

Looking out or turning in? Organisational ramifications of Online Political Posters on Facebook

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Abstract

Academic analysis of the growth and nature of political campaigning online has concentrated largely on textual interactions between politicians, parties, their members and supporters as well as voters more widely. In evaluating the shift from traditional to online campaigning techniques the use of social media's increasingly visual capabilities has been comparatively neglected in research. This article considers one type of online visual political communication, the online political poster, in terms of its strategic campaign functions relating to persuasive and organisational roles. The article uses a case study of an extensive dataset of online political posters collected from political parties in the UK, on Facebook, between September 2013 through to and including the General Election in May 2015, to try to understand how parties used online political posters and how audiences responded to them. The findings show that despite a clear emphasis on sharing images, very few received widespread attention arguably limiting their persuasive role. However, their prevalence suggests a role relating to parties trying to maintain relationships with existing online supporters as a form of displaying virtual presence, credibility and belonging, paralleling the function of traditional window posters and yard signs but in a social media setting.

Introduction

This article explores a relatively neglected area in studies of the role of digital media in election campaigns. Whilst much attention has been paid to the nature of political discourse on digital platforms and particularly the interactions between politicians, political parties, campaigners and ordinary citizens, there has been a tendency for such research to 'overlook examining visual symbols' (Schill 2012: 119) and to have concentrated on text rather than images (Barnhurst and Quinn, 2012). Despite increasing attention to the role of digital social networks in election campaigns around the world (e.g. Vaccari 2012; Jungherr 2013; Vaccari and Valeriani 2015; Baldwin-Philippi 2015), the tendency to concentrate on interaction in terms of text has predominated over the increasingly visual dimensions of these platforms. We aim to address this

gap in the research and develop a better understanding of an increasingly common form of visual political communication which we have termed online political posters (OPPs). OPPs are political images that are designed to be shared over digital social networks. They are widely used by a diverse range of political organisations including minor and mainstream political parties in many countries.

As an emerging phenomenon OPPs raise important questions about how the availability and exploitation of digital media is connected to the role of citizens in party structures. Our analysis considers two potential strategic functions for OPPs in this context: persuasive and organisational. Persuasive functions are the traditional objective of campaign communications, aiming to reach and persuade voters. At the same time, social networks such as Facebook have been identified as a potential source of organisational coherence for political parties, allowing them to mobilise weak tie relationships through 'low threshold activities' (Vaccari 2012: 119) such as following a party on social media. In this interpretation OPPs may be inward rather than outward looking, serving to reinforce existing support i.e. 'Preaching to the Converted' (Norris 2003). In order to investigate these possible functions, our analysis took the form of an exploratory and primarily quantitative content analysis approach which coded the presence of both organisational and persuasive appeals in a corpus of OPPs produced by political parties on Facebook in the UK from September 2013 up to and through the 2015 General Election. Our hope is that this work will provide a better understanding of the strategic functions of OPPs within political parties and stimulate further work on digital visual communication. This may also provide some evidence for how political parties are seeking to use social media and integrate it into party structures both within and outside of acknowledged campaign periods and in particular how such use is linked to the cultivation of groups of online followers.

This article is also a response in part to a growing interest in the politicisation of previously apolitical spaces. Wright (2011) suggested that research agendas need to move on from the polarised revolution versus normalisation debate by considering how the use of web can serve to politicise previously apolitical spaces. The growing potential importance of accidental, indirect and serendipitous exposure to political content through content shared by ordinary citizens on social networks has been noted in several contexts (Chadwick 2009; Vaccari 2012; Gibson 2013; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2015). Facebook in particular has become recognised across European countries at least as something of a 'catch-all medium' for campaigning of this kind (Lilleker et al. 2015: 762). OPPs constitute a specific visual form of explicit attempts by political parties to colonise the potentially apolitical audiences linked to their own supporters. In their persuasive form OPPs could well open up channels of political communication with previously unengaged

voters. In addition, the organisational perspective may contribute to wider debates around party decline and their reinvention. Whilst the addition of online supporters is hardly revolutionary, neither is it ‘politics as usual’ (Margolis and Resnik 2000).

Online Political Posters (OPPs)

Although less studied than broadcast advertising, poster advertising is a near-ubiquitous component of election campaigns in many countries around the world, especially those where broadcast advertising is limited, such as the UK (Burgess 2011; Seidman 2008a). Posters can take a variety of forms from simple posters in citizens’ windows or US-style ‘yard signs’ (Baldwin-Philippi 2015: 79) to more sophisticated billboard posters which have been prominently used in every UK general election campaign since the beginning of the twentieth century (Burgess 2011: 190). In an age of increasing digital distribution of content, however, notable shifts from print to digital posters have begun to emerge, such as the rise of ‘digital yard signs’ in the USA (Baldwin-Philippi 2015: 79). The UK serves as a good illustrative case of this transition with evidence of explicit party approaches to posters increasingly moving from print to digital since the 2010 general election (Wheeler 2015).

OPPs can be seen as a form of the wider professionalisation of political communication (McNair 2012) whereby political party organisations attempt to appropriate communication strategies used in other contexts. Images in the form of online “memes”, for instance, have become an everyday feature of contemporary social media, consisting of a stock image to which users add their own slogans for (typically) comic effect, with some images circulating millions of times (Shifman 2014 see also: Miltner 2014).ⁱ OPPs are arguably an attempt to tap into that potential for widespread dissemination by users, although unlike memes they are not intended to be redesigned by their audience, being party-produced messages. They are open to appropriation and manipulation, however. In March 2014, then UK Conservative Chairman Grant Shapps tweeted an OPP attempting to trumpet the impact of the recent budget on the price of beer and bingo. Described variously as an advert or infographic by media, the poster generated a “Twitter Storm” as users saw it as revealing Conservative party’s stereotypical views of the working class (Urquhart 2014). The party lost control of the image as numerous satirical alternatives were distributed online giving birth to a (relatively short lived) and unintended meme.

‘Going Viral’

Questions arise around how OPPs contribute to parties' communication efforts and what, if any, strategic functions they fulfil. OPPs seem to be designed as a form of viral political advertising. Political advertising can be thought of as: 'the purchase and use of advertising space, paid for at commercial rates, in order to transmit political messages to mass audiences.' (McNair 2012: 87). One potential function of OPPs, in keeping with traditional political posters, is mass persuasion (Seidman 2008a: 7) but rather than seeking to directly change the audiences' mind even simple posters lacking substantive factual content have been noted as contributing to a sense of presence and credibility in a campaign (Seidman 2008b). A study of posters in Japan suggests that while voters are unlikely to base their voting decisions on photos and slogans offered by campaign posters they still play a familiarisation and engagement role (Lewis and Masshardt 2002: 401). Studies of posters in France and Belgium suggest posters help establish a campaign's presence in particular locations, signifying the strength of the campaign (Dumitrescu 2011). Baldwin-Philippi suggests that digital yard signs in US election candidate social media pages serve a similar function as 'visual markers to show support' (2015: 79).

