

The data election: one story from 2015

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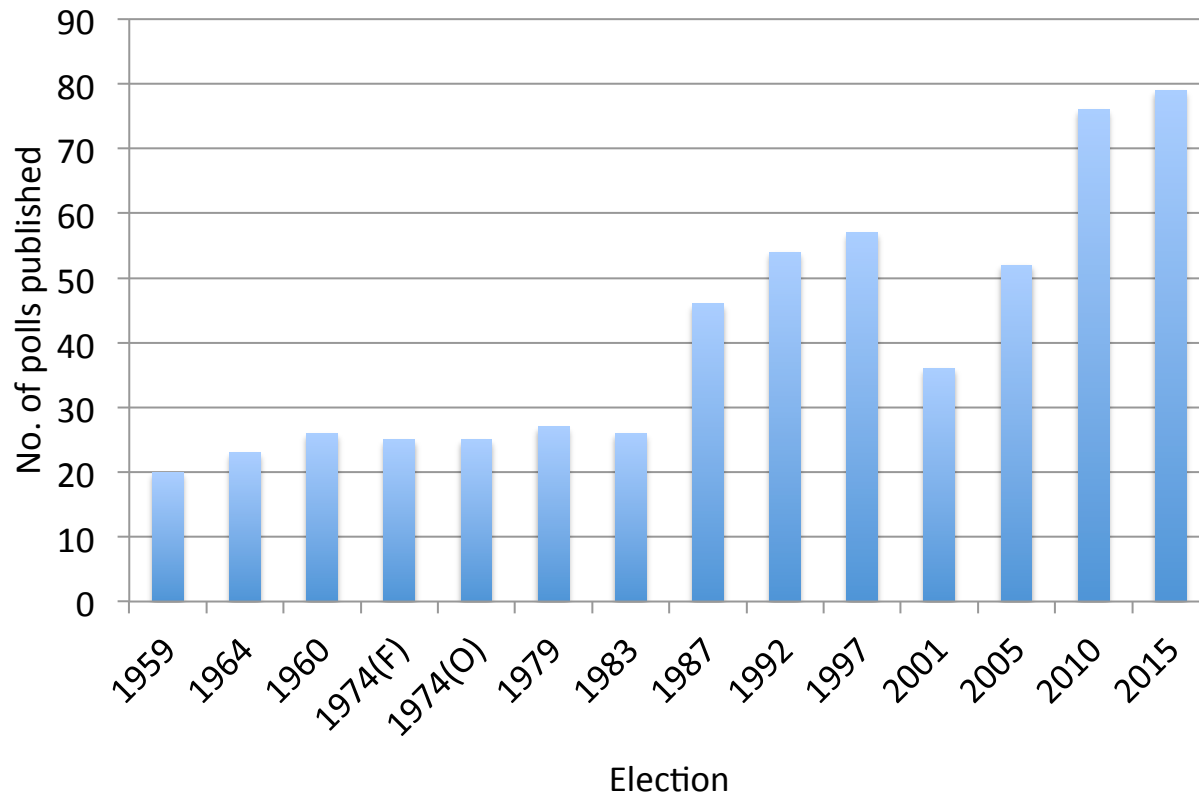
The data election

- Focus on two themes:
 - **Data and the public.** Different ways of understanding (or claiming to understand) the public and public opinion.
 - **Data-driven campaigning.** Ways in which the parties were seeking to target their resources effectively at particular voters.
- Then ask some broader questions about what this means for how British democracy is functioning.

Data and public opinion

- One development that has been widely commented on by political scientists is the increasing “horse race” nature of election coverage (for classic studies, see Hofstetter, 1976; Broh, 1980).
 - Although it should be noted that this trend is partially-driven by public demand (Iyengar et al, 2004).
- The most obvious manifestation is the rising number of opinion polls published in election news coverage.

Number of national opinion polls published during formal campaign period



Data from: Denver, 2007; Wells, 2015.

