

Same Message, Thousands of Times: Targeted Facebook Advertising by British Parties at the 2017 and 2019 General Elections

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2026

Preprint, not peer reviewed

Abstract

What did British parties say in their targeted Facebook ads, how often did they say it, and what did they spend? I combine three sources from the 2017 and 2019 general elections: 550 ads that I hand-coded for tone, topic and the people they featured (157 from 2017 and 393 from 2019); the 20,135 ads that the main party and leader pages started on Facebook between the dissolution of Parliament and 9 December 2019; and the daily spending reported in Facebook’s Ad Library Report, with Snapchat and Google spending for comparison. Labour’s party, leader and candidate pages spent most on Facebook and Instagram in the 2019 campaign, between £1.00 million on the days the report covers and about £1.32 million once five missing days are filled, ahead of the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives (up to about £0.9 million each). The Conservatives concentrated their ads on very few messages: they started 9,137 ads using 452 distinct texts, but one text accounted for 2,479 ads and five texts for 63% of all their ads, launched mostly in the first four days of December. The Liberal Democrats ran 7,930 ads from 174 texts. Labour and the Brexit Party spread their ads across many more messages. Within Labour, the top tenth of ads took about four-fifths of the estimated spend. In the coded samples, attacks on a rival leader appeared in more ads in 2019 than in 2017, but that rise came from the Brexit Party, almost all of whose ads attacked Jeremy Corbyn. Within the parties that advertised in both elections, attacks did not rise, and on a stricter definition they fell. Targeted advertising in 2019 was dominated by a small set of slogans, each run in hundreds or thousands of ads.

Keywords: political advertising; Facebook; microtargeting; negative campaigning; UK general elections; Ad Library

1 Introduction

Online political advertising in Britain has been discussed mostly as a threat: a hidden channel through which parties send different, unaccountable messages to finely sliced groups of voters ([Information Commissioner’s Office 2018](#); [Electoral Commission 2018](#); [Bennett and Lyon 2019](#)). Transparency tools introduced from 2018 made it possible to check some of these claims. Facebook’s Ad Library records the ads that pages run, and Facebook’s Ad Library Report records advertisers’ spending day by

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day (Facebook 2019). Researchers have used these sources to describe party spending and targeting (Dommett and Power 2019; Votta et al. 2024), and I used them during the 2019 campaign to document A/B testing (Hotham 2019).

This paper uses data I collected and coded during and after the 2017 and 2019 general elections to answer four questions. **RQ1.** How much did the parties spend on Facebook in 2019, and when? **RQ2.** How many ads did the parties run, and how many distinct messages did those ads contain? **RQ3.** What did the ads say, and did the content change between 2017 and 2019? **RQ4.** How much of the advertising attacked rival leaders, and which parties did the attacking?

Labour spent the most on Facebook. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats ran the most ads, and the Conservatives in particular put most of theirs behind a handful of slogans run in hundreds or thousands of ads each. Labour and the Brexit Party spread their ads across many more messages. Coded content was heavy on attacks and on Brexit, but the rise in attacks between 2017 and 2019 came from a new party, the Brexit Party. Within the parties that advertised in both elections, attacks did not rise.

The paper extends my doctoral research on parties' use of Facebook (Hotham 2021) and two recent preprints on party pages (Hotham 2026a,b). It adds the coded content data, which I have not published before, and puts the spending and ad-volume data together in one place.

2 Background

Targeting and variants. Digital platforms let campaigns choose who sees an ad by place, age, gender and interests, and let them run several versions of an ad to see which performs best (Kreiss and McGregor 2018). In the United States, online ads are more numerous, cheaper and more often aimed at mobilising supporters and raising money than television ads (Fowler et al. 2021). Work on targeted messages on Facebook in the Netherlands finds that parties vary their messages less than the term microtargeting suggests (Kruikemeier et al. 2022), and cross-national data from the Ad Library show large differences between countries and parties in how far they target (Votta et al. 2024). A party running many ads can be doing three different things: testing versions of an ad, showing the same ad to different audiences or places, or tailoring different messages to different groups. Only the last is microtargeting in the sense that worries regulators.

Negativity. Attack advertising is common and its effects on persuasion and turnout are weak and mixed (Geer 2006; Lau et al. 2007). Online, attacks are cheap to produce and to test. Whether parties attacked more in 2019 than in 2017, and which parties did, is a basic descriptive question that the coded samples can answer.

British context. Party spending on digital advertising rose sharply between 2015 and 2017 (Dommett and Power 2019). In 2019 Facebook's Ad Library was in place, Google and Snapchat published political ad archives, and campaign groups, especially on Brexit, spent heavily (Hotham 2019). The 2019 election was unusual: a winter campaign dominated by Brexit, with the Brexit Party standing down in Conservative-held seats and the Liberal Democrats running as the party to stop Brexit.