Higher prices and the increasing role of media coverage have reduced billboard poster launches in the UK to largely tokenistic events designed to attract media attention (Wheeler 2015). OPPs thus provide a possible solution to disseminating printed poster material for cost-conscious political parties. Coined in reference to the spread of the webmail service Hotmail, viral marketing or advertising online mirrors models of disease transmission, relying on message recipients to transmit messages on behalf of the originator (De Bruyn and Lilien 2008). Viral advertising is similar in many ways to more traditional word of mouth approaches to marketing but differs in the speed and reach of transmission, the focus on images and text, the control maintained over the message by the originator and a greater focus on a one-way direction of travel compared with the more conversational word of mouth (Swanepole et al, 2009: 11). To this list we can add the capability of a single person to contact many others at once through posting a piece of content on a social media network.

Applying viral advertising techniques to political advertising is to some extent a logical step as a tool through which parties can disseminate a lot of messages cheaply using software easily available to them in-house. Equally, the lower production costs and turnaround time mean that messages can also be timely in a way that conventional poster campaigns with long lead in times cannot. OPPs also represent a short conceptual leap for political parties that are used to using political posters and relying on their supporters to evangelise on their behalf. Positioning poster-

style images within social networks allows parties to effectively add their supporters' social endorsement to party controlled poster content in a manner similar to the use of yard signs. However, just as OPPs do not clearly fit in the definition of a meme, they may also eschew the precise understanding of viral dissemination. The concept of virality can be seen on different levels. On a broader level individual news stories may be widely disseminated through multiple outlets, while at the same time individual pieces of content may also take on viral characteristics (Nahon and Hemsley 2013). In this instance we are interested in individual pieces of content, i.e. the performance of single OPPs which may or may not contribute to a wider viral event. For content to be considered viral a number of criteria need to be met, including a specific slow-quick-slow frequency distribution for cumulative views (described as a sigmoid curve), a degree of reach in terms of numbers, and a wider recognition traversing different networks (Nahon and Hemsley 2013: 22). Whilst OPPs are clearly intended to receive this kind of dissemination, the reality may be far more moderate, limiting them to 'Word of Mouth' communication, lacking the speed and scale requirements of true virality (ibid.: 37). If OPPs are falling short of going truly viral and jumping between networks, the continued use of OPPs may be explained by strategic functions other than persuasiveness.

'Virtual belonging'

There is a good theoretical basis for OPPs also to be interpreted as an organising tool for political parties. In this interpretation, OPPs become a tool for building organisational coherence, serving to create a shared identity between supporters that are unlikely to ever meet physically. Party political organisations are often viewed as conforming to loosely-defined ideal organisational types. Like many other polities, in the UK political parties have been regarded as having gone through phases of organisational types such as elite or cadre parties with little connection to the voting public (McKenzie 1963), mass parties more reliant on establishing relationships with citizens for support with citizen involvement crucial to political success (Duverger 1954) and then to more marketing-oriented 'catch all' parties (Kirchheimer 1966) structured around campaign professionals (Panebianco 1988; Katz & Mair 1995; Mair and van Biezen 2001). The emergence of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) as a possible tool for political parties led to further theorising about the form of party organisation such as Margetts concept of the 'cyber party' (2001) based on what she saw as a series of changing circumstances for parties including: declining memberships, the growth of single issue political activity, a growing reliance on symbolic actions rather than mass mobilisation and more generalised expectations amongst the public that political support, as with other activities, should

be possible online. The defining property of the cyber party model for Margetts was that the web would be used to connect voters and the party, leading to a new and more integrated form of relationship which would provide supporters with a similar level of inclusion to that reserved previously for full party members (ibid.: 11). In the process the costs of political participation in terms of time and energy would be drastically reduced, taking some of the more burdensome elements out of political participation such as evening meetings and constituency canvassing. Löfgren and Smith (2003) suggested four broad party strategies (mass, cartel, consumerist and grassroots) linked to how ICTs use would be fitted to each parties' individual strategy. Closest to Margetts' cyber party model is Löfgren and Smith's 'grassroots' strategy in which permanent organisational forms were replaced with loose and decentralised connections (Löfgren and Smith 2003: 49). At the same time, the focus shifts from the more traditional aggregation of views performed by mass parties to supporters taking on 'democratic identities' (ibid: 49). Despite heavy influence of the US in party utilisation of ICTs in campaigns elsewhere in the world (Jungherr 2013) studies have also shown variation in the integration and adoption of new and social media into party campaigning strategies internationally (Lilleker et al. 2011) and a consideration of the potential for increasing citizen involvement in party campaigning (Gibson 2013; Baldwin-Phillip 2015).

The ubiquity of social media today increasingly takes these discussions out of the realm of the theoretical. Even conservative estimates, for example, now put the numbers of Facebook supporters in the same range as, or in some cases in excess of, formal party membership figures for the three largest UK parties particularly amongst younger citizens who are more likely to be among these 'virtual members' (Bartlett et al. 2013: 8-9). In the context of political parties, social media allows for:

‘...direct, free and easy involvement (or disengagement); regular updates and information; and active participation from members. This can help generate a sense of ‘virtual belonging’ towards the specific online group enhanced also by the possibility of interacting directly with likeminded people from all over the world.’ (Bartlett et al. 2013: 11-12)

Of course, there are acknowledged risks to online-centric party organisational models. Margetts (2001) highlighted potential risks of strategic penetration and the lack of on-the-ground campaigners come election time and the difficulty in extracting money from online supporters compared to those traditional supporters. Early concerns of candidates that online presence would expose them to additional levels of scrutiny and communicative risk (e.g. Stromer-Galley

2000) haven't been entirely offset by still persisting limited knowledge of the benefits in terms of persuasive and mobilising reach (Baldwin-Philippi 2015; Vaccari and Valeriani 2015). Critics question the value of low engagement online political activism for mainstream political campaigning (Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2011), with weak tie networks like Facebook and Twitter arguably ill-suited to eliciting large amounts of time, effort or money from citizens (Vaccari and Valeriani 2015). Nonetheless, party campaigners themselves are increasingly convinced of the value of these platforms to their work (Vaccari 2012; Vaccari and Valeriani 2015; Lilleker et al. 2015; Baldwin-Philippi 2015). UK Green Party campaigner Mark Cridge, for instance, cited social media "share graphics" as a key reason for increased party membership in the run up to the 2015 General Election (Ross 2015).

Persuasive and organisation roles for OPPs are unlikely to be mutually exclusive and there is a degree of theoretical overlap between them. After all, the same messages that seek to persuade unaligned voters will likely act to reinforce supporters' preferences. Commercial advertising material, for instance, is often targeted as much at a company's own sales force as it is at potential consumers, telling sales people *how* to sell the product (Schudson 1984). This function in particular seems to connect with OPPs as supporters of a party on Facebook have access to a near constant stream of facts and opinions that they can use to try and persuade others both online and in any number of potential conversations, arguments and discussions supporters have with friends, colleagues and family. Requesting that supporters share persuasive information with their own networks also has an effect on organisational relationships. Gibson's (2013) conception of 'citizen initiated campaigning' sees bringing citizens into the campaigning process itself as being transformative of the expected relationship between the party and the voter. In bringing voters into the process of campaigning by asking them to share persuasive content, parties are delegating some decisions that would have been reserved for centralised and professionalised campaigners under traditional models to individual supporters. However, there remains a significant question over the authenticity and extent of this transformation in organisational relationships (Chadwick 2013). In the case of OPPs, individual-level decision making is limited to deciding to read, engage with and share content within an individual's own network; design, production and seeding ultimately remain under the control of party professionals. While the transmission of OPPs is horizontal, their production remains very much a top-down process.