Opinion polling in the 2015 election

- This however only tells half the story...
 - Lord Ashcroft in particular produced large-sample polls in the run up to the election (sample 25k).
 - In the two years before the election, 121 English constituencies, 29 Scottish constituencies, 5 Welsh constituencies and 1 constituency in Northern Ireland were publically polled, some multiple times (source: [Wikipedia](#)).
 - Polls examining groups of marginal constituencies were also published, as were sub-national polls (10 Scottish polls during the formal campaign period, for example)(Wells, 2015).
 - Polls of sub-portions of the electorate were also published (for example women, Christian voters and the Jewish community).

Public opinion in the 2015 election

- But even this is not the whole story.
- Other methods for measuring public opinion and reaction seemed to be becoming a more staple part of political coverage:
 - Predictive analytics and Bayesian analysis is now referenced in media coverage.
 - The Guardian, for example, hired research firm Britain Thinks to run focus groups in marginal constituencies (Guardian Staff, 2015).
 - New media was also monitored for public reaction, especially around the TV debates.

Explaining the changing way public opinion is presented

- There are a number of reasons why these various methods took center stage in the 2015 election:
 - **Money and resources.** This in particular reflected the influence of Lord Ashcroft.
 - **Internet polling.** This has made commissioning surveys considerably cheaper.
 - **Media demand.** This is true of both traditional providers and more niche outlets.
 - **More fractured party system.** This made traditional polling metrics less useful.
 - In turn, this change was reflected in TV debates.
 - **The private becoming public.** Resources that were traditionally exclusive to the political class are now widely circulated.

The data-driven ground campaign in 2015

The Telegraph

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Ed Miliband wants to have four million conversations with voters to win general election

The Labour leader will urge activists and supporters to mobilise for an unprecedented four million doorstep conversations with voters in the run-up to polling day

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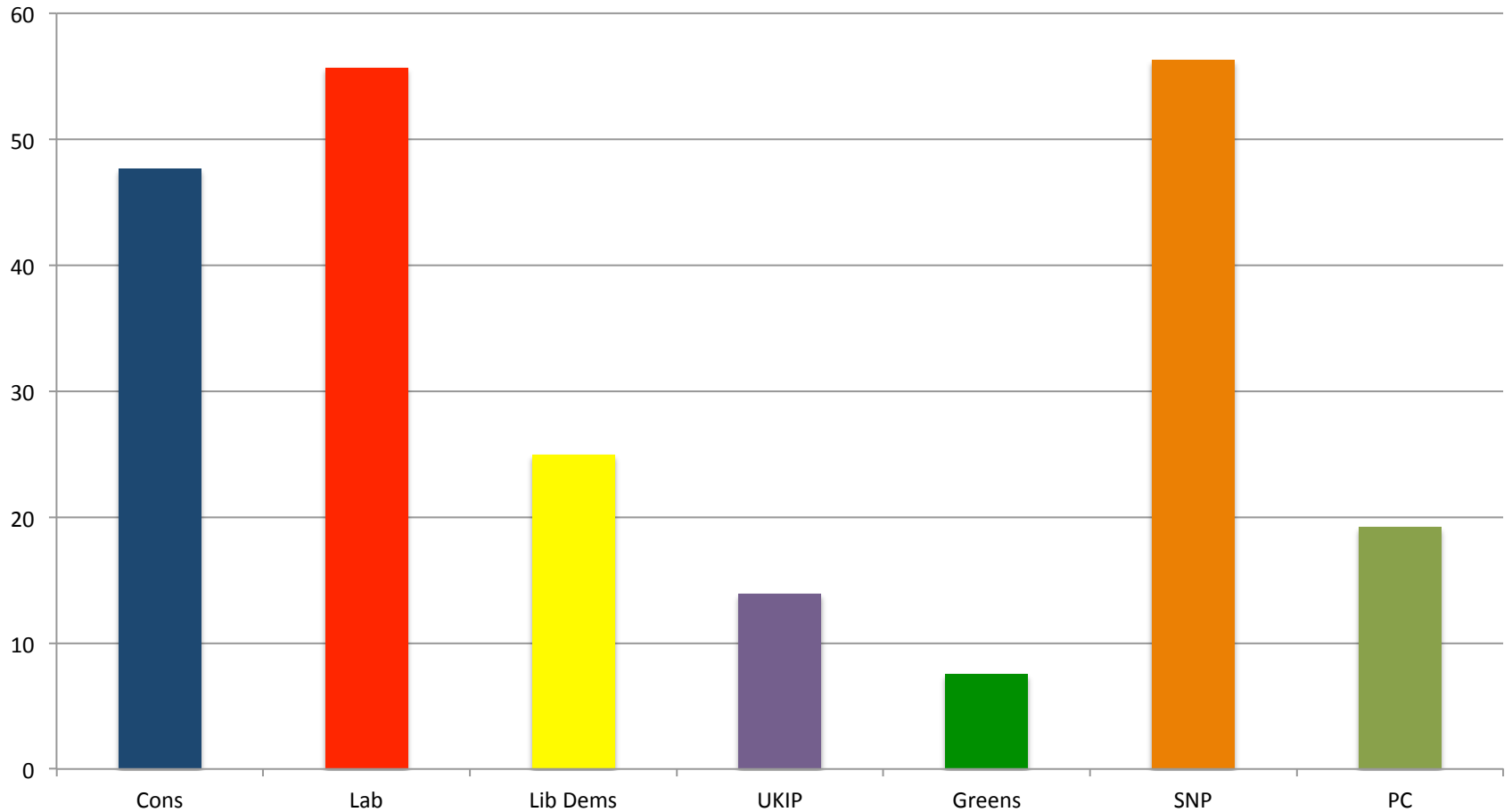
“[W]e were under immense pressure from the central party to produce very high levels of contact right through the campaign... The problem was we didn’t get any penetration with this pattern of campaign outside our core vote. Our core vote was cemented and we marginally expanded it.”