Table 1. Coding scheme. All codes are binary. Each ad has exactly one main topic.

Code	Definition
Links	Links to the party’s website; links to another website
People	Features the party’s own leader; features an opposition leader
Tone	Positive sentiment; negative sentiment; more negative than positive; more positive than negative
Evidence	Uses expert or statistical evidence
Main topic	Brexit/EU; leadership and attacks on opponents; party action (campaigning, events, calls to act); NHS and social care; economy; environment and energy; young people; education; protection (crime, security); government practice; Scottish independence referendum; social identity; immigration; apolitical

3 Data

3.1 Hand-coded ads, 2017 and 2019

I coded 550 ads by hand using one scheme for both elections. The 2017 ads (157) come from data gathered by Who Targets Me, whose browser extension recorded the ads its volunteers saw on Facebook during the 2017 campaign ([Who Targets Me 2017](#)). They come from Conservative (26), Labour (51), Liberal Democrat (61) and Green (19) party and leader pages. The 2019 ads (393, of which 390 have distinct text) come from the Facebook Ad Library and were created on the main party and leader pages between 31 October and 23 November 2019: Conservative and Boris Johnson pages (177), Labour and Jeremy Corbyn pages (50), Liberal Democrats (77), the Brexit Party (78) and the Greens (11).

For each ad I recorded whether it links to the party’s website or to another website; whether it features the party’s own leader or an opposition leader; whether its sentiment is positive, negative, or predominantly one or the other; whether it uses expert evidence; and a single main topic from fourteen categories (Table 1). An ad can be coded both positive and negative. I define an attack ad as one coded negative that features an opposition leader, and I also report a stricter definition, an ad coded predominantly negative that features an opposition leader. All coding is mine. I did not use a second coder, so I cannot report inter-coder reliability, and the categories, especially sentiment, involve judgement.

The two samples were drawn differently. The 2017 ads are those that a group of volunteers happened to see; the 2019 ads are a sample of distinct ads from the archive in the first half of the campaign. Because coding stopped on 23 November, the 2019 Conservative sample misses the party’s heavily repeated messages launched in December (Section 4.4). I therefore treat comparisons between years as descriptive, and I compare within parties to remove the largest difference between the samples, their party mix.

3.2 All party ads, 2019

From the Ad Library I collected every ad from the Conservatives, Boris Johnson, Labour, Jeremy Corbyn, the Liberal Democrats, the Brexit Party and the Green Party of England and Wales, as of 9 December 2019. I keep the 20,135 ads whose delivery started between the dissolution of Parliament on 6 November and 9 December. For each ad the archive gives its text, link title and description, and its start and stop dates. The archive also reported the age, gender and regional breakdown of each ad’s audience, but my

export did not include these fields. I group ads with identical text (after removing case and spacing differences) into message families. I measure how concentrated each party's ads were on a few messages with the share of ads in its five largest families and with the effective number of messages, the inverse of the sum of squared family shares. Some texts have character-encoding errors, so a few families are split in two and concentration is, if anything, understated.

To describe what all these ads said, I search their text for a small set of themes with keyword lists: Brexit and the EU, the NHS and health, naming Corbyn, naming Johnson, tactical voting, the economy and tax, and requests to donate or volunteer. I check three of the lists against the hand codes for the 2019 sample. The Brexit list finds 99% of the ads I coded as mainly about Brexit, with a precision of 69% because it also finds ads that only mention Brexit. The opposition-leader lists find 73% of the ads I coded as featuring an opposition leader, with a precision of 96%. The NHS list is weaker (precision 45%, recall 59%), so I treat its figures as rough. Keyword searches describe topics; they cannot measure tone.

3.3 Spending

Facebook's Ad Library Report gives each advertiser's daily spend on ads about social issues, elections or politics. I downloaded it for 1 November to 13 December 2019 and classified its 4,787 advertisers by party or campaign side and by page type (party, leader, candidate, local party, campaign group, union, charity and others). Three features of the file matter. First, it has no data for 18 November or for 6, 8, 9 and 10 December; I report spending on the days with data and, as an upper estimate, with the missing days filled by linear interpolation for each party. Second, the report shows spending below £100 as a range, and the file records those days as £18; these cells add £391,000 across all advertisers but little to the parties. Third, many pages are partisan without belonging to a party, such as Momentum, unions and campaign groups, and £2.55 million of spending, 38% of the total, sat with advertisers I did not classify to a side. I therefore report party spending only for pages run by the parties: party, leader, candidate and local party pages. This excludes, for Labour, £476,000 spent by Momentum, unions, Labour mayors and regional pages that the file lists under Labour. I do not compare campaign sides, because the unclassified spending is too large.