Contextually, OPPs are only one part of a wider campaign message played out on Facebook, online more generally and through many different offline channels. By themselves, the use of OPPs cannot confirm or contradict any of these organisational theories more generally. Even more nuanced approaches that carve out differing roles for ICTs are still difficult to marry up with the complex reality of political parties. Despite the drawbacks and acknowledged complexity and overlap with persuasive functions, these theoretical approaches do however, give good reason to see ICTs, and in this context OPPs, as fulfilling an organisational function. Audiences may not be formal party members, or even particularly committed partisans, but they represent an online resource that OPPs may in some respects help to marshal and bind together over an online platform in the absence of more formalised political activities such as attending constituency or national meetings or canvassing for candidates.

Researching OPPs

So far we have presented two broad theoretical explanations for the use of OPPs by political parties: persuasive and organisational. We have also acknowledged that these explanations are unlikely to be mutually exclusive and that a degree of overlap exists between them. The overarching objective of this article is to develop a better understanding of the strategic function played by OPPs in political campaigning using the UK as a case study. With this in mind we have identified four research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do political parties in the UK make use of OPPs on Facebook and how does this use differ between parties and time periods?

RQ2: What is the nature of OPP design and content?

RQ3: What is the extent and nature of mobilising appeals in OPPs?

RQ4: To what extent do audiences engage with OPPs?

Data to answer these questions was manually collected daily between 12th September 2013 and 8th May 2015 encompassing the 2014 European and local elections (22nd May 2014), the Scottish Independence Referendum (18th September 2014) and culminating with the 2015 general and local elections (7th May 2015). In this study we were specifically concerned with OPPs produced by seven parties in the UK, all of whom are represented in Parliament: Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Green Party, UKIP, Plaid Cymru, and the Scottish National Party. In particular, we focus on the form and style of OPPs, the types of messages being disseminated, and an indication of audience reaction to these images through associated metadata. In total 2447 OPPs were collected, alongside associated metadata including the date of posting and the

number of 'Likes', and 'Shares'. Metadata was collected three days retrospectively, so that an image posted on the 1st of May would be saved and the metadata recorded on the 3rd of May. Research on the 'half-life' of social media posts supports the judgement that metadata was unlikely to change substantially after three days (Bit.ly 2011), though to ensure consistency, metadata that could not be recorded on the correct day was reported as missing.

During the analysis we encountered a huge diversity of images and postings. To be considered an OPP an image needed to:

- appear on the official party Facebook page;
- be posted as an image;
- exhibit elements of purposive design;
- include a political message.

These criteria excluded images that did not originate on party pages. Photographs were excluded unless they included text clearly produced for the purposes of the image such as the case with Labour's use of photos of activists holding written messages for the camera. Photographs and images solely of manifestos, newspapers and other literature were also excluded.

The coding frame was developed iteratively, going through several versions before being finalised. In total five variables were coded: design, brand, orientation (positive/negative/other), focus (policy/image/other) and mobilisation. Mobilisation was coded as being non-mutually exclusive: for example, OPPs may include multiple mobilisation appeals such as to visit a website and to share an image. As a result it was broken down into a series of binary (yes/no) variables. Coding of OPPs was done by two trained researchers (a pilot test on a sample of the content produced an inter-coder reliability mean of 0.947 using Holsti's formula).

Production

In total 2447 OPPs were recorded between the 12th September 2013 and 8th May 2015, the day after election day, and the production by party is indicated in Graph 1. By far the biggest producer of OPPs was the Labour Party which posted 888 (36% of the total) during the observation period, more than twice as many as any other party and perhaps an indication of efforts to offer a signalling of virtual presence and party strength paralleling the use of traditional posters (Seidman 2008a, Dumitrescu, 2011). Labour aside, there was no clear pattern of greater OPP production from the comparatively resource-rich major political parties; indeed one of the smaller parties included in this analysis, Plaid Cymru, produced the second highest number of OPPs, ahead of the coalition government partners suggesting that at least in this one form of

party communication minor parties have a potentially slightly more level playing field to compete on.

Graph 2 gives a breakdown of OPP production over time, in thirty-day periods leading to the election day (May 7th 2015) by party. The overall trend is a clear increase on OPP production in the run up to the 2015 general election, with a small uptick at the start of 2015 and a more dramatic increase in March 2015. All parties seem to increase OPP production during this time, but the most dramatic increase came from the Labour Party and Plaid Cymru. Two other significant electoral events are encompassed in this dataset, the local and European elections held on 22nd May 2014 and the Scottish Independence Referendum held on 18th September 2014. Neither produced as significant an uptick as the general election, strongly suggesting that the largest level of OPP production in the UK was focused primarily on the general election. However, it is notable that, aside from declines reflecting the Christmas holiday seasons in 2013 and 2014, all parties continued to produce a small but steady number of OPPs throughout the time period observed, indicating that, unlike traditional posters, they are now a permanent feature of party communication.

Design & Content

In terms of the design and content of OPPs, several attributes were analysed. As shown in Graph 3 OPPs were analysed in terms of their basic composition. As a relatively new form of party communication some variation in design was evident, with some very simple text only OPPs, such as Labour's 'Hell Yes, I'm Voting Labour' OPP (Image 1), which echoed party leader Ed Miliband's response to a television interviewer's question over whether he was tough enough to be Prime Minister to which he responded 'hell yes, I'm tough enough'. Overall, just under half of all OPPs featured text in combination with some kind of photograph, quite often a senior party figure (the leader more often than not), with a little over a quarter featuring text in combination with some kind of graphics - sometimes a graph or chart depicting factual information (such as Conservative OPPs showing rising employment figures (Image 2)), and at other times illustrations and drawings (such as Plaid Cymru posters depicting leader Leanne Wood in a manner similar to the now famous Shepard Fairey-designed 'Hope' poster featuring Barack Obama (Image 3)). While on a few occasions OPPs were straight reproductions of conventional billboard posters (such as a Conservative poster of Labour leader Ed Miliband in SNP senior figure Alex Salmon's pocket (Image 4)) in general it was clear that OPPs were a

distinctive type of party communication, at times like traditional billboards, but often much simpler in style and content, closer to constituency window posters.

IMAGES 1-4 ABOUT HERE PLEASE

Overall, around three-quarters of OPPs (76.5%) also featured clear party branding in some form or other (such as party name and/or logo) (Graph 4), and both the presence and absence of party branding can be explored somewhat further when the OPPs are analysed for the orientation of their messages (Graph 5). OPPs were coded as being either predominantly positive, negative, or 'other' in their message. The other category was used where OPPs featured a balance between positive and negative messages, often this occurred where OPPs compared the policy of the authoring party to that of another party. OPPs were overwhelmingly positive across the dataset, with almost two-thirds (64.7%) of all OPPs containing messages reflecting positive statements or claims with only just over a fifth containing overtly negative messages (21.1%). 'Other' OPPs (14.2%) were usually either comparative, for example highlighting a party's achievements or policy compared with competitors, or concerned more basic information, such as where they referred to media appearances or party conferences. In the main OPPs may reflect the idea that the more control a party has over its messages the more likely it is to offer positive messages (Vliegenthart, 2012). The positivity of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats may be explained by an incumbency effect, able to point to party achievements in government. The Liberal Democrats had the lowest proportion of negative orientation in their OPPs at just over one in ten. Minor parties, with the exception of the SNP, tended to be more positive in their OPPs, whether branded or not.

