

# @SEX+POLITICS2015: WOMEN AND MEN POLITICIANS TWEET THE BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION 2015

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## Abstract

Our primary interest was to explore how politicians use Twitter during an election campaign and the extent to which gender and party affiliation makes a difference to their Twitter activity. We found that gender was important in some aspects but not others and that party was *as* important in influencing certain behaviours. Women were less frequent tweeters, more likely to send original tweets and include weblinks and slightly less likely to have their tweets favourited or retweeted than men. Men were more likely to include photos and use @messages and hashtags and much more likely to tweet negative or hostile content than women.

## Keywords

Twitter, gender, UK General Election 2015

## Introduction

The past few years have seen a considerable rise in the use of social media for political campaigning which has, in turn, prompted a growing scholarly interest in exploring the consequences and impact of social media use during election campaigns (Bruns and Highfield, 2013; Conway et al., 2013; Dolezal, 2015; Vergeer et al., 2013). While more traditional forms of political engagement during election campaigns, such as Town Hall meetings, local party meetings and constituency surgeries are more likely to be attended by older citizens than millennials, many of us interested in politics are also likely to be reading political news on our laptops, mobile phones or tablets and using social media such as Facebook and Twitter as supplementary sites of political commentary (see also Himelboim et al., 2013; Moeller et al., 2014). In particular, the notoriously hard to reach voting bloc – the 18-25 year olds – are especially active on social media and thus constitute a major attraction for politicians keen to reach this traditionally underwhelmed cohort, notwithstanding the unprecedented levels of young voter turnout for GE2017. Digital media providing political information during election periods are now part of the regular

diet of many citizens, complementing legacy media events such as party election broadcasts and televised political debates. Indeed, social media chat has itself become a source for online news stories as the content of celebrity tweets and Facebook posts become stories in their own right, social media functioning as a new newsbeat (Broersma and Graham, 2012) and a tool for empowering politicians and parties to spread their messages (Engesser et al., 2017). This is perhaps most obviously and recently evidenced by the considerable news coverage given to Donald Trump's more extreme and provocative tweets and the responses they provoke. The seamless combining of new and old media platforms has therefore produced what Chadwick et al. (2016) and others have described as a 'hybrid' media system. Whilst social media platforms have been part of European campaigning for many years, arguably beginning with the 2004 European parliamentary elections (Lilleker et al., 2011), their use gained significant traction during Barack Obama's 2008 campaign where his team credited their creative use of Facebook in leveraging public support as an important aspect of his subsequent success, further extended during his 2012 campaign (see also Gerodimos and Justinussen, 2015).

However, despite the increasing interest amongst researchers to explore social media as the latest tool in the politician's repertoire, there are relatively few studies which look at British politicians, still less which focus on their Twitter activity and almost none which explicitly examine gender as a potentially influential variable in tweeting behaviour, although there is small but growing interest in gender/politics/Twitter coming out of the US. Our study provides a corrective to this gap by undertaking an analysis of the tweets of 40 British politicians who contested the 2015 general election (the top 20 tweeting women and top 20 men), focusing on content, reach and visibility.

The importance attached to social media, at least by their supporters, has prompted increasing numbers of politicians to cultivate their online presence with varying degrees of enthusiasm and skill, creating a variety of public Facebook walls, Instagram and LinkedIn profiles and Twitter accounts. Their motivations to do so are as varied as the strategies they employ but include: the desire to be seen to be active on social media and build visibility (Ross and Bürger, 2014) even if they post infrequently; to subvert traditional media's gatekeeping proclivities; to engage citizens and potentially voters via an increasingly important communication mode (see Williamson, 2009); and to show themselves to be regular citizens like everyone else. In their study of German politicians, Bernhard et al. (2016) found that politicians use social media platforms even where there is no evidence that their tweets actually influence behaviour: it seems enough to simply be part of the Twitterati. In a political context which has seen the celebrification of party leaders (Kriesi, 2012) and unrivalled levels of personalised self-promotion, it is easy to understand why less prominent politicians see social media as important mechanisms through which to enhance their brand recognition, deliver their message and engage the polity.



