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# Political Communication on Social Media: An Analysis of the 2019 United Kingdom General Election

## Understanding Agenda-setting Strategies on Facebook

Author: Clémence De Coster
Thesis supervisor: Mr. Paul Arblaster
Academic year 2020-2021
Master [120] in Multilingual Communication
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# Introduction

Since the early days of the Internet, extensive research has been conducted on this medium and its influence on our society. What seemed new back then about the Internet has become an integral part of our daily lives. Yet, the Internet and its uses constitute an ever-changing and developing phenomenon, which makes its analysis a never-ending process (Blumler, 2016). The Internet as it was known by the first generation of users no longer exists: it gave way to the web 2.0, the era of interactivity, witnessing the rise of social media, which has totally disrupted our societies. Understanding those changes is crucial to fully apprehend the world we live in today.

The impact of the Internet on the political field made no exception in arousing scientific interest. Since politics and communication are closely intertwined (Lilleker, 2006), researchers also delved into the particular field of political communication in the last decades. Jay Blumler (2016), an international figure in political communication studies, described political communication as “an exceptionally rich, complex, fluid and important sub-field . . . of communications studies” (p. 23), which makes its analysis highly interesting. Understanding changes in political communication is all the more crucial that this field has democratic implications. Indeed, several studies have pointed out that an informed public is necessary to any political system (Meyer and Wagner, 2016; Rußmann, 2012). Therefore, political communication is key to enabling the electorate to make well-informed choices.

The growing use of the Internet and social media in politics has impacted political communication in many ways: not only in the way citizens participate in politics, but also in the way politicians engage with citizens. Amongst these changes, which will be examined further in this study, the impact of new technologies on agenda-setting capacity has fully caught our attention. Indeed, mass media has traditionally had a predominant role in determining the issues set on the political agenda, especially during electoral campaigns (Clark, 2018). However, with the Internet and social media, new ways of dealing with information have arisen. They have opened up new possibilities for political parties to draw public attention on particular issues, therefore promoting their own electoral agenda and bypassing the agenda set by traditional media more easily (Schroeder, 2018).

This gives us a glimpse of how rich political communication is as a field of study. Besides, just like the Internet, politics is constantly evolving. And what better way to illustrate this than to look into the politics of the United Kingdom? Indeed, over the last decade, the UK has faced tremendous political turmoil with the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the 2016 referendum on EU membership, Brexit, internal divisions and leadership elections within the Labour Party and the Conservative Party, opposition between the government and the Parliament over the question of Brexit (Fieldhouse et al., 2020). All those events have had strong repercussions on the

country and its people. An early election was called by Boris Johnson's Conservative Party and on the 12th of December 2019, the British people went to the polls (Fletcher *et al.*, 2020).

Given the stakes for the future of the country underlying the 2019 general election and given the above-mentioned growing use of the Internet and social media in politics, analysing political communication on social media during the 2019 campaign appears crucial. Therefore, this study aims to examine how the Conservative Party and the Labour Party used Facebook as a communication tool to promote their political agenda during the electoral campaign preceding the 2019 general election.

First, this study will investigate if and how both parties used the possibilities offered by Facebook in terms of agenda-setting and strategic communication. The interest is here to see if the role of mass media in setting the agenda was still as predominant as before, or if social media allowed political parties to focus on other issues than the ones set on the agenda by mass media. Therefore, we determine the first research question of this study as such:

Q1: Did the Conservative Party and the Labour Party use the possibilities of agenda-setting brought up by the Internet and social media to focus on other issues than those covered by mass media during their 2019 election campaign on Facebook? If so, how?

Secondly, it is interesting to see whether the Conservative Party and the Labour Party developed similar political agendas or not. In other words, in our analysis, we will also examine if the parties focussed on similar issues, or if, on the contrary, they had different campaign priorities. The extent to which political parties discuss the same issues during a campaign actually refers to the concept of issue convergence (Meyer and Wagner, 2016). When issue convergence is strong, we talk of issue engagement (*ibid*). These are important features of electoral communication. Thomas Meyer and Markus Wagner (2016) even stated that the concept of issue engagement has "important implications for understanding the democratic quality of election campaigns" (p. 555). Indeed, we have seen earlier in this introduction that an informed public is essential in politics. In order for citizens to be able to make well-informed choices in an election, political parties should provide sufficient information about the different options they offer on a same matter (Meyer and Wagner, 2016).

The purpose is here not only to determine each party's campaign priorities, but also to identify and explain underlying communication strategies. To do so, we will also look at the level of hostility and aggressiveness of each publication. In other words, we will analyse if parties criticise their opponents, which can be referred to as negative campaigning (Clark, 2018; Lilleker, 2006).

Therefore, we formulate our second research question as such:

Q2: Was issue convergence strong or weak between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party in their 2019 general election Facebook campaign, and what were the underlying strategies?

Moving on to the last part of this study, we wanted to go further in our investigation and look into strategies potentially linked to the type of publication. Indeed, Facebook offers two different options to publish content: organic posts and paid-for ads. Organic posts are free; they appear on the Facebook page of the party and may appear on the news feed of the people who like the page, depending on Facebook's algorithms. As for Facebook ads, parties have to pay for them. Ads will appear on people's news feeds without them having to like the page or look for it. For transparency reasons, ads are labelled as such by Facebook. Moreover, Facebook ads are a highly strategic tool, since buying ads gives the possibility to target the audience quite precisely, based on a wide range of data and criteria. It actually enables political parties to apply segmentation strategies borrowed from the marketing sector (Lilleker, 2006). It is indeed well known in marketing that citizens do not form a homogenous group, and that the population can be segmented in groups of people influenced by the same kind of messages (*ibid*). Political parties can therefore use the big data to identify key segments of voters, and ads to target them. Although this process is not new in politics, it has been facilitated by new technologies.

Given that posts and ads do not follow the same logic, they require differentiated uses for their strategic potential to be fully exploited. The third and last part of this study will therefore be dedicated to investigating if and how the Conservative Party and the Labour Party adapted their message to the type of publication used. We defined our research question as follows:

Q3: During the 2019 general election campaign, did the Conservative Party and the Labour Party exploit the potential of strategic communication on Facebook by using Facebook ads and Facebook posts differently? If so, how?

More concretely, to answer this research question, we will examine if the results of our second research question are influenced by the type of publication. In order to further refine our understanding of the parties' strategies, we will also examine the extent to which the image of Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn was used as visual content. Indeed, Loughborough University's report on mass media coverage (2019) indicated that Johnson and Corbyn played an important role in the 2019 general election.

Analysing differences between posts and ads use is even more interesting given that Facebook has only recently made it possible to access data on paid-for ads. Indeed, in order to ensure more transparency, Facebook first created an Ad Archive in 2018

(Leathern, 2018), which became the Facebook Ad Library in 2019, a tool referencing ads and providing additional data (Shukla, 2019).

In the study that follows, we will first set out the method which was used to collect and analyse data. Then, fully understanding the impact of social media in agenda-setting capacity would not be possible without understanding the wider changes brought about by the Internet. Therefore, the first chapter of this study will aim at giving an overview of the main impacts that the Internet has had on politics and political communication, not only from the politicians' perspective but also from the electorate's perspective. Next, before analysing the UK 2019 general election campaign, it is necessary to understand the context in which it took place. This will be the core of our second chapter. This chapter does not have the purpose to explain the UK political system, but rather to look into the political situation of the UK in 2019 and into more long-term tendencies. We will then get on with the analysis of the Facebook campaigns of the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, basing ourselves on our three research questions. This analysis will provide interesting observations about the parties' ability to bypass and influence mass media's political agenda, about issue convergence and about communication strategies linked to the type of publication. Finally, we will draw some more global conclusions, in the light of recent events that shook the United Kingdom since the 2019 general election.

# Methodology

## I. Scope of the study

First and foremost, it seems important to explain the choices that were made when defining the core of the study. Although political actors use a wide range of social media platforms, we decided to focus solely on Facebook for several reasons. First and quite obviously, given the amount of data available on the Internet, it was crucial to determine realistic objectives regarding the quantity of data to analyse. Second, at the start of the election campaign in November 2019, the UK counted 45,170,000 Facebook users, which represents 66.6% of the British population (NapoleonCat, 2019). This is quite an important proportion of people potentially influenced by campaigns on Facebook. Thirdly, Facebook is the most popular social media amongst the British population (YouGov, 2021). And finally, Facebook was also an interesting choice for practical reasons, as we have seen in the introduction that it now offers a database referencing Facebook ads.

Then, this study focuses on the political campaign led by the two main parties in the UK: the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. This approach is relevant since the United Kingdom is a two-party system, although we will see later how electoral shocks also affected this aspect of UK politics. However, it was not possible to analyse the entire Facebook campaign led by those two parties, as an online campaign is in fact the action of multiple actors. Indeed, the national party communicated, the party leader communicated, local candidates communicated, local groups communicated, and so on (Dommett and Bakir, 2020). Actually, Katharine Dommett and Mehmet Emin Bakir revealed that 367 actors participated in Labour's online campaign, and 300 in the Conservatives'. We thus decided to limit our analysis to the official Facebook pages of the Labour Party and of the Conservative Party.

Finally, our study analyses Facebook communication from the 6th of November 2019 until the 12th of December 2019. These dates were chosen since the 6th of November marked the dissolution of Parliament, as required in the organisation of a general election, and the 12th of December was polling day, thus marking the end of the campaign (Johnston, 2019).

## II. Research

As for any study, preliminary research was the first step in our approach.
In order to find relevant books and scientific articles, our main search keywords were: United Kingdom, UK politics, 2019 general election, Facebook, social media, issue

convergence, agenda-setting, political communication, electoral communication, online campaigning, Conservative Party, Labour Party, Brexit, Boris Johnson, Jeremy Corbyn.

## III. Data collection

Concretely, publications from the 6th of November 2019 until the 12th of December 2019 were collected for both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. Facebook posts were directly saved from the Facebook pages of the parties, and Facebook ads were retrieved from the Facebook Ad Library.

In total, 1,922 publications were collected and analysed. For Facebook organic posts, it was quite straightforward as one post counted for one publication. However, the process was slightly more complex for Facebook paid-for ads because parties could buy several identical ads. In that case, the similar ads were aggregated in the Facebook Ad Library, with a coefficient indicating how many similar ads were published. See Appendix A1 for a concrete example. Therefore, when encoding data, we multiplied each ad by its coefficient. In total, taking the ad coefficients into account, we collected 12,829 publications for the two parties together.

## IV. Method

In order to answer our first research question, we decided on Loughborough University's report on media coverage of the UK 2019 general election (Deacon *et al.*, 2019) as our base of comparison. We adopted the same categories used in the report for our analysis, so that a comparison would be possible. However, we added a few others when we felt it was necessary in order to reflect the subtleties of Facebook communication. We came up with a list of campaign issues that we used to classify our data. Each publication could only be classified in one category, which means that we had to determine the most predominant issue of each publication, as several issues could be addressed in one publication.

This analysis of the main issue addressed in each publication also served as material for our second analysis on issue convergence between Labour and the Conservatives. As explained in the introduction, we included an additional variable in our analysis. For each publication, we evaluated whether the message contained an attack against opponents or not, in order to determine the level of hostility and aggressiveness of each party's Facebook campaign. To do so, we used a categorical variable with two categories:

- 0: There is no attack on opponents in the publication
- 1: There is an attack on opponents in the publication

Next, to be able to answer our third research question, we encoded for each publication the kind of publication it was: a post or an ad. Here also, to better understand parties' strategies, we analysed an additional variable, namely the importance of both party leaders' image. For each publication, we used a categorical variable to analyse whether Boris Johnson was visually represented in the publication:

- 0: There is no visual representation of Boris Johnson in the publication
- 1: Boris Johnson is visually represented in the publication

The same process was applied to analyse Jeremy Corbyn's visual presence on publications.

Concretely, we conceptualised an Excel sheet based on the above-mentioned criteria of analysis. The Excel sheet was thus composed of six columns:

- Political Party
- Ad-Post distinction
- Main issue
- Attack on opponents
- Visual representation of Boris Johnson
- Visual representation of Jeremy Corbyn

Each of the 1,922 collected publications has been analysed separately, and encoded in the Excel sheet. The software JMP has been used to statistically analyse collected data.

## V. Additional comment

During our analysis, we will often mention the political agenda and the campaign strategies that the Conservative Party and the Labour Party developed on Facebook during the UK 2019 general election campaign. As this is quite long and heavy, we will not always specify everything and we will refer to this using shorter terms, such as 'online campaign', 'online political agenda' or 'online strategies'. In such cases, the reader should consider that it is not the whole online campaign that is being referred to, but only the part of the Facebook campaign that is analysed in this study, unless specified otherwise.

This remark only applies to the analysis presented in the third chapter, and not to the first two chapters of the study.

# 1. Impact of the Internet and Social Media on Political Communication

## 1.1. Evolution and Stakes of Political Communication

Political communication can take place on various communication channels. Jay Blumler (2016) theorised this matter and distinguished four different ages of political communication. Initially, he and Dennis Kavanagh (1999) had built a theory based on three ages of political communication, but changes in the last two decades made them adapt their model and add a new age, brought up with the Internet and digital technologies.

In the first age of political communication, political institutions were controlling the field and it was quite easy for politicians and parties to communicate through the existing channels (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). Then, the second age was characterised by the advent of limited-channel television, which rapidly became the most important channel for political communication, giving growing influence to the news (*ibid*). Later, the third age came when multi-channel television replaced limited-channel television (*ibid*). The main characteristics of this age were abundance, professionalisation, competition, diversification and finally, a tendency towards populism (*ibid*). Finally, new digital technologies and the Internet caused Blumler (2016) to add a fourth age to the model. This fourth age amplifies some of the features of the third age and adds new ones, as we will see later in this chapter. In a study about the Internet and political transformation, Bruce Bimber (1998) even suggested that changes brought about by the Internet would be as significant as the ones induced by the advent of radio and television.

Political participation has become a crucial issue, as political engagement continues to decline (Siaroff, 2009). Indeed, voter turnout has significantly fallen in recent years (Kelso, 2007). In fact, between 1992 and 2019, voter turnout has fallen by 11% in the United Kingdom (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, it is a challenge for politicians to engage citizens in the political game. In order to ensure this and reach audiences, candidates must make use of all the communication tools they have at their disposal. According to several scholars (Slotnick, 2009; Williams and Gulati, 2009), it has become clear that television is not sufficient any more for candidates to campaign, nor are old ways of campaigning such as going door to door. Added to this, the press has been facing an important decrease in newspaper sales for several years (Reuters Institute, 2019). So today, maybe more than ever, it is essential for politicians to take advantage of the new communication channels offered by the Internet.

## 1.2. The Internet and Political Participation

The Internet, thanks to its characteristics and the advantages it brings, allows for new behaviours and practices in communication in general and, in our case, in political communication. First of all, the Internet is a high-speed communication tool, breaking time boundaries (Bastien and Greffet, 2009; Buchanan, 2016) and making asynchronous communication possible (Bimber, 1998). Processes of communication on the Internet are thus less time consuming than traditional ones (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). Then, it also frees users from spatial boundaries, since physical distance does not exist on the Internet (Bimber, 1998; Buchanan, 2016; Clark, 2018). This, combined with high speed, allows for more flexibility of use and makes rapid communication across borders possible (Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Furthermore, thanks to new technologies, all of this is now available at a low cost (Carlisle and Patton, 2013; Hagar, 2014). Recent developments of the Internet were also directed towards being more user-friendly (Hagar, 2014). Decreasing costs and an increasing user-friendliness, amongst other factors, have led to higher penetration rates amongst the population. Indeed, in 2019, 95% of the British population was connected online (Reuters Institute, 2019). Therefore, there is a greater diversity of Internet users (Blumler, 2016). Finally, another feature of the Internet that influences communication behaviours is its capacity of keeping written tracks of what is posted online (Bimber, 1998).

All those characteristics combined facilitate interactions (Blumler, 2016; Gibson *et al.*, 2003; Hagar, 2014), whether one-to-one or one-to-many (Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). People use the Internet and social media to connect with others, to chat, to inform one another, and to learn from one another (Bimber, 1998). In other words, we develop online networks to influence and to be influenced (Bond *et al.*, 2012). A study by Douglas Hagar (2014) about the 2010 Niagara municipal elections actually showed that the number of interactions rises globally.

As stated above, the Internet freed users from spatial boundaries, making international debate possible on a large scale (Buchanan, 2016). Furthermore, the accessibility of this communication channel gives the opportunity to marginal groups to make themselves heard (Blumler, 2016). This leads to the broadening of the public debate to a range of opinions that were not given a voice before, as traditional media was controlling the field of political communication (Blumler, 2016; Buchanan, 2016).

According to Shelley Boulianne (2009), social media enables its users to meet people who think alike. However, the ability of social media to make people meet online has to be mitigated with the fact that, in most cases, social media sites are used to reinforce existing bonds (Ellison *et al.*, 2007; Mercanti-Guérin, 2010). In other words, people use it to connect with people previously met offline. Indeed, this statement is supported by Bruce Bimber (1998), who observed that the characteristics of social interactions, namely familiarity, stability and social pressure, were mostly found in social media groups composed of people sharing pre-existing bonds. Bimber (1998) also raises the

question of whether large online groups, for instance, can be qualified as ‘communities’ or not. This is a debate that is still going on. However, it merely concerns the name tag attached to this phenomenon and does not interest us further in this study.

Another change induced by the Internet and its characteristics is that social media is increasingly used by citizens to inform themselves (Rußmann, 2012). In a study about the Scottish referendum campaign on social media, Margot Buchanan (2016) pointed out that this tendency is even stronger amongst young people, who tend to read the news on social media. With the Internet also come new ways of dealing with information. On that matter, Allison Slotnick (2009) identified a tendency towards rapid information and instant gratification, which means that people want to quickly get the central piece of information, without having to read much. Nevertheless, as the costs for sharing information diminished with new technologies, access to information has increased (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). Access to information is all the more crucial in politics as Peter Dahlgren’s work (2000) revealed that political knowledge is essential to civic engagement.

The Internet and social media also facilitate and accelerate political mobilisation (Bastien and Greffet, 2009; Carlisle and Patton, 2013; Slotnick, 2009). Citizens now face fewer obstacles to initiate political movements, and the Internet gives them tools for more rapid and less expensive mobilisation (Bimber, 1998). Moreover, several studies have shown evidence of a correlation between online mobilisation and offline participation (McLoughlin and Southern, 2021; Rojas and Puig-i-Abril, 2009). Furthermore, Juliet Carlisle and Robert Patton (2013), in a study about social media and political engagement, highlighted the use of social media to mobilise people who are disengaged offline. Indeed, for those who find the costs of offline participation too high, as well as the time it requires, online participation is an acceptable alternative because of the advantages it brings in terms of rapidity and flexibility (Carlisle and Patton, 2013; McLoughlin and Southern, 2021). For instance, signing an online petition is a lot less time-consuming than going to an actual protest. These small actions that take place online are referred to as ‘tiny acts of political participation’ by Margetts *et al.* (2016) and can be considered as political participation. Evidence also shows a link between the number of friends on social media and participation: people with a smaller network of friends show higher levels of participation and vice versa (Carlisle and Patton, 2013). Furthermore, this phenomenon of social media facilitating and fostering participation is expected to keep growing in the coming years (Boulianne, 2020).

