Who Pays for the Party?

The Structure of British Party Advertising on Meta, 2019 to 2026

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Abstract

Who actually pays for British party advertising on Facebook and Instagram, and through which pages? I use Meta's public Ad Library Report for the United Kingdom, which lists every advertiser running ads about social issues, elections or politics from October 2019 to October 2026: 90,565 pages that spent about £252 million on 1.51 million ads. I classify 3,531 of these pages as belonging to a party, by party and by tier (national page, leader pages, devolved-nation pages, English-region pages, local and candidate pages). Party pages account for only 8.3% of the spending, though 19% of the ads. The biggest spenders in the whole library are charities and government bodies; the Labour Party's page ranks eleventh and the Conservatives' thirteenth. Within the party system, structure differs sharply. Labour spent £8.70m through 1,150 pages and put 38% of it through devolved, regional and local pages, against 24% for the Conservatives, whose national page took 58%. Leader pages carry 41% of Labour's and 40% of Reform UK's combined leader and national spending, but 0.7% of the Liberal Democrats'. Reform UK has almost no sub-national tier (4.3% of its spending). Labour spent 14% of its money in Scotland, against 7.7% for the Conservatives, although Scotland has about 8% of the population. The data are lifetime totals, so the paper describes how party advertising is organised rather than what any one campaign did.

Keywords: political advertising; Facebook; Instagram; Ad Library; UK parties; campaign organisation; personalisation

1 Introduction

Debate about online political advertising in Britain has concentrated on the content of ads and on targeting (Information Commissioner's Office 2018; Electoral Commission 2018; Bennett and Lyon 2019). A more basic question is rarely asked: through which pages does a party pay for its advertising? A party's message can be carried by one national page, by the pages of its leaders, or by hundreds of regional and local pages run by branches, councillors and candidates. These are different ways of organising a campaign. A national page implies central control. Leader pages imply personalised campaigning. A large local tier implies a decentralised party, or one that has mobilised its members to pay for their own ads.

Meta's Ad Library Report records, for every advertiser that has run ads about social issues, elections or politics in a country, the total amount spent and the number of ads (Meta 2026). It is crude. It has no dates beyond the chosen window, no targeting and no ad content. But it covers every page, and in the United Kingdom it now covers seven years. That makes it possible to look at the whole structure of party advertising, not just the biggest pages.

I ask four questions. RQ1: how large is party advertising within all political and issue advertising in the library? RQ2: how do the parties differ in the tiers through which they spend? RQ3: how far does spending run through leaders rather than parties? RQ4: where, in the four nations of the UK, was the money spent? The paper complements my earlier work on the 2017 and 2019 general elections (Hotham

2026a), which used daily spending data and coded ad content for a single campaign. Here the unit is the page, and the period is the whole life of the library.

2 Background

Digital platforms let campaigns choose who sees an ad by place, age, gender and interests (Kreiss and McGregor 2018). Online ads are more numerous and cheaper than television ads, and are more often used to mobilise supporters and raise money (Fowler et al. 2021). Dommett and Power (2019) describe Facebook advertising spending and targeting in Britain, and cross-national work using the Ad Library shows large differences between parties in how far they target (Votta et al. 2024; Kruikemeier et al. 2022). Less is known about who in a party pays. British parties are loosely coupled organisations. The national party, devolved sections, regional offices, local associations and individual candidates can each run their own Facebook pages. The Ad Library makes it possible to see the organisation of paid communication across all of them.

3 Data and method

3.1 The Ad Library Report

I downloaded the United Kingdom report for “all dates” (12 October 2019 to 11 October 2026) from Meta’s public Ad Library Report page on 15 October 2026. It contains one row for each combination of page and “paid for by” disclaimer: 100,745 rows covering 90,565 distinct page IDs. Each row gives the amount spent in pounds and the number of ads in the library. The report also provides one file per nation (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and unknown) listing the amount each advertiser spent on ads shown there. Meta rounds low spenders: 75,319 of the 90,565 pages (83%) are reported as spending “≤£100”. I treat these as zero spend, which understates the total by at most £7.5 million. Among party pages, 1,504 of 3,531 fall in this group.