Despite this, there was an interesting relationship between negative OPPs and party branding. Unbranded OPPs tended to be far more negative, with negative messages increasing to 46.2% in unbranded OPPs. This shift is mainly a result of Labour and the Conservatives using non-branded OPPs for negative attacks on opponents. Labour were the biggest producers of negative OPPs with nearly a third of their output being negative (29.7%) overall but rising to over half of their non-branded OPPs being negative (57.2%). The Conservative party went negative in just under a fifth of their OPPs overall (19.1%) jumping to just under three quarters (71.7%) of their non-branded OPPs. When these parties wanted to make clear negative attacks on opponents (Labour mostly on Cameron and the Conservatives, the Conservatives mostly focused on Labour and the SNP) there was seemingly more reticence in explicitly branding those attacks,

perhaps with a view that the critical message alone might be shared more readily, and be more persuasive, if not seen to be originating from a rival party.

A further feature of the content of OPPs analysed here was the thematic focus presented in Graph 6. The graph reveals a predominant focus on factual and policy-oriented information over more values and image-based statements (or other kinds of focus such as party events). Across the dataset 71% of the OPPs were coded as dealing with policy or facts, although quite often this was done in broad terms, such as Labour OPPs offering support for the NHS, or Conservative OPPs for small businesses, rather than necessarily with regard to specific policy statements (though these appeared too). The Liberal Democrats produced the most fact-based OPP campaign, with over four-fifths (82.3%) of their output focusing on policy-oriented statements. The Green Party and UKIP traded most heavily on image and values-based statements in just under a third in both cases (Green 32.5%, UKIP 30.2%), possibly reflecting the appeal of minor parties with little in the way of political representation and attempts to demonstrate fundamental value-based positions distinct from traditional parties who can concentrate more on specific policy areas. During the General Election campaign both the Greens and UKIP (as well as nationalists) portrayed themselves as being outside the traditional political system and political elites that were presented as mismanaging the country, although they did so in noticeably different ways with UKIP offering a greater focus on negative campaigning than the other minor parties.

A final feature of design and content to mention in relation to aspects of thematic focus is the propensity for OPPs to feature prominent party figures either visually, textually or both. Over a third of all OPPs featured a prominent political figure of some kind (37.5%) (Graph 7). This was more notable amongst many of the minor parties, where getting wider recognition for party leaders in particular was arguably a clear goal in OPPs. UKIP OPPs featured a political figure three-fifths of the time (61.9%), and the vast majority of these were leader Nigel Farage. Both the SNP (40.0%) and Plaid Cymru (42.1%) featured political figures extensively, again mainly their leaders (Nicola Sturgeon and Leanne Wood respectively). The Greens, perhaps reflecting their party's reluctance to focus on individuals only featured political figures in a quarter of their OPPs (25.3%) split mainly between leader Natalie Bennett and the party's only incumbent MP Caroline Lucas. Still haunted by unpopularity over broken election pledges made as part of the Coalition government, it is perhaps unsurprising that Liberal Democrat politicians featured in less than a fifth (18.1%) of their OPPs. For the two main parties, prominent politicians featured

a little over a third of the time, though these figures include persistent and prominent attacks on opposition figures rather than just featuring the parties' own political celebrities.

Mobilisation

Further evidence of the status and role of OPPs within political parties is available by looking at the mobilisation appeals explicitly appearing in OPPs (Table 1). It was common for images to include a variety of mobilising appeals in OPPs including to join the party, vote, share content, perform another online activity, watch a media performance, perform a real-world activity (IRL), and donate. These appeals were not mutually exclusive and OPPs commonly included more than one mobilising appeal, for example asking audiences both to share the image and visit a website. In total, 63.6% of observed OPPs included at least one type of mobilising appeal, in a pattern which suggests the parties focused mainly on low engagement mobilisation activities. The most common appeal was to share an OPP, for example, featured in 40.3% of OPP output more than twice as prominent as appeals to vote (19.5%). Similarly, asking audiences to visit a website (15.1%) was much more frequent than appeals for high engagement activities such as joining (2.7%) or giving money to (0.8%) a party. However, there was some significant variation between the parties, suggesting different strategies possibly at work. Some clearly focused more on online engagement appeals like sharing OPPs, such as Labour (52%) and Plaid Cymru (51.1%), or visiting websites, such as UKIP (38.1%). Others concentrated proportionately more on offline activities such as voting being the most prominent appeal in Conservative OPPs (25.2%), and the Greens devoting a noticeable proportion (15.7%) to joining the party.

Audience Engagement

Thus far OPPs have seemingly been designed with both persuasion and mobilisation in mind – featuring predominantly positive, policy orientated messages and appeals to further disseminate images. This is somewhat contradicted, however, by audience responses. The available metadata includes the number of times an OPP has been liked or shared and allows us to judge to some extent how successful any particular OPP has been in terms of audience engagement. Of the 2447 OPPs recorded over 603 days, data on the number of likes or shares was not available for 94 individual OPPs. Graph 8 shows the mean number of times OPPs were liked and shared by party in the remaining 2353 OPPs. Comparatively speaking the Greens and UKIP did better than the main parties, with UKIP in particular seemingly adept at getting audiences to 'like' their OPPs. This data should be heavily caveated as a judge of success for individual OPPs. The question of what constitutes "success" for an OPP remains open. Equally, mean values provide

only a relative measure of success. Parties with a higher output may be reaching greater numbers of people overall (or a smaller number more often) with individual OPPs doing less well, for example, despite the difference in means Labour is much closer to UKIP when measured in total likes (Labour 1,229,129; UKIP 1,595,554) and surpasses UKIP in the total number of shares (Labour 766,922; UKIP 426,726). Nevertheless, for challenger parties to be outperforming larger mainstream parties in this way suggests that they may have a greater affinity for this type of campaigning.

More important than the comparative successes of individual parties, however, is the overall picture. Both likes and shares were heavily positively skewed, i.e. the majority of OPPs received very few likes whilst a small minority of OPPs did comparatively well. As a result of this distribution, the mean values are somewhat misleading. The median number of likes was 831; the median number of shares 297. Overall 90% of images were 'liked' less than 4592 times and 90% were shared less than 1883 times. Overall, while a very few OPPs may escape the political ghetto, the vast majority do not attain the kind of viral transmission they seem intended for.

Conclusion

This article sought to analyse a significant new form of online visual political communication that has largely been ignored in studies of election communication, the online political poster. We set ourselves the overarching objective of establishing the wider strategic role of OPPs, theorising that OPPs may potentially fulfil roles of external persuasion and/or inward-looking organisational coherence, using a case study of OPP production in the UK. Much of our analysis firmly points towards OPPs being designed to achieve viral distribution and thereby to be an externally focused persuasive tool. However, whilst OPPs may be intended to achieve viral distribution, the audience responses in most cases seem to indicate that there is little of the 'reach by networks' described by Nahon and Hemsley (2013: 29). For the most part OPPs have been confined to their own political back yards, unseen by the mass public and therefore not much use for the kinds of mass persuasion traditionally associated with posters.