Vergeer and Hermans (2013) show that early adopters of Twitter have often been politicians from more established parties while other studies suggest that the smaller parties are likely to use social media more frequently since they struggle for mainstream media exposure and often have a younger membership (see Larsson and Moe, 2012; Scherpereel et al., 2016). Dolezal's (2015) study of Austrian politicians found that the typical political tweeter was male, a member of a moderate party, at the top of the party list and fighting in an urban constituency: age was also an important factor. The particularities of national political systems (Rauchfleisch and Metag, 2016; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013), incumbency, party position and political affiliation, as well as a range of personal factors such as professional backgrounds, their beliefs regarding the usefulness of social media for political campaigning and their facility with and interest in digital technologies, are thus all in the social media use mix (Graham et al., 2016; Vaccari and Valeriani, 2015).

### The tweeting effect: old-school message, new-style medium

Although we know something about the who and the why of politicians and social media, it is less clear how effective such tweets and posts are in engaging and/or influencing the public. We know that social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook *can* function as helpful channels through which politicians can subvert mainstream media's trivialising and marginalising tendencies by enabling them to communicate with their publics in their own voice and in their own style. However, most research suggests that a majority of politicians and parties, "still live predominantly in the world of traditional mass media" (Klinger, 2013: 732). Although a wealth of research has explored the changing conditions for politicians and political parties in an increasingly mediatized and networked political sphere (Strömbäck and Van Aelst, 2013), many politicians do not seem to be able or willing to fully adapt to or implement these new political communication logics. Confronted with new ways to produce and distribute their messages, too many politicians simply megaphone them in a simple monologic mode, broadcasting the information *they* want their followers to receive rather than asking citizens what information *they* need or want, a straightforward re-hash of one-way flow communication which typifies standard (offline) political communication (Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, et al., 2013). Suiter's (2015) study of by-elections in Ireland found that candidates focused on marketing and mobilising rather than engaging with voters, an approach which reflects what most politicians do when attempting to integrate social media within their broader campaign strategy, using the former to direct people to the latter, for example, to their personal or party websites.

Interestingly, however, despite the limitations of politicians' social media behaviour, their posts and tweets are assumed to have a positive impact on the voter-politician relationship (Enli and Skogerbø, 2013) if not necessarily at the ballot box. But *what* is

said and *how* it's said also impacts audience reaction: some studies show that attacking an opponent fosters a high degree of engagement amongst social media users whereas direct calls for action or donations seem to reduce that effect (Ceron and d'Adda, 2016). However, politicians cannot presume that their social media behaviour will have any impact on their political fortunes, a disconnect which is supported by studies which map behaviour against electoral outcome and show that frequency of messaging and high numbers of friends and followers does not guarantee success (Larsson and Moe, 2012). Our study also shows this disconnect very clearly as we see below.

### The woman question

While we are beginning to better understand something of the behaviour of politicians on social media, many studies fail to differentiate between women and men as if their sex is irrelevant. This is rather puzzling because studies which look at other forms of online political discourse and *do* include a gendered dimension mostly show that sex does indeed matter, albeit to a greater or lesser extent and with different degrees of consciousness. For example, Banwart and Winfrey's (2013) analysis of the websites of candidates competing in the US general election cycle of 2012 showed that women operated what they describe as 'gendered adaptiveness' in order to make themselves more attractive to voters, not least by stressing their so-called masculine traits but also making mention of 'feminine' characteristics such as sensitivity. Men were similarly cognisant of the need to be appealing, actively promoting their competence but unafraid to mention feminine traits such as compassion. Both women and men used a 'feminine' communication style through a personalised form of audience address which positioned citizens as peers rather than subjects (Meeks, 2016). Lee's (2013) research on US politicians' websites found exactly the same proclivity, with women making more use of words such as 'tough' and 'fighter' than their male counterparts. Similarly, in her interview-based work with Italian woman politicians, Levonian (2014: 51) suggests that women "attempt to construct their identity in a composite manner, uniting values such as firmness and courage with empathy and sensitivity to social issues." What these studies suggest is that women and men are extremely careful in the ways they construct their media profile and it is useful to consider if this care extends to their social media presence.

