

From the Doorstep to the Debate: Momentum's Facebook Page in the 2017 General Election and the 2018 Permanent Campaign

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Abstract

Satellite campaigns, organisations that campaign for a party without being part of it, are now a familiar part of British elections. We know less about what they do between elections. I compare the Facebook page of Momentum, the campaign group formed to support Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, in the month before the 2017 general election (153 posts) with a random sample of its posts from 2018 (120 posts). All posts were hand coded with the scheme used in my doctoral thesis. During the 2017 campaign, as I show in a companion paper, Momentum's page mainly asked its followers to campaign. In 2018 that changed. Requests to help on the doorstep, volunteer or sign up fell from about half of posts to 6% to 8%. The page became more negative (posts mainly negative in tone rose from 28% to 55%) and turned its criticism to the media and to opposition MPs: criticism of mainstream media rose from 14% to 38% of posts, of newspapers from 1% to 20% and of opposition MPs from 5% to 22%. It praised party members more, asked people to join the party more often (2% to 16%), and used less humour and fewer memes. Between elections, Momentum's page moved from organising campaigners to arguing about politics and the media on behalf of its side.

Keywords: satellite campaigns; permanent campaign; Momentum; Labour Party; Facebook; mobilisation; political communication

1 Introduction

At the 2017 general election, Labour did better than almost anyone expected. Part of the story told afterwards was about Momentum, the organisation founded in 2015 to support Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, and its digital campaign: viral videos, an app to send volunteers to marginal seats, and a large, young online audience (Dommett and Temple 2018; Dennis 2020). Momentum is an example of what Dommett and Temple (2018) call a *satellite campaign*: a group that campaigns for a party from outside its formal structure.

In a companion paper I compare Momentum's page with Labour's party and leader pages during the 2017 campaign (Hotham 2026b). Labour's party page ran a campaign for votes, Corbyn's page carried

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the same programme in a more combative style, and Momentum asked its followers to campaign, with humour and news clips the party page hardly used. This paper asks what happened next. Elections end, but satellite campaigns do not. What does a satellite campaign do on Facebook when there is no election to fight?

I compare Momentum's Facebook posts in the month before the 2017 election with a random sample of its posts from across 2018. I ask one question: How did Momentum's page change between the election and the following year's permanent campaign?

The answer is clear. In 2017 about half of Momentum's posts asked people to knock on doors, volunteer or sign up. In 2018 those requests almost disappeared. The page became more negative, criticised the media and opposition MPs far more often, praised party members and asked people to join the party. It moved from organising an election campaign to arguing about politics between elections.

The paper draws on my doctoral thesis (Hotham 2021a) and extends my work on Momentum's 2017 campaign (Hotham 2026b), which replaces my 2021 working paper. It is part of a series of preprints on British parties online (Hotham 2026d,c,a,e).

2 Satellite campaigns and the permanent campaign

Satellite campaigns. Digital media have lowered the cost of campaigning from outside a party. Supporters can organise themselves, run their own pages and produce their own content, a shift Gibson (2015) calls citizen-initiated campaigning. Some argue this weakens parties; others that it renews them by drawing in energy from outside (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016). Dommett and Temple (2018) describe satellite campaigns as one result: organisations linked to a party but outside its formal control, which can campaign in ways the party itself cannot, more informally, more aggressively or to different audiences. Momentum is the leading British example. It has been described as a movement faction, a group inside a party that uses the tools and style of a social movement (Dennis 2020), and as part of a wider type of party-driven movement (Muldoon and Rye 2020). Similar organisations elsewhere, such as MoveOn in the United States, mix electoral work with advocacy and campaigning between elections (Karpf 2012).

The permanent campaign. Campaigning no longer stops when an election ends. Blumenthal (1980) coined the term *permanent campaign* for governing as a continuous effort to win public support. Social media make permanent campaigning cheap. Studies of party pages show that parties keep posting between elections, but that their content changes, with less mobilisation and more routine communication (Larsson 2016). We know much less about how satellite campaigns behave between elections. A satellite campaign has particular reasons to keep going: it needs to keep its supporters engaged, to keep raising money and members, and, in Momentum's case, to strengthen its faction's position inside the party.