3.2 Classifying party pages

I assigned pages to a party family and a tier using the page name, and checked the result by hand. A page belongs to a family if its name contains the party’s name or its standard short form (for example “Labour”, “Conservatives”, “Liberal Democrats”, “Reform UK” or “Brexit Party”, “Green Party”, “SNP”). I excluded names that matched the pattern but are not party pages (for example “Social Democratic and Labour Party”, which I put with the Northern Ireland parties, “Best For Britain” or “Electoral Reform Society”) and set aside pages whose names signal opposition to a party (“Stop Reform UK”, “SNP Exposed”, “Anyone but the Conservatives”). Those opposition pages are excluded from all totals below; they amount to under £50,000 in all.

Within each family there are five tiers. National pages are the party’s own main page (for the Northern Ireland parties, the party’s main page). Leader pages are the pages of party leaders and devolved leaders, such as Keir Starmer, Rishi Sunak, Boris Johnson, Kemi Badenoch, Nigel Farage, Anas Sarwar and Jeremy Corbyn, identified by name from the list of large pages; other prominent politicians (for example cabinet or shadow cabinet members, mayors and local candidates with a personal page) are not counted as leaders, so the leader tier is a lower bound. Devolved-nation pages are the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish sections. English-region pages are the party’s English regional pages (for example “London Labour Party”, “Labour North West”, “West Midlands Conservatives”). Everything else is a local or candidate page. I read 60 randomly drawn local and candidate pages with non-zero spending: 58 were clearly party

or candidate pages, one was an opposition page (“Anyone but the Conservatives for Colne Valley”), which I have since excluded, and one (“Stand up for Labour”) is ambiguous. The largest local-tier Labour page, “Labour Future” (£87,000), is a party-linked group rather than a branch.

A name-based rule will miss some party advertising: candidates whose page names do not mention their party, and any page run by a campaign group or supporter network. The totals are therefore lower bounds on party-linked advertising, and the comparison between parties assumes that the share of such missed pages is similar across them. The classified list of pages is available as supplementary data.

3.3 Measures

For each family I report the number of pages, spending, and ads; the share of spending through the national page; the share through devolved, regional and local pages (the sub-national share); the leader share, defined as leader-page spending divided by leader plus national spending; the share of the family’s spending on its largest page and a Herfindahl–Hirschman index (HHI) of concentration across pages; and spending per ad. Because the report counts all versions of an ad and all ads that were delivered, spending per ad is a rough measure and is best read as a comparison between parties.

4 Results

4.1 Party advertising is a small part of the library

The library holds 90,565 advertisers that together spent £252.1 million on 1,510,036 ads. Spending is highly concentrated: the ten largest pages account for 24% of all spending, the hundred largest for 64%, and the thousand largest for 91%. None of the ten largest is a political party. They are charities and public bodies (WWF UK, Greenpeace UK, the UK Government, UNICEF UK, the International Rescue Committee, Oxfam, Shelter and the British Red Cross), together with Fair Pay For All and The Week Junior. The Labour Party’s page ranks eleventh (£3.18 million) and the Conservatives thirteenth (£3.06 million). Reform UK is 27th, the Liberal Democrats 35th, Keir Starmer’s personal page 36th and Nigel Farage’s 44th.

The 3,531 party pages together spent £20.88m, which is 8.3% of the total, but they ran 289,237 ads, which is 19% of all ads in the library. Parties therefore run far more ads at much lower cost per ad than the typical advertiser. Spending per ad across the library is about £167; across party pages it is about £72.

4.2 Party families and tiers

Table 1 sets out spending by family and tier, and Figure 1 shows the same figures for the six largest families. Labour is the largest party advertiser at £8.70 million, followed by the Conservatives (£5.28 million), Reform UK (£2.88 million), the Liberal Democrats (£1.90 million), the Greens (£1.09 million) and the SNP (£0.46 million).

Party family	Pages	National	Leaders	Devolved	English regions	Local	Total £m	Ads
Labour	1,150	3.18	2.22	0.96	1.24	1.09	8.70	168,286
Conservative	916	3.06	0.95	0.44	0.10	0.73	5.28	49,023
Liberal Democrat	653	1.33	0.01	0.09	0.01	0.45	1.90	38,254
Reform UK / Brexit Party	263	1.66	1.10	0.02	0.00	0.11	2.88	15,304
Green	248	0.72	0.00	0.21	0.04	0.13	1.09	7,841
SNP	152	0.33	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.12	0.46	3,652

Table 1. Lifetime spending (£ million) on Meta ads about social issues, elections or politics by party family and tier, UK, 12 October 2019 to 11 October 2026. Opposition pages excluded. Source: Meta Ad Library Report; author's classification.

