

**WHAT THE VOTERS SAW: VOTER EXPERIENCE IN THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTION**

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## 1. Introduction and Executive Summary

What does a general election look like from the point of view of the voters? Media attention tends to focus on the content of political parties' messaging, and research tends to focus on its impact on turnout and voter behaviour. Unlock Democracy set out to examine something altogether different: we wanted to examine the levels of engagement, and how and where voters gained their information, as well as comparing local and national campaigning methods as perceived by voters.

In the past, Unlock Democracy have monitored voter engagement with elections, in a general election,<sup>1</sup> and in a Scottish election<sup>2</sup>. Between January and May 2015, Unlock Democracy analysed voter experience and messaging in the General Election through a series of surveys and a crowdsourced election leaflet analysis project.

Those surveyed were Unlock Democracy supporters, a demographic who are already more engaged with politics, and more politically active. They were also more likely to vote: 98.2% of our respondents reported having voted in the 2015 General Election. Nonetheless, the results present interesting insights into what caught the attention of those who are already paying attention.

We found:

In section 3 we examined the national campaign. The televised leaders' debate did not change viewers' opinions of the more media-exposed party leaders, but an effect was observed for female leaders, and mainstream media remained a dominant source of information about parties' national policies. Indeed, the mainstream media was considered the most important influence on the national campaign.

In section 4, we examined the local campaign. Knowledge of local candidates was good, and people felt it was easy to find information they wanted. Local election leaflets were the dominant source of information about local candidates. Very few people had been canvassed locally throughout the 2015 election campaign. On the whole, people felt the election was not very visible at a local level in February 2015, and visibility had not improved by May when the election took place.

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, E., & Fisher, J. (2005). General Election 2005: What The Voters Saw. London: New Politics Network. Available online:

<http://www.unlockdemocracy.org/publications/2015/8/19/general-election-2005-what-the-voters-saw>

<sup>2</sup> Robinson, E., & Casey, P. (2007). My Election: A Voter's Eye View of the 2007 Scottish Elections. London: Unlock Democracy. Available online:

<http://www.unlockdemocracy.org/publications/2015/8/19/my-election-a-voters-eye-view-of-the-2007-scottish-elections>

In section 5, we analysed the content of local election leaflets. Parties varied in making links between the local and national campaigns, with the SNP and Plaid Cymru most likely to mention their leaders in election leaflets, and the Liberal Democrats least likely to. The Conservative Party were the party most perceived to have run a negative campaign, while the Liberal Democrats were most likely to deploy “squeeze messages” in their election leaflets, framing themselves as the only credible rival to an opponent.

In section 6, we examined social media usage in what had been called “the first social media election.” The majority of respondents did not use social media to engage with the election, although 42% had used it at some point. In terms of other digital campaign tactics, while 77% had signed up to receive email updates, the majority of those had signed up to receive updates from parties they had already decided to vote for. Social media played a small but significant role in the local campaign, with 42% following all or some local candidates. Of those who used social media, the most popular reason was to show their support for a party or candidate they already intended to vote for.

Finally, in section 7, we examined how influenced respondents felt by campaign messages in the leaders’ debates, local and national campaigning. Our respondents felt they were less influenced by messages than others.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Surveys**

To recruit participants, an email was sent to Unlock Democracy’s mailing list, inviting them to take the first survey to register their interest in becoming part of the What the Voters Saw (WTVS) panel. The mailing list were first contacted in February 2015.

During the election campaign, those who had agreed to be part of the WTVS panel (n=823) received surveys on a weekly basis via email. Four surveys were administered in this way from 9th April to 4th May 2015.

A post-election survey was sent to the full mailing list on 12th May.

In total, six surveys were administered, each of which had a distinct theme. The table below gives details of the themes, dates and number of respondents for each survey. For ease of reference, each survey is numbered, and throughout this report will be referred to by its number: for example, the social media survey administered on 30th April will be referred to as “Survey 4”.

<b>Survey number</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Respondents</b>
1	Introductory survey	26th February	823

2	Leaders' Debate	2nd April	639
3	Local candidates	16th April	458
4	Social media	30th April	188
5	Canvassing	4th May	235
6	After the election	13th May	1852

Data were collected using SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool. Respondents were emailed a link to each survey.

The vast majority of respondents lived in England: across all surveys, fewer than 5% of respondents were from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2 Election leaflet analysis

Analysis of election leaflets was crowdsourced through Unlock Democracy's ElectionLeaflets.org, an online archive of election leaflets. The web interface allowed site users to upload scans of election leaflets they had received from January 1st 2015. Volunteers could sign up to analyse the leaflets by answering a series of questions about the content of each leaflet. By May 1st 2015, 2225 leaflets had been analysed.

## 3. Receiving the message: reception of national communications

A vast amount of money is spent on election campaigns on advertising communicating party messages to a wide audience: according to the Electoral Commission, in the 2010 General Election, £9,365,556 was reported as having been spent on advertising by the parties, with a further £1,605,418 spent on party broadcasts, and £666,534 spent on developing manifestos.<sup>4</sup> This section examines the impact and visibility of national communications, as perceived by the WTVS panel.

### 3.1 Impact of the TV Debates

Televised debates are a relatively new development in UK general elections, with the inaugural round of debates taking place in 2010 between leaders of the three main parties at the time. In 2015, the picture was more complex, with UKIP winning in the European elections, and David Cameron's call for the Green Party to be included in the debates. Following much discussion, it was decided that there would be a debate consisting of only Ed Miliband and David Cameron; a seven-way debate including the leaders of the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, UKIP, Labour,

<sup>3</sup> In each survey, respondents were asked to provide postcode data.

<sup>4</sup> Electoral Commission (2015) Political party spending at previous elections. Retrieved 12th August 2015: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/political-parties-campaigning-and-donations/political-party-spending-at-elections/details-of-party-spending-at-previous-elections>

the Green Party, the SNP and Plaid Cymru; a debate featuring the opposition, i.e. without David Cameron or Nick Clegg; and a special episode of Question Time featuring the Labour, Liberal Democrats and Conservative leaders. We wanted to examine the impact of the seven-way debate, as nothing of the kind had been broadcast in the UK before.

The WTVS panel was contacted shortly after the April 2nd televised seven-way Leaders' Debate to gauge the impact of the debate on their impressions of the candidates and their decisions as to who to vote for. 639 members of the panel participated in the post-debate survey.

90.3% of the respondents watched all or some of the debate, with a further 7.7% who hadn't watched the debate but had been following discussions of the debate online or through the news.

The majority of survey respondents (66.1%) had already made up their minds as to who to vote for before the debate.