The few studies which have used a gender lens to explore politicians and Twitter have mostly emerged from US contexts. For example, in work focused on the 2012 US elections, Evans and Clark (2016) found that women were more likely to tweet about women's issues and more likely to engage in attack tweets than male colleagues. They also found that candidates in opposition were more likely to tweet negatively against the majority party, a finding and orientation found in other studies of partisan Twitter behaviour (see for example, Wagner et al., 2017). A later study conducted by Evans (2016) found that women politicians' propensity to tweet about women's issues held true for non-election

contexts as well although her work was unclear about the direction and tone of those tweets. Merely counting things tells us something about the popularity of a topic but not the way in which the topic is presented, that is, if the tweeter is supportive or antagonistic. Interestingly, the gender skew in negative tweeting behaviour was reversed when Lee and Lim (2016) looked at Trump's Twitter behaviour: in a comparison between Trump and Clinton's tweets during the 2016 Presidential campaign, the researchers found that 25 per cent of Trump's Twitter discourse, notwithstanding the likelihood of his account being managed by others, was negative or mocked others, compared with less than seven per cent of Clinton's tweets. In addition, ten percent of Trump's tweets were shown to have 'uncivil' content, mostly aimed at other politicians, journalists, or debates, with no such hostile content being found amongst the corpus of Clinton's tweets. This suggests that gender, party, and personality are all in the mix, not to mention the involvement of third-party proxies when considering the Twitter output from very senior politicians. These particular findings also demonstrate the importance of status and political context and the need to be careful in ascribing gendered characteristics to particular types of behaviour.

## Methods

Our primary research question asked, how did women and men politicians use Twitter during the 2015 British General Election campaign? In particular, we were interested to explore if their sex was an influencing feature of differentiated Twitter behaviour; the extent to which politicians' tweets extended their reach beyond their own followers; and the visibility of politicians in the wider Twitter community. Given the larger body of work on gender and traditional (offline) political communication which shows that a politician's sex *is* an influencing variable in both the style and content of their messages, do those differences hold for their Twitter behaviour? Importantly, given the multiplier effect ceded to Twitter via the use of retweets (RTs), was there evidence that politicians' tweets *were* being RTd and if so, were some politicians' tweets more likely to be RTd than others?

In February 2015, we identified that 400 sitting MPs had a Twitter account according to their profile on the Parliamentary website and determined that a 10% sample would be a manageable number of politicians to monitor in terms of the amount of tweeting activity anticipated during the campaign period (39 days). As several studies of Twitter show that the existence of a Twitter account is no guarantee of regular activity (see Wagner et al. 2017), we decided to focus on those MPs who *were* active on Twitter. We used the social media monitoring service *Yatterbox* to identify the top tweeting politicians by downloading all the tweets generated by all MPs over a random, two-day period in February 2015 and then determining the top 20 women and top 20 men in terms of the volume of tweets made by individual politicians over those two days: these 40 MPs then became our sample – see Appendix 1 for a full breakdown by name, sex and party. We captured all the tweets

sent by our sample politicians in real time during the 39 days of the campaign which produced 38,965 tweets. From this corpus, we selected a sub-set of tweets (18,879) which comprised original content only (not retweets) and a further sub-set of 1200 tweets (600 from women, 600 from men) which we used as the basis of a more qualitative analysis. We also captured all the tweets from citizens which mentioned one or more of our 40 sample MPs and this generated a corpus of 417,460 tweets which we used to measure reach and visibility in the Twittersphere. As well as discussing differences such as content, topic and type, we also wanted to explore valence as a way of gauging the emotional dimension of tweets and manually attributed one of four possible tonal categories to tweets: positive/supportive, neutral, mixed and negative. In order to determine tone, we considered the general sense of the tweets with words such as ‘thanks’, ‘good’, ‘support’ being coded as positive/supportive; and words such as ‘hypocrite’, ‘liar’, ‘troll’ coded as negative.