Snapchat's political ads library gives spend, impressions and targeting for each ad; I use the 356 UK ads in pounds, which ran from 2 November to 12 December 2019. For Google and YouTube I report each party's total political ad spend as shown in Google's transparency report when I downloaded it in February 2020; it covers all of 2019 to that date, not only the campaign, and is not comparable with the Facebook figures. For Labour I also have the archive's spend and impression ranges for 1,165 ads, recorded between 1 November and 12 December 2019.

4 Results

4.1 Labour spent most, and spending rose at the end

Labour's party, leader and candidate pages spent £1.00 million on Facebook and Instagram on the campaign days the report covers, and about £1.32 million with the missing days filled (Figure 1). The Liberal Democrats spent £0.73 to £0.89 million, the Conservatives £0.59 to £0.87 million and the Brexit Party £0.37 to £0.47 million. Labour's figure includes £318,000 spent by Jeremy Corbyn's page and the Conservatives' includes £175,000 by Boris Johnson's. The Conservatives spent more than the Liberal

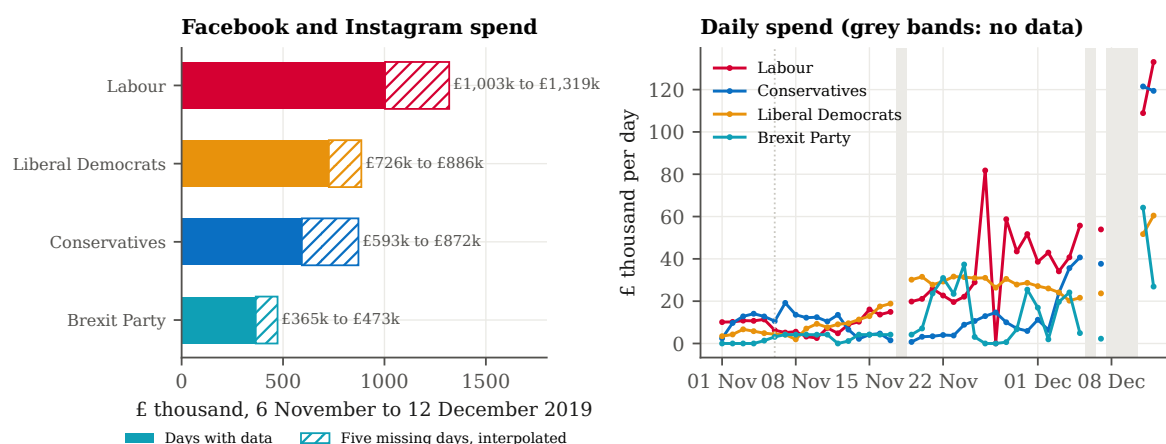


Figure 1. Left: spending on Facebook and Instagram ads by party, leader, candidate and local party pages, 6 November to 12 December 2019, on the days the Ad Library Report covers (solid) and with five missing days filled by linear interpolation (hatched). Right: daily spending; grey bands mark days with no data. Source: Facebook Ad Library Report; classification by the author.

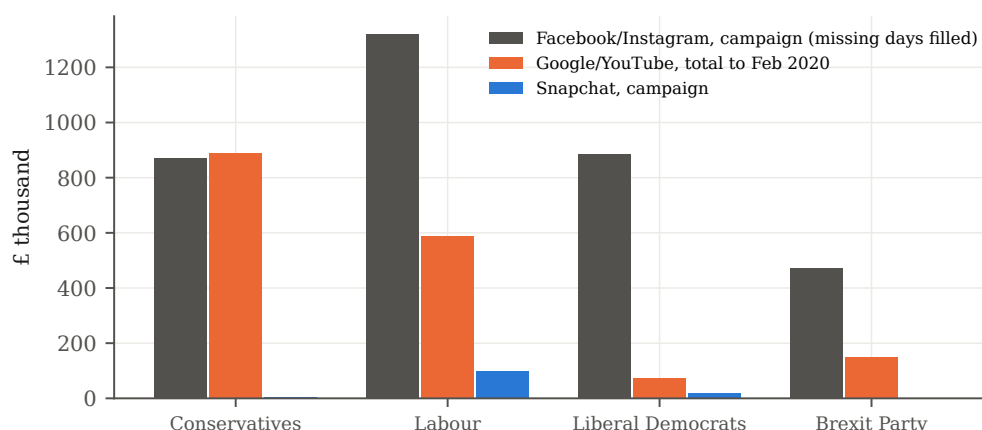


Figure 2. Spending by platform. Facebook/Instagram (party, leader, candidate and local pages, missing days filled) and Snapchat cover the campaign; Google/YouTube covers all of 2019 to February 2020 and is not comparable. Sources: Facebook Ad Library Report, Snapchat Political Ads Library, Google Transparency Report.