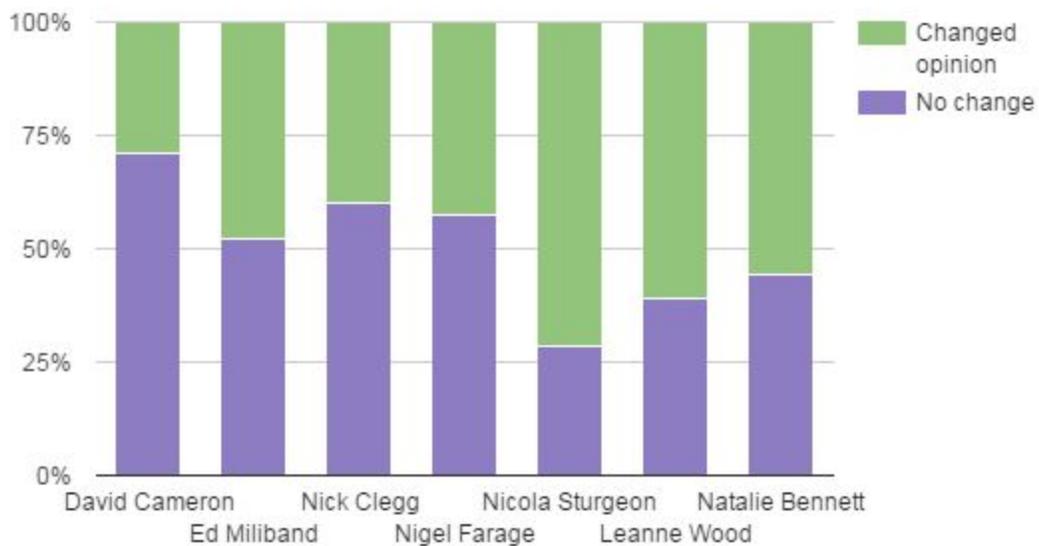
The panel were asked as to whether the leaders' debate had made a difference to their impressions of the seven party leaders<sup>5</sup>. For the leaders of the three main parties, most respondents said that the debate had made no difference to their impressions. The same was true for Nigel Farage of UKIP.

Among the female leaders of the smaller parties, however, fewer respondents said that the debate had made no difference to their impression, and a greater number said that their opinion had changed.

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<sup>5</sup>Asked in Survey 2 n=639 Question: Regardless of who you intend to vote for, did the debates leave you with a more positive or negative impression of...? Response options: 1. More positive 2. More negative 3. No difference to my opinion (already positive) 4. No difference to my opinion (already negative) 5. No difference to my opinion (not sure). Difference figures were sum total of 1 and 2. No difference figures were sum total of those who answered 3, 4 or 5.

### Change to impression of party leaders following leadership debate



There are a number of possible explanations for this trend. Content analysis of the media coverage of parties and candidates in the 2015 General Election, carried out by Loughborough University<sup>6</sup> found discrepancies: a “stopwatch gap” with the three major parties and UKIP receiving more TV and press coverage than the SNP, Green Party or Plaid Cymru. For the three women, there would have been less of an opportunity to form an opinion, and therefore less of an opportunity for there to be no difference made to the opinion. At the time the survey was administered, comparatively less attention was given in the media to Leanne Wood and Nicola Sturgeon in the English press, as they were both leaders of parties in the devolved countries; this could further explain why. Loughborough University’s team also found a huge discrepancy in coverage of men compared to women in the election campaign, with woman politicians covered far less in the mainstream media: despite being leaders of their parties, the three less-covered candidates were all women.

There is also a possibility of bias among the respondents which led to a greater positive impression of the three women, all of whom articulated left-wing views throughout the debate; this is partially supported by Labour Party leader Ed Miliband having made more of a difference to respondents’ opinions than the centre- and right-wing leaders.

Regardless of the underlying reason, it appears that leaders of smaller parties who received less media attention benefited most from appearing in the debate. However, while it may have

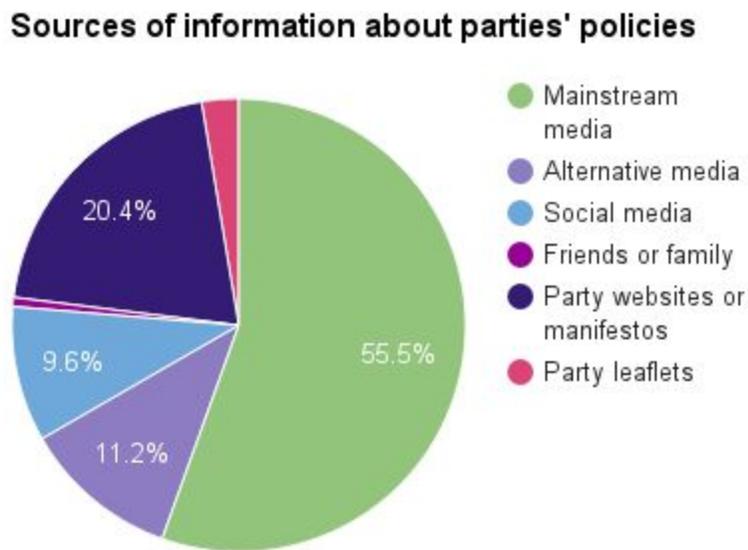
<sup>6</sup> Loughborough University Communication Research Centre (2015). Media Coverage of the 2015 General Election (Report 2). Available online. Retrieved 19th August 2015: <http://blog.lboro.ac.uk/general-election/media-coverage-of-the-2015-general-election-report-2/>

affected opinions, it is unlikely to have strongly affected vote choice, since the majority of viewers had already made up their minds who to vote for.

### 3.2 Where voters get their information on national policies

The televised debates may be new, but they stand among more traditional methods of getting the message out--as well as other novel methods.

In Survey 3, we asked the 458 respondents where they got their information about parties' national policies<sup>7</sup>. Mainstream media remained a dominant source of information, with 55.5% saying they got most of their information from it. This likely includes the televised debates.



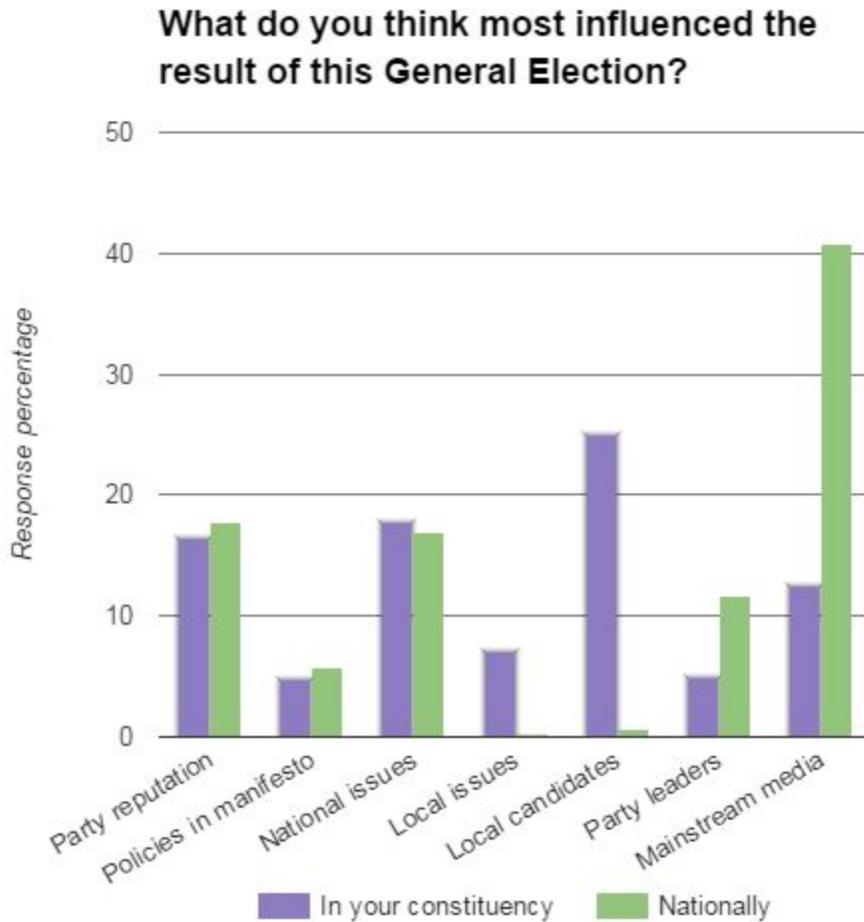
In second place was the parties' own communications through their websites or manifestos, with 20.4% of respondents getting their information on national policy through here. Also significant were alternative media outlets (such as political blogs) at 11.2% and social media at 9.6%. Party leaflets and the opinions of friends and family were not considered a primary source of information about policies in this survey: this is not to say that people do not talk to their family and friends about the election, but rather that it is not family and friends they go to for information about what a party would do in government.