## Findings

### *Everything in*

In our discussion of findings, we explore both quantitative and qualitative elements of the collected tweets and we begin by looking very briefly at the entire corpus of tweets we captured (38,965) to show the broad sweep of tweeting activity in terms of volume, distribution, and tweet type in relation to women and men MPs. What was immediately apparent was that not only were women significantly less frequent posters on Twitter than men, 13,353 (34%) compared with 25,512 (66%) but that some men were very active. Amongst the top 10 tweeting politicians, only two were women and the top ten tweeters accounted for 50% (19,495) of the tweets in the entire corpus, of which only 2,707 (14%) were from women. Of the total number of tweets we captured, 52% were original tweets, with women (45%) less likely to retweet than men (55%). This echoes other research on US politicians which found the same result (see Wagner et al. 2017). As we were primarily interested in politicians’ self-presentation, the substantive analysis below focuses on tweets with original content and excludes retweets.

### *The 18,879: politicians tweeting in their own words*

When we consider the data in this sub-set, we see a less extreme range of frequency differences between women and men with three women amongst the top ten tweeters. One interesting but perhaps unsurprising finding was the use of Twitter by smaller parties: the average number of tweets from MPs from the two main parties was 411 (Labour) and 373 (Conservative), compared with 1,254 for George Galloway’s Respect Party (one MP), 1,039 for the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (one MP) and 755 for the Scottish National Party (SNP, two MPs). These differences are particularly striking when gender is considered, so that the average number of tweets from the 11 Labour women was 342,



from the four Conservative women it was 340 and for the three Liberal Democrat (Lib Dem) women it was 285, compared to Naomi Long's 1,039 tweets (Alliance Party) and the 409 produced by the Green Party's Caroline Lucas. Given the over-representation of the main party leaders in mainstream news discourse, using social media is an obvious way in which to gain visibility for smaller parties but also for those who are routinely marginalised such as women politicians (Larsson and Moe, 2012; Lassen and Brown, 2011; Ross et al., 2015) and if a candidate is both a woman and a member of a minor party, as with Long and Lucas, then social media platforms such as Twitter are doubly important.

In an election campaign context, the personal and the political move against each other in interesting ways and Table 1 shows the extent to which politicians' tweets focused on the key policy issues covered by the mainstream news agenda, identifying differences by both sex and party bias where it exists. The categories were derived from a key word search for issues which were significant themes in news coverage during the election campaign. We also included the search terms "child/ren", "family/ies" and "women" as these categories of citizen were often referenced in news discourse in relation to the *impact* of policies on individuals and families.

**Table 1.** Tweets by policy-focused topic and sex

Policy-focused topics	WOMEN	MEN	TOTAL	PARTY BIAS
Tax*	349	183	532	385 Lab; 83 Cons
NHS	149	206	355	146 Lab; 111 Cons
Bedroom**	255	35	290	286 Lab
Voter/s	63	101	164	61 Lab; 49 Cons
Cuts	48	80	128	93 Lab
Housing	60	41	101	70 Lab
Austerity	9	65	74	55 SNP
Food***	39	33	72	49 Lab
Immigration	14	21	35	15 Cons
Child/ren	106	85	191	98 Lab
Family/ies	271	78	349	265 Lab; 51 Cons
Women	83	43	126	61 Lab; 22 Cons

\*also includes "bedroom tax"; \*\* also included in "tax"; \*\*\* as in "food banks"