Alex Sobel, former-Labour candidate for Leed North-West on the Labour List blog, June 2015

Data-driven campaigns

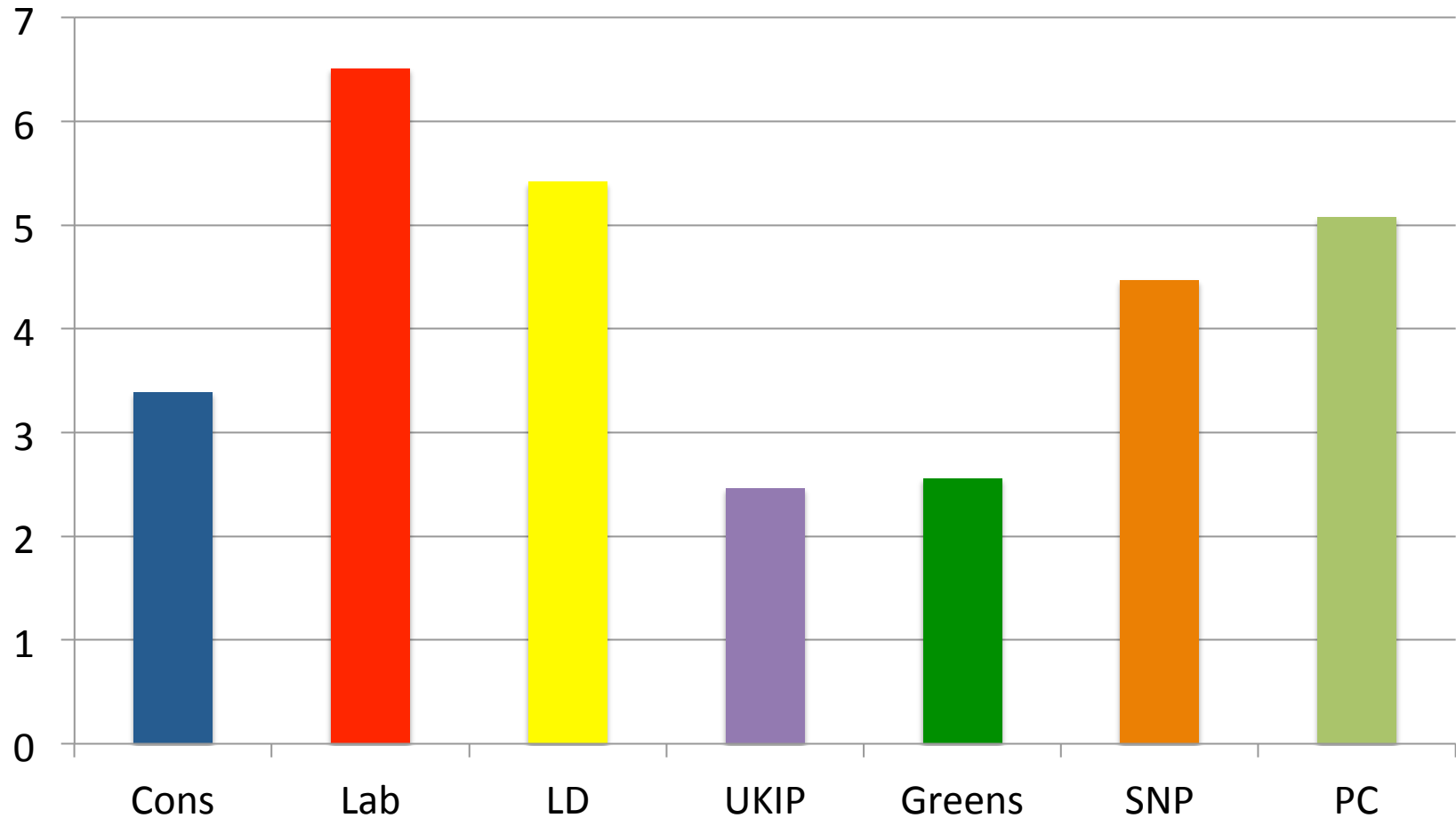
- Increasingly, political parties are seeking to target the “right” voters with the “right” communications.
- There are a number of reasons why they are incentivized to do this (arguably, increasingly):
 - There is now hard evidence that constituency campaigning does make a difference to election results (Fisher et al, 2011).
 - Parties are no longer sectional in nature, so have to appeal directly to voters who are not affiliated with them (Webb et al, 2002).
 - Parties have fewer resources (especially active members) so need to distribute what they have efficiently (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2010).
 - The fracturing of the two-party system and geographical patterns of party support rewards parties for concentrating their resources.
- Data is the most important element of running a campaign of this type.