Democrats on the missing days, so whether they or the Liberal Democrats were second depends on how those days are filled.

Spending rose sharply in the final days. Before December no party's pages spent more than £82,000 in a day, and that figure, Labour's on 26 November, is followed by a recorded zero the next day, which suggests two days were reported as one. On 11 and 12 December Labour spent £109,000 and £133,000 and the Conservatives £121,000 and £119,000. Figure 2 sets Facebook beside the other platforms. The Conservatives' Google and YouTube spend for 2019 to February 2020 (£889,000) was the largest of any party. On Snapchat, where 89% of ads were aimed at age bands no older than 40, Labour spent £97,000 on five ads, mostly aimed at all adults, which recorded 36 million impressions; the Conservatives spent £3,000.

Within a party, money was spread very unevenly across ads. Of Labour's 1,165 ads with spending ranges, 71% were in the lowest band (under £100), and the top tenth accounted for about 82% of estimated spend (Figure 3). Most of Labour's ads received little money; a few received most of it.

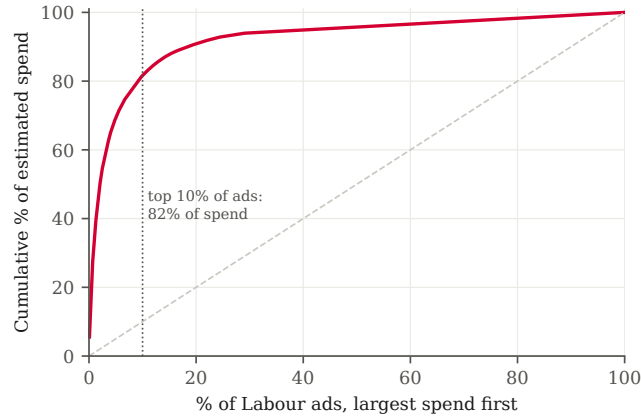


Figure 3. Cumulative share of Labour’s estimated Facebook spend by ad, largest first, using the midpoints of the archive’s spending ranges for 1,165 ads recorded between 1 November and 12 December 2019.

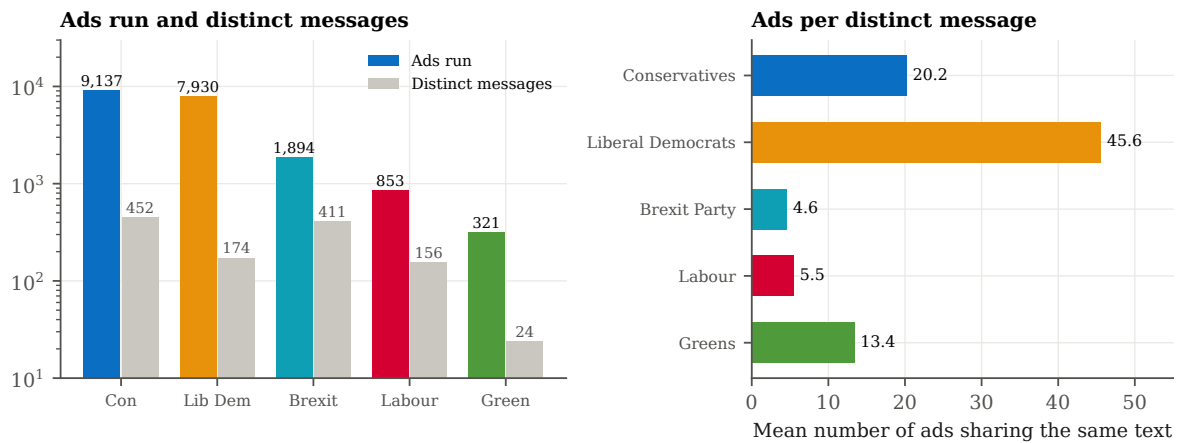


Figure 4. Left: ads started from 6 November to 9 December 2019 and distinct ad texts, by party (log scale). Right: mean number of ads per distinct text. Conservatives include Boris Johnson’s page and Labour includes Jeremy Corbyn’s. Source: Facebook Ad Library.

4.2 The Conservatives put most of their ads behind a few slogans

The parties ran very different numbers of ads (Figure 4). From dissolution to 9 December the Conservative and Johnson pages started 9,137 ads and the Liberal Democrats 7,930, against 1,894 for the Brexit Party, 853 for Labour and Corbyn and 321 for the Greens. The number of distinct texts was much closer: 452 for the Conservatives, 411 for the Brexit Party, 174 for the Liberal Democrats, 156 for Labour and 24 for the Greens.