In terms of political movements, two phenomena have been observed. First, there is an effect of fragmentation (Bimber, 1998). Bruce Bimber (1998) has dedicated a lot of his work to understanding this phenomenon and he developed a concept called ‘accelerated pluralism’.

He describes his model in those terms:

> The Internet contributes to the on-going fragmentation of the present system of interest-based group politics and a shift toward a more fluid, issue-based group politics with less institutional coherence. (Bimber, 1998: p. 133)

Therefore, there is less stability and less coherence in the political field (Bimber, 1998; Blumler, 2016). It is not only the mobilisation process that is accelerated because of the Internet, but as a consequence, there is an acceleration of the whole pace of politics in our society, including the response of politics to public issues (Bimber, 1998). Secondly, our society faces increasing polarisation, reinforced by new technologies (Blumler, 2016). Indeed, the population is increasingly fragmented and, with social media and the Internet, comes the ability for users to only listen to messages that consolidate their beliefs (*ibid*). Moreover, we have seen earlier that the Internet enables its users to meet people who think alike. All this reinforces beliefs and leads to more polarised positions (*ibid*).

Social media has also proven its importance in the particular situation of countries affected by conflict. Hyunjin Seo and Husain Ebrahim (2016), in a study about visual propaganda on Facebook during Syrian conflicts, demonstrated how social media played a big role in the Syrian conflict. In this kind of situation, social media becomes a tool for citizens to denounce abuses of power in order to draw international attention to the conflict (Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Another example of the role played by the Internet in conflict situations is the Arab Spring, when social media helped citizens to organise mobilisation (Howard and Hussain, 2013).

## 1.3. The Internet Used by Politicians

If social media is used by citizens to denounce the ones in power in the case of countries in conflict, it is also used by political leaders to consolidate their power and position. Research shows that they make extensive use of propaganda online (Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Besides, they use the Internet to control citizens, to censor and track dissidents (*ibid*).

Of course, this applies to extreme cases of political conflicts, yet the Internet and social media are also used by politicians in peaceful situations. It is a tactical tool for them to build direct bonds with citizens (Clark, 2018; Rußmann, 2012; Schroeder, 2018). Although online interactions are less powerful than face-to-face ones, they offer the benefits of being less time consuming and less expensive (Slotnick, 2009). Politicians also use these new communication channels to inform citizens about their campaigns and about societal matters (Rußmann, 2012; Spyridou and Veglis, 2011). On social

media, they get to choose what they want to communicate about, what they want to show, therefore controlling their image (Buchanan, 2016; Lilleker, 2006). However, as we will see later in this chapter, image building online is a fragile process that can rapidly get out of hand.
Furthermore, and as we have seen in our introduction, because of social media, the influence of traditional media regarding agenda-setting is diminishing (Bimber, 1998; Schroeder, 2018). Indeed, politicians and political parties are now able to communicate directly towards citizens, thus bypassing traditional media (Chadwick *et al.*, 2015; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Citizens themselves can also use social media to raise issues to the attention of traditional media (Towner and Muñoz, 2020). This brings more instability to the political sphere, as agenda-setting on the Internet is rather unpredictable (Bimber, 1998).

In order to build successful campaigns online, politicians' strategy is to actively involve their followers on social media in their campaign (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019). Indeed, likes, comments and shares, in other words, tiny acts of political participation, accelerate the diffusion of publications on social media, which gives greater visibility (Karlsen, 2015). It is what Manuel Castells (2007) refers to as peer-to-peer flow, or horizontal communication: information is spreading across networks on social media and has the potential to reach people initially not interested in politics (McLoughlin and Southern, 2021). This phenomenon is called 'accidental exposure' (Valeriani and Vaccari, 2016). Moreover, a study carried out by Augusto Valeriani and Cristian Vaccari (2016) revealed that there is a positive correlation between accidental exposure to political content and political participation. One tactical use of the visibility that likes, comments and shares can give is to diffuse messages through social influencers, which are citizens with a large audience on social media (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). This type of communication refers to the two-step flow theory developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), a well-known theory to communication specialists.

There are a lot of factors that can affect communication efficiency on social media and that have been analysed. First of all, an interesting strategy in political communication is to be proactive and to post regularly (Hagar, 2014; Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019). A study carried out by Karolina Koc-Michalska and Darren Lilleker (2019) shows that frequency of posting positively influences political participation. Then, several studies indicate the importance of visual content when communicating on social media (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019; Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Communication on social media can be referred to as multimodal communication, as it consists of a mix of textual and visual messages (Buchanan, 2016). Combining a written message with a video, a picture or computer graphics for instance, seems to be the key to building a powerful publication (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019). As a matter of fact, visual content appeals to emotions and political judgement is influenced and shaped, at least partially, by emotions (Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Next, the tone in which the message is written is also an important feature, and communication of politicians on social media tends to

be more casual (Slotnick, 2009). Jay Blumler (2016), across his study of the political communication field, observed a shift towards more authenticity and transparency, in accordance with citizens' current expectations.

To sum up, there are quite a lot of parameters in online political communication that influence the number of likes of a publication and thus visibility. The ones that we have already examined are frequency, visual content and tone. It also appears, according to Hyunjin Seo and Husain Ebrahim (2016), that there is a correlation between the theme of the publication and the number of likes. Similarly, framing, which is the angle through which an issue is presented, influences people's perception of a situation, thus their judgement as well (Seo and Ebrahim, 2016). Finally, the ideology of the party or politician does not seem to have repercussions on having a more active online community (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019).

Those precepts can seem pretty natural to us now, but it is important to point out that when politicians started to invest in campaigning on the Internet, there was no ready-made manual to deal with political communication online. In fact, trial-and-error was mostly their methodology (Williams and Gulati, 2009). Today, things are different. Research has been carried out by specialists to better understand the use of the Internet in politics, and the field of political communication has been hit by a wave of professionalisation (Bastien and Greffet, 2009; Clark, 2018; Lilleker, 2006; Mercanti-Guérin, 2010). Behind each account of politicians or political parties generally stands a team of communication specialists (Bastien and Greffet, 2009; Slotnick, 2009). Indeed, a levelling of online practices can be noticed and differences in tones are diminishing (Klinger, 2013). Besides, politicians largely use techniques borrowed from the marketing and advertising fields (Lilleker, 2006).

More concretely, some studies demonstrate that presence and activity on social media affect voter turnout and the election outcome (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019; Williams and Gulati, 2009). However, Douglas Hagar (2014), in his study of the 2010 Niagara municipal elections, did not find a significant statistical link between presence on social media and political success. Yet, his study shows that political success is positively influenced by the number of posts and likes (Hagar, 2014). It is also important to highlight the fact that political parties are not equal vis-à-vis social media. According to Douglas Hagar (2014), financial resources remain the main factor for political success. This statement supports the normalisation thesis, according to which important political parties with substantial resources have greater presence on social media than smaller parties (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019; Lev-On and Haleva-Amir, 2018). This theory opposes the equalisation thesis which states that the Internet reduces the gaps between parties with important resources and smaller ones (Clark, 2018; Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019; Lev-On and Haleva-Amir, 2018). However, research suggests that social media benefits parties with already a large audience (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019). Broadly speaking, social media reinforces what is already acquired offline (Bimber and Davis, 2003). Besides, parties that are more likely

to win seats during the next election tend to be more active on social media (Lev-On and Haleva-Amir, 2018).

Regarding the popularity of social media pages, research by Christine Williams and Girish Gulati shows that the more followers a party or politician gets on Facebook, the higher the vote percentage they get (Williams and Gulati, 2009). However, the causal link in this statement has to be qualified. Facebook followers are usually a good indicator of the popularity of a campaign and communication in its entirety, and a popular and effective campaign is more likely to boost votes (*ibid*).

In addition, social media has proven its use as an appreciable tool to reconnect with disengaged audiences such as young voters (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013; Slotnick, 2009; Williams and Gulati, 2009). It has been mentioned earlier in this chapter that voter turnout is decreasing. Actually, young people show an even lower rate of voter turnout than other age groups (Williams and Gulati, 2009), and youth disengagement is an actual concern (Livingstone, 2007; McLoughlin and Southern, 2021). As the Internet and social media are popular amongst younger generations, it is an interesting tool to reach those audiences (Clark, 2018; Mercanti-Guérin, 2010; McLoughlin and Southern, 2021). Indeed, research carried out by Douglas Hagar (2014) shows a positive link between the use of social media in campaigning and engagement of the youth.

All those positive effects of the Internet and social media on political campaigns can be exemplified. There seems to be a consensus amongst specialists to declare Barack Obama's 2008 campaign for the U.S. presidential election to be the first one to consequently invest in the potential of the Internet and social media (Buchanan, 2016; Carlisle and Patton, 2013; Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019; Slotnick, 2009; Williams and Gulati, 2009). Specialists agree that his campaign on the Internet was a decisive asset that helped him win the election (*ibid*). Since then, other campaigns have drawn the attention of researchers in terms of use of new technologies, such as the campaign around the Scottish referendum in 2018 (Buchanan, 2016) and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign (Enli, 2017), to name just a few.

## 1.4. Limitations of the Positive Effects of the Internet on Politics

So far, campaigning on the Internet and on social media seems convenient but there are drawbacks, as there are for every communication channel. Firstly, new technologies put high pressure on the candidates, as a presence on the Internet has become mandatory (Slotnick, 2009). What is more, they are expected to be present online at all times (Blumler, 2016). This means that politicians cannot just communicate during the campaign period before the elections, they have to be active before that and to establish long-term strategies (Clark, 2018; Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019). This

phenomenon is called the permanent campaign, or permanent campaigning (Bastien and Greffet, 2009; Clark, 2018; Metz and Lecheler, 2020). Of course, it induces new costs as it usually requires media specialists and paid posts for instance (Nitschke *et al.*, 2016).

Secondly, the Internet has brought up an important increase in the abundance of available information (Blumler, 2016). This is a phenomenon that had already started during the third age of political communication, as defined by Jay Blumler (2016), but it increased in the fourth age. Abundance leads to competition for public attention (Blumler, 2016). This, coupled with the increasing popularity of entertaining content, leads politicians to pay more attention to the attractiveness of their message than to its content and the ideas they aim to convey (*ibid*). Darren Lilleker (2006) also speaks of a tendency of aestheticisation in our societies. Politicians are turned into celebrities in the way parties and media communicate about them, for instance by talking about their private lives (Lilleker, 2006). Even public service broadcasters are influenced by those tendencies. Indeed, Jay Blumler notices that they now dedicate an increasing part of their content to entertainment, at the expense of their civic mission (Blumler, 2016).

Previously in this chapter, we talked about how the Internet increases the opportunities for interaction amongst citizens, but also between citizens and politicians. Yet, this has to be mitigated. It appears that politicians mainly use social media sites to publish updates of their campaign, to inform their followers about offline events, amongst others (Rußmann, 2012). In short, they use it for self-promotion (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019). In order to reach audiences outside the circle of their followers, they pay for post optimisation (*ibid*). In fact, this kind of communication can be labelled as top-down communication, or vertical communication (Lilleker, 2006; Rußmann, 2012), which does not especially lead to more interactivity and dialogue between candidates and citizens (Hagar, 2014). According to Uta Rußmann (2012), who analysed political campaign communication on Facebook, actual uses of the Internet do not lead to develop, at the present time, a collaborative democracy on the Internet. Politicians do not yet use the full potential of social media to foster interactions (Rußmann, 2012). This can be explained by the fact that they took some time to appropriate those communication channels offered by new technologies of the Internet (Bastien and Greffet, 2009). Indeed, it is only in recent years that politicians have started to become familiar with it (Hagar, 2014).

If we look at citizens' behaviours, we notice that they do no better in terms of online interactions with politicians. Few of them ask questions to politicians, whereas they are given the opportunity to do so through social media (*ibid*). Whether politicians answer those questions or not is another debate. Besides, Uta Rußmann (2012) observed that only a minority of social media users actively interact with publications, while the majority only reads them. In fact, online behaviours replicate disparities in engagement to be found offline: a majority of citizens is not active in politics, whereas only a minority

is politically active (Bimber, 1998; Carlisle and Patton, 2013; Clark, 2018). Disparities in participation have drawn the interest of researchers for years. A key fact to understand this behavioural pattern is that interest leads to action (Carlisle and Patton, 2013), and people only have interest in a few subjects (Bimber, 1998). In other words, motivation to be involved in politics is a key factor that determines people's engagement.

Furthermore, citizens are limited by human nature. This has been theorised years ago by Walter Lippmann (1922), stating that there are too many issues, too much complexity for people to be able to focus on them all. Therefore, according to Bruce Bimber (1998), even though the Internet allows for more availability of information, easier interactions and mobilisation processes, it does not change the human limitations that apply to political participation, namely motivation and capacity. This statement implies that new technologies will not drastically change people's political behaviours and that intermediaries will continue to play an important role in politics, for instance by drawing public attention on certain matters (Bimber, 1998). However, other scholars do not share his views. We have seen, for instance, that Ralph Schroeder (2018) stated that the influence of mass media regarding agenda-setting is diminishing. Moreover, Lawrence Grossman (1995) also claimed that intermediaries' importance is decreasing in politics. Some theories even predict a shift towards more plebiscitary societies, in which new technologies would allow citizens to participate in every government decision, thus making political parties useless (Bimber, 1998). This brings us back to the human limitations of motivation and capacity: are citizens willing to endorse this responsibility, and are they capable of informed choices on all matters? Evidence, as we have seen, suggests otherwise.

However, according to James Snider (1996), availability of information on the Internet still has an impact on politics and societies. Simply by making information available online, it allows for citizens to exert greater control over the government (Snider, 1996). Indeed, people do not need to read everything to be able to hold the government responsible, as long as they know that the information is available somewhere on the Internet (*ibid*). This theory does not face human limitations to political engagement, as it is only the availability, and not the actual reading, that empowers citizens.

Finally, social media can be a positive tool to foster political campaigns but it can also make politicians, and public figures in general, fall (Slotnick, 2009). Once something is published on the Internet, no one can hardly have control over it (*ibid*). We have seen that likes, comments and shares give more visibility to publications because of the Facebook algorithms (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019). However, it is important to point out that comments can be either positive or negative (*ibid*). In addition, there is a low degree of respect in comments on social media (Rußmann, 2012). Criticism and insults are even common features (Buchanan, 2016; Mercanti-Guérin, 2010; Slotnick, 2009).

Furthermore, a majority of people commenting online publications only state their opinion, without giving facts or further argumentation (Dahlberg, 2001). This questions the ability of social media to promote dialogue, as it can rather be seen as a sum of monologues (Hagar, 2014). Furthermore, Uta Rußmann's findings (2012) indicate that discussions on the Internet and on social media do not meet ideals in terms of quality of communication. Bruce Bimber (1998) also insists on the persistent need for mediation by intermediaries in political communication, as so many citizens virtually brought together cannot debate with a sufficient level of quality.

Nevertheless, the Internet and social media play an important role in increasing the democratic process (Rußmann, 2012; Williams and Gulati, 2009), as they serve as a central place for mobilisation (Slotnick, 2009). Graeme Browning (1996) even spoke of an 'electronic democracy'. In times when traditional civil action declines, political communication on the Internet and on social media has become indispensable for political parties and politicians. For all the benefits it brings and despite its drawbacks, the Internet has become a necessary tool to integrate in any political campaign strategy (Slotnick, 2009).

# 2. State of UK Politics on the Eve of the 2019 General Election

## 2.1. The UK, a Two-party System Facing Fragmentation

Since the end of World War II, the UK political system can be referred to as a two-party system, as the political field is dominated by two main parties, namely the Conservative Party and the Labour Party (Clark, 2018; Evans and Menon, 2017). Indeed, the first-past-the-post electoral system which characterises UK politics (UK Parliament, n.d.) favours big parties, or rather disadvantages smaller parties (Clark, 2018; Curtice, 2020a). Yet, the two-party system has been weakened by increasing fragmentation since 2010, notably due to the rise of smaller parties (Clark, 2018; Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2020; Prendiville, 2015). In fact, since constituent nations of the UK now have their own parties to represent them, devolution also contributed to the fragmentation of the votes (Clark, 2018). This is particularly apparent with the rise of the Scottish National Party [SNP] in Scotland (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2020; Prendiville, 2015). In fact, according to some specialists, the UK can be referred to as a multi-layered system, or multi-level party system (Clark, 2018; Montgomery and Baglioni, 2018). Another striking example of this tendency towards fragmentation was the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government formed in 2010 (Prendiville, 2015). However, according to Alistair Clark (2018), the erosion of the dominance of the two main parties can even be traced back to 1974. This seems to confirm Bimber's theory of accelerated pluralism (1998), announcing greater fragmentation accelerated by the Internet.

However, we have seen in the introduction that the United Kingdom has been hit in recent years by some major electoral shocks, such as the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the 2016 EU referendum (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2020). These events are called electoral shocks because they made party attachments shift (*ibid*). And this was possible because of a phenomenon of dealignment characterising the modern electorate: in short, the bonds between voters and parties are weaker and therefore shift more easily (*ibid*). This is what happened with Brexit, which made party attachments change and reinforced the UK two-party system (Evans and Menon, 2017; Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2020). According to Geoffrey Evans and Anand Menon (2017), we can now talk of a realigned two-party system.

## 2.2. The 2019 General Election Results

The Conservative Party, which only had a minority government before the election, was the big winner of this general election. Indeed, with 43.6% vote share, it won 365 seats, therefore securing an 80-seat majority (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). Such results had not been seen since Margaret Thatcher's victory in 1987 (Tonge *et al.*, 2020a; Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). This outcome is all the more remarkable that the Conservatives already had three consecutive terms in office (Tonge *et al.*, 2020b), and that according to Alistair Clark (2018), the longer a government stays in office, the lesser its popularity.

These election results bring quite a change in the UK political landscape that had recently been characterised as unstable, because of a hung Parliament and a coalition government between the Tories and the Liberal Democrats in 2010 and a minority government and a hung Parliament in 2017 as well (Curtice, 2020a). Besides, it is a significant victory for the Conservative Party, after a 2017 campaign that was considered a fiasco, partially due to the terrible performance of Theresa May (Denver, 2020; Hannah, 2018).

However, for the Labour Party, this election was a whole different story. They scored their worst results since 1935, winning only 202 seats with 32.1% vote share (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). What is particularly striking is that they lost constituencies that had been Labour strongholds since 1945 (Tonge *et al.,* 2020b), especially in the North of England and in the Midlands (Denver, 2020; Goes, 2020; Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). The Tories have thus broken through what used to be called the 'Red Wall' (Power *et al.*, 2020). Besides, these results highly contrast with Labour's 2017 campaign. Indeed, during the last general election, the Labour Party scored historic results, its highest since 1966 (Hannah, 2018). In comparison with 2017, in 2019, they lost 7.9% vote share and 60 seats (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). The causes of this downfall will be examined later in this chapter.