We have demonstrated that while OPPs are in common usage by UK political parties of all stripes, they are used to different extents by different parties, with a dramatic increase in the run up to the 2015 UK election with less clear increases evident around the time of the European Elections and Scottish Referendum. The design and content of OPPs varied between the parties but was largely positive, broadly fact-based branded imagery, and featured most heavily low

engagement mobilisation appeals that required little of the audience. Audience engagement with OPPs was, in most cases, relatively low with only a very few examples receiving widespread attention.

In this case, the vast majority of OPPs cannot be seen a form of viral advertising, but this does not mean that OPPs are strategically useless. The best information on audience engagement with OPPs is available only to the parties themselves and they have produced a near-continuous stream of OPPs in the 20 months during which this data was collected. This continued use of OPPs can be explained in three ways. Firstly, despite the failure of the vast majority of OPPs to go ‘viral’ a number do receive wider dissemination and may therefore fit within the viral model orientated towards mass persuasion. This kind of success is likely difficult if not impossible to predict and so parties may feel the failure of the vast majority of output is a small price to pay for the benefits of a limited few successes. In this context, success may mean direct persuasive effects or contributing to a subtler signalling of credibility and presence in the online space (Baldwin-Philippi 2015).

Secondly, there are good theoretical reasons to think that parties are looking for a way to maintain organisational coherence through online networks. Conventional party organisations are still relevant but they are facing a challenging environment, competing for fewer activists with more dynamic social movements and facing a decline in the numbers of active members and consequently offline organisations. Models like the cyber party suggest that parties will need to find a way of connecting with supporters that does not rely on physical presence. OPPs are lightweight tools that allow the party to communicate the party line to supporters quickly, simply and cheaply. Equally, the use of slogans and images allows parties to build and maintain a coherent image with supporters online and engaging with OPPs is a way for supporters to connect with the party that does not require huge commitment in terms of time and energy. Thirdly, there is a ritual value to OPPs. Billboard posters were seen as a way to project party presence in a physical place and insert the party into the everyday lives of voters (Seidman 2008a: 12). Establishing virtual presence through OPPs, while difficult to relate to the actual business of winning elections, may similarly help to establish party credibility with voters. Previous analysis of online campaign presences has confirmed that candidates often see online tools as necessary for representing a party as modern and accessible even where they have little direct effect on the actual campaign (Lee 2013). Whilst they may be of little benefit electorally, not producing OPPs

may be harmful, as any party that did not produce them might be seen as somehow lacking by voters.

OPPs are a new phenomenon and, as with visual communication in digital campaigns more generally, they have not received much academic attention (Schill 2012; Barnhurst and Quinn 2012). This is despite the increased focus on highly visual social media (Baldwin-Philippi 2015). This article has engaged in a substantive exploratory analysis of OPP use in the UK, contributing to wider understanding of how political parties use social media both during and outside of campaigns as well as the role of visual communication in digital campaigning. There remains a great deal of work to be done. Of immediate concern is a better understanding of the content of OPPs. OPPs usually contain text and images and require detailed qualitative analysis as well as large-scale aggregate analysis as presented here. In particular, the data is rich in sub-campaigns on specific issues and votes as well as demonstrating relationships between parties as they co-opt and repurpose each other's material. Equally, the availability of OPP metadata in the form of likes and shares allows for some predictive modelling of OPP success. Although a large number of factors are difficult to represent in a model, for example the effects of the Facebook algorithm, such an approach, when linked with a more in-depth understanding of OPP content, may yield some insight into the factors driving audience engagement. In addition, we do not know who makes up the audiences for OPPs. Although there has been some work on this (Bartlett et al 2013), by and large it is impossible to say how politically experienced or active contemporary party political Facebook audiences are. It may well be that Facebook audiences are composed largely of established party members; more likely they are composed of those who feel positively disposed to the party but are not full party members. Alternatively, Facebook audiences could be dominated by those who have little attachment to the party, who clicked like once and never went back, or even a negative disposition to the party with an intention of gathering information or disrupting the opposition.

As well as audiences, a significant gap in our knowledge is how OPPs are produced within party organisations. The risks of producing so much content publically suggests that there must be some level of oversight in the production of OPPs, but the speed of their production points to this being done in-house. There also remains the question of the extent to which the use of OPPs represents a genuine and authentic decentralisation of political power within political structures. Gibson's 'Citizen Initiated Campaigning' (2013) suggests that the inclusion of citizens in the campaign process in itself is transformative. Nevertheless, OPPs represent a fairly passive

form of political involvement and it is not clear how valuable either of the roles described here, external persuasion or internal cohesion, are to the party. As a result, it seems doubtful from the evidence presented here that a shift to social media based campaigning will, on its own, result in a radical flattening of party hierarchies. OPPs do, however, represent an acknowledgement from central party hierarchies that they are becoming more reliant on online audiences as offline structures stagnate. Online audiences are becoming an important component in (potentially) distributing political messages and establishing organisational coherence.

Beyond these questions, OPPs are only one aspect of a broader phenomenon of online political advertising in election campaigns. Future research on the production and distribution of online advertising material could consider additional types of content, additional platforms and additional groups outside of parties. As well as posters, Facebook is being used to distribute short videos either through links to video sharing sites like YouTube or directly over the recently available Facebook video platform launched in May 2014 in the UK (Lafferty 2014). In addition, Facebook is also used to disseminate more detailed content aimed at mass persuasion and to highlight media coverage. As well as Facebook, a plethora of social media platforms also serves a similar function, most notably Twitter. Finally, this analysis has addressed the use of OPPs by central party organisations. Further work could consider how OPPs produced centrally are used by local candidates and regional campaign organisations as well as by non-party groups with political agenda including interest groups and social movements.

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Image 1: OPP posted by the Labour Party 27th April 2015 (originally posted to: <https://www.facebook.com/labourparty/?fref=ts>)



Image 2: OPP posted by the Conservative Party 16th July 2014 (originally posted to: <https://www.facebook.com/conservatives/?rf=114379021912787>)



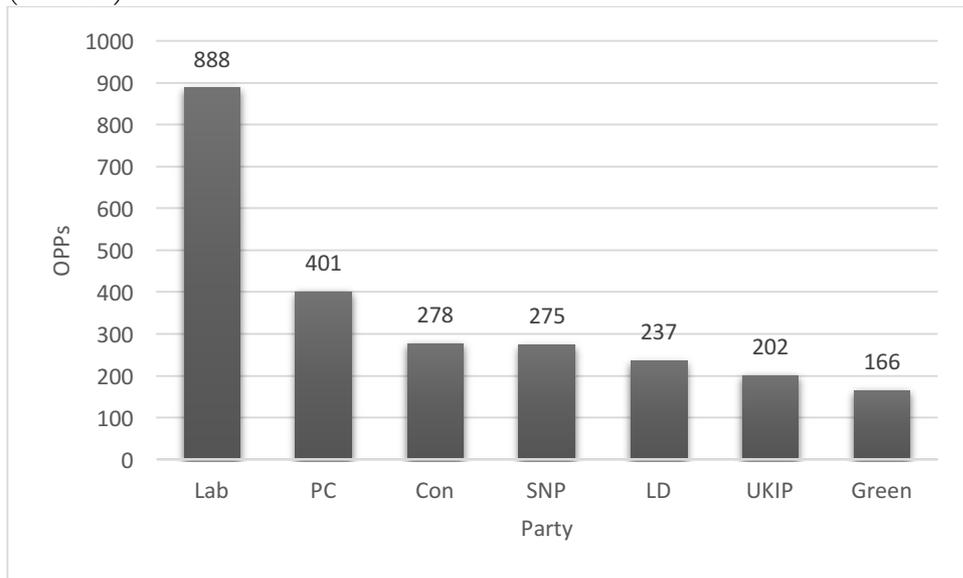
Image 3: OPP posted by Plaid Cymru 27th April 2015 (originally posted to:
<https://www.facebook.com/PlaidCymruWales/?fref=ts>)