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<sup>7</sup>Asked in Survey 3. n=458 Question: Where do you get most of your information about parties' national policies from? Forced-choice response options: 1. Mainstream media 2. Alternative media 3. Social media 4. Friends or family 5. Party websites or manifestos 6. Party leaflets

### 3.3 Influencing the election

When asked what they thought had the biggest influence on the outcome of the election at a local and national level, once again, respondents saw the mainstream media as the biggest influencer of the national campaign. However, it was not seen as a particularly significant force in influencing the local campaign, where local issues and local candidates were seen as the driving factor.<sup>8</sup>



### 4. The local campaign

National and local campaigning require somewhat different approaches in order to provide locally-targeted information and raise awareness of local candidates. The Electoral Commission

<sup>8</sup> Asked in Survey 6. n=1852. Question: What do you think most influenced the result of this General Election? (a) Nationally (b) Locally Response options: 1. Don't know 2. Political parties' track record nationally 3. The policies in parties' manifestos 4. National issues 5. Local issues 6. Local candidates 7. The party leaders 8. Mainstream Media

report that in the 2010 general election, £12,538,490 was spent on “unsolicited materials”, which largely consists of election flyers and leaflets. A further £1,854,227 was spent on market research and canvassing.<sup>9</sup> This section examines the impact and visibility of the election campaign at the constituency level.

#### **4.1 Knowledge of local candidates**

The WTVS panel had a good knowledge of their local candidates, with 97.6% reporting knowing who all or some of their local candidates were.<sup>10</sup> This may be due to the standing caveat in interpreting our data: that Unlock Democracy supporters are highly politically engaged.

66.8% of respondents felt it was easy to find information about their local candidates<sup>11</sup>, which suggests that information was reasonably accessible and available.

Respondents experienced a fairly high level of contact from local candidates, in particular in the form of receiving election leaflets (79.6%), emails (51.2%) and letters (36.1%)<sup>12</sup>. Despite this, 12.9% of respondents reported not having received any information from their preferred local candidates or parties.

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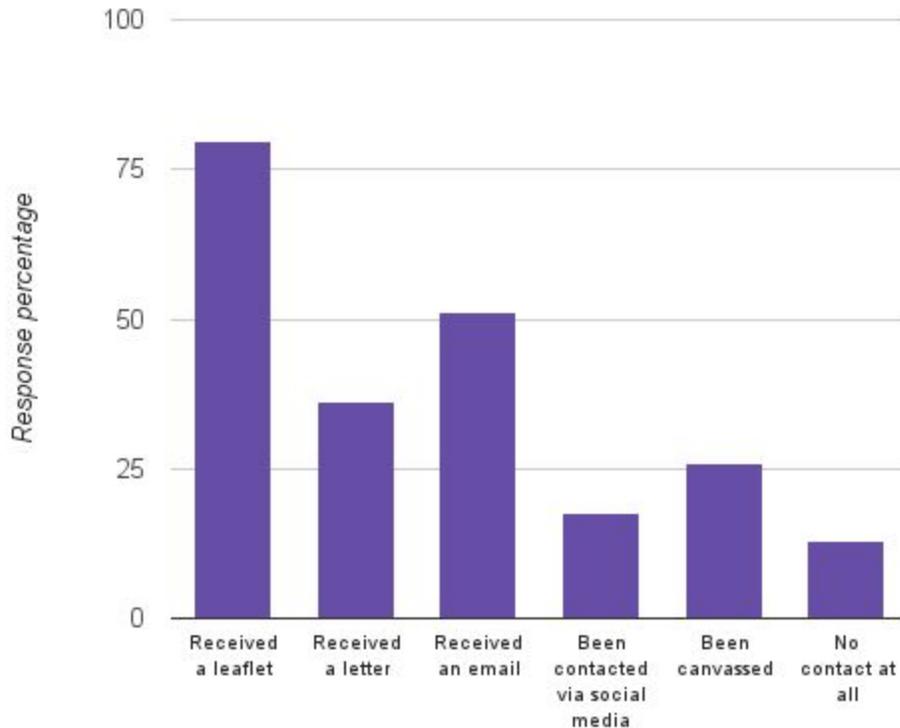
<sup>9</sup> Electoral Commission (2015). Political party spending at previous elections. Retrieved 12th August 2015: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/political-parties-campaigning-and-donations/political-party-spending-at-elections/details-of-party-spending-at-previous-elections>

<sup>10</sup> Asked in Survey 3. n=458. Question: Of the parties you might vote for, do you know who your local candidates are?

<sup>11</sup> Asked in Survey 3. n=458. Question: How difficult or easy do you find it to get information about your local candidates? Response options: 1 Very easy 2 Quite easy 3 Quite difficult 4 Very difficult. Easy figure is sum total of 1 and 2.

<sup>12</sup> Asked in Survey 3. n=458. Question: In the past few months, have you been contacted by the candidate(s) for your preferred party or parties in any of the following ways? 1 Received a leaflet 2 Received a letter 3 Received an email 4 Been contacted via social media 5 Been canvassed (on the doorstep or over the phone) - by the candidate 6 Been canvassed (on the doorstep or over the phone) - by a representative for that candidate 7 No contact at all

**In the past few months, have you been contacted by the candidate(s) for your preferred party or parties in any of the following ways?**

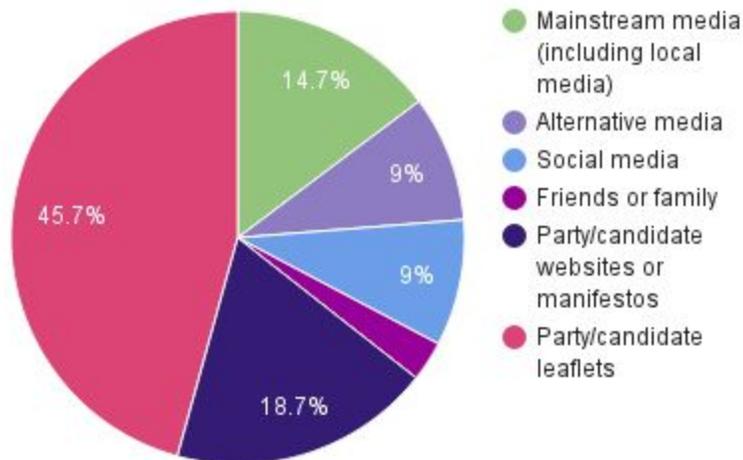


#### **4.2 Where voters get their information**

The national election campaign differed vastly from the local campaign in terms of how voters got their information. While only 2.6% of panelists got information about national policy from leaflets, it was the dominant source of information about local candidates, with 45.7% considering this the source of information they used most.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Asked in Survey 3. n=458 Question: Where do you get most of your information about your local candidates from? Forced choice response options: 1. Mainstream media 2. Alternative media 3. Social media 4. Friends or family 5. Party websites or manifestos 6. Party leaflets

### Sources of information about local candidates



Communications from the party in the form of websites and manifestos were also a crucial source of information about local candidates, with 18.7% getting their information this way.