Overall contact rates of UK parties (last 4 weeks, March 2015. SNP Scotland only, PC Wales only)



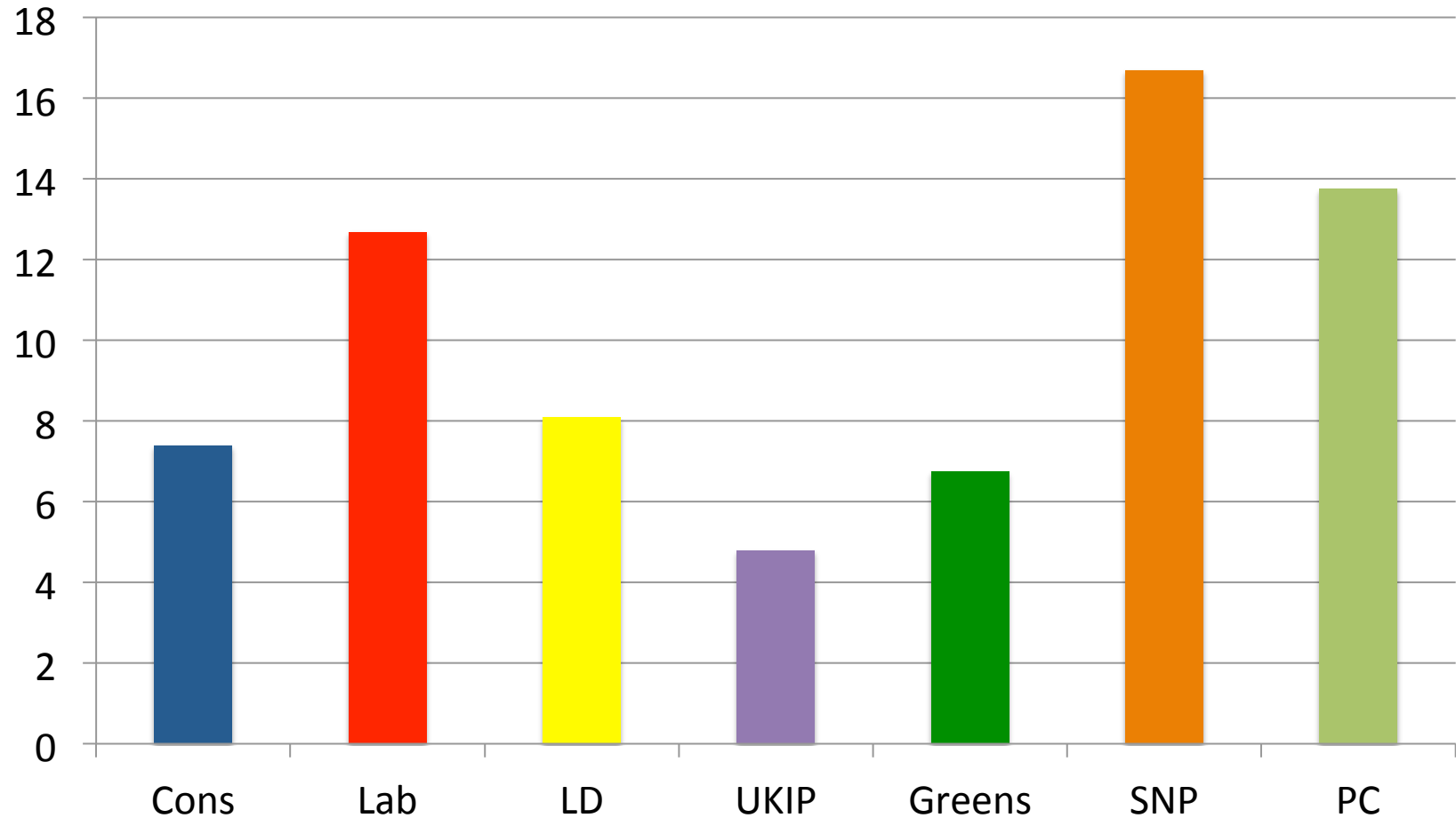
Data from Wave 4, British Election Study, 2015

