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Corbyn, Labour, digital media, and the 2017 UK election

The 2017 election result was truly extraordinary in many respects but here I want to discuss what it reveals about the role of digital media in reshaping the Labour party.

The deep question here is to what extent Labour's surge during the campaign—and remember it was really only during the final two weeks of the campaign that the surge became evident—can be explained by broader, below-the-radar systemic shifts in political engagement in UK party politics and how elections are being reshaped by ongoing changes in our media system.

Central to this are new forms of engagement through digital media and how they jell with the evolving ground war on the doorstep and online, as well as longer-term cultural shifts in how people experience politics. As Jenny Stromer-Galley and I argued in the introduction to a special issue on digital media, power, and democracy in parties and election campaigns the growth of digital media in citizens' political repertoires has affinities with a broader shift toward youth engagement and a general skepticism toward authority. There is now a willingness among many individuals to see elections and party participation as fair game for social media-fuelled contentious politics of the kind that has been so important for non-party protests and mobilizations over the last decade. This is happening among those significant sections of the public who have started to channel their social media-enabled activism into party politics and to integrate it with face-to-face doorstep campaigning under the guidance of the new Labour party leadership and Corbyn's ancillary movement Momentum.

We saw similar forces at work with Bernie Sanders' campaign in last year's U.S. presidential election. We saw it with Italy's M5S and Spain's Podemos. Key here is the process of organizational and generational cultural change and how it fits with changes in how digital media are now used in political activity.

When Labour lost the 2010 election, and even as Corbyn continued to attract a huge influx of new members for his party during 2015 and 2016, much commentary revolved around the "death" of social democracy and even of the party form itself. But what June 9 suggests is that, for Labour and its half a million-plus members, the party organizational form is alive and kicking.

Rather than dissolving, Labour looks like it is going through a long-term process of adaptation to postmaterial political culture and is leading the way in new organizational strategies that combine online and offline citizen activism. Skepticism about Labour's new members, suggesting that they are not prepared to help out on the doorstep and are merely "clicktivists" who do not see the value of old-style campaigning now seems wide of the mark.

This is a complex process. Interactions between the organizations, norms, and rules of electoral

politics, the new, flexible, ad hoc, connective styles of political engagement, specific issues, and the affordances and uses of digital media will make the difference. National, regional, and local contexts will also shape overall outcomes.

Digital media and the party-as-movement mentality

But still, digital media foster cultures of organizational experimentation and a party-as-movement mentality that enable many individuals to reject norms of hierarchical discipline and habitual partisan loyalty. Substantial numbers of the politically active now see election campaigns as another opportunity for personalized, contentious political expression and for spreading the word in their online and face to face networks. As a result, Labour is being renewed from the outside in, as digitally enabled citizens, many (though not all) of them young people, have breathed new life into an old form by partly remaking it in their own participatory image. The overall outcome might prove more positive for democratic engagement and the decentralization of political power than many have assumed.

So far, this shift has not touched the Conservatives. They remain a declining party, with a shrinking membership of fewer than 150,000, stuck in the elite-driven, broadcast-era mode that they (and Labour) perfected a generation ago, bolting on digital media targeting without the engagement.

Turnout among young voters rose significantly during this election. A reported 63 percent of 18–34 year olds voted Labour. The campaign saw a massive voter registration drive led by Labour, Liberal Democrats, and Greens, but missed in the coverage is that the parties were also joined by online movement 38 Degrees who ran their own crowd-funded registration campaign including targeted Facebook advertising that generated four million "register to vote" ad viewings. It looks like it worked.

At the same time, it pays to remember that these extraordinary changes are also accompanied by persistent, long-term trends in our media system. The election day front pages of *the Sun*, *the Star*, *the Mail* and *the Express* were outrageous even by the usual standard of these outlets.

The Conservatives achieved more than 42 percent of the popular vote and will be forming a government, albeit a weak one. Labour surged, against all the odds, but it seems difficult to suggest that the incessant campaign against Corbyn in the British press did not make a difference to the overall outcome of the campaign.

How long the Conservative minority Government will last is anyone's guess. But there are deeper changes underway on the British left. Digital media logics, in complex interactions with older media logics, older organizational forms, and evolving patterns of participation are playing a role in these changes.



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