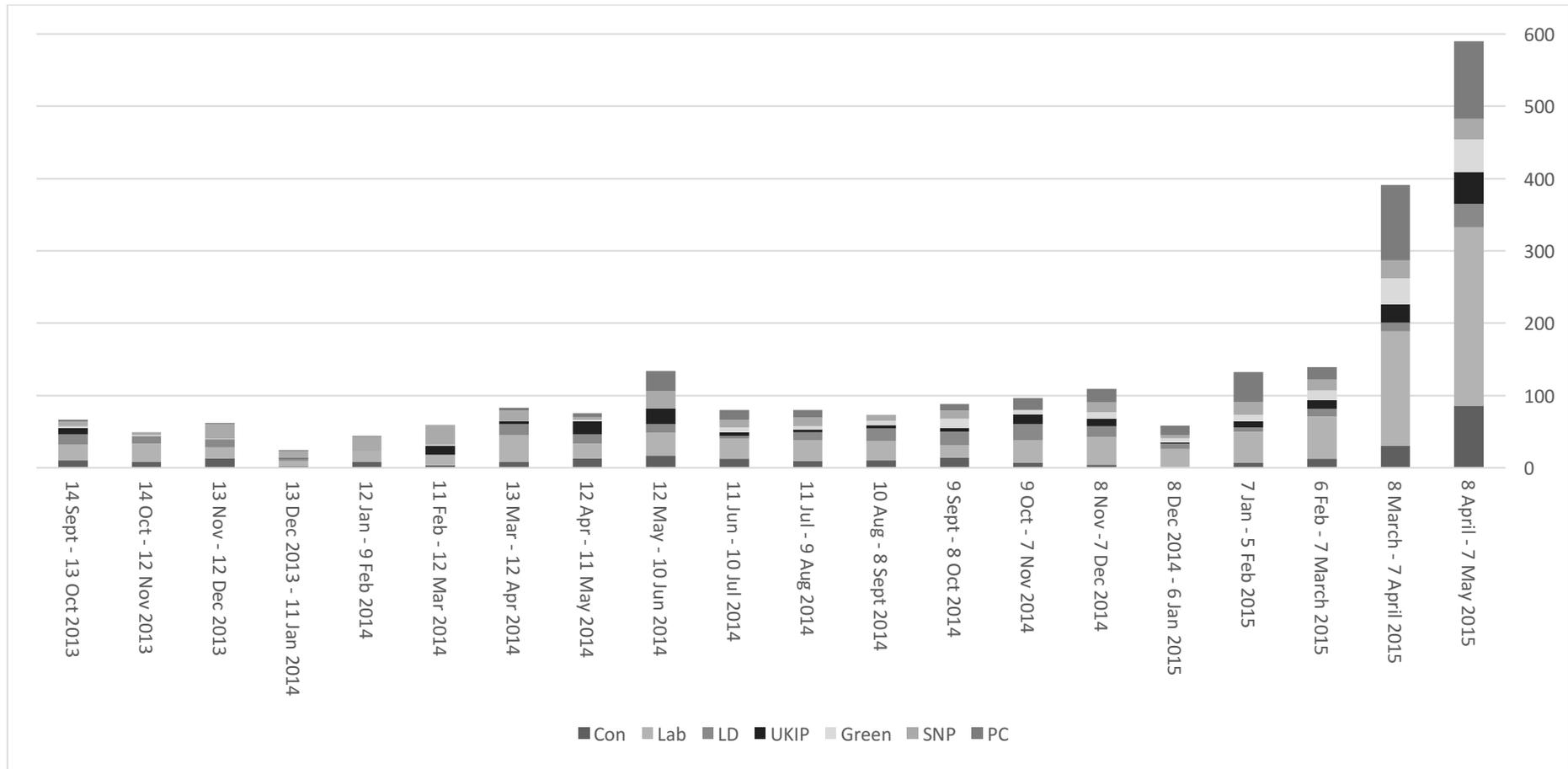
Image 4: Posted by the Conservative Party 9th April 2015 (originally posted to:
<https://www.facebook.com/conservatives/?rf=114379021912787>)



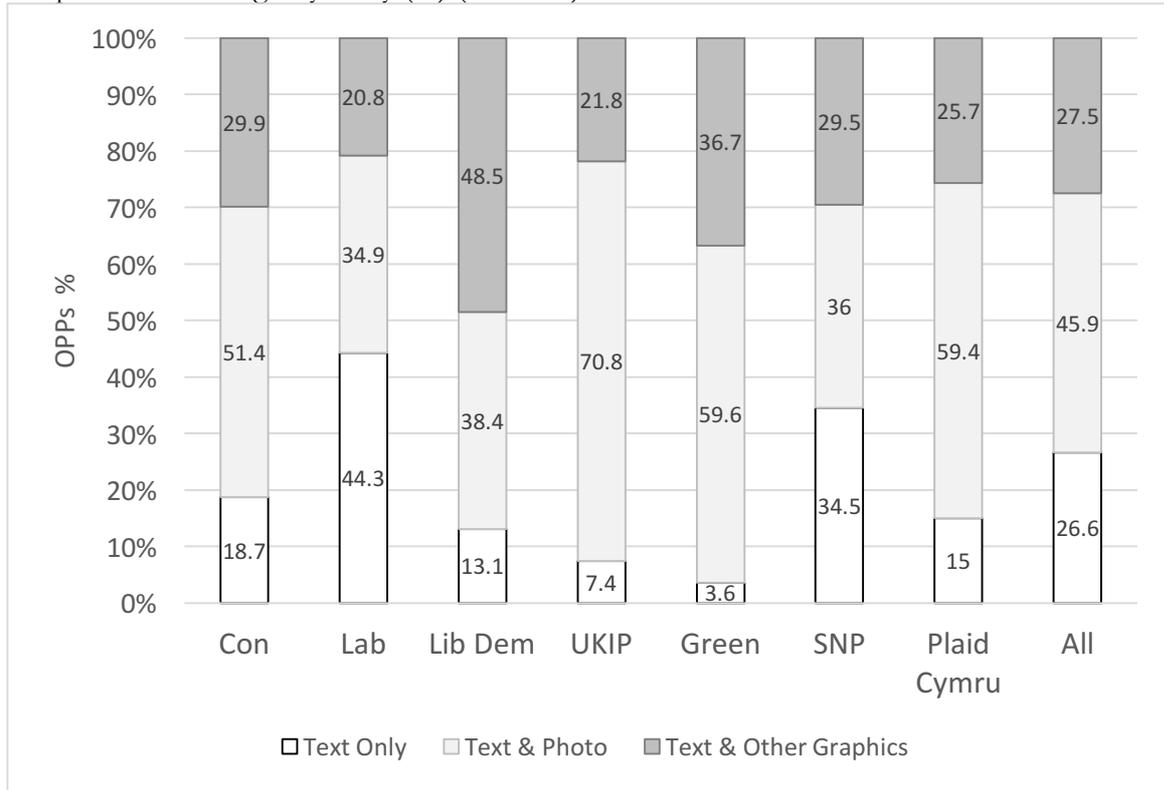
Graph 1: Online Political Poster (OPP) production 12th September 2013 – 8th May 2015 (n=2447)