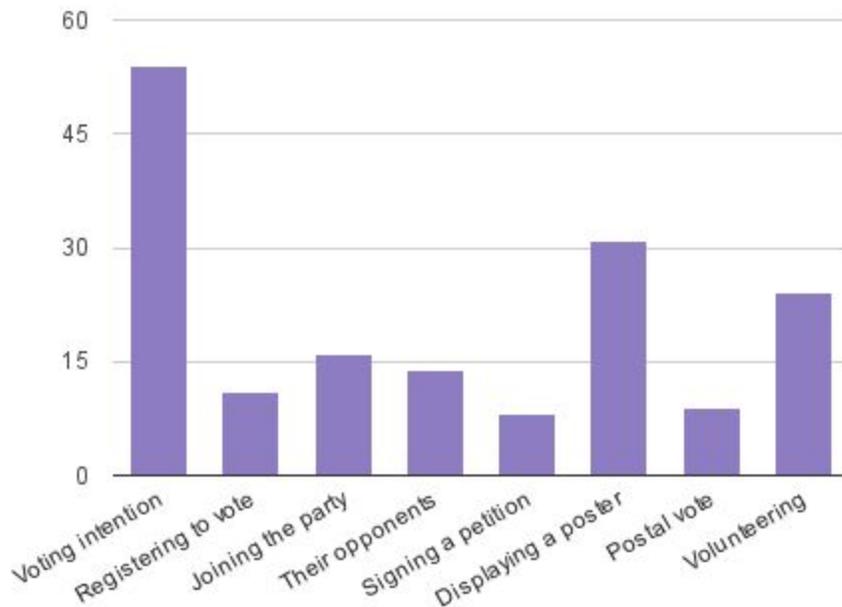
#### 4.3 Canvassing

Canvassing has traditionally formed a large part of the election campaign at a local level, although the majority of our WTVS panel had not been canvassed, with 60.1% reporting they had not been canvassed at home, and 82.9% reporting they had not been canvassed in public (at street stalls, for example). Of those who had been canvassed, the vast majority--87.1%--said that it made no difference to how they would vote.

The topics respondents were canvassed on were largely what one might expect with canvassing, with the top issue being asking who they were planning on voting for: 65.1% of respondents who had been canvassed were asked this question<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Asked in Survey 5. n=83. Question: If you've been canvassed, did they talk to you about any of the following? Tick all that apply 1. Who you are planning to vote for 2. Registering to vote 3. Joining the party 4. Their opponents 5. Signing a petition 6. Displaying a poster 7. Applying for a postal vote 8. Volunteering for the party

**If you've been canvassed, did they talk to you about any of the following?**



Despite the small numbers who had been canvassed, respondents saw strong value in canvassing, feeling that canvassing was an important way for politicians to meet ordinary people, as well as for people to meet their candidates<sup>15</sup>. Canvassing was also considered an important way for getting people involved in politics, with 68.9% rating it as important or very important. This relates to academic findings that face-to-face canvassing leads to better turnout.<sup>16</sup>

**4.4 Visibility of the election**

We asked respondents how visible they felt the election had been before and after the election. Disappointingly, the visibility of the election was not high, and did not improve over time.

In February 2015, we asked survey respondents to rate the visibility of the election in their constituency on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “You wouldn’t know an election is coming” and 5 being “The election is everywhere”. The mean score was 2.4.<sup>17</sup>

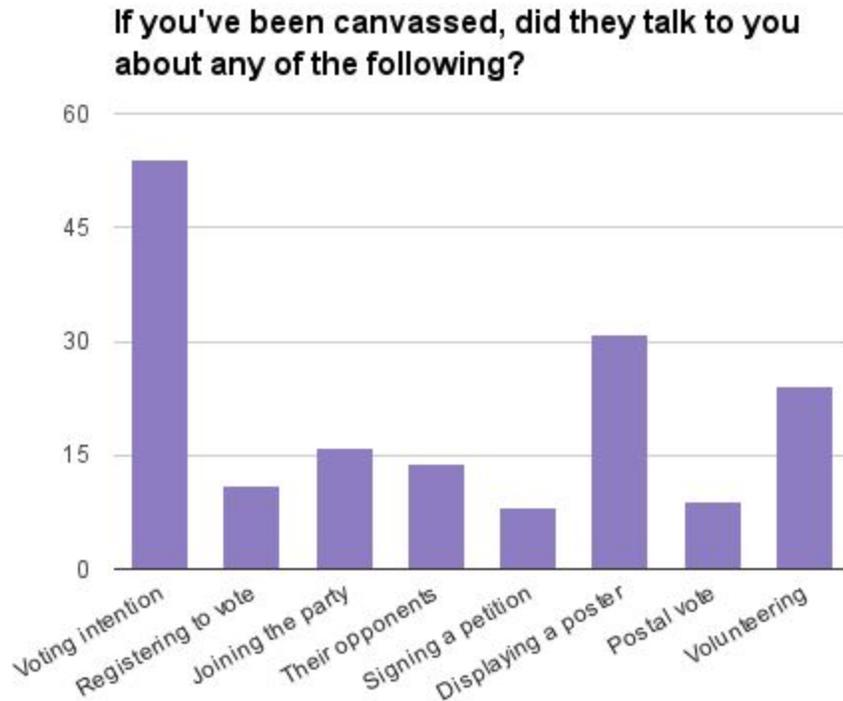
<sup>15</sup> Asked in Survey 5. n=235 Forced-ranking question: Please rank the following statements about political canvassing. 1. Parties only canvass because they want your vote. 2. Parties do want your vote, but they do care about local issues too. 3. Canvassing is important as it helps politicians to meet ordinary people. 4. I would rather get in touch with politicians myself than have them canvass me. 5. I wish that parties canvassed me more. 6. Canvassing is a good way for people to meet the candidates.

<sup>16</sup> Aldrich, J., Gibson, R.K., Cantijoch, M., & Konitzer, T. (2013) Getting Out the Vote in the Social Media Era: Are Digital Tools changing the extent, nature and impact of Party Contacting in Elections?. *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago. August 28th – Sept 1st 2013.*

<sup>17</sup> Asked in Survey 1. n=823

We asked the same question again in May, shortly after the election, and the mean score was only slightly higher, at 2.8.<sup>18</sup>

This low visibility may be due to a genuine lack of visibility of the election at a local level, although this seems unlikely, as when we asked respondents what they saw locally, a large number had seen posters in windows or gardens, and received election leaflets.<sup>19</sup>



## 5. Content of election leaflets

At several times throughout the WTVS project, the panel were asked if they had received any election leaflets. Even in February, more than half of the survey respondents had received an election leaflet, with 55.3% saying that they had.<sup>20</sup> By mid-April, 79.6% had received an election leaflet.<sup>21</sup> After the election, 89.1% reported having seen an election leaflet during the campaign.<sup>22</sup>

Given the importance of election leaflets in finding out information about candidates, our ElectionLeaflets.org volunteers undertook some analysis as to what messages the leaflets contained. This section summarises the analysis of election leaflets in May 2015. The source of this data was not from the surveys, but from data collected through the ElectionLeaflets.org website.

