- Year the country joined the EC/EU: 1973

- Number of eligible voters: 45.8 million

- Total population: 66.6 million

- Number of seats in the EP: 73 (EU 28)

- Number of parties running in the 2019 EP election: 21

- Number and name of parties present in the last EP (2014-2019, outgoing parliament): 10

  United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Labour, Conservative, Green Party, Scottish National Party

  (SNP), Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, Sinn Féin, Democratic Unionists, Ulster Unionists

-

- Number and name of parties present in the new EP (2019-2024): 10

  Brexit Party, Liberal Democrats, Labour, Green Party, Conservatives, SNP, Plaid Cymru, Sinn Féin,

  Democratic Unionist Party, Alliance Party of Northern Ireland

- Voter turnout in the 2019 EP election: 37.2%

- Distribution of Internet and Facebook among the population[1]: Internet penetration: 95%, Facebook for any

  purpose: 65% (for news: 24%)

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[1] Newman et al. (2020).

The UK: The Post-Brexit, Ghost Election

Darren G. Lilleker, Daniel Jackson & Anastasia Veneti

European Parliamentary (EP) elections in the UK tend to be dominated by national and party politics and very much follow the second-order thesis (Marsh, 1998) which explains why such contests gain lower public engagement, lower campaign intensity and media interest and so experience lower turnout and an increased use of protest votes (Heath et al., 1999). While EP elections have at times been a testing ground for campaign innovations (Lilleker et al., 2015), largely the online environment is used to mobilise supporters and inform and persuade voters, consistent with wider patterns of usage of technologies across the EU and wider democratic world. However, the 2019 contest was different. It was an EP election that should not have occurred and was overshadowed by the same spectre that had haunted British politics for three years: Brexit.

Following the June 2016 referendum on EU membership which resulted in a small majority for 'Leave', Brexit dominated UK politics. The result was acknowledged and the government formally announced the country's withdrawal the following year, March 2017, invoking Article 50 and setting the leaving date as 29th March 2019. Deadlock in Parliament ensued, meaning the actual date of leaving was postponed twice. This was exacerbated by the Conservatives' complete loss of their majority at the 2017 General Election—called to strengthen the position of Prime Minister Theresa May when the opposition was performing badly in the polls. The postponement of the leaving date meant that the EP election was held by requirement rather than choice. Public disquiet about the stasis, with the nation remaining polarised on the Brexit question, was the core issue in the EP election contest.

The 2019 EP Election in the UK

It is widely known that levels of knowledge about the EU in Britain are low, especially in comparison to other EU nations (European Commission, 2015; Gabel & Hix, 2005). This low understanding has permeated decision-making regarding the EU for a number of years and impacts on citizen engagement with EP elections (McCormick, 2014). Many voters also do not fully understand the proportional representation system for electing MEPs, due to it being more complex and alien to UK voters who are more familiar with the first-past-the-post system.

Despite having had only one MP, perhaps the most influential party in terms of European policy in recent years in the UK has been UKIP. The party has consistently campaigned for the UK withdrawing from the EU, and their arguments have gained traction over recent EP elections. From gaining 3 of the 84 seats in 1999, UKIP won 12 of 75 in 2004, 13 of 69 in 2009 and then 24 out of 73 in 2014. UKIP winning the largest number of UK seats in the EP precipitated Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron pledging to hold an 'in-out' referendum on EU membership in the Conservative party manifesto for the 2015 general election (Worcester et al., 2017). UKIP's leader Nigel Farage was a key player in the referendum but resigned directly after, purporting to be stepping back from mainstream politics. Internal disputes within UKIP saw three leaders elected between 2016 and 2019 and its support decline. UKIP lurched to the right, becoming associated with figures such as Tommy Robinson, one-time leader of the neo-Nazi English Defence League, and Carl Benjamin, anti-feminist blogger who uses the pseudonym Sarkon of Akkad. During this period, UK Parliament became increasingly fragmented over the questions relating to Brexit. In order to maintain momentum, Farage, having announced his resignation from UKIP in December 2018, in February 2019 had the Brexit Party