Expectations. If a satellite campaign mainly exists to help win elections, its page should look like a scaled-down version of its election self between elections: fewer posts and fewer requests to act, but the same style. If it is also a political actor in its own right, its content should change in kind: less organising for elections, more argument about politics, the media and the party, and more effort to recruit members and reward activists.

3 Data and method

Posts. The data are the third of the three datasets in my thesis (Hotham 2021a). For the 2017 election I collected all posts that could be retrieved through Netvizz from Momentum’s Facebook page between 3 May and 7 June 2017: 153 posts. For 2018 I extracted all posts the page made during the year and used a random number generator to select ten posts from each month, giving 120 posts. For context, Table 1 also shows the posts from Labour’s party page (278) and Jeremy Corbyn’s page (144) over the same 2017 period, from the second dataset in my thesis; the full comparison of the three pages is in the companion paper (Hotham 2026b). Facebook limited the posts that tools such as Netvizz could return, favouring each page’s most engaged posts, so the 2017 data are best read as the page’s most engaged-with posts rather than a full census.

The two Momentum samples are drawn differently. The 2017 posts are close to everything the page posted in the busiest month of an election, and the 2018 posts are a random sample spread across a whole year. That is the comparison I want, an election month against an ordinary year, but it means the 2018 sample includes quieter months and some events, such as Labour Party conference, that shape what was posted.

Coding. I coded every post by hand using the binary coding scheme used throughout my thesis. The codes used here cover requests for action (voting, sharing, volunteering, helping on the doorstep, signing up, joining the party, visiting websites); tone (whether a post is negative and whether it is mainly negative); who a post praises or criticises (the party leader, the Conservative leader, MPs, the media, newspapers, experts, party members and campaigners); style (first-person language, humour, memes, screenshots of tweets); and substance (pledges, policy detail, the party slogan and the people pictured). Reliability was tested on the second dataset of my thesis, the party and leader pages at the 2015 and 2017 elections: a second, paid coder recoded 10% of its 1,208 posts (121 posts), and Krippendorff’s alpha (Krippendorff 2004) across all binary codes was 0.81 (0.86 for information codes, 0.84 for mobilisation codes, 0.74 for framing codes and 0.72 for personalisation codes). The Momentum posts were coded with the same scheme by the same coder.

Analysis. For each code I report the share of posts that carry it, the change from 2017 to 2018 in percentage points with Newcombe’s interval (Newcombe 1998) and Fisher’s exact test, with *p*-values adjusted across the 34 codes in Table 1 using Holm’s method (Holm 1979). The comparison with Labour’s pages is descriptive. With one satellite page and two periods, these are comparisons of one organisation’s choices, not estimates of what satellite campaigns do in general.

4 Findings

4.1 2018: from the doorstep to the debate

Figure 1 and Table 1 show how Momentum’s page changed in 2018. The organising almost stopped. Requests to help on the doorstep fell from 48% of posts to 6%, requests to volunteer from 49% to 7%, requests to sign up to campaign from 47% to 8%, and links to campaign pages from 44% to 12%. Each of these falls is around 30 to 40 percentage points and remains significant after adjustment for multiple testing. Requests to vote stayed at 12%, and requests to share stayed at about 30%.

What replaced it was argument. The share of posts that were mainly negative in tone doubled, from 28% to 55%, and the share with any negative element rose from 47% to 68%. The targets changed. Criticism