<sup>18</sup> Asked in Survey 6. n=1852. Scale options changed to 1="You wouldn't know there was an election happening" 5="The election was everywhere"

<sup>19</sup> Asked in Survey 6. n=1852. Question: Did you see candidates or parties campaigning locally? Please tick all that apply

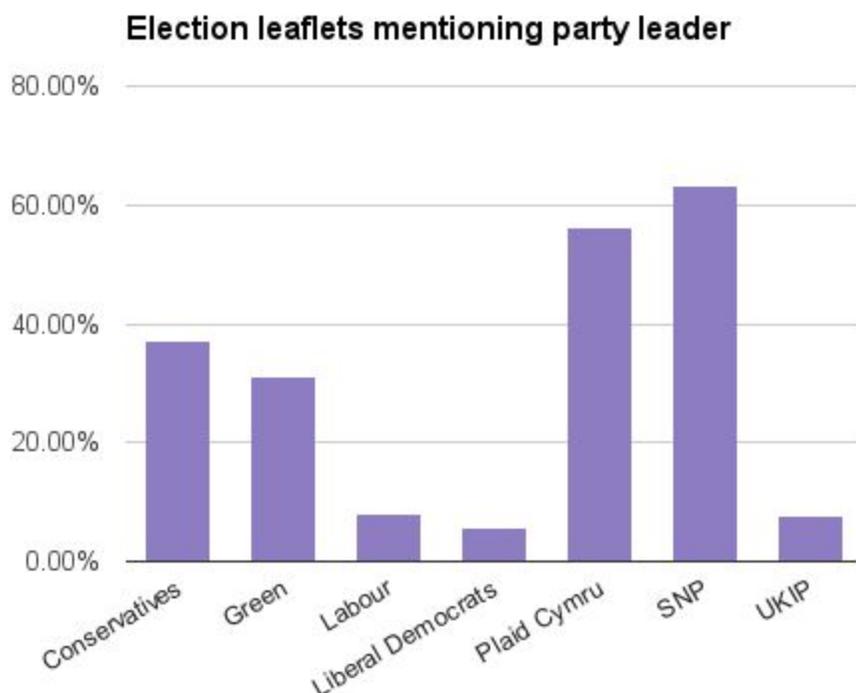
<sup>20</sup> Asked in Survey 1. n=823

<sup>21</sup> Asked in Survey 3. n=458

<sup>22</sup> Asked in Survey 6. n=1852

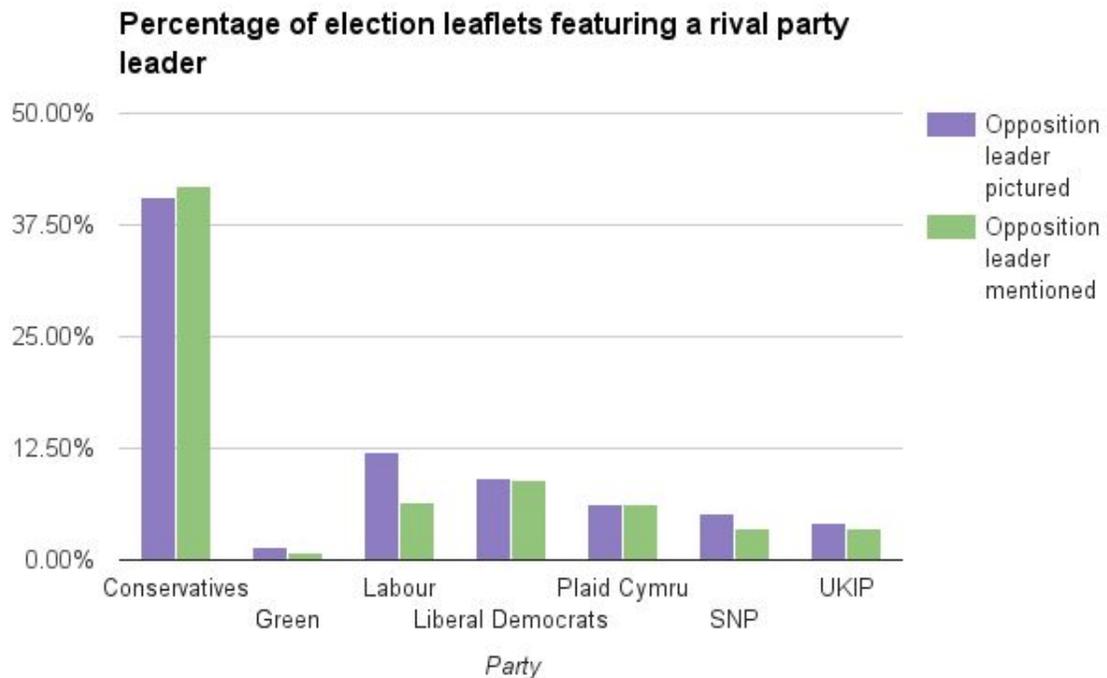
### 5.1 Links between local and national campaigns

To examine links between the local and national campaigning, we identified how often the party leaders were mentioned. The two nationalist parties were most likely to mention their leaders, although of the UK-wide parties, the Conservatives were most likely, with 37.1% mentioning the party leader. The Liberal Democrats were least likely to mention their leader, with only 5.64% of leaflets mentioning Nick Clegg.



### 5.2 Negative campaigning: rival leaders in election leaflets

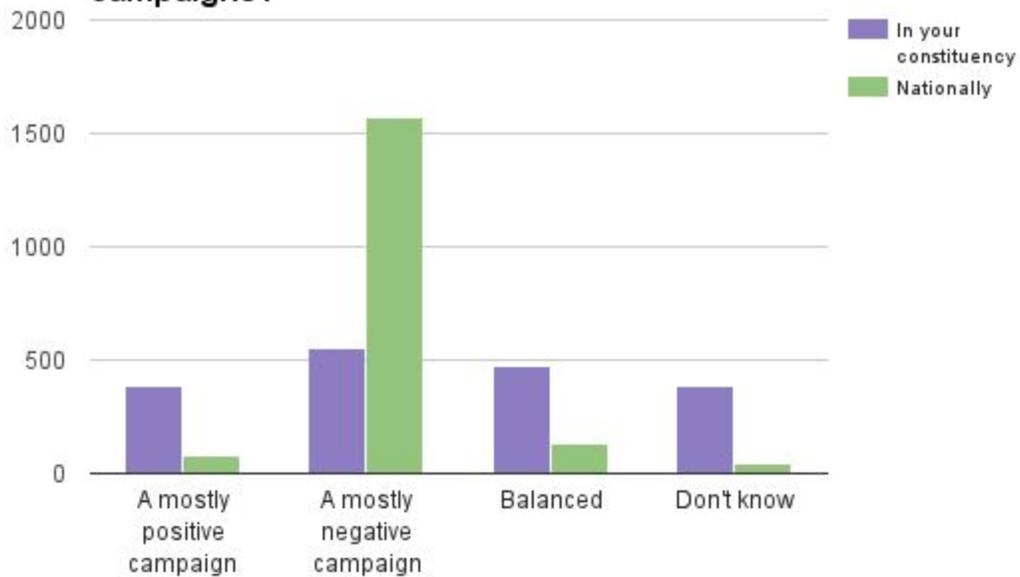
To examine the instances of using negative campaign tactics we looked at how often election leaflets featured leaders of rival parties. The Conservatives were most likely to mention or picture a rival leader, with 42% of leaflets analysed mentioning a rival leader, and 40.5% picturing a rival leader. The Green Party were least likely to mention rival leaders, with only 1.4% of leaflets doing this.



In Survey 6, we asked respondents how they felt the campaign had been run, and unveiled stark differences in perception of the local and national campaigns: the national campaign was perceived as overwhelmingly negative.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that our heuristic for identifying negative campaigning--depictions of rival national leaders in election leaflets--tapped into perceived negative campaigning. It is notable in perceptions of the local and national campaigns, far more respondents checked "don't know" for the local campaign. This is likely due to the perceived lack of visibility of the election, as examined in section 4.4.