registered with the Electoral Commission allowing it to field candidates for the EP election. This insurgent force of former Conservatives, UKIP members and anti-EU campaigners captured significant media coverage, squeezing out UKIP's share of the vote, and providing them the base to win the most seats in the 2019 contest. The decline in support for the major parties, particularly the Conservatives, contributed to the eventual appointment of Boris Johnson (the leader of the official Leave campaign), and a tumultuous time in British politics where the deadlock deepened. The stasis was only resolved with a general election, held in December 2019, delivering Johnson the majority required to deliver on the result of the 2016 referendum. While there was deadlock in Parliament over the eventual type of Brexit the UK would pursue, there was little doubt that this would be the last EP election that the UK would be part of. Indeed, until April 2019, there was much uncertainty about whether the UK would take part in the EP election at all. As it turned out, UK MEPs elected in the 2019 EP election served a term of little more than six months. Hence, the context for the 2019 EP election was one of political divisions in society and Parliament, a 'lame-duck' Prime Minister, deadlock on the issue of Brexit, normal politics being on hold and widespread dissatisfaction with the positions of the major parties. It is fair to say, then, that this was a unique EP campaign in the UK's history with the EU, and one where the campaign itself was overshadowed by bigger political events.

Campaigning at the EP elections in the UK has mirrored two broader trends. The elections tend to follow the second-order model, with parties devoting fewer resources and both media and voters giving the contests minimal attention (Cushion & Thomas., 2016). However, research has indicated that in the UK social media was adopted earlier than in some other European nations, in an attempt to reach voters directly for minimal expenditure (Lilleker et al., 2011). Initially it was the major parties that exploited the new technological affordances (Lilleker

& Jackson, 2010), and it was the Conservatives and Labour which pioneered the use of Facebook

as a way of developing a more interactive dimension to campaign communication, although the

far-right fringe British National Party also exploited the ability of the platform to build a

community (Jackson & Lilleker, 2010). However, the 2014 contest evidenced most parties saw

second-order elections offering opportunities to be more innovative and test new platforms and

approaches to campaigning (Lilleker, 2015) and the use of social media is now largely

normalised as a space for party self-promotion, minimal interactivity and greater focus being

placed on microtargeting advertising during national elections (Dommett & Temple, 2018).

Methodical Peculiarities

For the UK sample, all posts created four weeks prior to the EP election on 26th May by

the eleven parties that gained at least 3% or at least one seat in the 2019 EP election were

collected daily via the tool Facepager (see chapter x). The total posts were 1,431   , a sample of

653   posts were selected for coding by three coders. The intention was to randomly select 50%

of posts by each party drawn to be representative for each party, and for each day. The Brexit

party deleted the majority of their posts immediately and while text was harvested the fact that

the majority of their posts were images with no text means there was limited content to code.

These factors meant that only 19 of their posts were able to be coded meaning they are under-

represented in the overall sample.

Results

Despite an understated social media campaign, the outright winner of the EP election in

the UK was the Brexit Party, taking 29 of the 73 seats. The divisions over Brexit reflect in the

patterns of voting with significant gains for the pro-EU Liberal Democrats, winning nine more seats than in 2014, and the Greens winning seven. The major parties suffered the most, particularly the Conservatives, who were essentially leaderless after the resignation of Theresa May on 23rd April (effective 7th June 2019). The results, however, show that having a proactive Facebook campaign was of marginal importance, and the brand recognition of the Brexit Party dominated.

Party Posts and Supporter Engagement

As Table 1 shows, UKIP was by far the most proactive campaigner on Facebook, with more than three times more posts than the next prolific party. This reflects a different social media strategy to the other parties. Where the vast majority of posts by most parties were produced by party headquarters, UKIP was far more likely to post and share the content of their various MEP candidates. In contrast to the larger parties which were producing glossy videos, animations and pictures, UKIP produced simple memes and homemade videos reflecting lower resources. While still overwhelmingly visual, UKIP's posts were also less likely (87%) to be visual than those of other parties (at 95% or more), reflecting their tendency to share and post news stories. The Brexit Party, meanwhile, focused their campaigning attention on the mainstream media, using the prominence of leader Nigel Farage and other key candidates (including former Conservative MP Anne Widdicombe) to gain media attention and win the support of those who had voted to leave the EU but who felt the traditional parties were ignoring the result of the referendum.