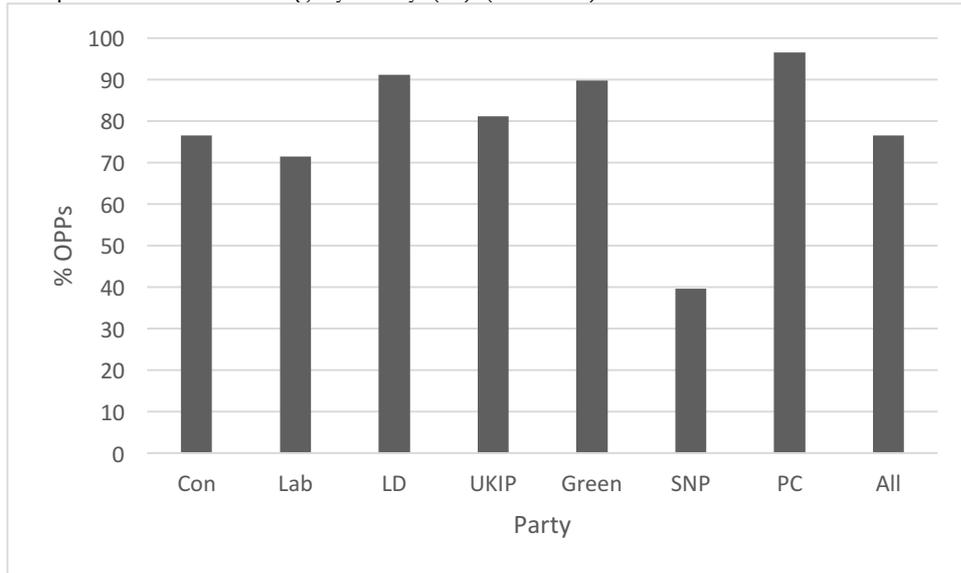
Graph 2: OPP production by 30 day periods to election (n=2431)(Excludes OPPs posted before 14th September 2013 and after 7th May 2015)



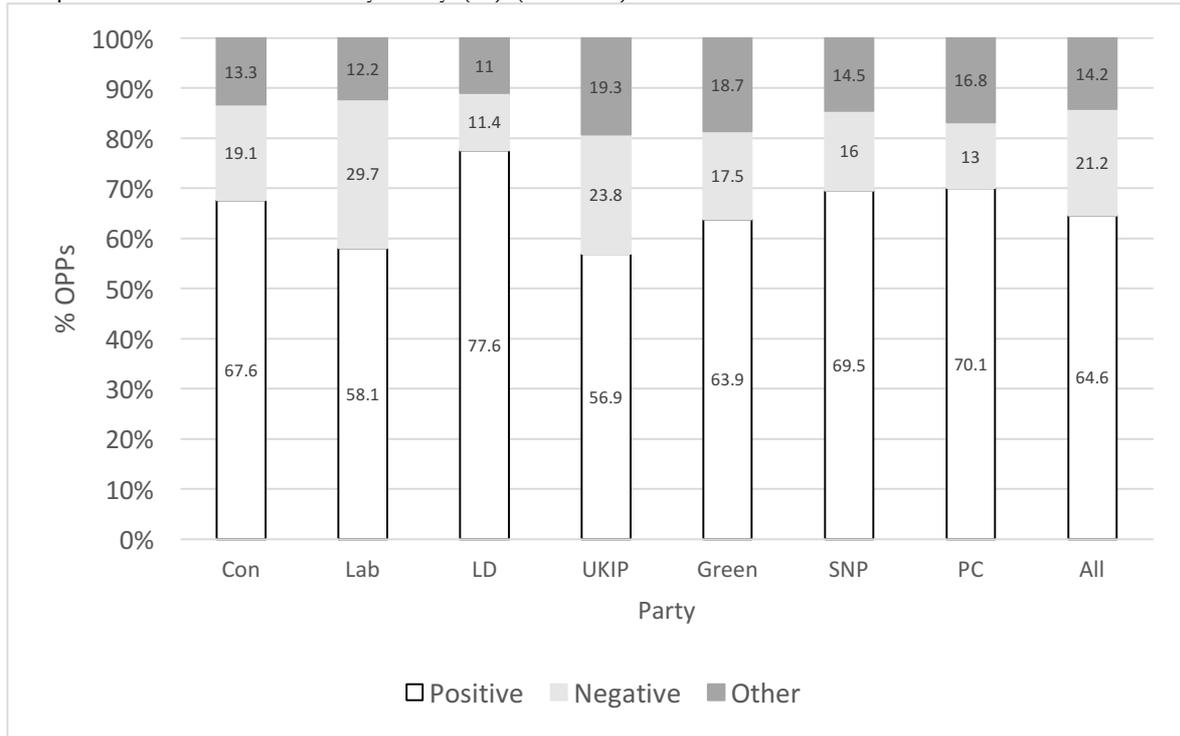
Graph 3: OPP Design by Party (%) (n= 2447)



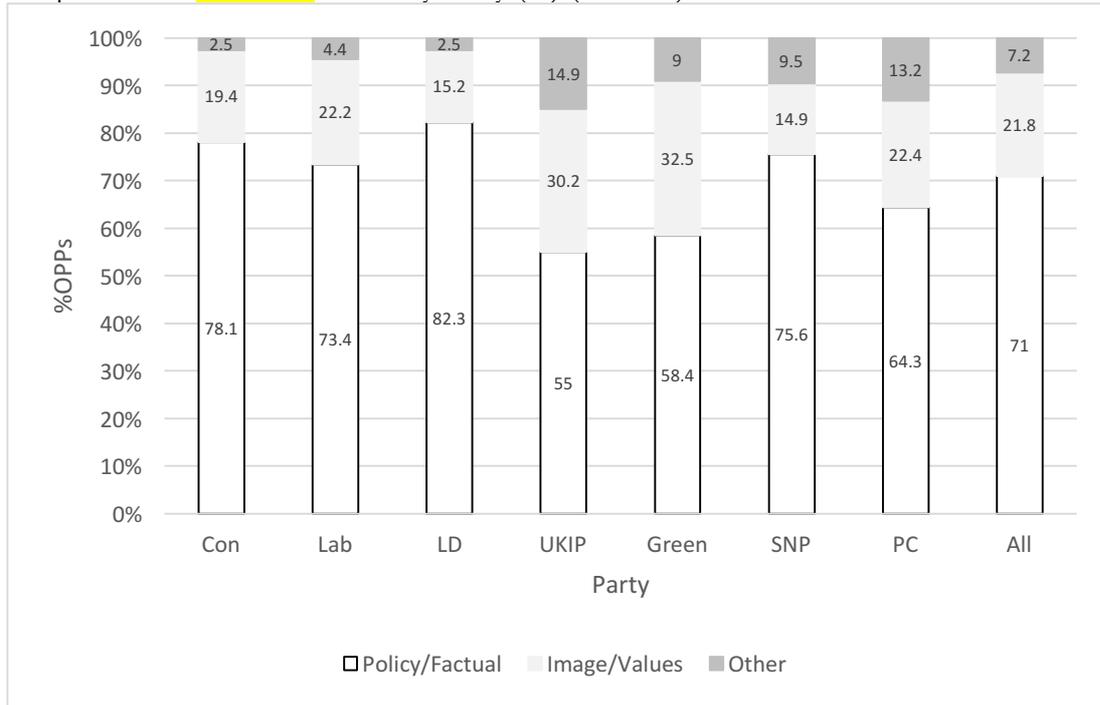
Graph 4: OPP Branding by Party (%) (n=2447)