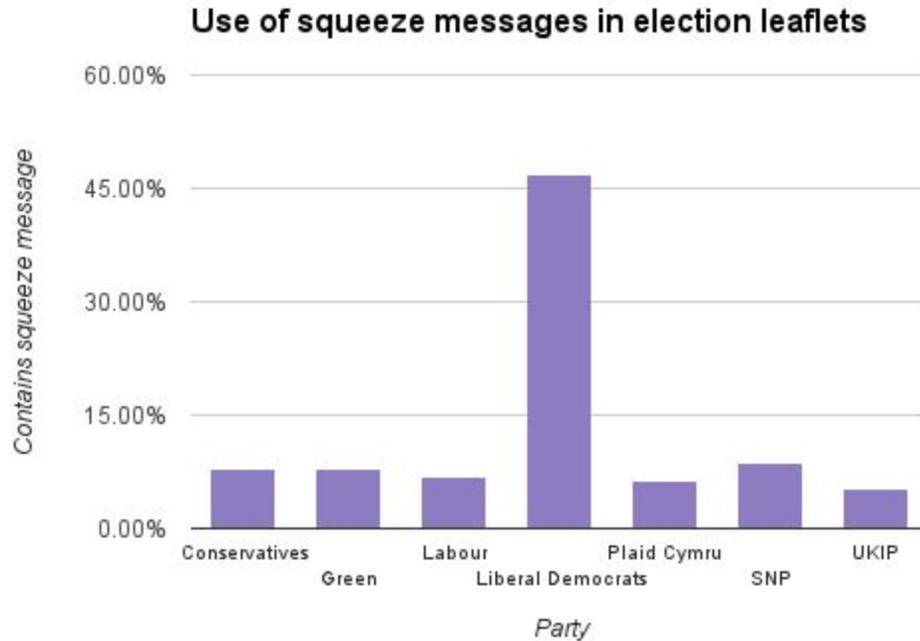
<sup>23</sup> Asked in Survey 6. n=1852

### In your opinion, how would you describe the nature of this year's General Election campaigns?



### 5.3 Squeeze messages

Squeeze messages are messages which appear on election leaflets presenting the party as the only viable candidate against the opposition: “[rival party] can’t win here”, “only [party] can win here”, “it’s a two-horse race”, and so forth. In our analysis of election leaflets, we looked at presence of squeeze messages, as well as graphs to corroborate the squeeze messages. The Liberal Democrats were most likely to use squeeze messages, with 46.9% of their election leaflets analysed containing a squeeze message, and 42% containing a graph. They were far ahead of the other parties, large and small, in use of squeeze messaging: perhaps this is due to the position they usually occupy in the polls, and therefore a function of how our electoral system works, with the prevalence of tactical voting.



## 6. Social and digital media in the 2015 election

Social media has fast grown into an important communications tool within the last decade, and the 2015 general election was widely purported to be the “first social media campaign.”<sup>24</sup> The fourth WTVS survey examined social media usage during the election campaign. This section examines social and digital media use.

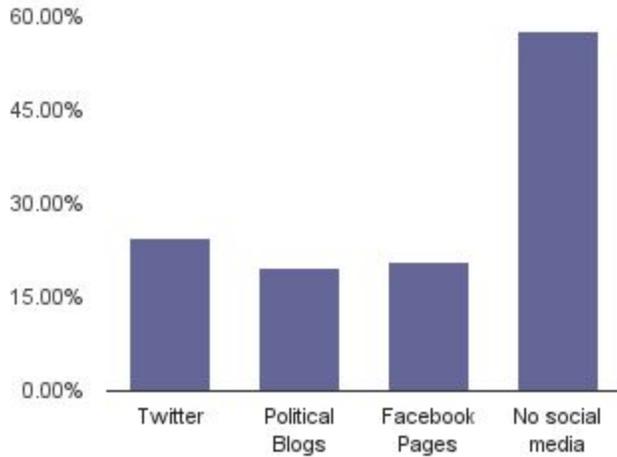
### 6.1 Engaging with the election

The majority of WTVS respondents--57.9%--did not use social media to engage with the election, although a sizeable portion did use Facebook, Twitter or political blogs<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Channel 4 News (2015). Election 2015: is this the first 'social media' campaign? Retrieved 12th August 2015: <http://www.channel4.com/news/social-media-general-election-2015-youtube-facebook-twitter>

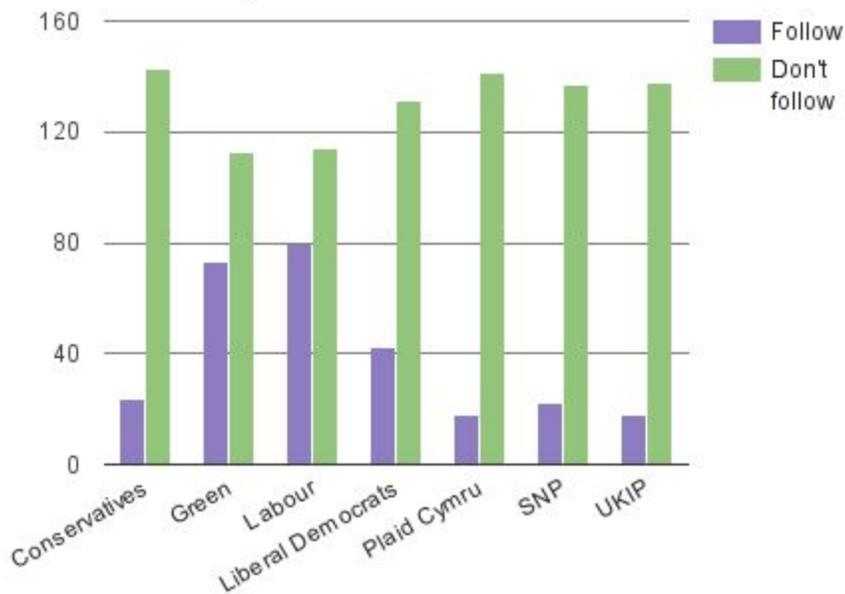
<sup>25</sup> Asked in Survey 6 n=1852. Have you used any of the following social media platforms to get involved with GE2015?

### Use of social media to get involved in the election



However, rates of following official party accounts on social media was low<sup>26</sup>:

### Following social media accounts of the main parties



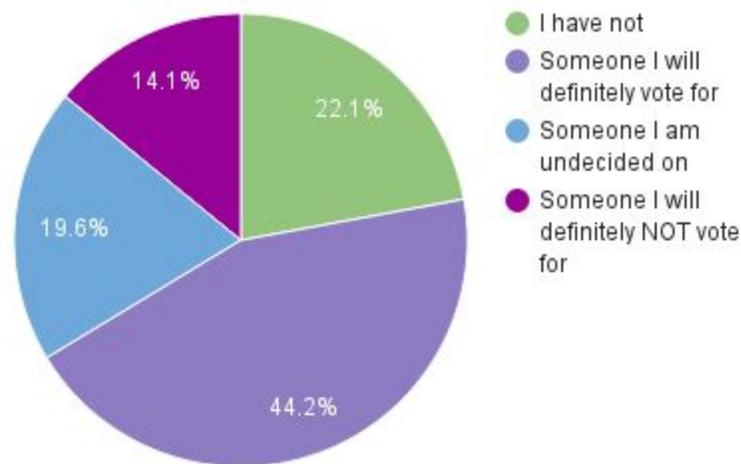
<sup>26</sup> Asked in Survey 4 n=188 Question: Do you follow any official social media accounts of any of these parties? Matrix response. Answer options: 1. Conservatives 2. Green 3. Labour 4. Liberal Democrats 5. Plaid Cymru 6. SNP 7. UKIP by 1. Facebook 2. Instagram 3. LinkedIn 4. Twitter 5. YouTube 6. None "Follow" is sum of 1, 4 and 5 (no respondents reported following on 2 or 3).