There are three key findings here which overlap and relate to sex, party and agency. Looking at the topics identified and given the ratio of 40:60 (women:men) in the sample, Table 1 shows that women were much more likely than men to tweet about major campaign issues which affected particular (and mostly) vulnerable groups such as "bedroom tax" and much more likely to refer to "families", "children" and "women" (so-called women's issues), than men (see also Evans 2016; Evans and Clark 2016). A good example is, "My blog in Huffington Post is up >> Food Banks - A Powerful Symbol of Five Years of Failure <http://t.co/ONDdZmeIe7> via @HuffPostUKPol" (Emily Thornberry, Lab). Men were more likely to tweet about more generic topics such as the "cuts", "immigration" and

“austerity”, for example, “*@olcoo of course. No way we'd agree to the £12 billion of welfare cuts the Tories are suggesting! It's a silly idea*” (Julian Huppert, Lib Dem). However, party was equally salient so that it was almost exclusively Labour women who used the term “families” and “bedroom tax” and SNP men who used the term “austerity”. While there are interesting differences in the take-up of these topics, what is perhaps more striking is that even the top policy topic (tax) was only mentioned directly in 3% of all tweets and the more controversial topic of immigration attracted an even smaller volume of tweets. This suggests both push and pull elements, since the primary content of the vast majority of tweets (88%) were on subjects which were *not* part of the news agenda although, as we will show below, many *were* about some aspect of the election. The disavowal of policy positioning in favour of self-promotion and horse-race commentary suggests that politicians mostly use Twitter for business-as-usual politicking although there was an explicit assumption by some that part of their followership comprised their own constituents and they therefore addressed them directly, for example, “*Grt morning in #Watton doing old fashioned doorstep politics: lovely to have time to chat+listen to people #bendmyear*” (George Freeman, Cons). But what was also very clear was their use of Twitter to proactively promote their own, albeit self-referential, news agenda rather than react to that of the mainstream news, displaying agency and autonomy to deliver their own messages to potential voters.

We also explored the extent to which politicians use Twitter to connect and ‘interact’ with others through the use of @replies, @mentions and hashtags. We counted a total of 12,734 @replies and @mentions (8,171 different ones), the vast majority (76%) of which were only used once. Several politicians used strings of @mentions, for example, “*@ChrisVobe1 @lisanandy @Alison\_McGovern @spellar and good luck to @HelenJonesMP too!!*” (Andrew Gwynne, Lab), while others name-checked themselves, for example, “*@team-caroline\_1 Thanks so much! Signing up at 2am definitely shows commitment (as does canvassing all day!)*” (Caroline Lucas, Greens). It would therefore seem that at best, @messages were used to reply to or connect with a particular individual as part of a very short conversational thread of no more than one exchange each way, rather than engage in a sustained interaction, thereby constituting rather thin examples of ‘engagement’. Very few @mentions were used more than 20 times, most of which referenced political parties or party leaders with the exception of “HereBeSin” who appeared to be a local party supporter who was only addressed by Julian Huppert.

Two interesting aspects to consider in relation to these higher volume @messages is the way in which they are gender-skewed in relation to Conservative women one way, and Labour women in the opposite direction, although not quite so starkly. However, this was only the case in relation to the more frequent @messages since overall, Conservative women used @messages on average 211 times each compared with 198 times for Conservative men. Conversely, Labour women used @messages on average 223 times

compared to Labour men's tally of 340 average. The numbers for Lib Dem women and men were 239 and 698 respectively. Overall, then, women used fewer @messages than men (253 average vs. 373) but this conceals the importance of party and the fact that a small number of men were very high users of @messages. While some studies suggest that the smaller and more marginal parties are more likely to use @messages (Larsson and Moe, 2012), we found mixed evidence for this, with Naomi Long and George Galloway using them more, and Caroline Lucas using them to the same degree as politicians from the more established parties. Most @messages which were used at least 20 times were specific to one party with the exception of @Ed Miliband, @David Cameron and @BBC4-today, suggesting that politicians are mostly 'interacting' with their own members and supporters in a relatively closed and cross-referential network of the like-minded (see Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, et al., 2013).