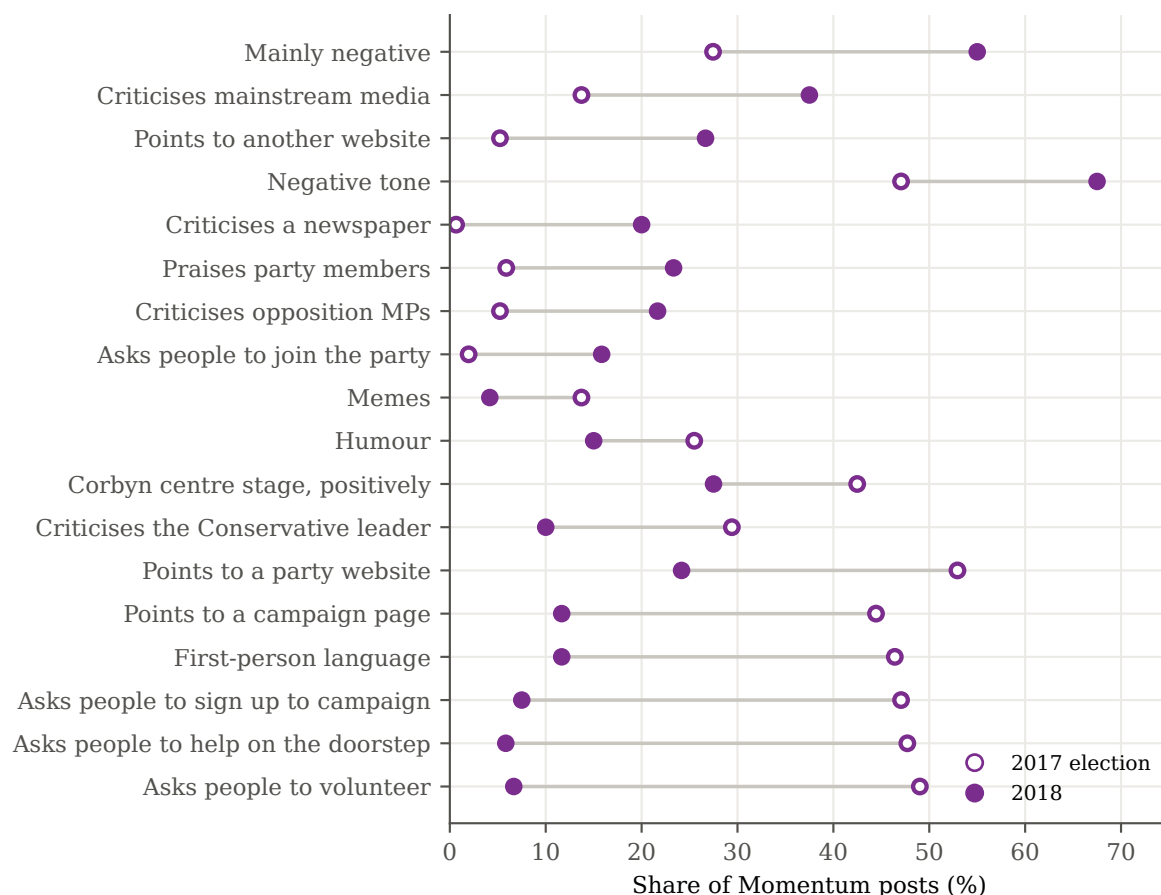


Figure 1. Change in Momentum’s Facebook page between the 2017 election month (153 posts, hollow) and a random sample of 2018 posts (120 posts, filled). Share of posts carrying each code, ordered by the size of the change.

of the Conservative leader fell from 29% of posts to 10%, as Theresa May was no longer an opponent in a campaign. Criticism of opposition MPs rose from 5% to 22%. The biggest new target was the media. Criticism of mainstream media rose from 14% of posts to 38%, criticism of named newspapers from 1% to 20%, and criticism of experts from 7% to 20%. Posts that re-edited news content to make a negative point rose from 22% to 36%, although that change is not significant after adjustment.

The page also turned inward to the movement. Praise of party members rose from 6% to 23% of posts and praise of campaigners from 10% to 22%. Requests to join the party rose from 2% to 16%, while links to party websites fell and links to other websites rose from 5% to 27%. It became less playful and less personal: humour fell from 25% to 15% and memes from 14% to 4%, while first-person language fell from 46% to 12%. Positive posts centred on Corbyn fell from 42% to 28%, although this change is not significant after adjustment.

Some things did not change. Policy detail stayed at about one post in eight, pledges and the party slogan stayed rare, and the people pictured were much the same: members of the public in 46% and 41% of posts, young people in about a quarter. Momentum pictured ethnic minority party members more often in 2018 (18% against 9%), but this change is not significant after adjustment. Seventeen of the 34 codes in Table 1 changed significantly after adjustment, most of them in mobilisation, tone and targets.

5 Discussion

Between elections, Momentum's Facebook page did not simply become a quieter version of its election self. Its job changed. In 2017 it was an organising tool that asked a large online audience to knock on doors in marginal seats, while Labour's own pages ran the broad campaign for votes (Hotham 2026b). In 2018 it was a voice in a running argument: about the media's treatment of Labour and its leader, about opposition MPs, and about the movement itself, which it praised and tried to grow.