As for the Liberal Democrats, they did not do particularly well: 11 seats and 11.5% vote share (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). This is a slight increase of 4.1% compared with 2017, but they still lost one seat (*ibid*). As a matter of fact, the Lib Dems have been struggling since their coalition with the Tories in 2010 (Clark, 2018; Curtice, 2020a; Denver, 2020). Indeed, a lot of their supporters have been disappointed and turned to other parties, the Green Party in particular (Prendiville, 2015). Furthermore, another part of their electorate was upset with their pro-remain position on Brexit, even though the leave camp had won the referendum (Denver, 2020; Fieldhouse et *al.,* 2020). Besides, given their declining popularity and therefore shrinking vote share, the Liberal Democrats did not appear as an interesting party for tactical voting any more (Fieldhouse et *al.,* 2020).

Regarding the Green Party, not much has changed in comparison with 2017, since the party held the one seat they already had in Parliament (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). However, they slightly increased their vote share by 1.1% (*ibid*).

Unsurprisingly, the SNP scored good results in Scotland with 45% of the votes and 48 seats out of 59 (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). This is an important increase since 2017, as they gained 8.1% vote share and 13 seats (*ibid*). It is in fact the SNP second best result since the creation of the party (*ibid*). Then, the Tories came second in Scotland with 25.1% vote share and 6 seats, followed by Labour far behind with only one seat although they won 18.6% vote share (*ibid*). They were actually outnumbered by the Lib Dems who won 4 seats with only 9.5% vote share (*ibid*).

In contrast with the predictable results in Scotland, the situation in Northern Ireland was more surprising. For the first time ever, nationalists won a majority (Tonge and Evans, 2020), with 7 seats for Sinn Féin and 2 seats for the Social Democratic and Labour Party [SDLP], while unionists joined the minority with 8 seats for the Democratic Unionist Party [DUP] (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). After the election, the Northern Ireland Assembly, which had not been used since 2017, was re-established (Tonge and Evans, 2020).

These results show a comeback of the Conservatives and Labour, after a disastrous performance during the local elections in May 2019. Indeed, people had expressed their dissatisfaction by not voting for the big two, while the Liberal Democrats, the Green Party and Independents won a considerable number of council seats (Denver, 2020; Uberoi, 2019). The same story repeated itself during the European Parliament election in May 2019. While the Brexit Party scored historic results, the Lib Dems and the Green Party also won seats, to the expense of the Labour Party and the Conservatives who respectively lost 10 and 15 seats (Uberoi, 2016). Dissatisfaction with the Tories can be explained by their successive failures to deliver on their promises on Brexit since the referendum (Tonge *et al.*, 2020a), obliging them to ask the EU for an extension on several occasions (Walker, 2021).

With results symptomatic of a weakened two-party system, the local elections and the European Parliament election served as a wake-up call for the Labour Party and the Conservatives. Nevertheless, the 2019 general election results show that the two-party system is still prevailing in the UK, as the two main parties gathered 76% of the votes together, which represents 567 seats out of 650 (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020).

## 2.3. A Climate of Distrust and Instability

As mentioned in the start of this chapter, this election took place in a very particular context. The election itself was particular, as it was in fact an early election called by

the Conservatives. The reason behind this was the deadlock in which the Parliament had been stuck for months over the question of Brexit (Curtice, 2020b).

As a brief reminder, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union during the referendum on EU membership on the 23rd of June 2016 (Walker, 2021). The leave camp won with 51.9% vote share while the remain camp only gathered 48.1% of the votes (*ibid*). The referendum led to the resignation of David Cameron as Prime Minister and then to Theresa May's election as leader of the Conservative Party (Walker, 2021). This decision to leave the EU was the result of complicated relations between the UK and the EU from the very beginning of European integration (Bolton and Pitts, 2018; Evans and Menon, 2017; Murphy, 2018).

Since the 2016 referendum, Brexit has dominated the political agenda of the UK (Denver, 2020; Evans and Menon, 2017). On each occasion, the Parliament rejected the withdrawal deals negotiated by the government (Denver, 2020; Thompson, 2020). The situation got to such a striking point that Ken Clarke, member of the House of Lords, described it as a "constitutional crisis" (HC Deb 29 January 2019). All those tensions led Theresa May to resign in May 2019, after a disastrous general election campaign in 2017 (Denver, 2020). Afterwards, Boris Johnson got elected party leader in July and therefore became Prime Minister (*ibid*). The Tories have thus known two leadership elections within three years. Boris Johnson made Brexit his number one priority and saw calling an early election as the only way to get through the gridlock in Parliament (Thompson, 2020). After Boris Johnson failed to activate the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act on several occasions, he managed to find another way to call an early election in December 2019 (*ibid*). The need for an early election to break Parliament's deadlock has been supported afterwards by Louise Thompson (2020). However, according to John Curtice (2020b), it is still debatable whether this was the best way to solve the problem.

From a more global perspective, the 2019 general election took place in a climate of distrust. Indeed, negative attitudes from citizens towards politics have increased, while trust in political leaders has declined (Evans and Menon, 2017). The Ipsos MORI Veracity Index (2019b), which analyses levels of trust from the British population in different categories of professions, indicates that politicians are the least trusted to tell the truth, with only 14% of British people trusting them. Government ministers do a little better with 17% vote share (Ipsos MORI, 2019b). However, it is still very low with regards to other professions. As a comparison, nurses and doctors have the best results with 95% and 93% respectively (*ibid*). As for journalists, who also tend to have a bad reputation amongst the population, they score 26%, which is still 12 points of percentage more than politicians (*ibid*). Besides, research also shows that citizens believe that politicians only act in their best interest (Evans and Menon, 2017) and not in the interest of the population (Flinders, 2020). Politicians are seen as a group of privileged people forming a distinct caste in society (Wainwright, 2016). This perception of corrupt politicians had been reinforced by the expenses scandal that

shook the UK in the late 2000s (Evans and Menon, 2017; Hannah, 2018). In fact, Hansard Society's Audit of Political Engagement (2019) revealed that the level of distrust reached in 2019 was even worse than the one reached after the expenses scandal.

Already-strong negative attitudes towards politicians have been reinforced by economical and political crises in the last decade, people being tired of debts, austerity and insecurity (Evans and Menon, 2017; Hannah, 2018; Innes, 2018). But above all, people were tired of Brexit (Reuters Institute, 2019; Tonge *et al.*, 2020). By the time of the 2019 general election, all the above-mentioned factors had led to increased frustration amongst the British population (Flinders, 2020). In fact, increasing dissatisfaction with politics is actually a wider phenomenon that touches not only the UK, but many other countries in Europe (Wainwright, 2016).

A concrete example of how those negative attitudes burst open during the campaign is the number of insults that some Members of Parliament [MPs] received on social media. A survey conducted by PoliMonitor (2019) actually revealed that during the 2019 general election campaign, there were four times as many abusive Tweets mentioning candidates than in 2017. However, PoliMonitor (2019) also indicates that all MPs were not concerned with this phenomenon: only 21% of candidates received abusive Tweets. This resonates with what has been said in the previous chapter about social media, insults and low degrees of respect.

As we have seen in the first chapter, this negative climate around politics and politicians leads to a decline in political participation and, as a result, to low voter turnout (Siaroff, 2009). The 2019 general election attracted 67.3 % of the electorate to actually vote (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). Although higher voter turnout had been witnessed during the 2016 EU referendum with 72.2% (Uberoi, 2016), the numbers have been declining again since then (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). As a matter of fact, when it comes to political participation, the UK population is not homogenous. We will see later in this chapter that some demographic groups show lower turnout than others, for instance young people and people with low income. When we look into the reasons why some citizens do not vote, polling reveals that they do not feel represented, they feel that their vote does not matter and that politicians are all the same (Evans and Menon, 2017). To illustrate this sense of uselessness felt by a part of the population when it comes to politics, Geoffrey Evans and Anand Menon (2017) picked up the abbreviation TINA, There Is No Alternative, famously used by Margaret Thatcher.

This feeling has also been reinforced by another tendency that characterises British politics, as well as politics in other countries of Western Europe since the 1980s: political parties tend to ideologically shift towards the centre of the political spectrum (Baggott, 2011; Evans and Menon, 2017; Wainwright, 2016). While similarities between parties rose, the importance of ideologies declined, and so did the ideological gap between parties (Baggott, 2011; Evans and Menon, 2017). In the UK, this could

be noticed with the Labour Party shifting towards the centre under Ed Miliband's leadership (Hannah, 2018). Moreover, Labour does not talk of socialism in its manifesto any more (Evans and Menon, 2017; Hannah, 2018). However, this has to be mitigated with the recent realignment towards the left under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership (Clark, 2018; Evans and Menon, 2017; Hannah, 2018). As for the Conservative Party, it became more liberal regarding social values (Evans and Menon, 2017). Moreover, their 2019 manifesto pledged to fight austerity and to invest in public services such as the National Health Service [NHS] (Conservative Party, 2019), which are usually left-wing policies. As a result, what used to be a competition between clear ideologies became more of a competition about credibility, branding and who appears the more qualified to rule (Baggott, 2011; Evans and Menon, 2017). Besides, political parties now tend to fight more over which issues should be on the agenda, than over the position to adopt on those issues (Baggott, 2011). This tendency to focus on competence rather than on substance has already been discussed in the previous chapter, since it is a characteristic feature of the fourth age of political communication, as defined by Jay Blumler (2016).

As everything is interconnected, convergence between political parties leads to less identification to those parties, which means that voters tend to be increasingly less loyal to a party (Clark, 2018; Evans and Menon, 2017). To put it short, political volatility is on the rise (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2020). This last decade, it increased to such an extent that the British Election Study (2019) talked about the "most volatile British electorate in modern times". Indeed, the Labour Party experienced it, as it lost constituencies that had been labour strongholds for several decades. However, the level of electoral volatility in the 2019 general election seems to indicate a return to more stability, as it consistently decreased compared to the 2015 and 2017 general elections (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2020).

Although this is true for political opinions during recent elections, opinions of British citizens towards the EU and Brexit showed remarkable low levels of volatility (Curtice, 2020b). Pollings carried out one year after the 2016 EU referendum revealed that people had not changed their mind about Brexit and that the leave and remain camps were still as strong as during the referendum (Evans and Menon, 2017). This can be explained by the fact that positions about the EU were mainly based on social values, opposing liberal values to more conservative ones, and that values are quite stable and vary little over time (*ibid*). That being said, there was a part of the population that initially voted to remain but that later supported the leave camp (*ibid*). This category of voters has been called the 'ReLeavers' (*ibid*). Those pro-remain actually believe that since the leave camp won the referendum, it is the duty of the government to deliver on those promises (*ibid*). In fact, research shows that by the time the government triggered the procedure for leaving the EU, 69% of the population was in favour (*ibid*).

## 2.4. Two Unconventional Party Leaders

The 2019 general election was marked by the confrontation of two party leaders with strong identities: Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn. Understanding the election results would be impossible without understanding their dynamics and the impact they had on their respective party's campaign.

Becoming leader of the Conservative Party after Theresa May's resignation, Boris Johnson rapidly appeared as a breath of fresh air to the British population, or at least to parts of it (Flinders, 2020). Unsurprisingly, he became more popular than Theresa May, whose popularity had plummeted (Heppell and McMeeking, 2021). Indeed, during the 2017 campaign, she had been perceived as cold, distant and rigid by the electorate, to such an extent that some even called her the 'Maybot' (Evans and Menon, 2017).

Boris Johnson, on the contrary, appears authentic, honest (Dommett, 2016), and has the charisma that Theresa May lacked (Tonge *et al.*, 2020). His singular style is actually a mix of a lot of features, including humour, oratory skills, physical theatre, a dishevelled look, along with a taste for provocation and controversy (Dommett, 2016; Flinders, 2020). Indeed, Boris Johnson cultivates his image of outsider and unconventional politician: he does not fit into the mould, nor does he want to (Dommett, 2016; Flinders, 2017, 2020). A way for him to distinguish himself from other politicians is to use humour, often in a self-deprecating way (Dommett, 2016). By answering questions with jokes or anecdotes, he often finds his way out without having to give substantial answers or arguments, as it distracts people (Flinders, 2017, 2020). Matthew Flinders (2017) describes his use of humour as a "self-preservation mechanism" (p. 114), since it helps him escape scrutiny. His strategy is known to the public, yet the public does not blame him for not answering consistently. On the contrary, thanks to his unconventional style, he is remembered and people generally want to see more of him (Dommett, 2016; Flinders, 2017). Hence, the way he delivers his message is generally more striking than the message itself. This tendency sounds familiar, since we have seen in the first chapter that abundance of information and competition for public attention leads politicians to pay more attention to the attractiveness of their message than to the content (Blumler, 2016). This, coupled with his atypical style and his sometimes-clownish manners, attracts media coverage (Dommett, 2016; Flinders, 2020). As we have seen, mass media is increasingly on the lookout for entertaining content (Blumler, 2016) and Boris Johnson has proven to be a goldmine in that matter.

His sloppy appearance, and especially his hair, is another example of him showing the people that he does not care about conventions (Dommett, 2016; Flinders, 2020). As mentioned earlier, Boris Johnson owes part of his success to his taste for provocation (Flinders, 2020). He does not weigh his words, nor does he care about political correctness and controversy (Dommett, 2016; Flinders, 2020). This tendency even

goes back to before entering politics, as during his career as a journalist, he was known to create scandals and provoke outrage with his articles (Flinders, 2020).

The image of outsider that Boris Johnson developed is a true asset, as people do not judge politicians that stand out the same way that they judge conventional politicians (Flinders, 2017). It seems to prove true, since polling has shown that he is more respected by the British public than were Theresa May and David Cameron at the time of their mandates (Dommett, 2016). Boris Johnson is not only an atypical politician, he also manages to create a close connexion with the public (*ibid*). Citizens feel that he speaks in the name of the people, that he is committed to truly help them and that he walks the talk (Dommett, 2016; Flinders, 2020). Therefore, he gets the support of those who think alike but also of those who like him and wish to see him more often in British politics (Dommett, 2016).

In fact, Matthew Flinders (2020) revealed that Boris Johnson's strategies can be referred to as populism. According to Benjamin Moffitt (2016), who studied the rise of populism, what characterises a populist leader is the rejection of political conventions, a radical style made out of provocation, aggressiveness, rudeness, and a tendency to appear as an outsider, developed in a context of non-political sentiment. Based on the description above, Matthew Flinders (2020) concluded that Johnson meets those criteria. Indeed, Boris Johnson understood people's frustration over politics and took advantage of it by presenting himself as different from other politicians (Flinders, 2020). Moreover, another characteristic of populism used by Boris Johnson is to present simple solutions to complex situations (*ibid*). This tendency towards populism is not surprising knowing that, during the EU referendum, the leave campaign had relied upon populist strategies as well (Evans and Menon, 2017).

However, although Boris Johnson is a good speaker in front of a crowd, he does not thrive in the same way when addressing members of Parliament (Dommett, 2016). When facing political scrutiny, his use of humour fails him and he often sounds condescending, aloof and defensive (*ibid*). Furthermore, his outsider strategy appears paradoxical (Flinders, 2020), as Johnson belongs to what some call the 'old boys' club' (Prendiville, 2015). Indeed, having studied at Eton College and at Oxford University, his educational background is quite typical of the UK Parliamentary elites (Flinders, 2020). A survey carried out by the Sutton Trust (2019) actually reveals that 41% of the Conservatives MPs went to independent schools, Eton being the most common amongst them, while only 7% of the British population received such an education. As for higher education, 27% of the Conservatives MPs went to Oxford or Cambridge, while only 1% of the British population did (Sutton Trust, 2019).

On the opposite side of the political chessboard stands Jeremy Corbyn, who represented the Labour Party during the 2017 and 2019 general elections. Elected party leader in September 2015, Jeremy Corbyn represents the left-wing of Labour, and even the hard left (Hannah, 2018; Wainwright, 2016). He is indeed one of the most

radical Labour MPs elected party leaders (Clark, 2018; Wainwright, 2016). His election, with almost 60% of the votes, was historic, given the above-mentioned tendency of the party to shift towards the centre, thus towards the right (Hannah, 2018).

However, Jeremy Corbyn's election revived internal divisions within the Labour Party (Clark, 2018; Hannah, 2018; Tonge *et al.*, 2020a; Wainwright, 2016). It revealed a gap between Labour MPs, who had backed a right-wing shift of the party, and Labour members, unhappy about that shift (Bolton and Pitts, 2018; Hannah, 2018; Wainwright, 2016; Wren-Lewis, 2018). Labour's supporters were angry with their own party (Hannah, 2018; Wainwright, 2016), and saw in Jeremy Corbyn a possible left realignment (Wainwright, 2016). Corbyn managed to mobilise not only disaffected Labour supporters but also tens of thousands of citizens that were not Labour before (Wainwright, 2016). Besides, his success was even more important amongst young people (Clark, 2018; Evans and Menon, 2017; Hannah, 2018, Wainwright, 2016), but this will be discussed further in this chapter.

Jeremy Corbyn is liked by his supporters because he appears human, authentic, modest and honest (Hannah, 2018; Wainwright, 2016). Most importantly, he appears as someone who has principles, who fights for them and who does not moderate his beliefs to attract voters (Bolton and Pitts, 2018; Hannah, 2018; Wren-Lewis, 2018). He is also passionate about politics and committed to his pledge to serve the people (Evans and Menon, 2017; Wainwright, 2016). Jeremy Corbyn is seen as an outsider who pays little attention to the conventions, whether by his physical attitude, his dress style, or by his behaviour in Parliament (Hannah, 2018; Wainwright, 2016). For instance, he does not hesitate to ask the Prime Minister questions that directly come from the people (Wainwright, 2016).

Nonetheless, not everyone shares those views on Jeremy Corbyn and he faced widespread criticism after his election as party leader. His opponents described him as unpatriotic, amongst others (Goes, 2020). He was also accused of being weak for not having handled Labour internal divisions effectively (*ibid*). Above all, he was criticised for supposedly not having leadership qualities (*ibid*). It is important to highlight the fact that a lot of criticism came from within his own party: several Labour MPs, especially from the right-wing, believed that he was unable to win elections and unfit of being Prime Minister (Hannah, 2018; Tonge *et al.*, 2020b; Wainwright, 2016; Wren-Lewis, 2018). Yet, perceptions of being fit to be Prime Minister are important as some studies (Curtice and Lisi, 2015; Towner, 2017) demonstrate that it influences votes and political success. Besides, after the EU referendum, Corbyn was blamed for the defeat of the remain camp (Evans and Menon, 2017; Hannah, 2018; Wren-Lewis, 2018). He refused to resign afterwards (Bolton and Pitts, 2018; Hannah, 2018; Wainwright, 2016), but the levels of criticism reached such an extent that a new leadership election for the Labour Party was called (Evans and Menon, 2017; Hannah, 2018; Wren-Lewis, 2018). Although a survey carried out by Ipsos MORI (2016) indicates that at the time, more than two thirds of the British population believed Labour should have a new leader,

Jeremy Corbyn was elected a second time with 62% of the votes, an even higher percentage than during the first leadership election (Hannah, 2018; Wren-Lewis, 2018). Labour's internal divisions diminished (Wren-Lewis, 2018), but during the 2017 general election campaign, some of his Labour opponents openly criticised him in the media (Denver, 2020; Wren-Lewis, 2018). However, this tactic proved to be counterproductive since it actually increased his popularity and Labour scored the historic results mentioned earlier in this chapter (Wren-Lewis, 2018). It reinforced Jeremy Corbyn's legitimacy as party leader (Hannah, 2018), but it did not mean that the Labour Party was out of trouble. Indeed, Labour faced an internal crisis of antisemitism that impacted the image of the party (Goes, 2020). What is more, Boris Johnson stepping in as Prime Minister was the final blow to Jeremy Corbyn's popularity. From that moment, Corbyn had the worst popularity rating known in UK political history (Tonge *et al.,* 2020b). It also appeared that internal crises within Labour prevented the party from playing its role of opposition against the Conservatives (Clark, 2018; Goes, 2020; Wren-Lewis, 2018).