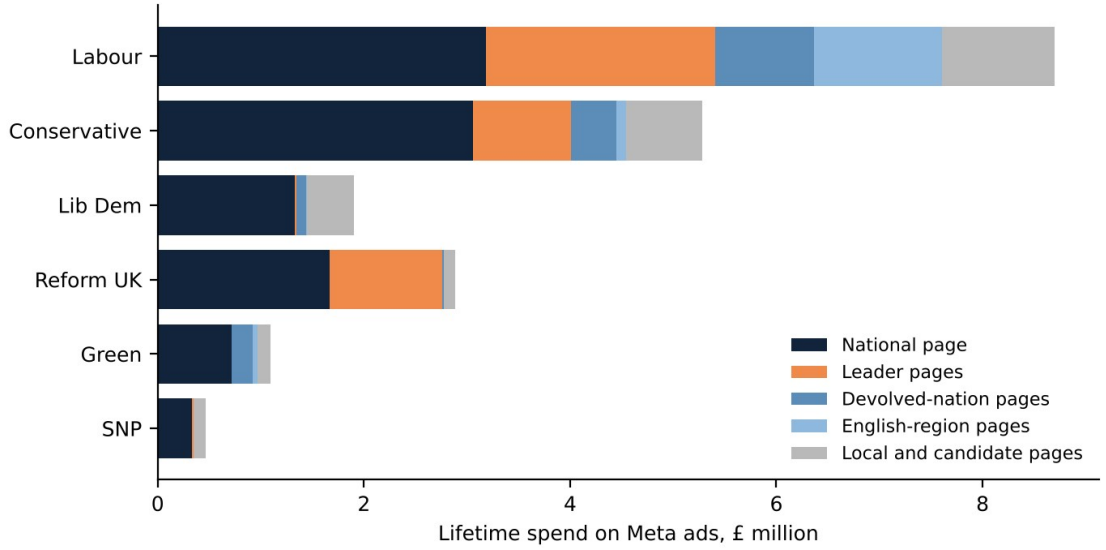


Figure 1. Lifetime spending by tier for the six largest party families.

The Conservatives and Labour spent comparable amounts through their national pages (£3.06m and £3.18m), but Labour added £3.29m through devolved, regional and local pages and £2.22m through leader pages. The Conservatives' sub-national total was £1.27m. The gap is largest in the English regions: Labour's ten regional pages (including London, the North West, the West Midlands and the South East) spent £1.24m, against £0.10m through the Conservatives' three. Labour also ran more local and candidate pages (1,122 against 906), and each spent a little more on average (about £971 against £810). The Liberal Democrats have 644 local pages, but their spending is overwhelmingly national, and Reform UK has 256 local pages that together spent £0.11m, 4% of the total.

4.3 Centralisation and personalisation

Party family	National page share of spend	Leader share (leader ÷ leader + national)	Sub-national share of spend	HHI across pages	Spend per ad
Labour	37%	41%	38%	0.17	£52
Conservative	58%	24%	24%	0.36	£108
Liberal Democrat	70%	0.7%	29%	0.49	£50
Reform UK / Brexit Party	58%	40%	4.3%	0.47	£188
Green	66%	0.0%	34%	0.45	£139
SNP	72%	4.0%	26%	0.51	£127

Table 2. Indicators of how party advertising is organised. HHI is the Herfindahl–Hirschman index of spending shares across a family's pages (1 = a single page). Spend per ad is spending divided by ads in the library.