Table 1. Facebook posts by party arranged in order by vote share

	Total Posts	Sample Size	% of Total Posts by each UK party in the sample	Reactions				'Shares'			
				Total	min	Median	max	Total	min	Median	max
Labour	175	91	52	140,970	26	473	6,238	56,517	5	152.5	8,979
Green Party	131	61	47	93,001	14	485	6,237	21,208	1	111	1,579
Plaid Cymru	94	35	37	17,563	6	146.5	1,026	6,581	2	40	500
SNP	106	51	48	98,029	151	785	4,413	37,168	17	247	2,973
Liberal Democrats	134	66	49	62,296	45	323	2,779	12,859	8	69	658
Conservatives	55	24	44	73,791	145	820	8,405	14,542	37	134	1,510
Ulster Unionist	44	19	43	1,440	3	23.5	121	354	0	2	63
Democratic Unionist	46	21	46	5,662	28	85	608	1,126	0	12.5	86
Change UK	22	5	23	39,898	102	364.5	12,103	5,374	7	58	1,363
UKIP	549	262	48	345,523	8	377	6,730	114,555	0	76	9,741
Brexit Party	75	18	24	67,614	77	828	3,360	29,238	10	185	5,151
Total	1,431	653		945,787	3	402	12,103	299,522	0	86	9,741

Note: *n* = 1,431 posts. The parties are ordered from left to right according to their ideological stances.

Reactions ('likes'), 'comments' and 'shares' are central to the architecture of Facebook as a forum that promotes discussion and opinion sharing. Facebook pages (such as those of political parties) that can elicit engagement with users are rewarded by Facebook's algorithm, which then pushes this content to the newsfeeds of other similar users to encourage them to engage further, raising its overall visibility (Bossetta et al., 2017). The parties with the highest median   of reactions were the Brexit Party and the Conservatives   , followed by the SNP, Green Party and then Labour   . These data indicate these parties had an active followership who found some of their material worthy of a reaction.

The form which reactions took, indicated by the emoticons followers used (see Table 2), is indicative of the way followers engaged. While the traditional 'like' was most used, there is evidence that supporters of the SNP and Greens expressed 'love' a significant number of times for their posts. Looking at the mean and maximum values compared to the median reveals that UKIP (mean = 137.2, max = 4731) and the Brexit party (mean = 237.2, max = 1792) elicited high numbers of 'angry' responses in specific cases, while the 'angry' reactions of posts published by the Conservatives (mean = 101,3 max = 482) tend to be distributed over their posts. The emotions match the mode of campaigning of the two anti-EU parties. We coded every post for the presence of positive and negative sentiments, finding that UKIP was net –13   % negative and the Brexit Party net –55   %, compared to +46% positive for Conservatives, +35 % for Labour, +42   % for Liberal Democrats, +39   % for SNP and +77   % for the Greens. These findings indicate that the pro-Brexit parties were channelling the anger of their supporters towards the other parties, the parliamentary elite and, of course, the EU. Studies across a range of contexts have found that compared to incumbents, challengers are significantly more likely to use negative rhetoric, with the hope of inducing voters to attend to their messages (e.g., Theilmann & Wilhite, 1998; Kahn & Kenney, 2004), a finding that has largely transferred to online campaigning (Ceron & d'Adda, 2016; Druckman et al., 2010). For main opposition parties, Labour, Liberal Democrats and the Greens pursued remarkably positive online campaigns in 2019, which probably reflects both their pro-EU stances during the campaign, alongside the generally low-key nature of the campaign (in the context of tumultuous domestic politics).