What separates the parties is how concentrated their ads were. The Conservatives’ five largest message families accounted for 63% of their ads, against 29% for the Liberal Democrats, 20% for Labour and 7% for the Brexit Party. Measured as an effective number of messages, the Conservatives ran the equivalent of 9 equally used messages, the Liberal Democrats 28, Labour 57 and the Brexit Party 211. The largest Conservative family, “Let’s end the chaos and uncertainty and make Parliament work for you again”, accounted for 2,479 ads, almost all started between 1 and 4 December. The next two were an NHS investment message (1,161 ads) and “We need to get Brexit done so we can focus on your priorities - like the NHS, schools and police” (953). The Liberal Democrats ran “Vote Liberal Democrat to stop Brexit and build a brighter future” in 759 ads and a “biggest, strongest party of Remain” message in 672.

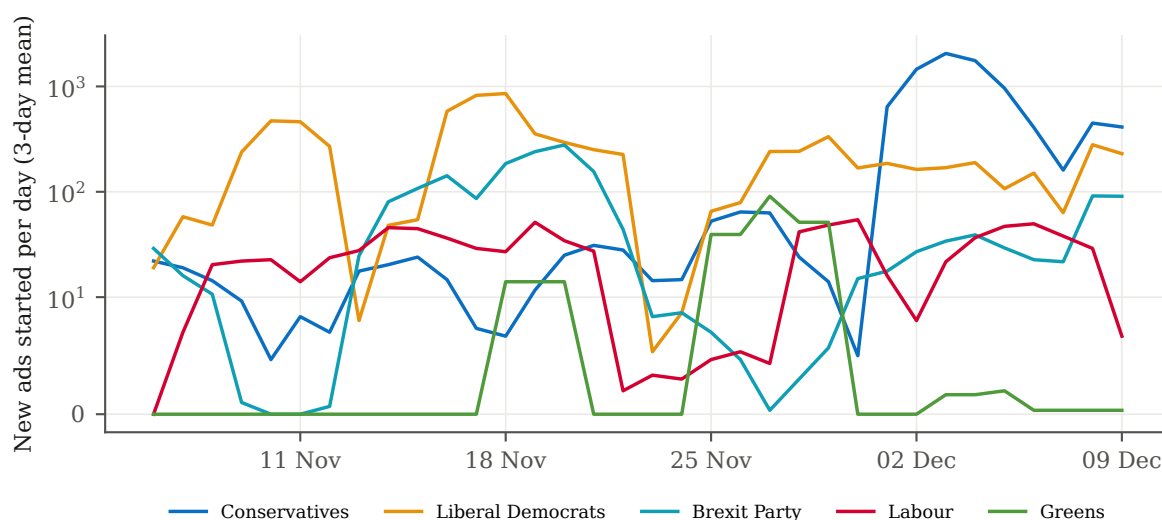


Figure 5. New ads started per day by party, three-day mean, 6 November to 9 December 2019. Source: Facebook Ad Library.

No Labour or Brexit Party text was used in more than 36 ads.

Identical text does not mean identical ads; images, link titles and audiences may differ, and the archive does not show which. A burst of more than two thousand copies of one text launched over four days, most of them still running when the data were captured, looks more like the same message being placed in front of many audiences or places than like a test between versions. Smaller families with varied images and headlines fit the A/B testing I documented during the campaign (Hotham 2019). Either way, the parties that ran the most ads did not run the most different messages.

The parties also launched ads at different times (Figure 5). The Liberal Democrats launched in bursts through November. The Conservatives launched relatively few ads in late November and then started 1,917, 2,450, 1,806 and 1,012 ads on the first four days of December.

4.3 Coded content: attacks, Brexit and the NHS

Table 2 and Figure 6 give the coded content by party and year. Across all coded ads, attack ads rose from 35% in 2017 to 52% in 2019, ads featuring an opposition leader from 36% to 57%, ads mainly about Brexit from 20% to 36%, and ads mainly about health and social care fell from 17% to 4%.

Most of the overall change comes from which parties advertised. The Brexit Party, which did not exist in 2017, ran ads that were almost all negative, almost all about Brexit and almost all aimed at Corbyn: 94% were attack ads. Comparing years within the four parties present in both, with party fixed effects, attack ads did not rise (−4 points, 95% CI −13 to +5), and neither did negative ads (−5, −14 to +5) or ads featuring an opposition leader (−2, −11 to +8). On the stricter definition, attack ads that were predominantly negative fell by 13 points (−22 to −4), and across all coded ads they rose only from 31% to 37%. Four other things changed within parties. Ads that were predominantly negative fell by 16 points (−26 to −6). Ads mainly about the NHS and social care fell by 7 points (−14 to 0). Ads whose main topic was leadership or attacks on opponents rose by 18 points (10 to 27). And ads linking to the party’s website rose by 26 points (17 to 35).