Graph 5: OPP Orientation by Party (%) (n=2447)



Graph 6: OPP Thematic Focus by Party (%) (n=2447)



Graph 7: OPPs Featuring Prominent Party Figures (%) (n=2447)

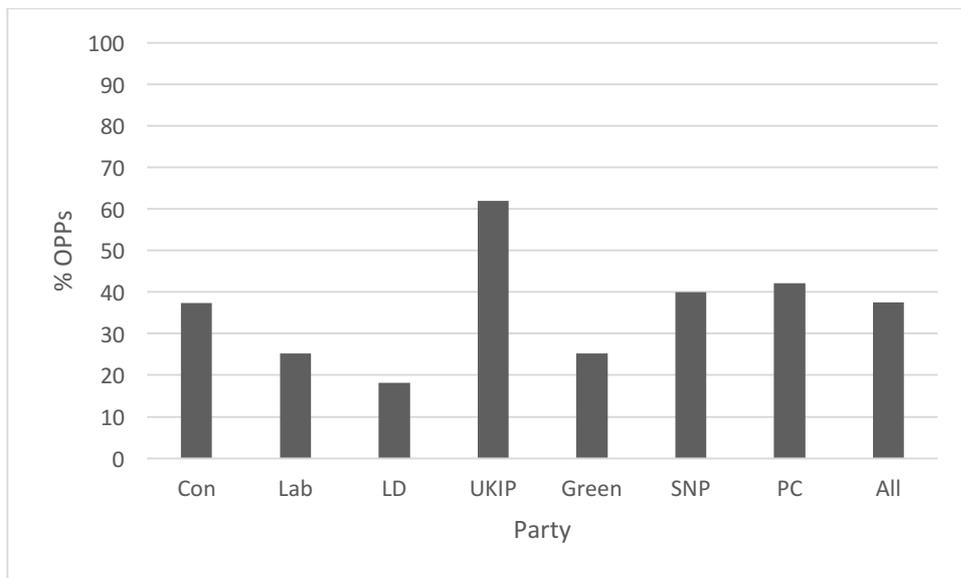
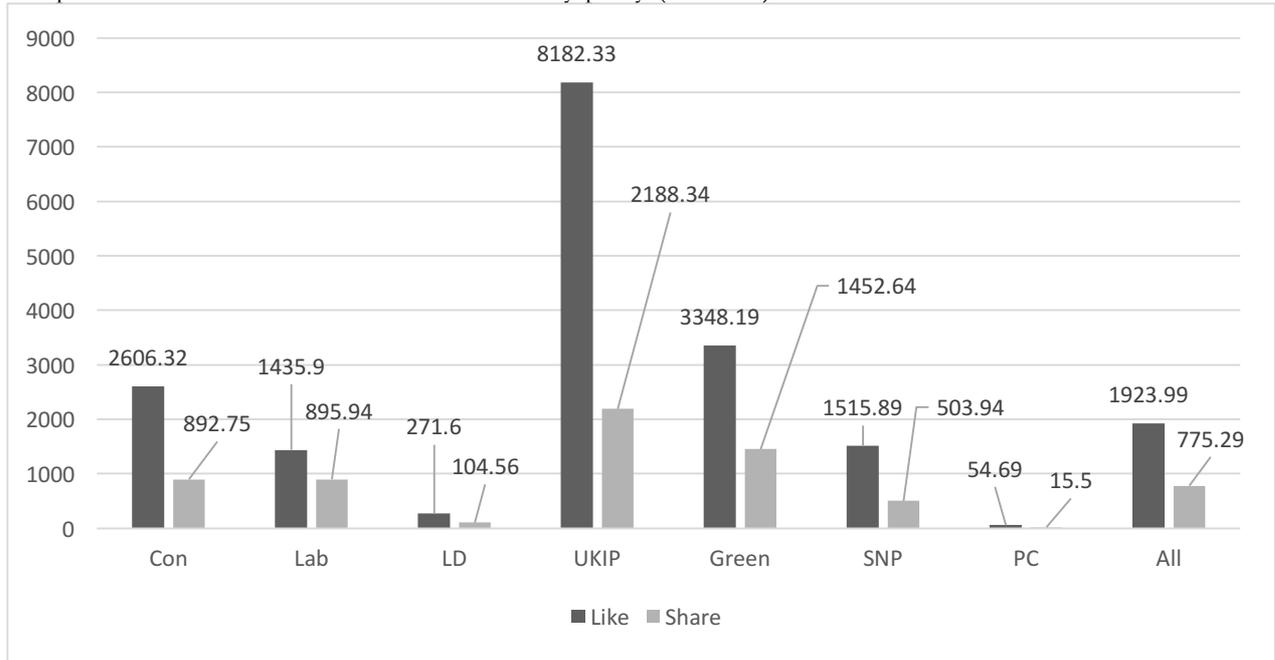


TABLE 1: Mobilising features in OPPs by Party (n=2447)

	Con		Lab		LD		UKIP		Green		SNP		PC		All	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Join	3	1.1	22	2.5	2	0.8	3	1.5	26	15.7	3	1.1	8	2	67	2.7
Vote	70	25.2	139	15.7	32	13.5	58	28.7	46	27.7	74	26.9	58	14.5	477	19.5
Share	24	12.2	461	52	83	35	49	24.3	56	33.7	98	35.6	205	51.1	986	40.3
Online	31	11.2	175	19.7	5	2.1	77	38.1	36	21.7	17	6.2	29	7.2	370	15.1
Media	0	0	0	0	2	0.8	14	6.9	1	0.6	10	3.6	11	2.7	38	1.6
IRL¹	1	0.4	4	0.5	0	0	11	5.4	12	7.2	3	1.1	24	6	55	2.2
Donate	1	0.4	8	0.9	1	0.5	9	5.4	1	0.4	1	0.4	0	0	20	0.8

¹ IRL: In real life, referring to encouraging the audience to participate in some kind of offline event such as canvassing, hustings or a conference.

Graph 8: Mean number of likes and shares by party (n=2353)



ⁱ For more on memes including examples see: <http://knowyourmeme.com/>