We discussed earlier in what way Boris Johnson was to be considered a populist leader. As for Jeremy Corbyn, he also presents characteristics of a populist leader, although not the same ones as Boris Johnson (Bolton and Pitts, 2018). To understand Corbyn's populism, we first have to look at Jan-Werner Müller's work on populism (2016), which states that populism is nurtured by a vision of the political elites being corrupted. Therefore, Corbyn's populism relies on his image of principled man, which we mentioned earlier (Bolton and Pitts, 2018). Corbyn's moral integrity is seen by its supporters as unwavering, and he appears as morally superior to all other politicians (*ibid*). Besides, Corbyn's populism also relies on left populism strategies, which consist in depicting the population as being dominated by a tiny part of wealthy people at the head of the country (*ibid*). This coincides with what Chantal Mouffe (2018) considers to be one of the main characteristics of populism: presenting the society as divided in two groups, one being led by the populist leader, and the other group being blamed for what is wrong in the society. This strategy opposing an 'us' group to a 'them' group is also used by Boris Johnson (Flinders, 2020), as we will discover in the next chapter.

This analysis of Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn shows that the British people elected two party leaders that are similar in some respects: they both appear as unconventional politicians, outsiders of the traditional political elites in their own way; they show low respect for conventions; they appear authentic and committed to their mandate to serve the people; and finally, they use populist strategies to appeal to the people. This reflects the tendencies amongst the population that were described earlier, notably the low levels of trust in conventional politicians that people believe to only act in their own interest, to the expense of the common people. Actually, anti-political sentiments leading to a rise of populism have recently been observed in many countries worldwide (Bolton and Pitts, 2018; Clark, 2018).

## 2.5. Dividing Lines Amongst the British Population

Like other countries, the United Kingdom and its citizens are not a homogenous block sharing all the same beliefs. On the contrary, it is characterised by some long-term cleavages. In the following paragraphs, the main fault lines dividing the British population will be looked at, as they influenced voting behaviours during the 2019 general election. Of course, those cleavages are interconnected, but for the sake of clarity, they will be addressed separately. Besides, the list of cleavages presented below does not claim to be exhaustive.

First of all, Brexit obviously reveals one dividing line, tearing the British people between the leave and the remain camp. It is important to point out that it is not the EU referendum itself that created those divisions, but it actually set light on divergences that were already profoundly rooted (Cutts *et al.*, 2020; Evans and Menon, 2017). The question of Brexit worked as a catalyst for people to express themselves on those matters and it has had a polarising effect on the population (Bolton and Pitts, 2018; Flinders, 2020). As a result, it appears that positions regarding Brexit changed traditional loyalties to political parties during the 2019 general election (Evans and Menon, 2017; Power *et al.*, 2020). This is what we referred to earlier in this chapter when we explained that Brexit had made party attachment shift (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2020). This factor helps to explain why Labour lost so many seats to the Conservatives: they lost constituencies that had voted to leave the EU. Indeed, analysis of the results show a correlation between high scores for the Tories in constituencies that had voted to leave, and high scores for Labour in pro-remain constituencies (Denver, 2020). However, as figures show, the correlation is stronger for the Conservatives in leave constituencies than it is for Labour in remain ones. Indeed, the Tories gathered 74% of the votes in leave constituencies against 14% vote share for Labour, while Labour won 49% vote share in remain constituencies against 19% for the Tories (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020).

The cleavage on the question of Brexit had an important impact on this election as we have seen that Brexit dominated the political agenda since 2016 and that the leave and remain camps were still strong at the moment of the election. However, since it is not Brexit itself that created those divisions, we must look into more rooted and more long-term cleavages.

We mentioned earlier that some dividing lines had an impact on other ones. In the case of Brexit, what initially was a question of external relations between the UK and the EU also revived questions about internal relations between the constituent countries of the United Kingdom (Montgomery and Baglioni, 2018). Indeed, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted quite massively to remain, while the leave camp dominated in England and Wales (Uberoi, 2016). Those divergences raised the questions of Scottish independence and Irish reunification (Montgomery and Baglioni, 2018). Similarly, taking into account the fact that older people voted more for the leave camp while more

young voters voted to remain (Uberoi, 2016), positions on Brexit send back to other cleavages based on demographics such as age.

This brings us to the second dividing line that we will address, namely the generation gap. Evidence shows that older people mostly vote for the Conservative Party, while younger people vote more for the Labour Party (Clark, 2018; Curtice, 2020b; Evans and Menon, 2017; Hannah, 2018; Power *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, deeper analysis of the election results indicates that 62% of the 18-24-year-olds voted for Labour while only 19% of them voted for the Conservatives (Uberoi *et al.,* 2020). Moving upwards in the age pyramid, the tendency is reversed from over 45 years old (*ibid*). Only 17% of people over 65 voted for Labour, against 64% for the Tories (*ibid*). It is then no surprise that vote analyses show that Labour scored best in constituencies with a high percentage of young people amongst its population (Denver, 2020). The same applies for constituencies with a high percentage of students: in total, Labour gathered 49,8% vote share in those constituencies (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). However, 18- to 24-year-olds represent only 11% of the British population (Evans and Menon, 2017), which is obviously not enough for the Labour Party to get a majority relying on this part of the electorate. Besides, the electorate is getting older, as our societies are confronted with an ageing population, due to a life expectancy that increases and families having fewer children (*ibid*). It impacts elections all the more that voter turnout is lower amongst young people (Evans and Menon, 2017; Harrison, 2020). This is a tendency that we already discussed in the first chapter. Besides, generation has an impact on social values and opinions on matters such as immigration, homosexuality and feminism: young people are more liberal thinkers than older people (Evans and Menon, 2017).

Then, qualifications and education are also a factor that influences voting behaviours (Flinders, 2020). This dividing line is connected to the generation gap, since older voters tend to have fewer degrees than younger ones (Evans and Menon, 2017). Regarding voting behaviours in 2019, 39% people with university degrees voted for Labour, against 34% who voted for the Tories (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). But the difference is much more striking when it comes to people with no qualifications: indeed, 59% of them voted for the Conservatives against 23% for Labour (*ibid*). It also had an impact on votes in the way that turnout is higher amongst people with qualifications than it is amongst people with no or little qualification (Evans and Menon, 2017).

Next, turning to more geographical divisions is the cleavage between urban and rural areas. Figures show that Labour scored better results consistently in urban constituencies while it scored worse in rural areas (Denver, 2020). Following the same pattern, cities and especially London are typically considered as Labour strongholds (Clark, 2018; Denver, 2020; Evans and Menon, 2017). To better understand this geographical fault line, an increasing number of specialists talk of a cleavage resulting from the impact of globalisation on the British population (Bickerton, 2018; Clark, 2018; Evans and Menon, 2017; Jennings and Stoker, 2016; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006). They distinguish, on one side, the people considered as the ‘losers of globalisation’, who are

described as typically older, with no qualification, from the working class, living in rural areas and strongly attached to their local communities (Clark, 2018; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006). These people suffer from competition brought about by globalisation, whether because of immigration or because of the open market (Evans and Menon, 2017). They are thus more likely to vote for parties advocating economic protectionism and strong policies on immigration (Jennings and Stoker, 2016; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006). On the other side, there are those who benefit from globalisation: typically younger, with university degrees, living in urban and cosmopolitan areas (Clark, 2018; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006). As a result of their positive experience with globalisation, they tend to vote for liberal policies, favouring immigration and European integration for instance (Jennings and Stoker, 2016; Kriesi *et al.*, 2006).

These are key elements to understand why Labour gets more support in urban areas and the Tories in rural areas. London's particular situation to the rest of the country is the example of globalisation at its fullest. In London in 2019, the Labour Party won 49 seats with 48.1% vote share, against 21 seats for the Conservative Party with 32% of the votes (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). These results illustrate Labour's popularity in cosmopolitan areas. In contrast, Boris Johnson's strategy was to get support from people frustrated by globalisation (Flinders, 2020). He developed his image to appear as the defender of 'Englishness', something that is less present in cosmopolitan cities but that is important to people living in rural areas (Flinders, 2020; Jennings and Stoker, 2016).

Then, moving on to the cleavage of social classes, it appears that classes are not a determining factor for voting behaviour any more (Denver, 2020). According to several authors (Clark, 2018; Denver, 2020; Evans and Menon, 2017; Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2020), the traditional class-party relation that had prevailed since World War II has been strongly weakened. The Labour Party who used to have the support of the working class is now more popular amongst the middle class, while the Conservative progressively gained ground amongst the working class (Curtice, 2020b; Evans and Menon, 2017), to such an extent that they outperformed the Labour Party during the 2019 general election (Power *et al.*, 2020). This tendency had been under way for a moment but Brexit accelerated the process (Evans and Menon, 2020). However, classes are still relevant to explain some voting behaviours, since the working class displays lower turnout than the middle class for instance (Denver, 2020).

Finally, as briefly mentioned above, divisions between the population in Scotland and in Northern Ireland are still vivid today. Although the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence seemed to have settled the question for a time, Brexit raised the issue again (Flinders, 2017). We will see in the next chapter how the idea of a second referendum on Scottish independence was an underlying issue during the 2019 campaign. Furthermore, divisions between Scots who voted yes for independence and those who voted against had repercussions on the election results. Indeed, a study by Edwige Camp-Pietrain (2020) focussing on the situation of Scotland in the 2019

general election indicates that three out of four of the Scots who had backed independence in 2014 voted for the SNP in 2019. As for those who had supported the Union, about half of them voted for the Conservatives (Camp-Pietrain, 2020). Labour was in fact the party that suffered the most from the rise of the SNP (Fieldhouse *et al.*, 2020).

In the case of Northern Ireland, Brexit also revived internal tensions as the leave-remain dividing line merged with the preexisting unionist-nationalist division, with unionists wanting to leave and nationalists voting to remain (McEwen and Murphy, 2021; Tonge and Evans, 2020). And the numbers are quite striking: 66% of people considering themselves as unionists voted to leave while 88% of those who consider themselves as nationalists voted to remain (Garry, 2016). The unionist-nationalist cleavage itself is linked to religious background, as there is a correlation between people with a Protestant background voting for unionists and people with a Catholic background voting for nationalists (Tonge and Evans, 2020). Tensions did not vanish after the referendum, on the contrary. During negotiations with the EU on withdrawal agreements, concerns were highly focussed on the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (De Mars *et al.*, 2018). On the one hand, there were fears of increased tensions in the case of a hard border, and on the other hand, the DUP did not want Northern Ireland to be marginalised by having a different status than the rest of the UK regarding its relations with the EU (De Mars *et al.*, 2018). The cleavage between unionist and nationalist parties is still strong and brings instability, as it has been reflected in the 2019 general election results, with the nationalists winning a majority for the first time (Tonge and Evans, 2020). However, beyond the unionist-nationalist divisions, a third political camp neither unionist or nationalist is emerging with the Alliance Party (*ibid*). Although it only won one seat in 2019, its vote share increased by 8.8%, which is the highest increase in Northern Ireland since the last election (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020).

To conclude this chapter, the United Kingdom has been increasingly divided in the last years and Brexit has had a polarising effect on these existing cleavages, reinforcing and even sometimes exacerbating identities. While Geoffrey Evans and Anand Menon (2017) talk of the United Kingdom as a divided democracy, according to Matthew Flinders (2017), it does not mean that the country is soon to become the “Dis-United Kingdom” (p. 78). Furthermore, we have seen in the first chapter of this study how the Internet and social media accelerate and increase fragmentation as well as polarisation (Blumler, 2016). As the Internet has long become an integral part of British society and politics, its polarisation effect most certainly adds fuel to the fire of the already-divided United Kingdom.

# 3. Analysis of the Campaign

## 3.1. The 2019 General Election and Public Opinion

Every general election takes place in a particular context and, with it, come specific priorities for the population, for the media and for political parties. This is one of the reasons why it was necessary to analyse and understand the context in which the 2019 general election took place, as we have done in the previous chapter. Those priorities are generally translated into salient issues that appear as the stakes of the election and on which the attention of multiple actors is focussed. Beyond the political agenda set by mass media, each party defines its own campaign strategy and with that comes the decision to invest more in some issues and to avoid others (Meyer and Wagner, 2016). This ability for the parties to define their own political agenda and to diffuse it has been, as we have seen in the first chapter, increased by the possibilities brought about by the Internet and social media. Therefore, analysing and comparing the electoral agendas set by mass media and by the political parties during the 2019 campaign is precisely what the first part of this chapter will consist of.

If we look back in time, we observe that the key issues raised during the 2010 and 2015 general elections were the financial crisis and the economy of the country (Ipsos MORI, 2019a; Montgomery and Baglioni, 2018). This is not surprising given the scale of the financial crisis that hit the country in 2008. In 2015, however, immigration started to make its way onto the political agenda, to such an extent that during the campaign of the 2016 EU referendum, it was by far the most important issue (Evan and Menon, 2017; Ipsos MORI, 2019a). Next came the 2017 general election with, as key issues, Brexit and the NHS (*ibid*). With Brexit still pending as the 2019 general election got closer, there were high chances that the issue would remain central. It effectively did, to such an extent that it was commonly called the 'Brexit election' (Deacon *et al*., 2019).

Before diving into proper analyses, it is interesting to look at the big picture of the UK public opinion at the time of the 2019 general election. The Ipsos MORI Issues Index (2019a) reveals that Brexit and health were by far the two main issues that people considered to be the stakes of the election (see Figures 1 and 2). Unsurprisingly, those two issues were also designated as the issues on which people would decide who to vote for, although in this case the gap between Brexit, in first position, and health, in second position, was wider. As for the other issues, we can notice that people considered education to be more important than the economy, although the economy was more likely to influence their vote. However, the difference in the percentage was quite small.

Figure 1: Most important issues for the British people in November 2019

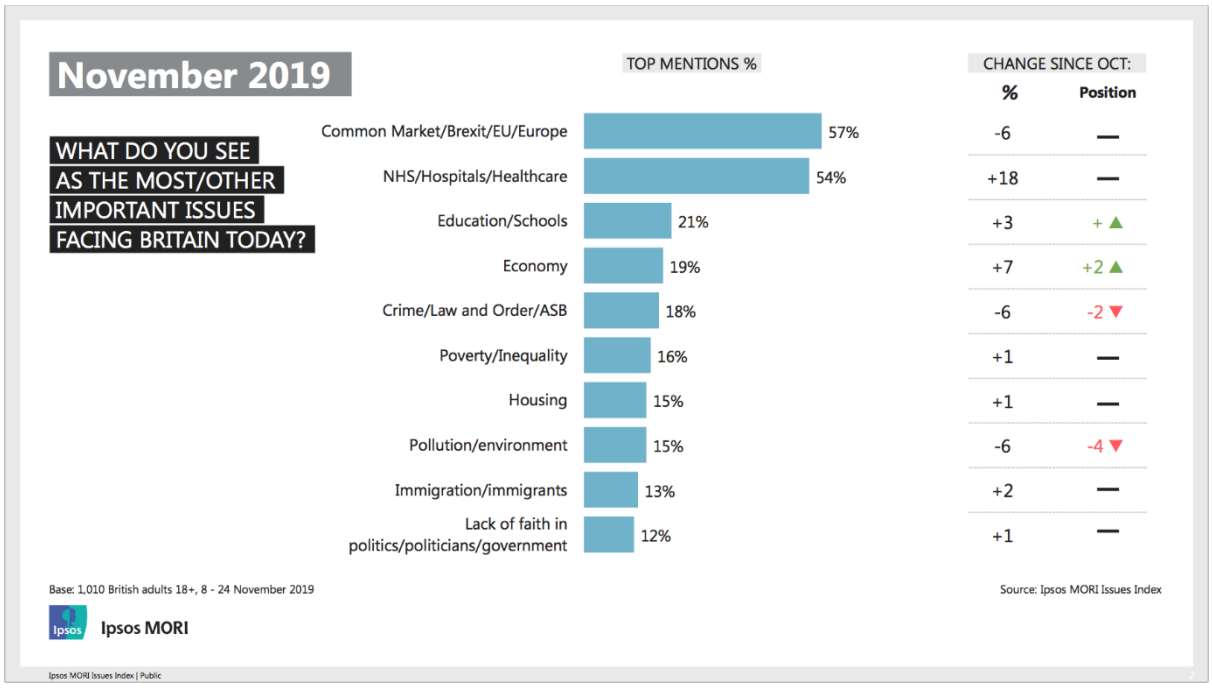
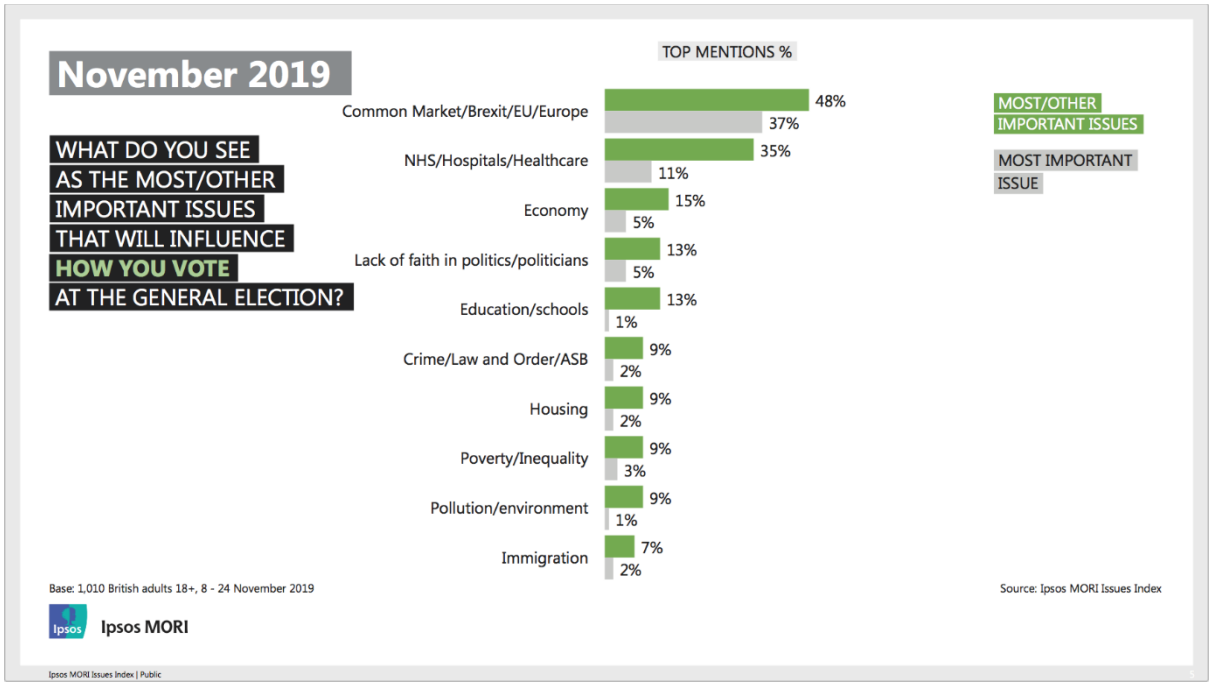



Figure 2: Most decisive issues for the British people in November 2019




This survey is a first indicator of the likely predominance of the Brexit issue in the 2019 campaign.

