player in the cross-party campaign for a second or so-called 'peoples' vote'. The European election also proved difficult for Labour who appeared keen to promote its policies on a range of issues but said little about Brexit. The party was conspicuous by its absence from this debate, as were the governing Conservatives whose virtual disappearance during the campaign preceded their ignominious defeat.

Having led the Conservatives to defeat and an unprecedented fifth place in a national election, Theresa May bowed to the seemingly inevitable and resigned as Prime Minister. Boris Johnson succeeded May though faced similar problems, at least in the short-term. The new premier eventually manoeuvred his government into a place where the momentum for another public vote to try to resolve the crisis became eventually unstoppable. But the poll would be the December General Election and not another referendum. Guided by Dominic Cummings, the strategist behind the Leave's 2016 victory, Johnson recycled messaging that echoed that used by Farage and his colleagues during the EU campaign. The 'Get Brexit Done' mantra not only proved readily understandable and appreciated by a significant section of the electorate, this also enabled the Conservatives to (once again) reinvent themselves as the party offering the country meaningful change.

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