The most interesting data is found through the use of the 'haha' emoticon. While mostly this was in response to an amusing post by the party attacking an opponent there are some

interesting anomalies with regard to the Conservatives. 1,389   followers laughed at their jibe at

a Labour poster, and 780   at a video of a Labour MP seemingly unable to answer a question on

party policy. However, 2,048   'laughed' at a post reminding followers to vote Conservative

and 680   at a post thanking those who had voted Conservative. The uses of this emoticon

might suggest that Conservative followers appreciate attacks on their major parliamentary

opponent, but many also used 'haha' to send a message of dissatisfaction to the party reflecting

their significant collapse in vote share. Yet, beyond such inferences, there is no correspondence

with the potential visibility earned and support at the ballot box. The same pattern is the case

with 'shares', where the SPN and the Brexit Party   had the highest median   of shares

, but the lower numbers relative to other reactions suggest a lower willingness to act as endorsers

of the parties. The data indicates that despite their highly proactive communication strategy

, UKIP had a smaller and less engaged followership and were eclipsed on Facebook as they were

within the national scene.

At this point it is worth noting that studies on computer-mediated communication show

that we still lack a comprehensive knowledge of patterns of emoticon use and their ramifications

(Wall et al., 2016; Derks et al., 2008 and 2007). Within the political sphere, although studies

suggest that Facebook reactions are a good data source to explore public's sentiments (Tian et

al., 2017; Samuel-Azran et al., 2017) only a limited number of studies has focused on the use of

emoticons, and still their findings are inconclusive. Among those, Vepsäläinen, Li and Suomi

(2017) reported that Facebook 'likes' were a significant but weak indicator of electoral success

in the 2015 Finnish parliamentary elections. In a similar way, Sandoval-Almazan and Valle-Cruz

(2018) in their study of Facebook emoticons during the 2017 local elections in Mexico, argued

that emoticons could explain voters' emotions but not their intention to vote.

Table 2. Emoticon reactions per party

	'Likes'	Love	Wow	Haha	Sad	Angry
Labour	373	36,5	1	23,5	1	2,5
Green Party	433	49	0	3	0	0
Plaid Cymru	129,5	12	0	2	0	0
SNP	617	67	1	18	0	4
Liberal Democrats	284	28	2	9	0	1
Conservatives	562	23	4	130	1	28
Ulster Unionist	23	0	0	0	0	0
Democratic Unionist	77,5	4	0	3	0	0
Change UK	301	25	1	29,5	1	7,5
UKIP	260	7	1	5	0	2
Brexit Party	602	41	2	16,5	0	3

Note: n = 1,431 posts; median values. The parties are ordered from left to right according to their ideological stances.

Party Discourse on Facebook

In terms of the topics of posts, it is clear the UK contest was dominated by the Brexit issue. Six out of the eleven parties included in the analysis posted content of which 50% or more referenced Brexit. The anomalous cases were the two major parties, the Conservatives and Labour. Both side-lined the issue and focused more on their domestic agendas, the Conservatives mentioning Brexit in only 8% of their posts and Labour in only 7%, perhaps in vain hope of shifting the debate. Following the norm for EP elections in many countries (Schuck et al., 2011; Wring et al., 2017), national political issues dominated the agenda, the exceptions being the Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh parties which offered a more regional level focus. The parties also focused on their own party policy, with two exceptions. Labour's campaign used 65 % of their posts to remind their supporters to vote while offering no reasons for doing so; the posts lacked any information at all. The Brexit Party, meanwhile, simply attacked the stasis in Parliament while offering no sense of having an alternative direction. It appears the negative attacks, which Farage also levelled at parliamentary parties from his LBC Radio Show as well as

via mainstream media, resonated at least in England where the major parties lost most votes. The Liberal Democrat campaign was almost entirely focused on promoting itself as the party that would stop Brexit, often using its slogan 'Bollocks to Brexit', the rest of the party's posts were simple reminders to vote, mirroring Labour's strategy.