## 3.2. The Influence of Mass Media

We have seen in the first chapter the increasing importance and influence that the Internet and social media have on political communication and, amongst others, on news consumption. In fact, Reuters Institute's report on digital news (2019) indicates that 40% of people use social media as a source of news. But this does not mean that traditional media does not play an important role any more, on the contrary. News consumption on television was declining but a rebound has been observed because of Brexit, as people tend to turn to television to get informed during a crisis (Reuters Institute, 2019). Therefore, in 2019, 71% of the British population consumed news on television (*ibid*). However, newspapers are facing a crisis, with print circulation plummeting (Clark, 2018; Wring and Ward, 2020). At the time of the 2019 general election, there had been a global 25% decrease in sales for the 10 national dailies, in comparison with 2017 (Wring and Ward, 2020). It was thus necessary for mainstream media to adapt, and it did by increasing its presence on the Internet. In total in 2019, 75% of the British people used the Internet to inform themselves, whether on social media, websites or online newspapers and others (Reuters Institute, 2019).

What is also characteristic of the British press is that most newspapers are partisan (Clark, 2018; Wring and Ward, 2020). Presenting the election as a binary choice between the Conservatives and Labour, newspapers not only praise the party they support, they also criticise the opponent, often with striking headlines (Wring and Ward, 2020). For instance, they did not hesitate to exploit Labour's internal divisions (Wren-Lewis, 2018). During the 2019 campaign, Jeremy Corbyn in particular was the target of newspapers (Bolton and Pitts, 2018; Mullen, 2018). In fact, when looking at the orientation of the main British newspapers, taking their respective circulation into account, the Tories got 72.5% news coverage in their favour, while Labour only got 12.8% (Wring and Ward, 2020). When we compare data from 2019 and 2017, a report from Loughborough University (2019) reveals that newspapers' hostility towards the Labour Party doubled, while it halved for the Tories.

## 3.3. Salient Issues in Mainstream Media

Coming now to the core of the analysis and to our first research question, we will first examine the key findings of Loughborough University's report (Deacon *et al.*, 2019) on media coverage of the UK 2019 general election. As explained in the methodology, this report will serve as our base of comparison for Labour's and Conservatives' communication on Facebook.

Table 1: Media coverage of key issues during the 2019 general election campaign

| | TV% | Press% | All% |
|---|---|---|---|
| Electoral process | 31 | 32 | 31 |
| Brexit/ EU | 18 | 11 | 13 |
| Business/ economy/ trade | 6 | 9 | 8 |
| Health/ health care | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| Standards/ scandals | 6 | 7 | 7 |
| Taxation | 4 | 6 | 5 |
| Minorities/ religion | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Defence/ military/ security/ terrorism | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Public services | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| Environment | 4 | 2 | 3 |
| Immigration/ border controls | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Scotland/ Wales/ Northern Ireland | 5 | 1 | 2 |
| Social Security | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Crime/ law and order | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Education | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| All other issues | 3 | 7 | 6 |

Note: percentages = (number of appearance of an issue/ all issues *100)

Source: Deacon *et al.*, 2019 (Loughborough University)

Table 1 reveals that the electoral process itself was actually the first issue covered by television and newspapers, and by far, with 31%. Then, and quite unsurprisingly, Brexit was the key issue number 2, attracting 13% of media coverage. If we look at the distinction between television and newspaper coverage, we can see that the predominance of Brexit was even stronger for television, with 18%. The third most predominant issue was the economy, with 8%, followed closely by health and scandals, each accounting for 7% of media coverage. As for the rest of the list, we can notice that differences were not sharply marked. In last position stood education, with only one percent of media coverage.

We can already point out some surprising facts about these figures. When we compare this list with the list of important issues in the opinion of the British people, we see some striking differences. Indeed, health was the second most important issue, almost

at the same level as Brexit, while it only stood in the fourth position regarding media coverage. The same observation can be made for education: it stood in third position in the public opinion, but on television and in the press, it was the least covered issue.

In order to evaluate if the political agenda of mass media converges with the online agenda of the Tories and Labour, Facebook posts and ads published by both parties were collected and analysed as presented in the methodology. In total, for the campaign period running from the 6th of November to the 12th of December, 12,829 publications were collected. The first observation we can make is that there is a significant difference between the two parties regarding the number of publications. Indeed, Table 2 shows that the Tories' publications account for 79.69% of the collected data, while Labour's only account for 20.31%, with 2,605 publications out of 12,829.

Table 2: Number of Facebook publications published by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party during the 2019 general election campaign

| Niveau | Dénombrement | Prob. |
|---|---|---|
| Conservative Party | 10224 | 0,79694 |
| Labour Party | 2605 | 0,20306 |
| Total | 12829 | 1,00000 |

Now analysing the repartition between Facebook posts and ads shown in Table 3, we observe that ads represent 93.69% of the Tories' communication on Facebook, and 80.54% of Labour's.

Table 3: Proportion of Facebook ads and Facebook posts published by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party during the 2019 general election campaign

| | Conservative Party | Labour Party |
|---|---|---|
| Ad/post | % | % |
| Facebook ads | 93,69% | 80,54% |
| Facebook posts | 6,31% | 19,46% |

Those figures are quite striking since it was acknowledged by scholars that the Labour Party had a clear advantage on social media during the 2017 campaign (Clark, 2018; Wring and Ward, 2020). However, it is not surprising that the Tories have understood the importance of campaigning on social media since then and invested more in Facebook in 2019, especially since there is evidence that the number of posts, likes and shares on Facebook positively influence political success (Hagar, 2014).

This difference can also be explained by financial factors. Indeed, in 2019, the Conservatives received considerable donations amounting to a total of about £19,400,000 (Uberoi *et al.*, 2020). In comparison, Labour came second with only about £5,400,000 (*ibid*). In fact, the Tories had more funds than all the other parties put

together. Moreover, Dominic Wring and Stephen Ward (2020) indicate that parties are spending increasingly higher sums in digital campaigns, and especially in online ads. Of all the parties, it is thus the Conservative Party that spends the highest sums in digital advertising (Clark, 2018). Beyond the fact that the Tories' impressive financial advantage seems to validate Douglas Hagar's (2018) statement that financial resources remain the main factor for political success, those findings seem to also validate the 'normalisation thesis'. Indeed, this theory that we discussed in the first chapter states that important political parties with higher resources have greater presence on social media than smaller parties (Koc-Michalska and Lilleker, 2019). With such a bigger number of Facebook publications, the Conservatives probably had a stronger online presence, at least on Facebook, than the Labour Party.

It is now time to assess the extent to which political parties' agenda diverges or converges with the political agenda set by mass media. Table 4 indicates the results of our first analysis, and aggregates data from the Conservative Party and the Labour Party together.

Table 4: Issues covered on Facebook by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party together during the 2019 general election campaign

| | All |
|---|---|
| **Issues** | **%** |
| Brexit | 17,46% |
| Constitutional issues | 25,27% |
| Crime/order | 0,12% |
| Defence/terrorism | 0,31% |
| Economy | 2,78% |
| Education | 0,13% |
| Electoral process | 14,06% |
| Employment | 0,42% |
| Environment | 0,97% |
| Events | 0,36% |
| Health | 14,93% |
| Housing | 0,13% |
| Immigration | 0,26% |
| Manifesto | 1,09% |
| Minorities/religion | 0,12% |
| Opposition | 10,38% |
| Other issues | 0,34% |
| Public services | 0,14% |
| Scandals | 0,13% |
| Scotland | 0,12% |
| Social security | 0,30% |
| Sport | 0,01% |
| Taxation | 9,71% |
| Transport | 0,21% |
| Women's issues | 0,18% |
| Young people | 0,04% |
| All | 100,00% |

At first glance, figures seem to suggest that there is a difference regarding agenda setting between traditional media and between the Facebook campaign of Labour and the Conservatives, but we will take a closer look at the figures to confirm that.

First, we can point out that, online, the first position is held by constitutional issues with about 25%. This category includes all the messages about the deadlock in Parliament that we already mentioned in the previous chapter. Then, the issue of Brexit comes second with 17.5%. In third position comes health (14.93%), closely followed by the electoral process (14.06%). Next in the ranking stands the category of opposition with 10.40%. This category is used to classify messages criticising the opposition itself and not criticising the opponent's position on a certain issue. Then, we find taxation in fifth place with 9.70%. At this point in the ranking, there is a gap between these issues that have substantial percentages and all the other issues that are close to each other with low percentages.

Looking at those results and comparing them with Table 1, we see some differences and some similarities. The first difference to point out is that the electoral process was by far the most discussed topic on television and in the press, while it only stands in fourth position for political parties on Facebook. With a difference of 17 points of percentage, the gap is quite wide. Then, we notice that constitutional issues do not constitute a proper category in the Loughborough University's ranking. This seems to indicate that when constitutional issues were discussed in mainstream media, discussion was not focussed on those issues only, and it was probably always linked to the Brexit issue. In our configuration, constitutional issues and Brexit were dealt with separately when the core of the messages was different, meaning that some publications were referring to constitutional issues only, with no mention of Brexit or any other issue. Given the predominance that constitutional issues have in our ranking on Facebook communication, with more than 25%, this is a huge difference. As for Brexit, it was the second most important issue on Facebook with 17.50%, which is not so far from its position on the mass media agenda, with only a difference of 4.5 points of percentage. If we look at the figures for television only, in this case, the proportion is almost exactly the same. However, if we consider that the deadlock in Parliament was fully due to Brexit, then we can aggregate constitutional issues and Brexit in one category, making Brexit the most salient issue on Facebook with 42.73%. Therefore, we see that in this configuration, the difference between traditional media and Facebook regarding the predominance of the Brexit issue is even starker.

Next, we also see clearly that the economy did not have the same importance on the Facebook agenda of political parties as it had for mass media. Indeed, for television and the press, the economy comes third with 8% of media coverage, while only 2.78% of Facebook publications talked about it, placing the issue in seventh position.

Then comes the issue of health. There is a difference of proportion, since Facebook communication was twice as much focussed on the issue than mainstream media was.

Looking at the ranking, it appears that it had more importance on Facebook, since it stands in third position, and even in second position if we consider that constitutional issues and Brexit should be aggregated, while it only stands in fourth position on the agenda of traditional media.

Next on the agenda of newspapers and television is the category of scandals, attracting 7% of media coverage. Here again the difference with Facebook communication is clear: with only 0.13%, this is one of the least important categories for the parties on Facebook.

As for the issue of taxation, it appears to be one of the few similarities between the two political agendas. Indeed, although the percentages are not quite the same, it is the sixth most important issue both for mass media and for political parties on Facebook.

Finally, for all the following issues, such as minorities and religion, defence and terrorism, public services, the environment, immigration, Scotland, crime and order, social security and education, we can point out that on Facebook, there is a gap between the least discussed issues and the most discussed issues. Indeed, after the issue of taxation (9.71%), all but two of the issues are below 1%. This is yet another difference with traditional media, since there is no such gap but a steady decrease. However, a final interesting element that we can notice is that in both cases, education was almost of no importance.

In the light of all these observations, we can answer our first research question and state that the Conservative Party and the Labour Party did use Facebook as a tool to focus their communication on other issues than mass media did during the 2019 general election campaign, therefore setting a different political agenda. As for how it diverged, we can summarise the main differences as follows: First, the electoral process got significantly more coverage in mass media than it got on Facebook. Secondly, although Brexit was given the priority on both political agendas, the extent to which it was discussed on Facebook far exceeded mainstream media coverage. Thirdly, health was a more salient issue on Facebook than it was in traditional media. Finally, television and newspapers were much more focussed on the economy than Facebook communication was.

However, there are three main similarities between mass media and Facebook communication that stood out: First, both political agendas gave high priority to the issue of Brexit over other issues. Secondly, the position of the issue of taxation was the same on both political agendas. Thirdly, coverage of the issue of education was almost insignificant on both political agendas.

Furthermore, if we compare these findings with the survey about public opinion (Figures 1 and 2) that we have discovered at the start of this chapter, we can conclude that the Facebook campaigns of the Conservative Party and the Labour Party were

more representative of the preoccupations of the British people than mass media coverage was. This is to be noticed in the predominance of the issues of Brexit and health, and the fact that less importance was given to the economy on Facebook than in traditional media. Finally, the main difference remains that the British population considers education as a key element, while it was almost not addressed online.

However, when looking at these results and when drawing conclusions, it is important to bear in mind that, as we have discovered earlier, the Tories published significantly more publications than the Labour Party. This obviously impacted the overall percentages presented here above, as the Tories' publications weighed more in the calculations. However, this size effect will be neutralised in the next part of the analysis when we look at the two parties separately.

## 3.4. Analysis of Issue Convergence between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party

In the introduction of this study, we saw that, when political parties address similar issues, we talk of issue engagement (Meyer and Wagner, 2016). Therefore, issue engagement between parties can be stronger or weaker, depending on the strategies chosen by the parties. Now that we have seen that media coverage and Facebook campaigns of both parties diverge in terms of agenda, we will look at figures for each party separately and compare them together. Those figures are provided in Table 5. It is interesting to see if one of the parties has an agenda that is more similar to the agenda set by mass media, but the main interest here is to see whether parties invested in the same issues or not, given the democratic implications that issue engagement has, as we have seen in the introduction. For the sake of clarity, issues will be addressed one after another, starting with the most important ones. Appendices B1 and B2 contain the same data as Table 5 but presented by order of importance for each party.

Table 5: Issues covered on Facebook by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party during the 2019 general election campaign

| | Conservative Party | Labour Party |
|---|---|---|
| **Issues** | **%** | **%** |
| Brexit | 20,63% | 5,03% |
| Constitutional issues | 31,71% | 0,00% |
| Crime/order | 0,11% | 0,19% |
| Defence/terrorism | 0,34% | 0,19% |
| Economy | 3,00% | 1,92% |
| Education | 0,00% | 0,65% |
| Electoral process | 0,24% | 68,29% |
| Employment | 0,20% | 1,31% |
| Environment | 0,12% | 4,34% |
| Events | 0,24% | 0,81% |
| Health | 17,08% | 6,49% |
| Housing | 0,00% | 0,65% |
| Immigration | 0,32% | 0,00% |
| Manifesto | 0,83% | 2,11% |
| Minorities/religion | 0,03% | 0,50% |
| Opposition | 12,86% | 0,65% |
| Other issues | 0,23% | 0,73% |
| Public services | 0,07% | 0,42% |
| Scandals | 0,03% | 0,54% |
| Scotland | 0,16% | 0,00% |
| Social security | 0,08% | 1,19% |
| Sport | 0,01% | 0,00% |
| Taxation | 11,62% | 2,23% |
| Transport | 0,09% | 0,69% |
| Women's issues | 0,00% | 0,88% |
| Young people | 0,00% | 0,19% |
| All | 100,00% | 100,00% |

As explained in the methodology, to better understand underlying strategies, we analysed the level of hostility and aggressiveness of each publication. Table 6 presents the results of this additional analysis, with the 0 column indicating that there was no attack and the 1 column indicating that the opponent was attacked. It is important to point out that in a large majority of cases, the Labour Party was attacking the Conservatives and the Conservative Party was attacking Labour. However, the term ‘opponent’ was chosen for its neutrality, as in a few cases, the SNP and the Liberal Democrats were also targeted. This variable will be discussed when interesting observations can be made.

Table 6: Level of hostility of the publications published on each issue by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party during the 2019 general election campaign

| | | Attack on opponent(s) | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | 0 | 1 |
| **Issues** | **Parties** | **%** | **%** |
| Brexit | Conservative Party | 92,13% | 7,87% |
| | Labour Party | 71,76% | 28,24% |
| Constitutional issues | Conservative Party | 86,71% | 13,29% |
| Crime/order | Conservative Party | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | 20,00% | 80,00% |
| Defence/terrorism | Conservative Party | 45,71% | 54,29% |
| | Labour Party | 60,00% | 40,00% |
| Economy | Conservative Party | 41,04% | 58,96% |
| | Labour Party | 40,00% | 60,00% |
| Education | Labour Party | 52,94% | 47,06% |
| Electoral process | Conservative Party | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | 98,59% | 1,41% |
| Employment | Conservative Party | 95,00% | 5,00% |
| | Labour Party | 20,59% | 79,41% |
| Environment | Conservative Party | 83,33% | 16,67% |
| | Labour Party | 89,38% | 10,62% |
| Events | Conservative Party | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| Health | Conservative Party | 99,71% | 0,29% |
| | Labour Party | 27,22% | 72,78% |
| Housing | Labour Party | 47,06% | 52,94% |
| Immigration | Conservative Party | 33,33% | 66,67% |
| Manifesto | Conservative Party | 78,57% | 21,43% |
| | Labour Party | 72,73% | 27,27% |
| Minorities/religion | Conservative Party | 66,67% | 33,33% |
| | Labour Party | 7,69% | 92,31% |
| Opposition | Conservative Party | 0,84% | 99,16% |
| | Labour Party | 0,00% | 100,00% |
| Other issues | Conservative Party | 87,50% | 12,50% |
| | Labour Party | 84,21% | 15,79% |
| Public services | Conservative Party | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | 36,36% | 63,64% |
| Scandals | Conservative Party | 0,00% | 100,00% |
| | Labour Party | 0,00% | 100,00% |
| Scotland | Conservative Party | 0,00% | 100,00% |
| Social security | Conservative Party | 37,50% | 62,50% |
| | Labour Party | 54,84% | 45,16% |
| Sport | Conservative Party | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| Taxation | Conservative Party | 11,53% | 88,47% |
| | Labour Party | 93,10% | 6,90% |
| Transport | Conservative Party | 11,11% | 88,89% |
| | Labour Party | 61,11% | 38,89% |
| Women's issues | Labour Party | 34,78% | 65,22% |
| Young people | Labour Party | 100,00% | 0,00% |

### 3.4.1. Constitutional Issues & Brexit

The first striking observation that we can make is the following: Labour did not post once about constitutional issues and the gridlock in Parliament, while the Tories dedicated more than 31% of their communication to this issue. We observe the same tendency for Brexit, since only 5% of Labour's publications talked about the issue, while a bit more than 20% of the Conservatives' publications were about Brexit. If we look at constitutional issues and Brexit together, the difference is even more marked: 52% for the Tories, which is more than half of their publications, against 5% for Labour.

As a matter of fact, given the Conservatives' global strategy for the 2019 general election, these figures are not surprising. Indeed, the Conservative Party had made Brexit its number one priority. In fact, the general election itself was part of the Tories' strategy since Boris Johnson had called an early election in order to break the deadlock in Parliament and to be able to pass his Brexit deal (Curtice, 2020b). The Conservatives' campaign slogan "Get Brexit Done" (see Appendix A2) proves how important this issue was on their agenda. Moreover, it shows that the Conservatives understood people's frustration over the question of Brexit going on for three years (Thompson, 2020). Their strategy also relied on the fact that they had an 'oven-ready' withdrawal deal, as Boris Johnson himself called it (see Appendix A3). Therefore, people knew that if they voted for the Tories, the deal would get through Parliament and the UK would finally leave the EU (Power *et al.*, 2020).