Overall telephone contact rates of UK parties (last 4 weeks, March 2015. SNP Scotland only, PC Wales only)



Data from Wave 4, British Election Study, 2015

Overall door-to-door contact rates of UK parties (last 4 weeks, March 2015. SNP Scotland only, PC Wales only)



Data from Wave 4, British Election Study, 2015

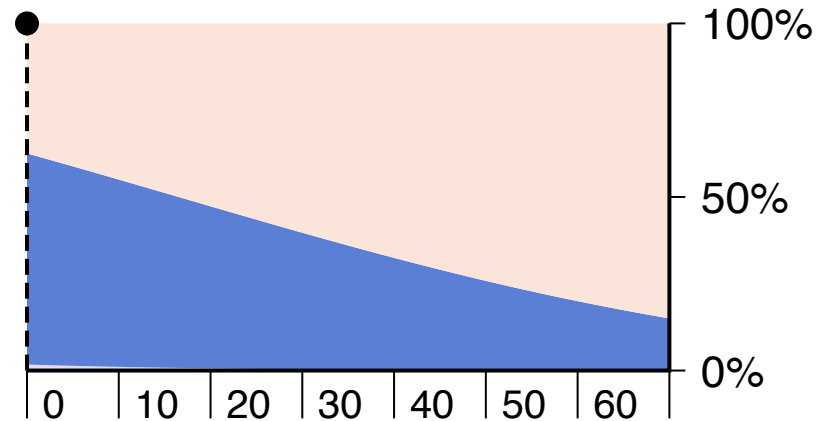
Predicted contact rates

Voter-type	Cons predicted contact rate	Labour predicted contact rate
“Can I get you a cup of tea” Party-supporter, strongly identifies with party, certain to vote.	67.989	72.778
“Would you like a lift to the polling station?” Party-supporter, not very strong ID, not certain to vote.	54.239 (Fairly unlikely to vote) 70.834 (Fairly likely to vote)	79.904 (Fairly unlikely to vote) 74.974 (Fairly likely to vote)
“I’ll vote but not sure for who” Not a supporter of any party, certain to vote (party ID strength excluded)	50.668	57.806
Model p values	Likelihood of voting in election***, party ID***, strength of party ID	Likelihood of voting in election*, party ID***, strength of party ID