This fits the expectation that a satellite campaign is also a political actor in its own right. Studies of party pages find that parties keep posting between elections but mobilise less (Larsson 2016). Momentum's page mobilised less too, but it also became more negative. Its new targets, the media, newspapers, experts and opposition MPs, are the targets of a faction defending its leader and building its position inside a party, as much as of an electoral campaign against another party (Dennis 2020; Muldoon and Rye 2020). Its requests to join the party fit the same picture: in a period of internal party contests, members are a resource.

There is a lesson here for how we think about satellite campaigns. The 2017 story was of a satellite that added something the party could not do for itself, mobilising volunteers in a voice the party's own pages did not use. That remained true in 2018 in a different way. Momentum could attack the media and criticise opponents in a way that Labour's official pages, which speak for the whole party, could not. That freedom is useful to a party during an election. Between elections it can also be used to fight battles inside the party. My data cannot speak to later elections, but they show that by 2018 Momentum's Facebook page spent less of its effort getting supporters out to campaign and more on arguing for its side.

These findings come from one organisation and two periods. They do not show that satellite campaigns in general become more negative between elections, or that Momentum's change had any effect on Labour. They do show that what a satellite campaign does online can change sharply once an election is over, and that studying satellites only during elections misses half of what they do.

6 Limitations

First, this is one page, compared in one election month and one year, so the findings describe Momentum's choices, not satellite campaigns in general. Second, the two samples are drawn differently: the 2017 data cover one intense month and the 2018 data sample evenly across a year, so some of the change reflects the difference between an election and an ordinary year, which is part of what I want to study, and some may reflect particular events in 2018. Third, Facebook limited which posts could be retrieved, favouring the most engaged. Fourth, the reliability test was carried out on the second dataset, not on the Momentum posts themselves, although the same scheme and coder were used. Fifth, my archive holds counts by code rather than post-level records, so I cannot link content to engagement or study combinations of codes within posts. Finally, the criticism codes record the type of target but not always the named newspaper or MP. The MPs in the code for criticism of MPs are opposition MPs; criticism of Labour's own politicians is recorded separately and was rare (none of the 2017 posts and 4 of the 120 posts in 2018).

7 Conclusion

In the 2017 election, Momentum’s Facebook page asked people to knock on doors, volunteer and sign up, while Labour’s own pages asked for votes. A year later, the doorstep requests had almost gone. In their place came a more negative page that criticised the media, newspapers, experts and opposition MPs, praised party members and asked people to join. The satellite that had helped run Labour’s election campaign had become a voice in the arguments of the permanent campaign. To understand satellite campaigns, we need to watch them between elections as well as during them.

Provenance and AI use

The data were collected with Netvizz for my doctoral research, before Netvizz closed in 2019. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis ([Hotham 2021a](#)). An earlier version was presented at the Political Studies Association conference in 2021 ([Hotham 2021b](#)), and the analysis develops Chapter 7 of the thesis. The analysis and writing were completed in 2026.

The analysis code and drafts of the text were prepared with the assistance of an AI system (Claude, by Anthropic), which was also used to review drafts. I checked the analysis and the text and take responsibility for both.

Data availability

The counts of posts carrying each code are shared with this preprint. The posts themselves are not shared, in line with the terms under which they were collected.

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Table 1. Momentum’s Facebook page in the 2017 election month and in 2018, with Labour’s own pages in 2017 for comparison.