Labour, the Green Party and the Liberal Democrats were the most-followed parties across social media.

## 6.2 Email updates

27.5% of respondents had not signed up to receive email updates, but of those who had, the majority had signed up for updates from parties or candidates they had already decided to vote for<sup>27</sup>.

**Have you signed up for email updates from a party/candidate?**



## 6.3 Following local candidates

While the majority of our panel did not use social media to follow local candidates, a not-insignificant portion followed all or some<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Asked in Survey 4. n=188. Question: Have you signed up for email updates from the party/candidate(s) Please tick all that apply. Answer options: 1. I have not signed up to any of the political parties' emails 2. A party or candidate I will definitely vote for 3. A party or candidate I may vote for or I am undecided on 4. A party or candidate I will definitely NOT vote for. Answers in fig x exclude 1.

<sup>28</sup> Asked in Survey 4 n=188. Question: How many of your local candidates do you follow online or through social media? Forced-choice answers: 1 All of them 2 some of them 3. None of them

Local candidates followed	Percentage of respondents
All	4.3 %
Some	38.3 %
None	58.0 %

While the numbers may appear small, they are not dissimilar to findings in previous research suggesting around a third of adults have used social media to engage politically.<sup>29</sup> For local candidates and parties alike, social media reaches a sizeable portion of the population.

#### 6.4 Why use social media?

It is likely that respondents who followed parties or candidates did not do so to receive information. When asked why they followed candidates or parties online, the most popular reason was to show their support.<sup>30</sup>

Voters' use of social media reflects how politicians use it, with one study of Norwegian politicians finding that they used social media primarily as a marketing tool rather than as a means for engaging in dialogue with voters.<sup>31</sup> It appears voters agree that it is a campaigning and marketing tool, and follow as a show of support. Social media engages a sizeable quantity of people, and even though it may not affect decisions, it allows people to engage with the election in a different way. One could view social media use as a modern update on the tradition of displaying a poster.

#### 7. Perceived impact of communications

A pattern among members of the WTVS was that they did not consider themselves influenced by forms of campaigning, although they considered others to be highly influenced.

Respondents did not believe their voting decisions were influenced by the televised leaders' debate, although other people's were<sup>32</sup>

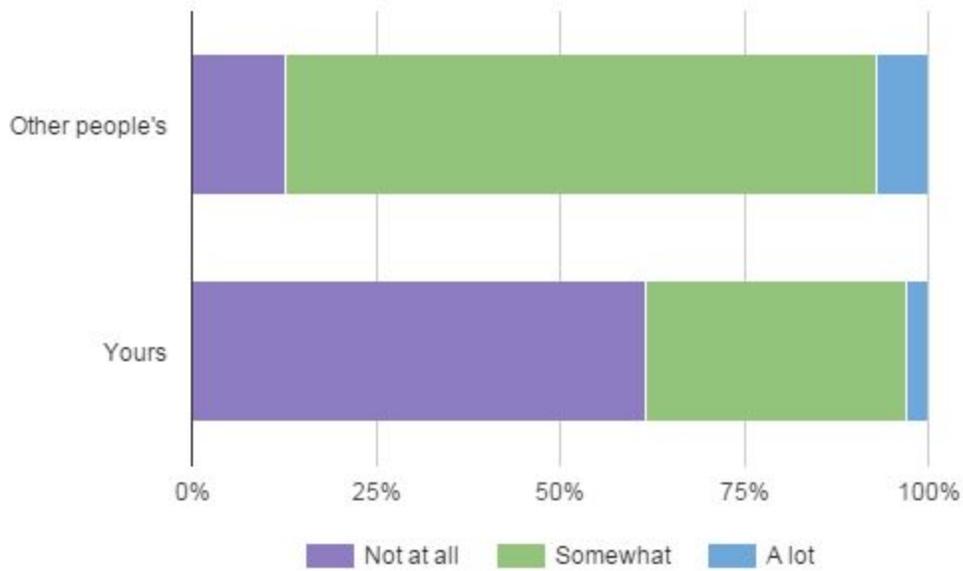
<sup>29</sup> Pew Research Centre (2014). Politics Fact Sheet. Available online. Retrieved 26th August 2015: <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/politics-fact-sheet/>

<sup>30</sup> Asked in Survey 4. n=188. Forced ranking system. Question: Please rank what are your main reasons for following candidates or parties online with 1 being the most important and 5 the least. 1. Helps me to find out political news before others do 2. Makes me feel more personally connected to the parties or candidates 3. The information is more reliable than what I get from traditional news sites 4. To show my support for a particular candidate or party 5. To be able to monitor and challenge particular candidates or parties I don't support. 4 was ranked highest.

<sup>31</sup> Enli, G. S., & Skogerbø, E. (2013). Personalized campaigns in party-centred politics. *Information, Communication and Society* 16 (5). 757- 774 .