With Boris Johnson at its head, the Conservative Party was seen as the Brexit party, even more than when Theresa May was Prime Minister (Tonge *et al.*, 2020b). This perception of the Tories being the Brexit party was reinforced by the fact that Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, the Tories' only competitor in the leave camp, decided to step back in constituencies where incumbent Conservative candidates were competing (Mellon, 2021; Tonge *et al.*, 2020b). However, according to Jonathan Mellon (2021) in a study about tactical voting in the 2019 general election, it did not have a significant impact on the results of the election because Brexit Party's supporters had already turned to the Conservative Party.

Unlike the Conservatives, the Labour Party failed to develop a clear position on the question of Brexit, due to persistent internal divisions (Evans and Menon, 2017; Goes, 2020). They eventually succeeded in defining a position on the issue, which was to negotiate a deal with the EU and then to give people the final say in a second referendum, where remain would be an option, next to the negotiated deal (Labour Party, 2019).

This situation seems to perfectly illustrate Meyer and Wagner's theory on issue engagement (2016). Indeed, Thomas Meyer and Markus Wagner (2016) state that political parties tend to talk about the same issues when their positions on those issues are quite similar, while they will be less likely to discuss the same issues if their

positions on the issue are rather opposite. Besides, when political parties know that they have some advantage over their opponent on a particular issue, they are more likely to raise this issue (*ibid*). Therefore, this explains why the Tories talked about it that much and the Labour Party less.

At the end of the day, the Conservatives' strategy revealed itself to be effective as they won 56 seats in constituencies that wanted Brexit done, while Labour lost 53 seats in such constituencies (Tonge *et al.*, 2020b).

Regarding attacks on opponents, we can notice that the Conservatives were not particularly aggressive on these issues: their main strategy was to highlight the benefits that a vote for them would bring for people wanting to leave the EU. As for Labour, they attacked the Tories mostly by claiming that Boris Johnson's deal was disastrous (see Appendix A4).

### 3.4.2. Electoral Process

The electoral process itself monopolised 68.30% of Labour's communication, while the Tories almost did not mention it. This is a sharp difference, even more important than the one on the issue of Brexit. This category actually gathers information about how to register to vote, how to find a polling station, how many days left until the vote, what time the polling stations open and close, and so on.

To explain this tremendous gap, we can refer to Wring and Ward (2020) who stated that the Tories used social media to reach remote voters and therefore gain new potential supporters, while Labour used social media to mobilise and remobilise Labour supporters. These two different strategies actually reflect two different positions on the mobilising-chasing continuum developed by Rohrschneider (2002), which differentiates between campaigns focussed on mobilising their usual electorate, and campaigns aiming at persuading, chasing thus, undecided voters and others. Indeed, Labour can be situated towards the mobilising end of the continuum. That would explain why they dedicated that many publications to remind people how and where to vote, as in Appendix A5. As for the Conservatives, they were trying to get the support of new voters and therefore stand more on the chasing end.

In the light of the election results, this strategy does not appear to have paid off, despite the fact that the Internet and social media usually facilitate mobilisation and allow to engage with disengaged audiences more easily, as we have seen in the first chapter of this study. But how can it be explained that Labour lost some of its strongholds in the North whereas their Facebook strategy was directed towards mobilising their supporters? Well, the answer to this question is complex and Labour's loss of seats results from the whole context that we have examined so far, with Brexit being an

important factor. The Conservatives' competition was even stronger as they led a chasing type of Facebook campaign. Furthermore, in this study, we examine the Facebook campaign led by the main Labour Facebook page, which is only a tiny part of Labour's electoral campaign. According to Eunice Goes (2020), Labour led a much more aggressive campaign offline, with Corbyn visiting constituencies that were not Labour. With the Tories targeting Labour constituencies in the North of England, the party realised it had neglected its core constituencies and changed its strategy two weeks before polling day (Goes, 2020).

The level of hostility for this category was obviously very low, almost at 0, since the purpose of these publications was to inform people about voting modalities and to encourage people to vote. It seems quite logical that positive messages were more likely to bring the desired effects and therefore, there was almost no negativity towards opponents in this category.

These observations and conclusions also apply to the Events category, which was also quite functional. Indeed, the publications gathered under this theme are publications inviting people to participate in campaign events, such as rallies, Facebook lives or television debates. Therefore, Labour communicating fairly more than the Conservatives about this confirms the tendency of Labour to try to mobilise its supporters. We can also observe that there was absolutely no hostility in this category.

### 3.4.3. Health

Next in importance comes the health sector. As we have seen at the start of this chapter, health, and especially the NHS, is the second most important issue that helps the British people decide which party to vote for. It was a key issue in the 2017 general election and the NHS was also a key battleground during this election. In 2019, the stakes regarding the NHS were crucial since it had been in crisis for years. Indeed, the NHS still suffers from austerity policies and cuts in its funding after the economic crisis (Montgomery and Baglioni, 2018). A report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] and the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies on the state of health in the United Kingdom (2019) highlights that it led to staff shortages and increasing waiting times. Besides, the NHS also suffers from the ageing population of the UK (Montgomery and Baglioni, 2018). Indeed, people are living longer, thanks to an increased life expectancy, but with that come more health problems when they get older (OECD and European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies 2019).

Health was Labour's second most discussed issue with 6.50% and the Tories' third issue with 17%. These percentages, which are at first sight rather surprising, can be explained by two factors. First, Labour has been perceived as dominant in the health

field since the 1980s (Baggott, 2011). Their attachment to the NHS was all the more strong that it was Labour that created the NHS after World War II (Clark, 2018), as Labour do not fail to remind people, such as in Appendix A6. The Labour Party has always wanted to invest massively in public services and that proved to be true in 2019 as well. They pledged, for instance, to increase the NHS funding by 4.3% each year, to invest £1.6 billion in mental health, £2 billion in hospital facilities and many other investments (Labour Party, 2019). On the opposite side, the Tories have long been associated with cuts, austerity and the privatisation of the NHS. However, in 2005, their strategy started to change under Cameron's leadership (Baggott, 2011). Indeed, their 2005 manifesto showed increasing similarities between their policies and Labour's policies regarding the NHS and it even amplified in 2010 (*ibid*). In 2019, their pledge was to invest £34 billion a year in the NHS, to build 40 hospitals and to recruit 50,000 nurses, amongst others (Conservative Party, 2019). Therefore, the Tories' willingness to match Labour on health care spending (Tonge *et al.*, 2020a) explains why they dedicated much of their communication on this issue before the 2019 general election.

Secondly, financial factors can also be mobilised to explain why the Conservatives were able to dedicate 17% of their publications to the NHS against only 6.5% for Labour. Indeed, as we have seen earlier, the Conservative Party had significantly more funding than Labour. Having more resources for a political party also means that it has more staff to deal with communication, and the party is therefore able to publish more content on more issues (Meyer and Wagner, 2016). That being said, it explains that the Tories' resources allowed them to not only focus on one single issue, but also to invest a lot in several ones, while Labour did not have this ability. This also applies to the following issues that we will examine.

Therefore, the Tories and Labour are not equal regarding financial resources, and 6.50% is not much compared to 17%, but we can seize the importance that health had for Labour simply by the fact that it stands on second position in their ranking, as Appendix B2 shows. Besides, the electoral process which stands in the first position is not an issue strictly speaking. Therefore, health and the NHS were Labour's priority number one during the 2019 campaign, while Brexit was the priority number one for the Conservatives.

As for the hostility analysis, we can point out interesting schemes. Indeed, with 99.71% of their publications not attacking their opponent on this issue, the Conservatives were mostly defending their policies and they probably did not want to attack Labour on this field, mostly perceived as Labour's ground. The Labour Party, on the contrary, published a majority of hostile publications. The Tories having been in office for nine years, the Labour Party was able to attribute the crisis of the NHS to the Conservatives' administration, as it is to be seen in Appendix A7. Moreover, Labour criticised Boris Johnson for putting the NHS on the table during his negotiations with Donald Trump on a potential future deal between the UK and the United States, as shown in Appendix A8.

### 3.4.4. Opposition

With 12.86% for the Conservatives and only 0.65% for Labour, this category is also interesting to look into. It gathers the publications that directly targeted and criticised the opposition itself, not for its political views on an issue, but for its behaviour for instance. Of course, for this category, we notice that the level of hostility shown in Table 6 was almost 100% for both parties.

The figures indicate that the Tories directly criticised their opponents far more often than the Labour Party did. This is not surprising since we have previously seen that Jeremy Corbyn had terrible popularity ratings by the time of the 2019 general election. Furthermore, he was highly criticised in the press (Bolton and Pitts, 2018; Mullen, 2018), and even by members of his own party (Denver, 2020; Hannah, 2018; Wren-Lewis, 2018). The Conservative Party probably saw Corbyn's unpopularity as an opportunity to take advantage of. Therefore, they attacked Corbyn on his indecision over Brexit for instance, as Appendix A8 shows. They also exploited Labour's internal divisions by sharing messages of Labour ex-members challenging Corbyn's ability to be Prime Minister (see Appendix A10).

As for the Labour Party, they attacked Boris Johnson on his tendency to avoid scrutiny, as exemplified by Appendix A11. Besides, Labour also depicted Boris Johnson as not trustworthy, and they exposed him using evidence of previous lies, such as Appendix A12 illustrates.

### 3.4.5. Taxation

Next comes the issue of taxation, another important issue during the campaign. Indeed, 11.62% of the Conservatives' communication covered the issue, against 2.23% for Labour. Despite the difference in percentages, the issue stands in fifth position for both parties.

These figures are even more interesting if we look at the level of hostility at the same time. Indeed, we notice a stark difference: 88.47% of the Tories' publications were attacking opponents, while Labour published only 6.90% of hostile publications. This is evidence that on this matter, the Conservatives were extremely aggressive towards the Labour Party, while Labour was on the defensive. In fact, the Tories' strategy was to depict Labour as fiscally irresponsible. And it was not difficult for them to do so because fears of Labour's spending were deeply rooted in the public opinion since David Cameron openly blamed the Labour Party for the 2008 financial crisis (Bolton and Pitts, 2018; Fieldhouse *et al*., 2020; Hannah, 2018). In the context of a post-crisis economy, people were thus afraid of where public money would come from (Denver, 2020). The Conservatives fuelled that fear by warning people about Labour taxes that

would be raised to finance their public spending plan (see Appendix A13). The Conservative Party was therefore better perceived than Labour regarding public spending in the public opinion, and Labour's manifesto was perceived as unrealistic (Power *et al*., 2020; Wren-Lewis, 2018).

However, it is true to say that Labour's manifesto was more radical than in 2017: the party itself described it as such, as it can be seen in Appendix A14. With important measures such as the nationalisation of the railways or a pledge to invest £400 billion in a National Transformation Fund (Labour Party, 2019), Corbyn's ambition was to fight austerity (Bolton and Pitts, 2018; Mullen, 2018; Wainwright, 2016). Since the 2008 financial crisis, austerity had long been characteristic of the British economy, especially under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government that had made important cuts in public spending and in the welfare state (Clark, 2018; Hannah, 2018). In 2017, the Tories' manifesto still advocated for more cuts and austerity (Hannah, 2018) but in 2019, they understood that people were tired of austerity and pledged a lot of public investments, such as £100 billion in infrastructure, £14 billion in education, £1 billion in social care, amongst others (Conservative Party, 2019).

### 3.4.6. Economy

Since taxation and economy are closely related issues, we will address the latter now. The Conservatives talked about the economy slightly more than the Labour Party did, although 3% against 1.90% is not a stark difference. There were indeed not a lot of publications that were fully dedicated to the economy, although in fact, the economy underlay a big part of other issues. When political parties were presenting policies on other issues, they often explained how their measures would benefit the country's economy. Moreover, economic arguments were sometimes used to support and justify other policies, on Brexit and taxation for instance. See Appendix A15 for an example.

As for hostility, we observe that both parties were attacking opponents in more than half of their publications related to the economy. The Labour Party was mainly criticising the Tories for the economic policies and cuts they have implemented since they came in office in 2010 (see Appendix A16). As for the Conservatives, they were less aggressive on the economy than they were on taxation. It may be due to the fact that Labour having been in the opposition for nine years, the Conservatives could not really criticise the party on more recent grounds than Labour's management of the country's economy when they were still in office (see Appendix A17).

### 3.4.7. Environment

Another observation that can be made is that the environment was one of the most important issues for the Labour Party, since it stands in fourth position with 4.34%. As for the Tories, it is in position 15 with a small percentage of 0.20%. Although the percentages are quite low for both sides, we can still grasp the predominance that it had for Labour and that it did not have for the Conservatives. This quite certainly results from Labour's strategy to avoid the Brexit issue and to focus on other issues that appeal to the people instead.

Moreover, a study about issue competition on the environment (Spoon, Hobolt and de Vries, 2014) reveals that a political party is more likely to tackle the environmental issue if it is threatened by the green party and if environmental issues are of growing concern in the context preceding the election, making climate a potential way to attract votes. It seems that those two criteria were met for Labour at the time of the election. First, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the Green Party had won a lot of seats during the 2019 local elections and European election. But Labour's fear of the Green Party goes back further in time. In 2014, the Labour Party had already created a strategy unit dedicated to tackle the threat posed by the Green Party (Prendiville, 2015). Labour's main fear was to lose voters to the Green Party and that the Conservative Party would benefit from it, since the left would be easier to defeat if divided (*ibid*). Moving on to the second criteria, the 2019 general election took place in a time of growing awareness about climate change worldwide. These rising concerns could be observed in the vast movements of protest on climate change that started in 2018 and that spread at the international level (Boulianne *et al.*, 2020). Those protests were mainly initiated by young people (*ibid*). Indeed, this generation tends to feel more concerned about the environment (Rycroft, 2020). We have seen that young people constitute an important part of Labour's electorate. Therefore, it was important for the Labour Party to talk about issues that appeal to their electorate. It was all the more crucial given that the Green Party is also popular amongst young people (Dennison, 2015).

### 3.4.8. Manifesto

This category gathers the publications talking about the launch of the manifesto itself as well as publications summing up the parties' policies with no emphasis on one issue in particular. We can notice that Labour talked more about its manifesto (2.11%) than the Conservatives did (0.83%). Besides, both parties showed the same level of hostility, with about one quarter of their publications attacking opponents.

### 3.4.9. Employment

Looking at Table 5, we observe that 1.31% of Labours communication was dedicated to this issue. If we compare with the Conservatives, we notice a sharp difference, even if the percentages are quite low for both parties. Indeed, only 0.20% of the Tories' publications were dedicated to employment. Labour's strategy was to criticise the Conservatives since almost 80% of their publications were hostile towards opponents. As for the Conservatives, they adopted a defensive position with no hostility in 95% of their publications.

Here again, we find the same dynamic as for the issues of health and economy: the Tories having been in office for nine years, Labour is able to blame the Conservatives' administration for the current problems that the UK faces. Actually, this could be the explanation for Labour's high level of hostility on several matters, namely housing, public services, as well as crime and order. See Appendices A18 and A19 for examples.

### 3.4.10. Transport

Transport accounted for 0.69% of Labour's communication and for only 0.09% of the Conservatives' publications. However, looking at the level of hostility enlightens us on the tone of these publications. Indeed, almost 90% of the Conservatives' publications were attacking their opponent. Labour also showed some hostility but in a lesser proportion. In fact, the Tories' attacks were mainly directed towards Labour's support of recent rail strikes, as it is to be seen in Appendix A20.

### 3.4.11. Education

Despite the fact that this is one of the most important issues in the minds of the British people, education stands amongst the least discussed issues during the 2019 campaign. In fact, the Tories did not communicate about it at all. However, they did mention education as one of their main priorities during their campaign. It was an argument to support Brexit for instance, since getting Brexit done would allow the government to focus on the UK priorities, including education, as explained in Appendix A21. However, the Conservative Party did not publish any publication that was actually focussed on education itself. As for Labour, 0.65% of their publications covered the issue, in a rather aggressive way (47.06%).

### 3.4.12. Housing

Although housing is an important issue in the UK, it did not make it to the top of the 2019 election priorities. Indeed, this issue was absent from the Conservatives' Facebook agenda, while it was covered by 0.65% of Labour's publication. We have seen earlier that housing is one of the issues on which the Labour Party showed much hostility, with more than half of their publications attacking opponents. They especially attack the Conservatives, which they blame for the housing crisis that the UK is facing (see Appendix A22).

Labour's pledges on housing were to build at least 150,000 social houses a year, to help first-time buyers as well as to increase protection of private renters, amongst other measures (Labour Party, 2019). And if, in fact, we take a closer look at the 2019 election results, Labour's strategy to appeal to renters having housing issues seems to have paid off. Indeed, 46% of private renters voted for Labour and only 31% of them voted for the Conservatives (Uberoi *et al*., 2020).

### 3.4.13. Scandals

Scandals were not an important part of the Tories' communication (0.03%), while it was slightly more important in Labour's campaign (0.54%). For this category, the level of hostility was 100% for both parties. This is not surprising since, just as for the *Opposition* category, these types of messages constitute what we have seen to be called negative campaigning. The parties communicated about some scandals in which their opponents were involved in order to take advantage of it. Figures could also indicate that the Conservatives have been involved in more scandals than Labour has been, and that therefore, Labour had more scandals to report on.

### 3.4.14. Women's Issues; Minorities/Religion & Young People

We will address those three issues together since they present relatively similar characteristics. In fact, these are issues that are typically regarded as Labour's ground. Indeed, we have seen in the second chapter of this study that the Labour Party was popular amongst young people, as well as in cosmopolitan areas. Gender is not a factor that typically influences voting behaviour, but differences were yet observed amongst the young electorate in 2019 (Uberoi *et al*., 2020). Indeed, analysis of the election results show that 65% of women between 18 and 24 years old voted for Labour while only 46% of men did (*ibid*). Therefore, it is not surprising to see that Labour covered these three issues more than the Conservative Party. In fact, the Tories did

not even address young people and women's issues. As for minorities and religion, it stands second to last on their agenda, with only 0.03%.

However, we can notice that these issues did not induce the same levels of hostility. Indeed, the Labour Party was extremely aggressive on the issue of minorities and religion (92.31%). In fact, criticism was mainly directed towards Boris Johnson himself and controversial things that he wrote about minorities, as Appendix A23 demonstrates.

As for women's issues, almost two thirds of Labour's publications were attacking their opponents. In fact, on this issue, Labour mainly criticised the Conservatives for their responsibility in the 'WASPI' issue (see Appendix A24). The Women Against State Pension Inequalities lead a movement claiming justice for women born in the 1950s, since changes in pension legislation strongly and abruptly impacted their pension plans (Vickerstaff and Loretto, 2019).

Finally, when it came to Labour's communication about young people, there was no attack on the opponent. This can be explained by the fact that those messages sought to appeal to young people positively, and there was therefore no negativity included.

#### 3.4.15. Public Services

Regarding the issue of public services, we notice that it accounted for 0.42% of Labour's publications, against only 0.07% for the Tories. These findings are in line with previous observations, about Labour investing more in smaller issues than the Conservatives. As for the level of hostility, the Conservative Party did not attack its opponents at all on this issue, while Labour published a majority of aggressive publications (63.64%). The potential reason for this high level of negativity has already been put forward when discussing the issue of employment.