Share of posts (%)	Labour 2017		Momentum				
	Party	Corbyn	2017	2018	Change [95% CI]	<i>p</i>	<i>p</i> _{Holm}
<i>Mobilisation</i>							
Asks people to help on the doorstep	7.0	3.0	47.7	5.8	-41.9 [-50.3, -32.2]	<0.001	<0.001
Asks people to volunteer	6.8	2.8	49.0	6.7	-42.4 [-50.8, -32.5]	<0.001	<0.001
Asks people to sign up to campaign	6.8	3.5	47.1	7.5	-39.6 [-48.2, -29.7]	<0.001	<0.001
Points to a campaign page	11.9	4.2	44.4	11.7	-32.8 [-41.9, -22.4]	<0.001	<0.001
Points to a party website	11.9	3.5	52.9	24.2	-28.8 [-39.1, -17.3]	<0.001	<0.001
Asks people to talk to friends and family	1.8	6.9	9.8	0.8	-9.0 [-14.8, -3.7]	0.001	0.024
Asks people to vote	85.3	59.0	11.8	11.7	-0.1 [-7.7, +8.0]	1.000	1.000
Asks people to share	59.4	8.3	32.0	29.2	-2.9 [-13.6, +8.2]	0.692	1.000
Asks people to join the party	0.0	0.0	2.0	15.8	+13.9 [+7.3, +21.6]	<0.001	<0.001
Points to another website	12.6	18.8	5.2	26.7	+21.4 [+12.9, +30.4]	<0.001	<0.001
Link to an outside website	18.3	21.5	35.3	50.8	+15.5 [+3.7, +26.8]	0.013	0.160
<i>Tone and targets</i>							
Negative tone	28.8	44.4	47.1	67.5	+20.4 [+8.6, +31.4]	<0.001	0.018
Mainly negative	15.8	34.7	27.5	55.0	+27.5 [+15.9, +38.3]	<0.001	<0.001
Criticises the Conservative leader	11.2	26.4	29.4	10.0	-19.4 [-28.1, -10.0]	<0.001	0.002
Criticises opposition MPs	2.5	5.6	5.2	21.7	+16.4 [+8.4, +25.0]	<0.001	0.001
Criticises mainstream media	4.7	12.5	13.7	37.5	+23.8 [+13.4, +33.8]	<0.001	<0.001
Criticises a newspaper	1.8	2.8	0.7	20.0	+19.3 [+12.5, +27.4]	<0.001	<0.001
Re-edits news negatively	2.9	13.2	21.6	35.8	+14.3 [+3.5, +24.9]	0.010	0.157
Criticises an expert	3.6	4.2	6.5	20.0	+13.5 [+5.5, +22.0]	0.001	0.025
<i>Leader, members and style</i>							
Corbyn centre stage, positively	19.1	58.3	42.5	27.5	-15.0 [-25.7, -3.5]	0.011	0.158
Praises Corbyn	15.5	4.9	35.9	21.7	-14.3 [-24.4, -3.4]	0.011	0.158
Praises party members	4.7	6.2	5.9	23.3	+17.5 [+9.2, +26.2]	<0.001	<0.001
Praises campaigners	6.5	6.9	9.8	21.7	+11.9 [+3.2, +20.9]	0.010	0.157
First-person language	18.7	39.6	46.4	11.7	-34.7 [-43.9, -24.3]	<0.001	<0.001
Humour	3.2	6.9	25.5	15.0	-10.5 [-19.6, -0.8]	0.037	0.366
Memes	0.0	0.7	13.7	4.2	-9.6 [-16.3, -2.6]	0.007	0.122
Screenshots of tweets	0.0	0.0	19.0	13.3	-5.6 [-14.2, +3.4]	0.251	1.000
<i>Policy and people</i>							
Makes a pledge	66.2	58.3	10.5	5.0	-5.5 [-11.9, +1.3]	0.119	1.000
Policy detail	57.6	38.9	13.1	12.5	-0.6 [-8.4, +7.8]	1.000	1.000
Party catchphrase	79.9	69.4	5.9	2.5	-3.4 [-8.6, +2.0]	0.239	1.000
Members of the public pictured	47.1	50.7	46.4	40.8	-5.6 [-17.1, +6.2]	0.391	1.000
Party members pictured	15.8	16.7	20.3	25.0	+4.7 [-5.1, +14.9]	0.382	1.000
Ethnic minority members pictured	15.8	11.8	8.5	17.5	+9.0 [+1.0, +17.5]	0.028	0.307
Young people pictured	22.3	22.9	23.5	25.8	+2.3 [-7.8, +12.7]	0.673	1.000
Posts	278	144	153	120			

Notes: Labour 2017 columns are the Labour Party page and Jeremy Corbyn’s page, 3 May to 7 June 2017. Momentum 2017 is all retrievable posts from the same period; Momentum 2018 is a random sample of ten posts per month. Change is the 2018 share minus the 2017 share for Momentum, in percentage points, with a 95% Newcombe interval. *p*: Fisher’s exact test; *p*_{Holm} adjusts across the 34 codes.