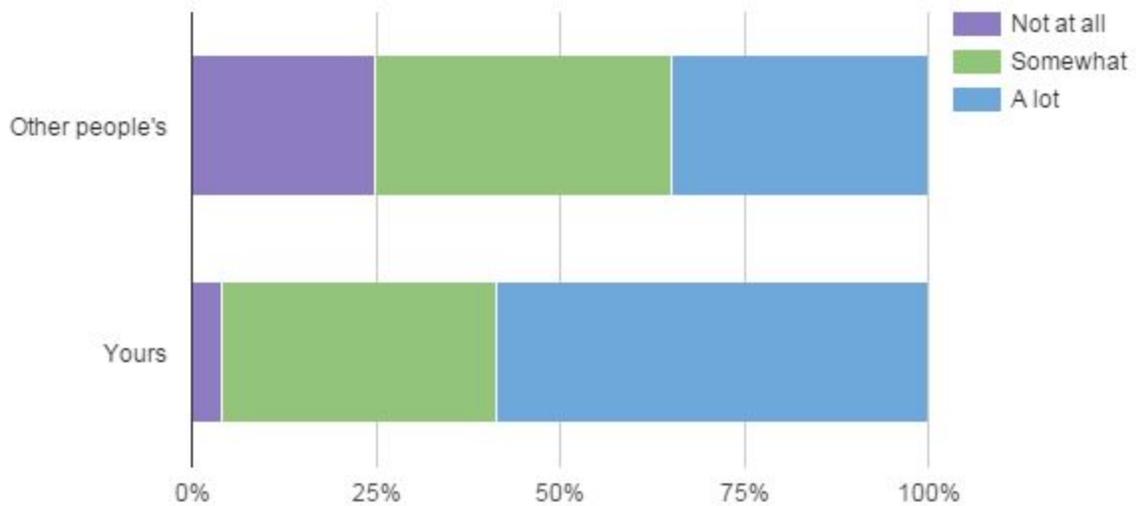
<sup>32</sup> Asked in Survey 2. n=639

**How much do you think people's voting decisions are influenced by the TV debates?**



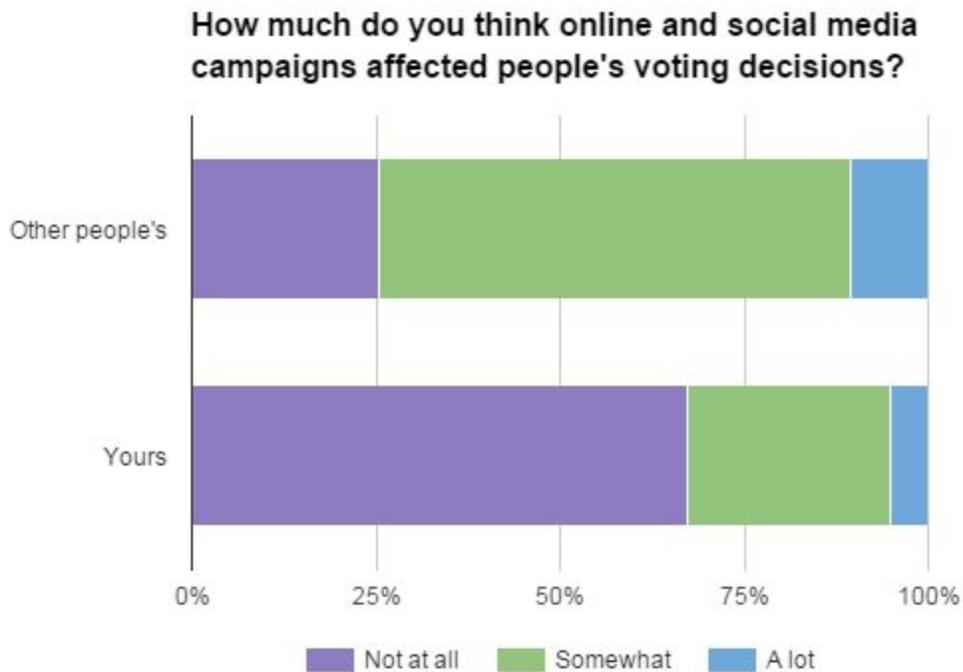
They did not consider their votes affected by the party leaders, although they thought that other people's would be.<sup>33</sup>

**How much do you think people's voting decisions were affected by the party leaders?**



<sup>33</sup> Asked in Survey 3. n=458

They did not consider their own votes affected by social media campaigning, although they thought that other people's were<sup>34</sup>



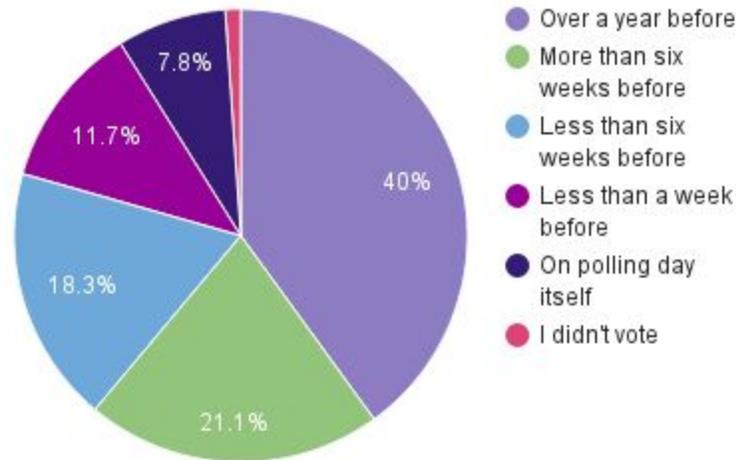
It is worth noting at this juncture that a high quantity of WTVS respondents had already made up their minds: a large portion had made up their minds long before the election, with 40% having decided a year in advance.<sup>35</sup> This may go some way to explaining why our respondents did not feel they were particularly influenced by the election campaign.

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<sup>34</sup> Asked in Survey 4. n=188

<sup>35</sup> Asked in Survey 6. n=1852

### Relative to polling day, when did you decide who to vote for?



However, it is worth revisiting the finding in section 3.1 that the Leaders' Debate *did* alter impressions of some party leaders--this suggests that the vast expenses spent on campaigning each election are not spent in vain!

It is likely, therefore, that at least some of this is down to the Third-Person Effect<sup>36</sup>, a documented phenomenon wherein people believe themselves to be less influenced by persuasive communications than other people are. Despite this strong belief, people *are* influenced by the communications, and it has been suggested that a stronger Third-Person belief during election times could lead to more people taking actions such as voting.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, a high number of survey respondents voted: 98.2% reported having voted after the election.<sup>38</sup>

### 8. Conclusions

As election campaigns are an expensive business, it is beneficial for campaign teams, party members and taxpayers alike to understand the impact of various forms of messaging. In the national campaign, the mainstream media was perceived as most influential, and also the dominant source of information about parties' national policies. In the local campaign, election

<sup>36</sup> Davison, W. P. (1983). The Third-Person Effect in Communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 47 (1). 1-15

<sup>37</sup> Golan, G. J., Banning, S. A. & Lundy, L. (2008). Likelihood to vote, candidate choice, and the third-person effect: Behavioral implications of political advertising in the 2004 Presidential election. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52. 278-290.

<sup>38</sup> Asked in Survey 6. n=1852

leaflets were a dominant source of information--perhaps justifying the high level of expenditure on this, with over £12.5million spent on unsolicited material last election.<sup>39</sup>

It appears that the newer methods of communication--social media--fill a different function to the more traditional methods of getting the message across: of our survey respondents, more treated social media as a means for showing support for a party or candidate that they were already planning on voting for than to learn more about those on whom they were undecided. Analyses of the literature suggest it is unwise to view social media as something which will have a revolutionary effect on political campaigning, although it is also important to avoid dismissing it altogether.<sup>40</sup>

The TV debates seem to be beneficial, particularly for the parties or leaders who got less mainstream media coverage throughout the election campaign. Opinions of candidates from smaller parties were more likely to change based on the debates than those from the larger parties. This suggests that participation in this new form of campaign activity is valuable for politicians.

Some caution must be exercised in interpreting the findings of our surveys and election leaflet analysis on the whole. Our WTVS survey respondents were recruited from existing Unlock Democracy supporters, who may differ somewhat from the general population by already being more engaged in politics: certainly, they were far more likely to vote than average, with 98.2% of respondents saying they had voted in an election where turnout was 66.1%. Likewise, the ElectoralLeaflets.org project was mostly promoted through Unlock Democracy's own networks, meaning there could have been some degree in "self-filtering" in which leaflets were submitted for analysis.

Nonetheless, even our highly-engaged respondents did not find the election visible within their constituencies, with little change between February 2015 and May, when the election took place. Perhaps this reflects a shift in how campaigns are run, with more resources put into digital and social media and less of a focus on billboards and posters, or perhaps it hints at another difference between how local and national campaigns are run. It is also possible that this relates more to what respondents noticed: nonetheless, this is damning news for visual mass-audience campaigning methods if they were barely noticed by voters.

The findings presented in this report provide interesting insights into voter experience during the 2015 general election, yielding glimpses at which campaign tactics engage voters, and which are less noticed.

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<sup>39</sup> Electoral Commission (2015). Political party spending at previous elections. Retrieved 12th August 2015: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/political-parties-campaigning-and-donations/political-party-spending-at-elections/details-of-party-spending-at-previous-elections>

<sup>40</sup> Larsson, A. O., & Jakob S. (2014). Politicians Online - Identifying Current Research Opportunities. *First Monday*, 19 (4).