The parties moved in different directions. The Conservatives’ coded ads became less negative (77%

Table 2. Coded content by party and year, % of ads with 95% bootstrap intervals. Negative: coded negative, including ads also coded positive. Attack: negative and features an opposition leader. Topics are main topics.

	<i>N</i>	Negative	Attack	Own leader	Brexit/EU	NHS/health	Links to party site
<i>2017</i>							
Conservatives	26	77 (62–92)	77 (62–92)	85 (69–96)	42 (23–62)	0	42 (23–62)
Labour	51	53 (39–67)	8 (2–16)	0	2 (0–8)	14 (6–24)	29 (18–41)
Liberal Democrats	61	62 (51–74)	49 (36–62)	13 (5–21)	31 (20–43)	31 (20–43)	70 (59–82)
Greens	19	26 (11–47)	5 (0–16)	26 (11–47)	0	5 (0–16)	16 (0–37)
All	157	57 (50–65)	35 (28–42)	22 (17–29)	20 (14–26)	17 (11–23)	46 (38–54)
<i>2019</i>							
Conservatives	177	50 (43–58)	46 (38–53)	56 (49–64)	24 (18–30)	1 (0–2)	50 (42–58)
Labour	50	54 (40–68)	28 (16–40)	32 (20–46)	20 (10–32)	32 (18–44)	50 (36–64)
Liberal Democrats	77	73 (62–82)	45 (34–57)	30 (21–40)	22 (13–31)	0	100
Brexit Party	78	94 (87–99)	94 (88–99)	9 (4–15)	92 (86–97)	0	99 (96–100)
Greens	11	0	0	0	9 (0–27)	0	100
All	393	62 (58–67)	52 (47–56)	37 (32–42)	36 (31–41)	4 (3–6)	71 (66–75)

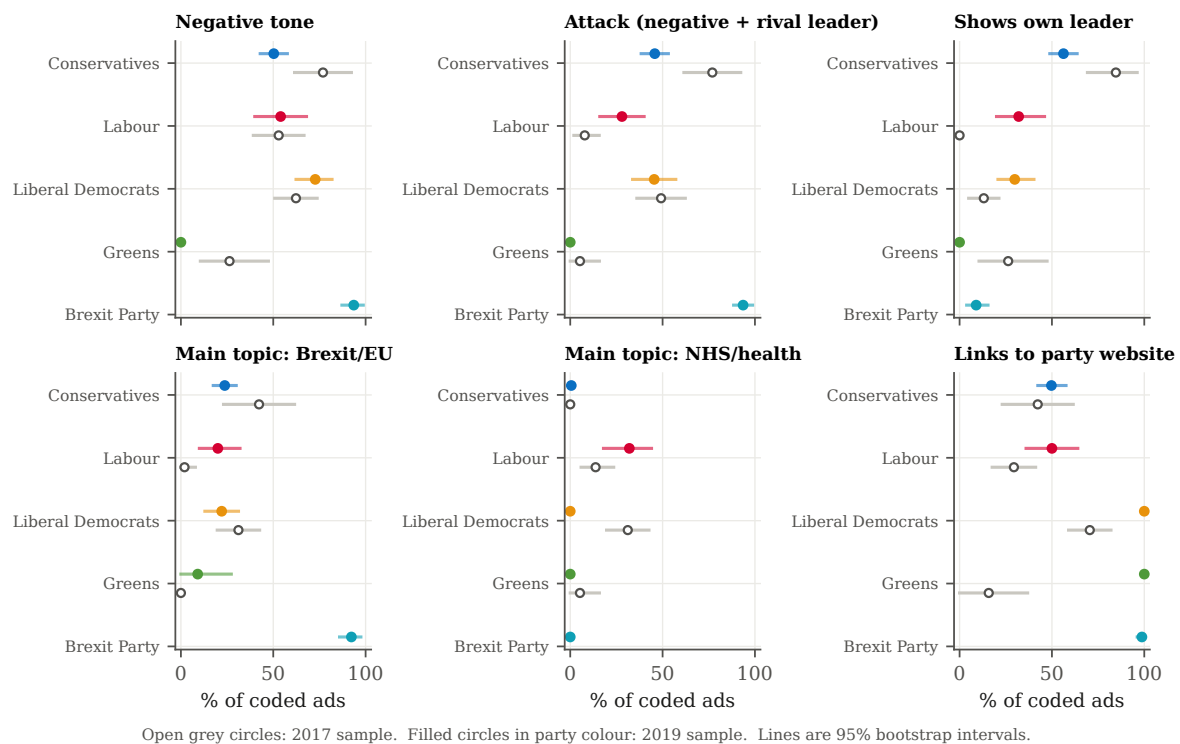


Figure 6. Coded content by party, 2017 (open grey circles) and 2019 (filled circles in party colour), with 95% bootstrap intervals.