We also explored the use of hashtags as indicators of politicians' interest in engaging with the various debates which emerged during the campaign and counted 4,646 hashtags (1,763 different ones) but, as with the use of @messages, the vast majority of hashtags were only used once (78%) or were unique to one person, for example #GE2015Elmet-andRothwell was used 102 times by Alec Shelbrooke who was the Conservative MP for that constituency, or unique to one specific group, for example, Labour women accounted for 163 out of 175 uses of #bedroom tax. Of the 31 hashtags which were used more than 20 times, only six were used by more than one party and Table 2 identifies the use of those six hashtags by sex and party. The average use of hashtags by women was 83 compared with 149 for men but again, as with @messages, this finding obscures the heavy use of hashtags by three men which together constituted 18% of the total number of hashtags counted.

**Table 2.** Most popular hashtags by sex and party

	Cons		Greens	Lab	Lib Dems		Respect	SNP	Total	
Hashtag #	W	M	W	W	M	W	M	M	M	
leadersdebate	60	40	3	29	40	11	7		52	242
bedroomtax				163	11				1	175
GE2015	7	32	4	12	3	1	32	1	5	97
BBCQT	8	2	1	9	43	3			31	97
BBCDebate		6	2	2	20	5			14	49
NHS	3	19	1	2	8		1			34

What is clear from this set of findings is that gender *and* party seem influential in determining politicians' Twitter behaviour in relation to their interest in connecting and interacting with others. Much research on politicians' tweeting behaviour suggests that it is mostly one-way flow but our findings suggest that many politicians *do* engage others through the use of @messages and hashtags, although these interactions are fleeting rather than sustained and in the case of @messages, rarely last longer than a single exchange.

### *The 1200: getting a bit more personal*

This section of our results focuses on the sub-set of 1,200 tweets drawn from the corpus of 18,879 original tweets, sampled randomly from the filtered sets of tweets from women and men respectively, to derive a sample of 600 tweets each from women and men. We determined that this number of tweets was a manageable number on which to undertake a more in-depth analysis, where the gender of the politician could be a salient aspect of any identified differences. For this set of findings, we manually coded each tweet to identify its primary characteristics including content and format. First, we were interested in the extent to which tweets included links to other material and Table 3 shows the four types of tweet we coded, displayed by sex.

**Table 3.** Tweets by type and sex

Tweet type	WOMEN	% row	MEN	% row	ALL	% row
Comment only	409	48%	442	52%	851	71%
Comment and weblink	142	72%	55	28%	197	16%
Comment and photo	41	30%	97	70%	138	11%
Comment and video	8	57%	6	43%	14	11%
TOTAL	600		600		1200	100%

From the above, we can see that a majority of tweets comprised a comment only, with additional material incorporated in around one-third of tweets. However, women and men differed significantly in the kinds of additional material they included, with women more likely to include weblinks and video and men much more likely to include photos. This finding confirms other research which shows that politicians are still not fully exploiting the potential of social media to add value to their followers by using extra-media to enrich their messages and instead, use Twitter as mostly a broadcasting medium (Adams and McCorkindale, 2013; Enli and Skogerbo, 2013). When we looked at the broad content of tweets in terms of topic, there were few differences between women and men and the top ten topics were the same for both, although not always in the same order (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Top 10 tweet topic by sex

Tweet topic (top ten)	% all	% W (column)	% M (column)
Reference to own (personal) campaign	15	14	16
Giving recognition and thanks	15	19	11
Message directed at an individual	12	13	11
Social/personal topics	12	13	11
Conversation*	8	7	8
Reference to a colleague's campaign	7	6	7
Broad policy issues	7	9	8
Reference to own (party) campaign	6	6	7
Criticism of another party	5	3	8
Reference to own party leader	2	2	3

\* where the tweet was part of a conversational thread but where the topic was not clear.