#### 3.4.16. Defence/Terrorism

On the matters of defence and terrorism, the Tories have communicated slightly more (0.34%) than the Labour Party (0.19%). Furthermore, if we look at the figures regarding negativity, we observe that more than half of the Conservatives' publications on these issues were aggressive towards opponents, and especially towards Jeremy Corbyn, who was mainly criticised for being soft on terrorism and national security, as Appendix A25 shows. However, the figures indicate that Labour was also quite aggressive on these issues (40%), although to a lesser extent than the Tories.

### 3.4.17. Crime/Order

Crime and order were not salient issues during the 2019 general election, since the Conservative Party and the Labour Party dedicated only 0.11% and 0.19% of their respective publications to talk about these issues. However, the analysis of the level of hostility shows interesting results. Indeed, the Tories did not attack their opponents once when talking about crime and order. This is a striking difference with Labour, who published 80% of hostile publications on these matters. As it has been put forward when discussing employment, Labour was able to criticise the Tories' management of the country, since the Conservative Party has been in office for quite a long time.

### 3.4.18. Immigration

The issue of immigration has not been addressed by the Labour Party in its Facebook campaign, while 0.32% of the Conservatives' communication was focussed on the issue, placing it in 9th position. Moreover, two thirds of the Tories' messages about immigration were hostile towards their opponents. In fact, just as Labour had been criticised for its indecision over Brexit, the party struggled to adopt a clear position on immigration (Evans and Menon, 2017).

In contrast, the Tories presented their key measure on immigration which was the establishment of an Australian-style points-based system (Conservative Party, 2019). To promote this policy, they emphasised the need to reduce immigration because of the impact it has on British public services such as the NHS (see Appendix A26). Moreover, they depicted the Labour Party as being in favour of uncontrolled immigration (see Appendix A27). To do so, they could rely on the fact that Jeremy Corbyn is one of Labour's party leaders that support immigration the most (Bolton and Pitts, 2018).

To understand why immigration stands so low in the parties' priorities, we must look back in time. We have seen at the start of this chapter that during the 2016 EU referendum, immigration dominated the political agenda by far (Ipsos MORI, 2019a). Then, the predominance of the issue significantly decreased once the leave camp won the referendum (Evans and Menon, 2017). In fact, with Brexit winning the referendum, people considered that the issue of immigration was sorted, since Brexit would stop immigration coming from the EU (*ibid*). Therefore, voting for the Tories to get Brexit done also meant getting immigration tackled in the minds of the British electorate (*ibid*).

### 3.4.19. Scotland

We have seen in the previous chapter how Brexit had revived internal divisions in Scotland. Given that the results of the 2016 EU referendum did not reflect the Scottish vote, the SNP (2019) considered that it had "a clear mandate to deliver a new referendum on becoming an independent country" (p. 4) and therefore, the hold of a second referendum on Scottish independence was on their agenda in 2019. However, the issue of Scotland was far from being a salient issue for the Labour Party which absolutely did not communicate about it, and for the Conservative Party as well. Actually, the Conservatives did talk about Scotland in their Facebook campaign, but in very low proportion (0.16%). Their communication on this issue was 100% hostile, as our analysis shows. Indeed, they expressed their opposition to the organisation of a second referendum on Scottish independence, as Appendix A28 demonstrates.

## Conclusion

In the light of all the observations that have been made here above, we can answer our second research question and firmly conclude that the Conservative Party and the Labour Party did not communicate on the same issues to the same extent in their Facebook communication. Issue convergence was thus low, and we cannot talk of issue engagement between the two parties. Therefore, it confirms that during the 2019 campaign, the Conservatives and Labour used Facebook as a tool to promote their own political agenda which, as our previous analysis demonstrated, was also different from the agenda set by mainstream media.

On the one hand, the Labour Party put a lot of resources into one category, namely the electoral process, in an attempt to mobilise supporters rather than to reach new voters. Its communication on this theme was not hostile towards opponents at all. Secondly, it focussed on its main priorities, namely health and the environment, with a rather aggressive tone on health but not on the environment. Focus on health had always been characteristic of Labour's policies and as for the environment, it became one of their priorities given increasing awareness about the climate crisis and given the threat posed by the Green Party. Quite surprisingly, Labour also talked about Brexit to almost the same extent as this issue. Thirdly, taxation, the economy, employment and social security came next in their priorities. On the issue of taxation, they adopted a defensive position whereas they attacked their opponents in most of their publications regarding employment and economy. Fourth, they paid relatively the same attention to all the other less significant issues, such as education, housing, transport, women's issues. For most of these issues, they criticised their competitors. Finally, they did not address at all the issues of immigration and Scotland, as well as constitutional issues.

On the other hand, the Tories dedicated more than half of their communication to Brexit and related constitutional issues. Secondly, they focussed in significant proportions on a few other issues, namely health, opposition and taxation. When talking of taxation, they adopted a highly aggressive tone. Thirdly, they moderately talked about the economy, with half of publications being hostile to opponents. Fourth, besides those issues, they paid very little attention, less than Labour, to all the smaller issues, such as environment, transport, public services, minorities. Finally, they did not cover the issues of young people, education, as well as women's issues.

During our analysis, we looked at the level of hostility for each issue separately. Now, if we look at it for the whole Facebook campaign, taking into account the preponderance of each issue for each party, we observe in Table 7 that globally, the Conservatives' campaign was more hostile towards its opponents (31.65%) than Labour's campaign was (14.78%). When examining each issue, we observe that Labour was more often hostile, but in fact, Labour was hostile on issues that had less significance thus less coverage. As for the Tories, they were aggressive on a smaller number of issues, but these were issues that weighed more on the agenda. Therefore, in the light of these results, we can state that the Conservatives' campaign was globally more negative than Labour's. These findings are in line with what we have seen regarding Boris Johnson's provocative and aggressive style, which matches Moffitt's definition (2016) of a populist leader.

Table 7: Global level of hostility of the Facebook campaign led by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party during the 2019 general election

| | Conservative Party | Labour Party |
|---|---|---|
| Attack on opponent(s) | % | % |
| 0 | 68,35% | 85,22% |
| 1 | 31,65% | 14,78% |

However, negativity is a communication strategy that should be used carefully since it is a double-edged sword. Indeed, Lilleker (2006) revealed that negative messages are striking in people's minds, and especially for people with low qualifications, which we have seen to be voting for the Tories in large proportion. However, Lilleker (2006) pointed out that negative messages also impact on the image of the advertiser, and that negative messages are rather counterproductive when it comes to attracting undecided voters.

We stated at the start of our analysis that it would be interesting to see if one of the parties' agenda was more similar to the political agenda set by traditional media. In fact, none of the parties exactly reflects it and the agenda of mass media is rather a mix of the two parties' priorities, which seems quite logical. On the Tories' side, we find the predominance of Brexit, coverage of the economy, health and taxation, as well as a bit of attention paid to immigration, Scotland and defence. On the Labour's side, we find the priority given to the electoral process, coverage of health and environment, as

well as moderate attention paid to social security, minorities, public services and education. Both parties matched mass media on crime and order, while none matched it on scandals.

## 3.5. Analysis of Potential Communication Strategies Based on the Type of Publication

The third part of this study aims at exploring the two different types of publications available on Facebook, i.e. organic posts and paid-for ads, and especially the way both parties used those formats to communicate. More precisely, we want to know if the Conservative Party and the Labour Party communicated in a consistent way throughout their whole Facebook campaign, with no regard for the publication format, or if they used ads and posts strategically to communicate in a different way. In order to determine this, we will look for significant differences in the extent they used ads or posts to cover the different campaign issues that we discovered earlier in our analysis. To do so, we will use data provided in Table 8. Such as for the previous analysis, we will address the different issues successively.

If Labour and the Conservatives communicated in a consistent way, we can expect the results to be approximately similar for each type of publication. However, significant differences in the results would imply that this resulted from a choice from the communication team.

Table 8: Proportion of Facebook ads and Facebook posts published on each issue by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party during the 2019 general election campaign

| | Conservative Party | | Labour Party | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Facebook ads | Facebook posts | Facebook ads | Facebook posts |
| **Issues** | % | % | % | % |
| Brexit | 20,15% | 27,75% | 5,82% | 1,78% |
| Constitutional issues | 33,48% | 5,43% | 0,00% | 0,00% |
| Crime/order | 0,01% | 1,55% | 0,00% | 0,99% |
| Defence/terrorism | 0,06% | 4,50% | 0,00% | 0,99% |
| Economy | 2,85% | 5,27% | 1,10% | 5,33% |
| Education | 0,00% | 0,00% | 0,10% | 2,96% |
| Electoral process | 0,02% | 3,57% | 80,70% | 16,96% |
| Employment | 0,07% | 2,02% | 1,19% | 1,78% |
| Environment | 0,00% | 1,86% | 4,15% | 5,13% |
| Events | 0,00% | 3,88% | 0,00% | 4,14% |
| Health | 17,94% | 4,34% | 2,72% | 22,09% |
| Housing | 0,00% | 0,00% | 0,10% | 2,96% |
| Immigration | 0,11% | 3,41% | 0,00% | 0,00% |
| Manifesto | 0,40% | 7,29% | 0,86% | 7,30% |
| Minorities/religion | 0,00% | 0,47% | 0,05% | 2,37% |
| Opposition | 13,41% | 4,65% | 0,00% | 3,35% |
| Other issues | 0,00% | 3,72% | 0,00% | 3,75% |
| Public services | 0,00% | 1,09% | 0,19% | 1,38% |
| Scandals | 0,00% | 0,47% | 0,14% | 2,17% |
| Scotland | 0,08% | 1,24% | 0,00% | 0,00% |
| Social security | 0,03% | 0,78% | 0,10% | 5,72% |
| Sport | 0,00% | 0,16% | 0,00% | 0,00% |
| Taxation | 11,30% | 16,43% | 2,29% | 1,97% |
| Transport | 0,08% | 0,16% | 0,24% | 2,56% |
| Women's issues | 0,00% | 0,00% | 0,24% | 3,55% |
| Young people | 0,00% | 0,00% | 0,05% | 0,79% |

As a reminder, different forms of logic underlie the two types of publications. Organic posts are shown to followers who like the page; we can therefore assume that a vast majority of them are supporters of the party. Ads, however, will target people based on a range of criteria chosen by the advertiser; they can therefore reach anyone using Facebook, supporters or non-supporters, depending on the parties' choices.

It is also important to highlight the fact that Facebook ads are a highly strategic tool. Buying ads gives the possibility to target the audience quite precisely, based on a wide range of data and criteria. Therefore, it enables political parties to apply segmentation strategies borrowed from the marketing sector to political communication (Lilleker, 2006). Indeed, it is well known in marketing that citizens do not form a homogenous group, and that the population can be segmented in groups of people influenced by the same kind of messages (*ibid*). As a result, political parties can use the big data to identify key segments of voters, and ads to target them. This is, of course, not a new process in politics but it has been facilitated by new technologies.

### 3.5.1. Brexit & Constitutional Issues

The Conservatives dedicated more than one quarter of their Facebook posts to Brexit, against only one fifth of their Facebook ads. Brexit has thus been used as a salient issue to appeal to both types of audiences, although we can point out that it was even more used to engage with followers of the page. As for the Labour Party, with 5.82% of their ads and 1.78% of their posts talking about Brexit, their communication on Brexit was more directed towards Facebook users outside their circle of followers.

If Brexit does not show marked tendencies, the results for constitutional issues are, however, rather striking. Indeed, more than one third of the Conservatives' Facebook ads talked about constitutional issues, while only 5.43% of their Facebook posts addressed the issue. This is a stark difference. It seems to indicate that the Tories used constitutional issues to appeal to the general public rather than to engage with their own followers. This could be explained by the fact that the Tories' argumentation on this issue was rather pragmatic and less ideologically oriented. Indeed, their main message on constitutional issues was that people should vote for them if they want the deadlock in Parliament to be broken so that parliament would work again, as Appendix A29 shows. As it is a rather logical statement, this argumentation could potentially appeal to a larger number of people and to people who were not especially right-wing voters but who were tired of the country being stuck on the question of Brexit. We have seen in Chapter 2 that it was indeed an increasing feeling amongst the British population when the 2019 campaign started (Tongue *et al*., 2020a). Furthermore, we have also seen that it is characteristic of populism to fuel people's frustration and to take advantage of it (Flinders, 2020). All this could therefore suggest that the Tories used populist rhetoric when communicating about constitutional issues.

Given the importance constitutional issues had on the Conservatives' Facebook political agenda, it seemed crucial to us to refine our understanding of the Tories' communication on this issue. Therefore, as explained in the methodology, we analysed the use of Boris Johnson's and Jeremy Corbyn's image in publications. Results of this analysis are presented in Table 9. The 0 column means that the party leader did not appear in the publication and the 1 column indicates publications in which the party leader was represented visually.

Table 9: Use of the image of Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn in the Facebook publications published on each issue by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party during the 2019 general election campaign

| | | | Boris Johnson | | Jeremy Corbyn | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Issues** | **Parties** | **Ad/post** | **%** | **%** | **%** | **%** |
| Brexit | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 95,08% | 4,92% | 99,69% | 0,31% |
| | | Facebook posts | 51,40% | 48,60% | 86,03% | 13,97% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 97,54% | 2,46% | 95,08% | 4,92% |
| | | Facebook posts | 55,56% | 44,44% | 66,67% | 33,33% |
| Constitutional issues | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 9,57% | 90,43% | 9,23% | 90,77% |
| | | Facebook posts | 57,14% | 42,86% | 62,86% | 37,14% |
| Crime/order | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 0,00% | 100,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 90,00% | 10,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook posts | 20,00% | 80,00% | 40,00% | 60,00% |
| Defence/terrorism | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 83,33% | 16,67% | 66,67% | 33,33% |
| | | Facebook posts | 82,76% | 17,24% | 72,41% | 27,59% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook posts | 100,00% | 0,00% | 80,00% | 20,00% |
| Economy | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 99,27% | 0,73% | 61,54% | 38,46% |
| | | Facebook posts | 67,65% | 32,35% | 85,29% | 14,71% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 91,30% | 8,70% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 85,19% | 14,81% | 66,67% | 33,33% |
| Education | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 80,00% | 20,00% | 80,00% | 20,00% |
| Electoral process | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 69,57% | 30,43% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 0,41% | 99,59% |
| | | Facebook posts | 100,00% | 0,00% | 93,02% | 6,98% |
| Employment | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 85,71% | 14,29% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 92,31% | 7,69% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 64,00% | 36,00% | 92,00% | 8,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| Environment | Conservative Party | Facebook posts | 83,33% | 16,67% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 93,10% | 6,90% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 84,62% | 15,38% | 92,31% | 7,69% |
| Events | Conservative Party | Facebook posts | 8,00% | 92,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook posts | 95,24% | 4,76% | 80,95% | 19,05% |
| Health | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 99,30% | 0,70% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 42,86% | 57,14% | 92,86% | 7,14% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 89,47% | 10,53% |
| | | Facebook posts | 81,25% | 18,75% | 81,25% | 18,75% |
| Housing | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 86,67% | 13,33% | 86,67% | 13,33% |
| Immigration | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 72,73% | 27,27% | 63,64% | 36,36% |
| | | Facebook posts | 81,82% | 18,18% | 63,64% | 36,36% |
| Manifesto | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 50,00% | 50,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 46,81% | 53,19% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 77,78% | 22,22% | 44,44% | 55,56% |
| | | Facebook posts | 86,49% | 13,51% | 72,97% | 27,03% |
| Minorities/religion | Conservative Party | Facebook posts | 66,67% | 33,33% | 66,67% | 33,33% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 0,00% | 100,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 41,67% | 58,33% | 83,33% | 16,67% |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Facebook posts | 41,67% | 58,33% | 83,33% | 16,67% |
| Opposition | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 99,77% | 0,23% | 3,19% | 96,81% |
| | | Facebook posts | 93,33% | 6,67% | 60,00% | 40,00% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook posts | 29,41% | 70,59% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| Other issues | Conservative Party | Facebook posts | 58,33% | 41,67% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook posts | 89,47% | 10,53% | 52,63% | 47,37% |
| Public services | Conservative Party | Facebook posts | 85,71% | 14,29% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| Scandals | Conservative Party | Facebook posts | 66,67% | 33,33% | 66,67% | 33,33% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 33,33% | 66,67% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 9,09% | 90,91% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| Scotland | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 75,00% | 25,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 87,50% | 12,50% | 75,00% | 25,00% |
| Social security | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 80,00% | 20,00% | 80,00% | 20,00% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 89,66% | 10,34% | 89,66% | 10,34% |
| Sport | Conservative Party | Facebook posts | 0,00% | 100,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| Taxation | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 99,82% | 0,18% | 13,77% | 86,23% |
| | | Facebook posts | 80,19% | 19,81% | 64,15% | 35,85% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 90,00% | 10,00% | 90,00% | 10,00% |
| Transport | Conservative Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 84,62% | 15,38% | 76,92% | 23,08% |
| Women's issues | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 83,33% | 16,67% | 77,78% | 22,22% |
| Young people | Labour Party | Facebook ads | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |
| | | Facebook posts | 100,00% | 0,00% | 100,00% | 0,00% |

Analysing the results, we can see that less than half of the Tories' Facebook posts about constitutional issues included Boris Johnson visually (42.46%) and even fewer posts presented Jeremy Corbyn's image (37.14%). But the most striking observation is that 90.43% of the Conservatives' Facebook ads on the issue included Johnson's image, and 90.77% Corbyn's image. This reveals that a vast majority of their Facebook ads depicted both Johnson and Corbyn. See Appendix A30 for an example of a publication representing both party leaders. If we take a closer look at these publications, we understand that the Conservatives depicted the situation as a binary choice between the two parties, with no third way possible. They emphasised the distinction between voting for the Tories, that would give the country a strong majority, and voting for Labour and other parties, which would create a hung Parliament. This emphasis of a strong division between "us" and the common enemy "them" is, as we have seen in the previous chapter, what Chantal Mouffe (2018) considers to be one of the main characteristics of populism. Besides, looking at Appendix A30, we also see that they use strong negative words to refer to their opponents, such as 'disaster'. The tone they used was thus rather aggressive, and this has been described by Benjamin Moffitt (2016) as a component of populism.

This additional analysis allows us to confirm that the Tories did use a populist rhetoric in their Facebook ads talking about constitutional issues. Indeed, these ads gather three characteristics of populism. First, they fuel and take advantage of people's frustration. Secondly, they depict the country as divided into two camps, one being the right camp, the 'us', and the other camp being the common enemy. Thirdly, they use an aggressive, negative and sometimes even provocative tone.

In fact, when we look at the whole campaign in the light of our recent observations, we observe that populist rhetoric is not limited to constitutional issues only. It is a wider strategy that the Tories also applied to other issues. Basing ourselves on the three above-mentioned criteria to define populist rhetoric, we find other publications that present those characteristics. The analysis of attacks on opponents, and the negative campaigning it implies, is also a good indicator to start with. Appendices A31, A32 and A33 are some examples of other publications that match our criteria.