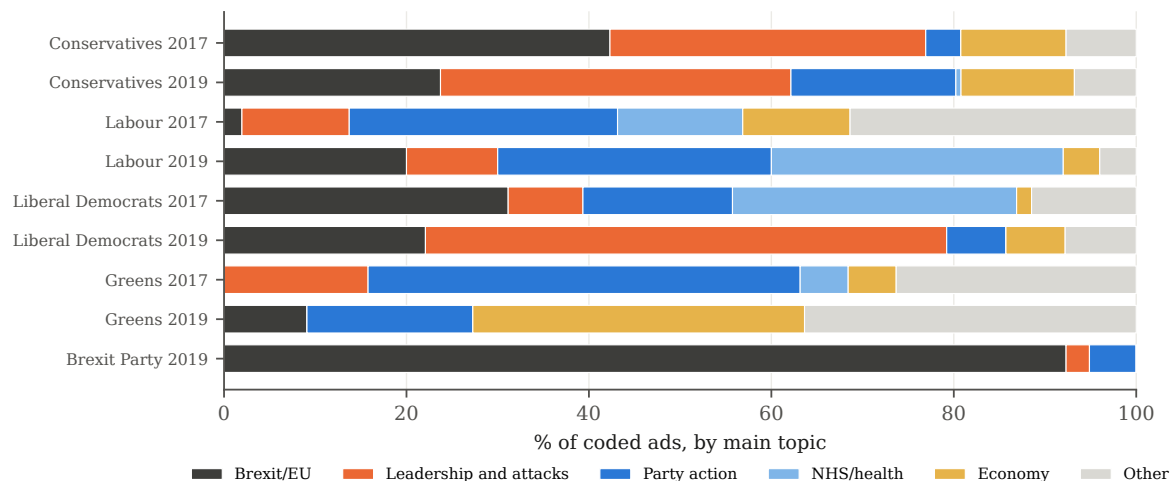


Figure 7. Main topic of coded ads by party and year. Other includes the environment, young people, education, protection and the remaining categories.

to 50%) and less focused on the leader (85% to 56%) between Theresa May’s campaign and Boris Johnson’s. Labour’s became more focused on its leader (0% to 32%) and more likely to attack (8% to 28%), while a third of its 2019 coded ads were mainly about the NHS. Weighted by how many ads used each text, though, only 5% of Labour’s matched ads were attacks, because its attack messages were run in few copies. The Liberal Democrats’ 2019 ads were the most negative of the main parties outside the Brexit Party (73%) and more than half were mainly about leadership and opponents.

Figure 7 shows the main topics. Brexit dominated the Brexit Party’s ads and was a quarter or less of every other party’s coded ads in 2019. Labour’s coded ads were mainly about party action, health and Brexit. The Greens’ eleven coded 2019 ads were mainly about the environment and the economy.

4.4 What the whole campaign said, by volume

The coded sample counts each distinct ad once. Counting every ad changes the picture for the Conservatives (Figure 8). The coded 2019 Conservative texts match only 341 of the party’s 9,137 campaign ads, against 7,660 of the Liberal Democrats’ 7,930, because the Conservatives’ largest families were launched after coding stopped. Across all campaign ads, 42% of Conservative ads mentioned Brexit and 31% the NHS, while 21% named Corbyn; the most repeated families were about ending deadlock in Parliament, NHS spending and getting Brexit done, although the fourth largest (606 ads) was an attack on the cost of Labour’s plans. The Liberal Democrats’ ads mentioned Brexit in 46% of cases and named Johnson in 20% and Corbyn in 15%, with tactical-voting appeals in 13%. The Brexit Party’s ads mentioned Brexit in 99% of cases, named Corbyn in 59% and asked for donations or volunteers in 86%. Labour’s ads were the least about Brexit (14%) and the most about the economy and tax (23%).

5 Discussion

Three findings stand out. First, the scale of party advertising in 2019 came mainly from repetition. The Conservatives put most of their ads behind a handful of slogans, and the Liberal Democrats ran a few hundred texts many times each. This is the pattern one would expect from placing the same messages in