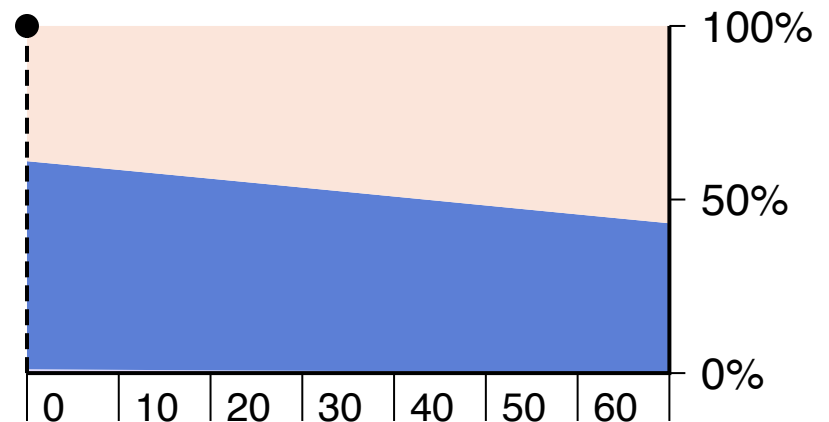
Constituency contact rates

- Constituency marginality is an important element in targeting in the UK system.
- In the most marginal constituencies (i.e. those with the smallest majority), the Conservatives (60.8) had a better **floating voter, certain to vote** contact rate than Labour (59.925).
- In addition, as the graphs show, they were using fewer resources in less marginal constituencies (blue area had been contacted by party in last 4 weeks).
- Predictions calculated from Wave 4, British Election Study, 2015.

predicted partyContactCon by margin



predicted partyContactLab by margin



How were parties targeting voters?

- We know very little about how parties targeted voters.
- During and immediately after the election campaign, various hints were dropped in the media and party blogs about party's data use:
 - The Tories used a system called “Merlin”, which had a number of problems (Wallace, 2015).
 - Labour used a system called “Contact Creator” which integrated canvassing data with Experian information (Hurst, 2015).
 - It is unclear whether, how and to what extent social media data was integrated. Larger parties did engage in data-gathering activities.
- Hopefully we can learn more by talking to campaign managers.
 - This is not necessarily all about data.



The image shows a screenshot of a Labour Party website form. At the top left is the Labour Party logo. The text reads: "Since our NHS was founded on 5 July 1948, its incredible staff have delivered almost 44 million babies. Tell us your birthday, and we'll tell you which number baby you were." Below this is a form with several input fields: "My date of birth is" followed by a dropdown menu showing "1", a dropdown menu showing "January", and a dropdown menu showing "2014". Below these are three text input fields labeled "Your First Name*", "Your Email*", and "Your Postcode*". A red button labeled "Tell me my baby number" is positioned below the form. At the bottom, there is a note: "(Or if you were born before 1948, tell us the birthday of a younger friend or relative.)" and a disclaimer: "Please note: your baby number is only our best estimate, using".

Democracy and data

- Both public opinion research and data-driven campaigning put data at the center of the election campaign.
- Arguably, both fill a vacuum created by the collapse of traditional organizing pillars of UK politics:
 - Different public opinion measurement techniques are an attempt to explain and predict fragmentation.
 - Without electorally viable traditional support bases and with greater variability in constituency profile, parties are seeking to identify the most important voters to contact.
- Both also raise particular normative questions.

Democracy and data

- Data and the public
 - How important was the focus on public opinion to setting the election agenda?
 - Do those who explain public opinion (i.e. journalists) have the conceptual language to explain new measurement tools?

“The polls were central to the politicians’ campaigns, too, so it would have been impossible to ignore them. But, surely, we and all other media organisations allowed the poll numbers to infect our thinking: there was too much ‘coalitionology’ as a result.”

*James Harding, BBC Head of News,
June 2015*

Democracy and data

- Data-driven campaigning
 - There are potential benefits to data-driven campaigning!
 - Assuming parties were doing it “effectively”, does it amplify the weaknesses of the first-past-the-post election system?
 - Does data-driven campaigning advantage large parties over small parties?
 - Does data-driven politics further distance political party’s leadership from their activists?
 - If messages can be tailored to segments of the population, does this challenge traditional ideas of accountability?

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