In terms of promoting other policies, it is interesting how few references there were in comparison to Brexit. Where Brexit did not feature the EP election purely focused on national politics, apart from those parties which stand in single regions (Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and the Green Party which discussed the importance of continent-wide collaboration on environmental protection. Labour, a party which tried to move the agenda away from Brexit led on their safe territory of social issues, particularly worker's rights and the National Health Service. Labour also discussed their economic and domestic policy and their policies to tackle climate change   . The Conservatives, who posted very little overall content anyway, led on the economy, an issue they tend to own (Bélanger, 2008), as well as posting about their health and social policy and environmental policy. These issues had a degree of visibility across party profiles, however apart from the Green's natural prioritisation of the environment no parties apart from the Conservatives and Labour seemed to wish to shift focus away from Brexit.

Information, Interaction and Mobilisation

While the policy focus may have been narrow, UK parties on the whole provided a fair amount of additional information on the campaign through their Facebook posts. Most provided at least some information on the EP election itself (see Table 3), although normally this amounted to little more than the election date or the way votes were divided across parties within each region. Parties also seemed keen to share information about the campaign and in particular

the state of the parties in the polls. Some parties were also keen to promote their history,

particularly the Liberal Democrats and UKIP positioning themselves as the parties which have

consistently stood on a pro- or anti-EU platform. Many parties also demonstrated keenness to

introduce their frontrunners and representatives to their Facebook community. UKIP gave its

more colourful candidates a platform, particularly if a prominent figure had delivered a speech

which could be converted to a video which captured a key aspect of the party's argument.

In terms of engaging with their Facebook communities, as most studies find (Graham et al.,

2014; Lilleker et al., 2011; Lilleker, 2015), there were few opportunities offered to interact with

the party and most interactions offered were within offline environments. Mobilisation attempts

largely invited people to participate in party events, offering the chance to attend and ask

questions. There were few examples of parties seeking public dialogue with visitors to their

pages. Where other forms of interaction were invited, they tended to be simplistic such as

inviting followers to "tell us if you agree" for example.

Parties did, again consistent with patterns in the usage of digital platforms (Lilleker et al.,

2011), attempt to mobilise their followers. We separate these into online and offline activities.

The SNP and Liberal Democrats offered the largest number of opportunities for supporter

involvement online   however on the whole few parties seemed to have been keen to

build an infrastructure that would accommodate supporter involvement. Surprisingly simple

requests, such as share, like a page, follow or subscribe were rarely used; perhaps parties assume

these are de rigueur behaviours for Facebook users or that many who see their posts have already

subscribed or follow a page. However, the fact that out of 262 analysed UKIP posts, only 11

asked followers to share their post suggests a failure to try to mobilise supporters to act online. In

terms of offline mobilisation, unsurprisingly, the majority of posts by all parties encouraged

supporters to vote for them. Change UK used offline mobilisation in every one of the sampled

posts; in 3 posts (60%) they asked supporters for their votes. The Democratic Unionists called to

vote in 81% of their posts, the Labour in 65% and the Green Party in 61%; whereas the

Conservatives used only 21% of posts seeking votes. UKP had a total of 149 prompts to vote for

them in posts, although this was only 57% of their overall posts.

Indicative of the unusual context as well as perhaps the smaller sample of posts available to

code, the Brexit Party which secured most votes was found to attempt to mobilise their

supporters to support them at the ballot in only one of the 18   analysed posts.

Table 3. Number (and percentage) of forms of information, and cues for interaction and

mobilisation

	Information on			Online		Offline	
	politics and EU election	Party policy	Party repre-sentatives	Inter-action	Mobili-sation	Inter-action	Mobili-sation
Labour	29 (32)	59 (65)	4 (4)	9 (10)	17 (19)	13 (14)	66 (73)
Green Party	7 (11)	52 (85)	12 (20)	6 (10)	12 (20)	8 (13)	46 (75)
Plaid Cymru	9 (26)	33 (94)	14 (40)	2 (6)	3 (9)	2 (6)	12 (34)
SNP	12 (24)	42 (82)	14 (27)	7 (14)	16 (31)	5 (10)	25 (49)
Liberal Democrats	7 (11)	64 (97)	10 (15)	5 (8)	22 (33)	11 (17)	43 (65)
Conservatives	1 (4)	22 (92)	3 (13)	2 (8)	6 (25)	2 (8)	5 (21)
Ulster Unionist	3 (16)	15 (79)	8 (42)	0	0	2 (11)	9 (47)
Democratic Unionist	6 (29)	18 (86)	7 (33)	2 (10)	0	2 (10)	17 (81)
Change UK	0	5 (100)	1 (20)	0	0	1 (20)	5 (100)
UKIP	29 (11)	195 (74)	79 (30)	16 (6)	27 (10)	48 (18)	162 (62)
Brexit Party	3 (17)	8 (44)	4 (22)	0	0	0	1 (6)