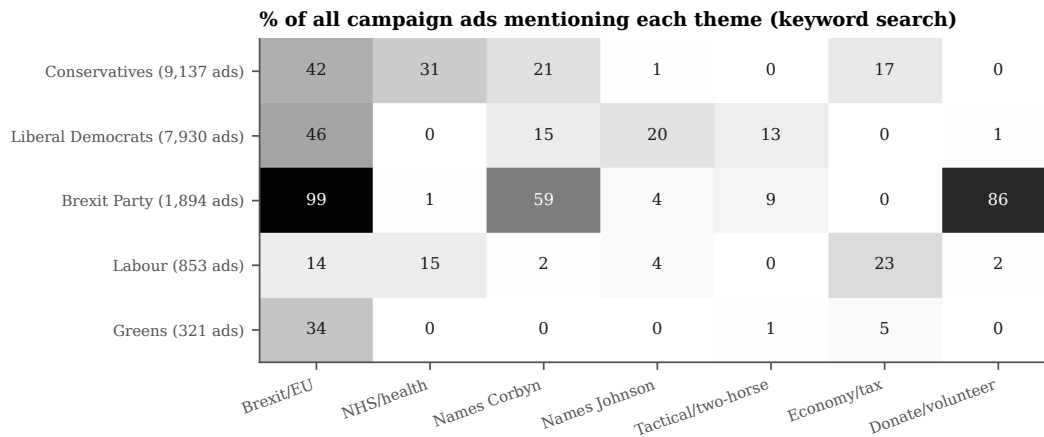


Figure 8. Share of all campaign ads, 6 November to 9 December 2019, whose text matches each theme’s keyword list, counting every ad. Keyword matching is cruder than hand coding; see Section 3.1 and the validation in Section 3.2.

front of many audiences, and from testing versions of them, rather than from writing different messages for different groups. Labour and the Brexit Party ran more varied campaigns, but even their distinct texts numbered in the low hundreds. This fits evidence from other countries that parties vary their messages less than the idea of microtargeting implies (Kruikemeier et al. 2022; Votta et al. 2024).

Second, the rise in attack advertising between 2017 and 2019 in the coded samples came from the Brexit Party’s entry, not from the established parties, which attacked no more often than in 2017 and, on a stricter definition, less often. The Conservatives under Johnson were less negative in their coded ads than under May. Labour coded more attacks than in 2017, but ran them in few copies.

Third, the transparency tools gave a partial view. The Ad Library showed texts and counts, and in 2019 the age, gender and regional make-up of each ad’s audience, but not the targeting criteria behind it, and spending was reported in ranges and with gaps. Google’s report did not separate the campaign from the rest of the year. Without targeting criteria, the archive cannot show whether repeated texts were aimed at different groups, which is the question that matters most for regulation (Electoral Commission 2018; Information Commissioner’s Office 2018).

5.1 Limitations

Coding. I coded every ad myself, without a second coder, so the coding has no reliability check and sentiment in particular involves judgement. **Samples.** The 2017 ads were those a group of volunteers happened to see, and the 2019 ads are distinct ads from the first half of the campaign, which miss the Conservatives’ most repeated messages. Year comparisons are descriptive. **Message families.** Identical text does not mean identical ads, and encoding errors split a few families. **Keyword themes.** The keyword lists are crude, especially for health, and say nothing about tone. **Spending.** The Ad Library Report has missing days and records small amounts as a placeholder, my classification of advertisers involves judgement, a large share of spending is unclassified, and the Google figures are not limited to the campaign. **No effects.** Nothing here measures what the ads did to voters.

5.2 What would strengthen the design

A second coder on a subsample would give a reliability estimate. Hand-coding the twenty largest message families for each party would remove the main bias in the 2019 sample. The audience breakdowns in the Ad Library, which my export did not capture, would show whether repeated texts reached different groups, and classifying the remaining advertisers would allow a comparison of campaign sides. A replication on the 2024 general election would show whether the pattern held.

6 Conclusion

In 2019 the main British parties spent several million pounds on targeted ads, with Labour spending most on Facebook and spending rising sharply in the final days. The two parties that ran the most ads ran few distinct messages, and the Conservatives put most of theirs behind a handful of slogans. Attack advertising rose in the coded samples only because a new party, the Brexit Party, did little else; the established parties attacked no more than they had in 2017. On this evidence, targeted advertising in 2019 was mostly a matter of repeating a few messages as widely as the budget allowed.

Data and code availability

The hand-coded dataset (ad identifiers and codes), the classified spending data and the code are available on request. Ad texts and spending figures are public in the Facebook Ad Library, the Snapchat Political Ads Library and the Google Transparency Report.

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Provenance and AI use

Note added in 2026 to version 2 of this preprint. The rest of the paper is unchanged from version 1.

The data were collected during my doctoral research. This paper builds on my doctoral thesis (Hotham 2021). Earlier findings appeared in a post on the LSE Brexit blog (November 2019), two Political Studies Association blog posts (December 2019), a chapter in *UK Election Analysis 2019* (“Behind the curtain of the targeting machine”) and a Democratic Audit post (2020). 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.

References for this note

Hotham, T. (2021). *How Do Political Parties Use Facebook and What Does It Offer to Their Campaigns*. PhD thesis, University of Bath.