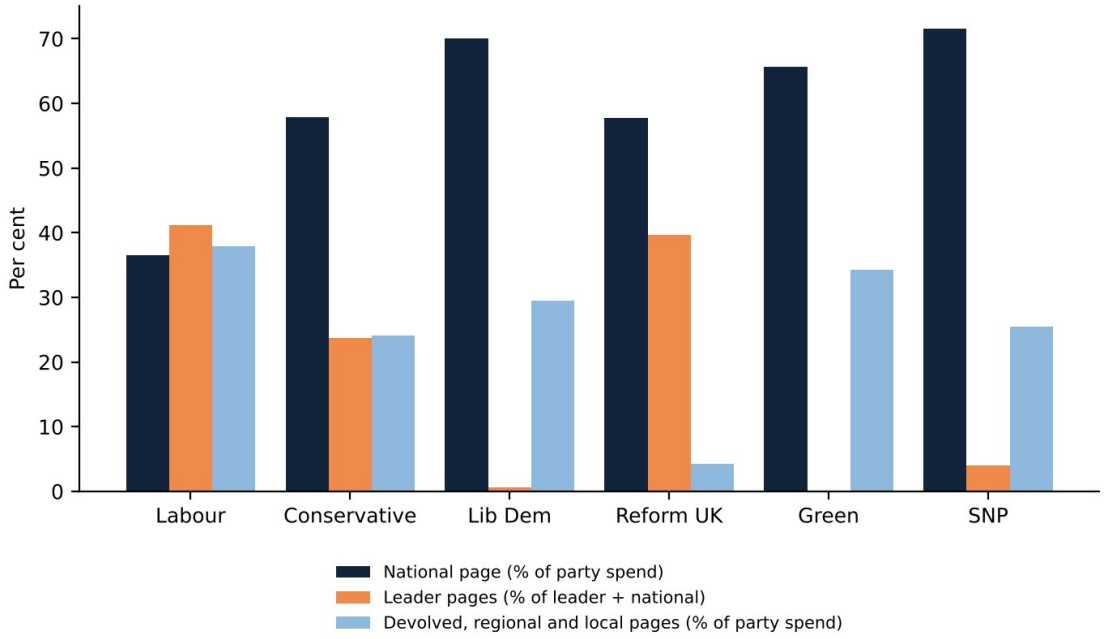


Figure 2. Where each party's advertising money goes.

Table 2 and Figure 2 show three different models. The Conservatives and Reform UK are centralised: their national page takes 58% and 58% of their spending. The Liberal Democrats and the Greens are more centralised again (70% and 66%), and have the highest HHI values among the large parties (0.49 and 0.45). Labour is the least concentrated: the national page takes 37%, and the HHI is 0.17, roughly half the Conservatives' 0.36.

Leader pages tell a different story. Keir Starmer's page spent £1.32m and Nigel Farage's £1.08m (the Liberal Democrats' national page spent £1.33 million). The leader share is 41% for Labour (which includes Jeremy Corbyn and the Scottish and Welsh leaders) and 40% for Reform UK (Farage and Richard Tice), compared with 24% for the Conservatives (Sunak, Johnson, Badenoch and Truss) and under 1% for the Liberal Democrats. Reform UK is therefore both centralised and personalised: nearly all its money goes through the party page and the leader's page, with almost nothing below. Labour combines a strong national and leader presence with the largest sub-national tier of any party.

Spending per ad differs even more than structure. Labour and the Liberal Democrats spent about £50 per ad; the Conservatives £108; the Greens £139; and Reform UK £188. Labour's many sub-national pages

run very large numbers of cheap ads. Reform UK runs fewer, more expensive ones. The measure includes ad versions, so I do not read it as the price of reaching a voter, but the ordering is consistent with the other differences.

4.4 Nations

Across the whole library, spending shown in England is £206.2 million (82% of the total), in Scotland £25.4 million (10%), in Wales £15.0 million (6%) and in Northern Ireland £5.1 million (2%). England has about 84% of the UK population, Scotland about 8%, Wales about 5% and Northern Ireland about 3%, so Scotland and Wales receive more than their population share of political advertising.