Note: $n = 653$ coded posts. The parties are ordered from left to right according to their ideological stances.

Conclusion

The UK campaign was thus process framed, with the Brexit stasis dominating discourse. The Conservatives and Labour, both embroiled in bitter parliamentary divisions, tried to shift the agenda but their content proved less salient, divorced as it was from the prevailing mood. Other main policy topics were the economy, intrinsically linked to Brexit, as well as domestic social policy and for the Green Party the environment. But Brexit was a topic referenced in nearly half (304   out of 653   ) of all posts, demonstrating its dominance. As with many studies of EP elections, the focus was largely at the national level (56% of all posts), although local elections run in some areas simultaneously meant some parties focused also on local issues (37% of all posts). The EU level featured in 21% of all posts, largely in relation to Brexit as an issue. Information on party policy and the campaigns dominated suggesting this was a largely persuasive and promotional campaign. Party candidates and MEPs gained some coverage across most parties. There were some parties which supplied information on the EP election itself, although largely providing the date of the election as part of a get out the vote campaign. Most parties produced posts which set out their general aims or spoke about their values and ambitions, as well as attacking opponents, the parliamentary elites blocking Brexit or those implementing a form of Brexit no-one had voted for, as part of their persuasive campaign discourse.

As seen in most previous studies, parties tend to eschew the interactive affordances of social media platforms (Graham et al., 2014): only five posts (3 by the SNP and 1 each by the Greens and Labour) sought 'comments'. Most offered simple ways to become engaged and sought more structured, private offline interactions, only two parties offered an invitation, on one

occasion each, to vote on an issue. Similarly, the affordances offered for mobilisation were underused by UK parties. Mobilisation tactics largely involved encouraging followers to go out and vote, in the case of Labour more than half of their posts. There were sporadic invitations to share, follow or subscribe embedded within posts but no clear sign any party made a concerted effort to mobilise their supporters on- or offline. Beyond going to vote, no more than 1-2% of posts attempted to mobilise supporters.

Returning to the political context of this campaign—that it was in effect a 'ghost campaign' which did not have the attention of the major parties, let alone the voters—we might have expected some innovation or experimentation with Facebook campaigning strategies. With the exception of the relatively positive tone of campaigning (UKIP and Brexit Party apart) however, the campaign was largely what one might expect in terms of the exploitation of the affordances of Facebook: cautious. Similarly, it followed the patterns of previous EP elections in UK (Lilleker et al., 2015) by focusing largely on national and domestic politics with the parties offering persuasive communication intended to deliver them votes on election day. The key difference was that despite attempts to draw the focus to domestic policy by the Conservatives and Labour Brexit dominated. The Brexit Party, with Farage as figurehead, mobilised the fervent supporters of leaving the EU, channelling their anger to deliver a decisive victory. A victory that would overshadow politics through to the 2019 UK general election where the party drew votes away from Labour to deliver Johnson's Conservatives a clear majority. The major parties lost significant ground, and while the Liberal Democrats and Greens took up the anti-Brexit mantle, the support they gained could not eclipse the Brexit Party's victory. As a placebo for a second referendum on EU membership the contest delivered a similar equivocal response with a small majority for Brexit overall. The EP election, however, proved highly important as it highlighted

the spectre of a strong Brexit Party in future general elections, and thus paved the way for the

election of Johnson as a more hard-line Brexit Conservative Party leader and his subsequent

decisive victory in the 2019 general election.

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