While it would be expected that during an election campaign, politicians would make reference to their own campaign activities, what is interesting to note is the number of tweets which had social/personal content, and that the propensity for such content was broadly the same for women and men. This resonates with other studies which show similar topic patterns (Evans et al., 2016; Meeks, 2016). More generally, the range and volume of topics echo findings from Graham et al.'s (2013) study of MPs' tweeting behaviour during the 2010 general election, where they also found that a majority of tweets focused on individual campaign information, support for their party and candidates and critiques of opposition politicians, with a small minority of tweets focused on policy issues or articulating a political position. This shows that the focus on horse-race elements which preoccupies mainstream news media is reflected in the kind of content which politicians' themselves promote. However, we did see several politicians responding to comments or questions by asking individuals to contact them directly in order to provide advice and information, for example, "*@xxx Can send you some key points on those issues- could you e-mail me? Thanks!*" (Karen Buck, Lab).

Given that Twitter is often considered to be a rather rude medium, we were interested to see if elite users such as politicians demonstrated a similar propensity for impoliteness and if gender was an influencing feature. Twitter's 140-character limitation often results in terse messages which eschew regular grammatical conventions in favour of abbreviations and various kinds of 'text speak'. In our study, the majority of tweets were broadly positive/supportive (48%) or neutral (26%) with smaller proportions being coded as either mixed (14%) or negative (12%). However, within these categories, there were interesting differences in relation to both gender and party. Women were slightly more likely to post neutral (58%), positive/supportive (52%) and mixed-tone tweets (51%) and considerably less likely to post negative tweets (22%) than men. Even amongst the tweets coded as negative, women's brand of negativity tended to be less harsh than that of men. For example, "*@xxx if you can't use punctuation, please don't troll me as takes too long to read-*



*thanks #clickburr*” (Stella Creasy, Lab) compared with, *“#leadersdebate Cleggy breaks ranks and starts shouting DC down. What a hypocrite. He was Deputy Prime Minister!”* (Mike Fabricant, Cons). The words which prompted a ‘negative’ coding included: lazy, liar, sarcasm, toxic, troll (words used by women); and busted, chaos, pervert, hate, hypocrite (words used by men). This finding is in direct contrast to that of Evans (2016) and Evans and Clark (2016) in their work on the 2012 elections in the US, where women were significantly more likely to make hostile and negative tweets than men. In our study, in addition to sex-based differences, were differences based on party, so that Conservative women were twice as likely as Labour women to post hostile tweets, for example, *“@xxx But you keep displaying your acute lack of intelligence and keep on being manipulated by a sick liar”* (Nadine Dorries, Cons), whereas women from the Greens, Alliance and Liberal Democrats posted very few hostile tweets. However, with the small numbers involved, the most likely explanation for these differences could be the particular personalities included in the sample rather than their party or their gender, as most of the negative tweets were posted by very few politicians. This echoes work by Wagner et al. (2017) on the tweets from Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump’s Twitter accounts during the 2016 Presidential campaign, where Trump was both ruder and more negative than Clinton.

Social media proselytisers suggest that the facility which enables friends to like and share messages (Facebook) and followers to favourite and retweet posts (Twitter) means that the reach of users extends considerably beyond their circle of friends and followers, so we wanted to examine the extent to which the tweets in our sample did indeed achieve this multiplier effect. A little over half the tweets (58%) were favourited at least once, with the majority being favourited five times or fewer (66%) and 11% were favourited between 6 and 10 times: a mere 2% of tweets were favourited more than 100 times. Women’s tweets were a little less frequently favourited (47%) than those of men and a similar picture emerged for RTs, although only half of all tweets were retweeted, with women’s tweets less likely to be retweeted (45%) than those of men: women’s tweets also had less reach with three-quarters of their tweets being retweeted ten times or fewer compared with 64% of men’s tweets. A very small proportion (5%) of tweets were RTd more than 50 times, 5% for women and 7% for men. This suggests that despite the *potential* for extending message reach beyond their immediate followers, most tweets did not enjoy this additional circulation and even when they did, the scale was very modest. This reflects other studies which suggest that Twitter is mostly *not* being used by followers as a promotional tool (locally or nationally) nor to leverage visibility (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2015). However, the caveat to this general finding is that the followers of the minor party politicians in our sample were extremely active in their promotion of their candidates’ tweets, so that 90% of tweets from Caroline Lucas (Green Party) were favourited, as were 82% of those from George Galloway (Respect) and 86% of those made by the two Scottish National Party politicians: the tweets from the politicians from these three parties also attracted the most RTs.