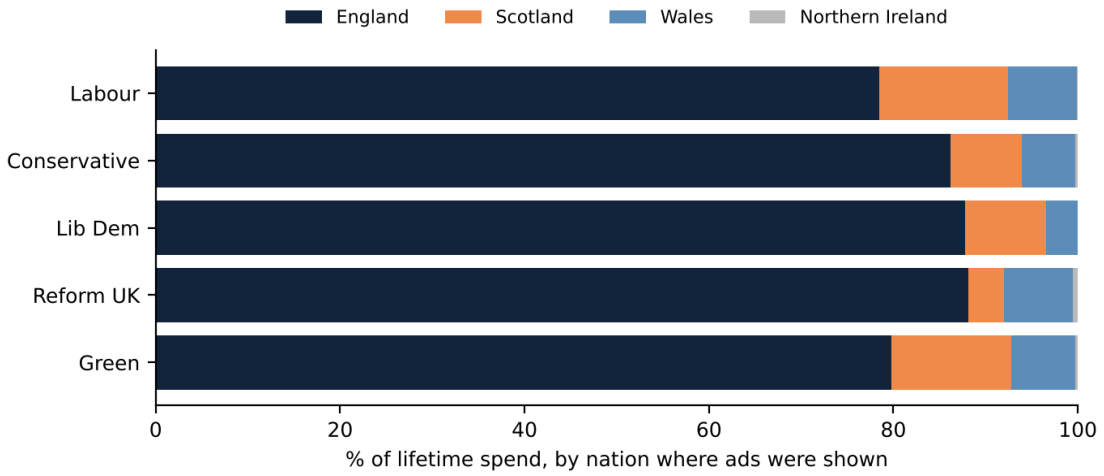


Figure 3. Nation where ads were shown, as a share of each party's lifetime spending.

Parties differ in where they spend (Figure 3). Labour spent 14% of its money in Scotland and 7.5% in Wales, against 7.7% and 5.8% for the Conservatives. The Greens look like Labour (13% in Scotland), and Reform UK spent 88% in England and 7.5% in Wales. Part of Labour's Scottish share is explained by the Scottish Labour page itself (£0.49 million), which is a separate tier in the classification. The SNP and Plaid Cymru spent, as expected, almost entirely in Scotland (99.8%) and Wales (98.6%).

5 Discussion

Three findings stand out. First, party advertising is not the centre of political advertising on Meta in Britain. It is a small and cheap part of a market led by charities and government. Studies that treat the Ad Library as a record of party campaigning describe a minority of the money and a majority of the ads.

Second, parties organise differently. The Conservative model is centralised, with the national page carrying more than half of the spending. Labour's is the opposite, with a large devolved, regional and local tier. A likely reason is that Labour has devolved sections with their own leaders, regional offices and many local parties and councillors who can run their own pages, but the report cannot show who decided to pay for what, so this is an interpretation rather than a finding. The Liberal Democrats have hundreds of local pages, but their spending through them is small.

Third, the leader matters most for Labour and Reform UK. For both, around two-fifths of the money spent through the leader and national pages goes through the leader. This is a measure of paid personalisation. It asks, of paid output, a question I have asked of organic engagement: who carries the party on Facebook

(Hotham 2026b)? The two are different things, since a page can attract engagement without paying for ads.

The results are relevant to regulation. The Ad Library shows that party money is spread across thousands of pages, many of them at branch level. Looking only at a party's main page would miss the 38% of Labour's classified spending, and the 24% of the Conservatives', that goes through devolved, regional and local pages, and more if leader pages are included.

6 Limitations

The report gives lifetime totals only. It does not show when money was spent, so it cannot separate the 2019 and 2024 general elections, local elections, by-elections and periods outside campaigns. Pages that were deleted or whose names changed may be missing or misclassified. The ≤£100 category hides the spending of the smallest pages, and the classification depends on page names. The report counts only ads classified by Meta as being about social issues, elections or politics, so it excludes issue advertising that Meta does not classify and any political ads run through other platforms. The leader tier is a lower bound. Spending per ad depends on how Meta counts ad versions. Finally, the report says nothing about who saw the ads or what they said, so the paper cannot say anything about targeting. A follow-up using the Ad Library API, which provides dated ads with regional and demographic delivery, could address timing and targeting.

7 Conclusion

British party advertising on Meta is small beside charity and government advertising, but it is the most numerous, and it is organised in very different ways. Labour spreads spending across a large sub-national tier and a strong leader presence; the Conservatives run through the centre; Reform UK combines centre and leader with almost nothing below; the Liberal Democrats and the Greens run mainly through the national page. These differences are visible only when the whole library is examined, page by page.

Data availability

The source data are Meta's public Ad Library Report for the United Kingdom (all dates, report dated 11 October 2026). The classification of party pages used here (page ID, name, party family, tier, spending and number of ads) is available as a supplementary CSV file with this preprint.

Provenance and AI use

The advertising data were downloaded from Meta's Ad Library Report in October 2026, when the analysis and writing were completed. I designed the study and am responsible for the analysis and conclusions. I wrote the text, with drafting and editing assistance from Claude (Anthropic), which also helped prepare the analysis code and classify the pages. I reviewed and checked all text and results.

Ethics

Not applicable: the study involves no human participants. The data are Meta's public, page-level totals of spending on ads about social issues, elections or politics. No ad content is quoted, and no data on individual users are used.

Funding

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