In fact, still basing ourselves on those criteria, we see that the Labour Party also used this type of rhetoric. Indeed, in some of its publications, Labour presented the Tories as a common enemy, and they presented themselves as representing the people. Appendices A34, A35 and A36 provide some examples. However, for Labour, we observe that the appeal to frustration is less present than in the Tories' communication. It can be understood by the fact that Labour did not have a clear position on Brexit, while the Tories did and it is precisely Brexit and constitutional issues that fuel the most frustration amongst the British people.

#### 3.5.2. Crime and Order; Defence/Terrorism; Economy; Education; Housing; Immigration; Manifesto; Minorities/Religion; Public Services; Scandals; Scotland; Social Security; Sport; Transport; Women's Issues & Young People

All these issues will be dealt with together because they show similar figures and tendencies. Both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party dedicated more Facebook posts than Facebook ads to talking about these issues. The explanation for this appears quite straightforward. Indeed, we discovered earlier in this chapter when analysing political agendas that these issues were not key issues during the 2019 general election. Therefore, both parties published more posts than ads because they did not want to allocate financial resources to advertise issues that were not decisive enough to attract new voters.

### 3.5.3. Electoral Process

The Conservatives dedicated 3.57% of their Facebook posts to talking about the electoral process while almost none of their Facebook ads did. It is not surprising given the fact that it was not a key theme on their political agenda, as we have discovered in our second analysis. As for the Labour Party, they used more than 80% of their Facebook ads to communicate about the electoral process, which is an enormous proportion. Then, about 17% of their Facebook posts were focussed on the issue, which is a lot but not that much in comparison with ads.

We have seen earlier that Labour had been investing a lot in this category during the campaign because its strategy was to mobilise and re-mobilise its supporters to vote (Wring and Ward, 2020). Yet, figures seem to indicate that they targeted Facebook users in general in far greater proportions than they targeted their Facebook followers. A potential explanation for this lies in the theory of tiny acts of participation (Margetts *et al*., 2016) that we discovered in the first chapter of this study. As a brief reminder, this theory states that even small and easy actions that are characteristic of the use of social media, such as likes and shares, can be considered as political participation (*ibid*). We can thus consider that liking Labour's Facebook page is a political act. Therefore, Labour's followers can be considered as politically active, at least to some extent, and may not need to be mobilised to go to vote. With this in mind, Labour may have used ads to target and reach disengaged supporters outside their Facebook circle, since their followers were not considered to be disengaged. This makes all the more sense since we know that the use of Facebook ads enables to target the audience thanks to a wide set of criteria and data that Labour may have used to target disengaged supporters.

### 3.5.4. Employment & Environment

When looking at Table 8, these two issues show similar patterns. Indeed, the Tories dedicated a small but still consistent part of their Facebook posts to talking about employment and the environment but they did not, or almost not, used Facebook ads to cover these issues. In comparison, there is little difference, less than one point of percentage, between Labour's Facebook ads and posts on these issues. It makes sense that Labour invested resources on these issues since we have seen that these were important issues on its political agenda, especially the environment which was one of its top priorities.

### 3.5.5. Events

For this category, the results quite speak for themselves. Indeed, neither the Conservatives nor the Labour Party published one single Facebook ad talking about campaign events. This seems to indicate that active supporters of the party are the profiles targeted to attend campaign events.

### 3.5.6. Health

Health is one of the issues that present surprising results and sharp differences between the two parties. Regarding the Tories' communication, 4.34% of their Facebook posts were dedicated to health. But what is striking is that the issue comes third after Brexit and constitutional issues in terms of Facebook ads, with 17.94%. This reflects the Conservatives' strategy to improve their image on health. Indeed, we have discussed earlier in this chapter the fact that the Tories were associated with austerity and cuts, especially in the NHS funding. But since then, the party has shifted somewhat towards the left-wing on the matter of public spending (Baggott, 2011; Tonge *et al*., 2020a). They did not want to be associated with cuts any more. Therefore, they actively communicated on their pledges to increase NHS funding, as Appendix A37 illustrates, and they invested heavily in Facebook ads to reach people massively.

As for the Labour Party, the situation is quite the opposite. A huge part of its Facebook posts was dedicated to health (22.09%), while only a small part of its Facebook ads (2.72%) was focussed on the issue. These results seem quite surprising and may be due to the fact that Labour had fewer financial resources. Since they went "all in" in their mobilising strategy, with lots of ads on the electoral process, they may not have had sufficient resources to focus ads on health as well. It may also be due to the fact that Labour is traditionally perceived as the party that stands for the NHS (Baggott, 2011). Therefore, they may have relied on this image and took it for granted in order to be able to focus their resources on other issues that would appeal to new supporters. But since they have the NHS at heart, they talked about it massively in their Facebook posts, as those publications do not require financial resources.

### 3.5.7. Opposition

The figures on this category are quite striking as there is an important gap between Labour and the Conservatives. Indeed, the Conservatives dedicated a very significant part of their Facebook ads (13.41%) to directly attacking the opposition, while the Labour Party did not pay for one single similar ad. As for Facebook posts, Labour and

the Conservatives show relatively similar rates: 3.35% for Labour and 4.65% for the Tories.

One explanation for this stark difference may lie in Boris Johnson's and Jeremy Corbyn's popularity ratings. We saw earlier that the Conservatives criticised Corbyn largely and strategically. Indeed, with Jeremy Corbyn having the worst popularity ratings in UK political history (Tongue *et al*., 2020a), the Tories could take advantage of it and criticise him even outside the circle of their followers, since this type of message would appeal to all people disliking Corbyn, thus to a lot of people.

On the contrary, the Labour Party probably did not dare to criticise Boris Johnson outside of Labour's active supporter circle. Given Johnson's popularity, this may have triggered many people that actually like him. Indeed, we have seen in Chapter 2 that even people who do not share Johnson's views tend to appreciate him because of his clownish manners and his atypical style (Dommett, 2015).

### 3.5.8. Taxation

Finally, regarding the issue of taxation, we do not observe very stark differences amongst each party. The Tories dedicated a more important part of their Facebook posts to taxation (16.43%) than they did for their Facebook ads (11.30%). However, the proportion of Facebook ads is still significant. As for Labour, proportions between Facebook ads and Facebook posts are almost the same, with 2.29% for ads against 1.97% for posts. These observations confirm that taxation was an important issue during the 2019 campaign, since the parties invested in Facebook ads on this issue.

## Conclusion

Our analysis coming to an end, we can now answer our last research question, and more importantly perhaps, draw some conclusions. In the light of our observations, we can state that the Conservative Party and the Labour Party effectively did use Facebook ads and Facebook posts in a different way. And behind those different usages lay strategies that the parties developed to optimise their communications. On some issues, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party showed similar strategies, while on others they developed specific strategies.

Globally, we observed that the choice for the type of publication was influenced by the significance that the issue had on the party's agenda. In our analysis, what stood out is that both parties used a higher proportion of ads than posts when they addressed issues that stood high on their Facebook political agenda. Therefore, the use of ads

reflects the importance that parties give to each issue. This makes sense, given the professionalisation of the field of political communication and, given that online campaigning has become necessary, parties are spending increasing amounts on digital strategies. Therefore, when they invest in ads, they expect a return on investment. And to maximise this return on investment, they invest in ads strategically, by targeting issues that have the most potential to attract voters.

In the case of the 2019 campaign, the Conservative Party invested a lot in ads on constitutional issues, Brexit and health, followed by taxation and opposition in a smaller proportion. As for the Labour Party, it invested massively in the electoral process, then moderately in Brexit and the environment, followed by health, taxation and finally employment and the economy.

Turning now to differentiate strategies between Labour and the Conservatives, their choice to talk about the opposition with ads or posts was probably influenced by Johnson's and Corbyn's respective popularity. The Tories targeted voters outside their usual circle, taking advantage of Corbyn's wide unpopularity. As for Labour, it almost did not use ads to attack Boris Johnson, probably given his widespread popularity across the country.

Concerning communication on the electoral process, Labour did not place the priority on its Facebook followers, since they published more ads. Ads would allow them to reach potentially disengaged supporters, given their 'mobilising' strategy underlying their Facebook campaign.

Next, the Tories invested a lot of ads, and thus resources, on health. It confirms their strategy to improve their image on health, since they advocated for more public funding and not for cuts and austerity any more. As for the Labour Party, it mainly targeted its followers when talking about health, potentially because of financial factors and because they relied on their good reputation on health.

One of our most interesting findings was perhaps that both parties used populist rhetoric, the Conservatives to a greater extent than Labour. It was particularly noticeable on constitutional issues, due to the extensive use that the Conservatives did of Boris Johnson's and Jeremy Corbyn's visual representation, highlighted in our additional analysis. Fuelling people's frustration, using an aggressive tone and presenting the society as divided in two groups are techniques that were used during the 2019 general election campaign. As a populist rhetoric is meant to appeal to the many, the extensive use of ads that the Tories made when communicating on constitutional issues is therefore logical.

Finally, to end this analysis, Table 10 presents the aggregate data of our additional analysis on the importance of party leaders' image. When looking at the figures, we understand how much prominence the image of Jeremy Corbyn had in this election.

Indeed, Corbyn was visually present on more than half of the Tories' publications, and on more than two thirds of Labour's publications. As for Boris Johnson, his image was in fact less instrumentalised during the campaign, with only 4.41% of Labour's publications and more than one third of the Conservatives' publications representing Johnson visually.

Table 10: Use of the image of Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn in the Facebook publications published by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party during the 2019 general election campaign

| | Boris Johnson | | Jeremy Corbyn | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Parties** | % | % | % | % |
| Conservative Party | 67,95% | 32,05% | 47,80% | 52,20% |
| Labour Party | 95,59% | 4,41% | 31,06% | 68,94% |

# Conclusion

This analysis of the Facebook campaigns led by the Conservative Party and the Labour Party has enabled us to have a grasp on political parties' ability to bypass the political agenda set by mass media during a campaign. But most importantly, it has shown us how campaign priorities impact on the whole communication during a campaign. Indeed, the extent to which an issue is considered crucial by a party not only determines the extent to which the party communicates about this issue, but also the extent to which it uses ads to promote its agenda towards Facebook users. It also determines the communication strategies that the party implements. Examples of such strategies during the 2019 UK general election were the use of populist rhetoric, mobilising messages, as well as negative campaigning.

All these findings are important since they allow us to understand some of the changes that are occurring at the moment in the United Kingdom, and to speculate about future developments of UK politics, which we will do in the following lines.

Thanks to its 80-seat majority won in the 2019 general election, the Conservative Party has been able to deliver on its promises: Boris Johnson's withdrawal agreement got through Parliament and, on the 31st of January 2020, the United Kingdom officially left the European Union (Walker, 2021). With Brexit finally sorted out more than three years after the referendum, the British people could have expected some appeasement in the political turmoil that had prevailed in British politics. Nothing could be more untrue. On the 30th of January 2020, the World Health Organization [WHO] (2020) declared the coronavirus outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern. On the same day, the first positive cases of COVID-19 were detected in the United Kingdom (Lillie *et al.*, 2020). The pandemic struck the United Kingdom with full force, propelling the country into crisis mode.

The COVID-19 crisis has already had many apparent implications on British politics. Whereas Brexit had been number one on the UK political agenda for years, Ipsos MORI Issues Index (2021) revealed that, in a very short period of time, the pandemic became the most important concern for the British population, to an extent that had never been reached before. Indeed, concerns about the coronavirus crisis reached a peak of 85%, while the highest level of concern about Brexit had only reached 72% (Ipsos MORI, 2021). In fact, no issue in British politics has ever reached such levels, not even the economy after the financial crisis or immigration by the time of the EU referendum (*ibid*). After the 2019 general election, the importance of Brexit in the public opinion plummeted (*ibid*), which seems quite logical. Similar tendencies had been observed with the issue of immigration after the EU referendum. Interestingly enough, since the pandemic became the most important issue, concerns about defence and terrorism reached their lowest level since 2001. However, what is rather striking and

questioning is that concerns about the NHS also plummeted after the 2019 general election and have not surged during the pandemic.

Given the importance that the COVID-19 crisis has for the British population, we can predict that it will be a crucial stake in the next general election, which ought to take place in 2024. Therefore, we can expect drastic changes in the political agenda, with the pandemic being the most salient issue. We have seen that the NHS was already a key issue in the 2019 general election and it was already declared as being in crisis before the start of the pandemic. Considering the pressure that the coronavirus crisis is exerting on the NHS, it can be argued that it will become the top priority in the 2024 general election. Then, Brexit should logically not be a predominant issue, since it has been sorted out. Besides, because of the health crisis and its consequences on every aspect of the society, it may be harder to distinguish the consequences of Brexit from the consequences of the pandemic.

Taking into consideration the scale of the crisis, we could also hypothesise that the agenda of mass media and the agenda of political parties will converge and be more similar than it has been in the 2019 general election. The same applies for issue convergence between political parties. Indeed, in our study, we learned that political parties tend to address the same issues when their positions on these issues are quite similar. In the next general election, we can expect the Conservatives and the Labour Party to both pledge to fight the pandemic and to increase funding of the NHS and health services. We can make this assumption since Labour has always pledged for more funding of the NHS and since the Tories' policies recently shifted towards the left regarding funding of public services, as we have discovered in our analysis. Therefore, the Labour Party and the Conservatives would be more likely to fight on the same battleground and to both invest a lot in communicating on health. Issue convergence would thus be strong and we could talk of issue engagement.

In fact, the COVID-19 crisis is certainly to be considered as an electoral shock, just as Brexit has been. Therefore, the stakes are high for the UK political parties, since we have seen that electoral shocks make dividing lines and party attachment shift. The perception that the British people will have of the way Boris Johnson and the Conservatives have handled the crisis will be of much importance in the next general election. If people consider that the Tories have successfully dealt with the crisis, the party might benefit from it. But on the contrary, if people are dissatisfied with the Conservatives' management of the crisis, they could turn to other parties, and especially to the Labour Party, given that health and the NHS are perceived as Labour's ground. Given the stakes for the two parties, political communication in the 2024 general election will be crucial. A major challenge for political parties will be to frame and shape the narrative of the crisis management in the way that benefits them. Indeed, we have seen earlier in this study that framing influences people's perceptions of events (Seo and Ebrahim, 2016), and perceptions are decisive in influencing people's minds and voting behaviours (Wren-Lewis, 2018).

Basing ourselves on our analysis of the 2019 campaign, it is probable that Boris Johnson would be an even more central figure in the next election. Just as he was depicted as the man who would get Brexit done, he could this time be depicted as the man who fought against the virus. As for the Labour Party, they will likely criticise the Tories for their management of the coronavirus crisis and of the NHS, just as they already have done in 2019. Therefore, we could expect an increase of negativity in Labour's campaign.

Furthermore, both parties will have to face their own challenges during the 2024 general election. The Conservative Party scored really good, even historic, results in 2019. It will therefore be complicated for them to do better, and they even face the risk of losing new voters they attracted in 2019. Since a part of Labour voters voted for the Tories because of frustration over Brexit and over their own party, rather than conviction for the Tories, Boris Johnson himself recognised that those voters had only lent him their support, and that it was therefore a challenge to maintain them on their side (Flinders, 2020). As for Labour, Jeremy Corbyn resigned after the 2019 general election and Keir Starmer became the new leader of the party (Goes, 2020). Starmer's challenge will be to bury Labour's internal divisions in order to present a competent opposition to the Conservative government (*ibid*). Indeed, as we have seen, competence has become increasingly important in the eye of the electorate in modern times, even more important than ideology. Both parties will also have to face the growing competition of smaller parties, as well as the growing fragmentation that comes with it, since we have seen that the rise of smaller parties weakens the UK's two-party system. At the time, Brexit reinforced the two-party system, and it will be interesting to see whether the pandemic will have the same effect or not.

All the reflections presented here above constitute assumptions on the future of the United Kingdom, formulated in the light of recent events, and in the light of what we have discovered in our study about political communication on social media. Naturally, nothing of what we have said is written in stone. There is still much time left before the 2024 general election and, in the meantime, the situation that we are experiencing now can change drastically. Indeed, recent events, and especially the pandemic, have proven that even when we think that a situation is unstable, it still can get more unstable. UK politics has been characterised by increasing instability, which has accelerated by the Internet and social media. Therefore, the next general election will probably deliver its share of surprises.

Turning now to the evolution of political communication under the influence of the Internet and social media, Facebook ads seem to have a bright future ahead of them. Indeed, last UK general elections were characterised by an increased use of ads in the online campaign of political parties, and we have seen that parties tend to spend increasingly more on digital strategies. If no big change happens by 2024, we can predict that ads will be even more important as a tactical tool in the next general election.

However, scholars are drawing attention to potential dangers that these new strategic digital tools may bring to our societies (Chester and Montgomery, 2017; Dommett and Bakir, 2020). The UK Electoral Commission (2018) even stated that, because of those new tools, “democracy may be under threat” (p. 1). Indeed, systems and technologies used to track and to target citizens are becoming increasingly precise (Chester and Montgomery, 2017). But the public does not have access to enough information about these processes that affect them. There is a global lack of transparency on the use of digital tools in campaigning (Dommett and Bakir, 2020). Therefore, concerns about the misuse of data are rising (Electoral Commission, 2018), as well as concerns about misinformation (Electoral Commission, 2018; Wring and Ward, 2020). In fact, misuse of data has been an increasing concern since the scandal of Cambridge Analytica, which accessed data about more than 87 million Facebook users under cover of some research projects and was therefore able to target users individually in a very accurate way (Isaak and Hanna, 2018). The UK Electoral Commission (2018) raised the issue on the agenda and formulated a series of recommendations to regulate the use of those tools and technologies. Dealing with that will probably be an important challenge for the UK in the coming years.

This leads us to the limitations of this study. First, when we analysed Facebook organic posts, we faced some limitations. Indeed, Facebook gives the possibility to pay in order to boost organic posts once they have already been published, in order to give greater visibility to the posts. This could not be taken into account in our study since there is no official data available on boosted posts. Secondly, our study was able to analyse ads thanks to the Facebook Ad Library. Otherwise, ads are only visible to the person targeted and there is no way to access them. However, in our study, when analysing strategies underlying the different types of publications, we made the assumption that posts were directed towards followers of the page, and that ads were directed towards a broader range of Facebook users. This is not untrue per se. Nonetheless, as we have previously explained, ads can target specific ranges of Facebook users and, unfortunately, precise data on the criteria chosen by the advertiser when designing a Facebook ad was not available. If such data was available, it would have been much easier to understand the parties’ strategies, but we had to make more general assumptions and therefore, our analysis of strategies underlying the use of ads lacks accuracy.

In any case, what the Facebook Ad Library does provide is information on ad reception. It gives estimated data on the number of times an ad was seen, the region of the UK where it was seen, and data on the gender and age of people who saw it. It would be interesting to use this data in a complementary study, in order to refine our analysis, as well as to get some perspectives on the reception of ads, linked with the generational, geographical and gender gap.

Finally, a highly interesting follow-up to this study would be to analyse the 2024 general election campaign using the same criteria as the ones used in this study, in order to compare it with our findings. It would provide interesting observations on the evolution of the political agenda, as well as on the evolution of the use of ads, of negative campaigning, of the image of party leaders and of populist rhetoric. Therefore, it would give perspectives on how campaigning on Facebook is evolving.

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