Related to visibility and connectivity, the last set of finding we discuss here relate to politicians' visibility in the wider Twitter community. First, we looked at the number of mentions our MPs received during the campaign period and this varied from 131,400 for George Galloway and 58,892 for Caroline Lucas (the most frequently mentioned woman and man respectively), down to 823 for Anne Milton (Cons) and 18 for Guy Opperman (Cons), the least frequently mentioned woman and man. Leaving aside Lucas and Galloway as they were respectively three times and five times more frequently mentioned than the next most popular female and male MP (Harriet Harman, Lab, 18,328 and Pete Wishart, SNP, 23,967), the average number of mentions for women and men was 6,494 and 5,462 respectively, with a mean of 5,837 for women and 5,197 for men. However, as we did not explore the context of these mentions nor who mentioned them, we cannot say if they were positive or negative, nor if politicians were mentioning each other.

We also explored if our sample increased the number of their followers over the campaign period and whether this was related to their Twitter activity, that is, did visibility lead to a growth in followers? As expected, Caroline Lucas (118,120) and George Galloway (238,918) had the most followers at the beginning of the campaign but unlike Galloway who saw less than a 1% gain in followers by the day after polling day, Lucas saw an 11% increase in her followers over the monitoring period. Overall, women and men saw an average gain in followers of just over 3% and most MPs also increased the number of people they followed over the same period by an average of 4.4% and 2.5% for women and men respectively.

In terms of identifying relationships between the number of tweets and visibility, Caroline Lucas had the most followers amongst the sample of women, attracted the most @mentions/replies but was only the 7<sup>th</sup> most frequent tweeter. The top female tweeter, Naomi Long, was the 3<sup>rd</sup> most frequently mentioned politician but had the fewest followers. For men, George Galloway made the largest number of tweets, had the most followers and received the highest number of @mentions/replies but for the other men, there were no discernible relationships between their tweeting behaviour and the number of @mentions/replies or followers. This finding suggests that for most politicians, the frequency of their tweets is *not* related to their visibility and Harriet Harman is a good example of this: despite being almost the least frequent woman tweeter in the sample, she received the most mentions behind Caroline Lucas, had the second highest number of followers and grew her following by just over 7%.

With the exception of two MPs, the number of followers exceeded the number of @messages, suggesting that followers are not using Twitter to leverage visibility for the politicians they are following. Although some politicians in our sample *did* have a sizeable following, most did not and other work on politicians' followers on Twitter in other countries show a similar pattern (see Spierings and Jacobs, 2014). Not only do politicians have modest numbers of followers but the possibilities of extending their reach through

leveraging their followers' own supporters is also limited by the number of followers who then follow those supporters. The multiplier effect thus only really works when the skeins of each network are themselves sizeable. Although in this study, we did not look at those extending networks, in an ambitious study which looked at two million Twitter accounts of people who followed ten national party leaders during the Italian elections of 2013, Vaccari and Valeriani (2015) found that most were infrequent tweeters, had few followers and that a small number of users were responsible for the majority of tweets and followers.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our primary interest in this work was to explore how politicians use Twitter during an election campaign and the extent to which their gender made a difference to their Twitter behaviour. Overall, our findings show a mixed and complex picture of politicians' use of Twitter and suggest that some aspects of politicians' tweeting behaviour seem to be influenced by their gender but not others, and that party was often *as* important as gender. For example, women were less frequent tweeters than men on average but women (and men) from the smaller parties were the most active, while Labour MPs tweeted more often than either Conservative or Lib Dem MPs. Women were much more likely to send original tweets and include weblinks than men and slightly less likely to have their tweets favourited or retweeted than men. Men were more likely to retweet, include photos and use @messages and hashtags than women. However, in the case of the latter two, it should be noted that a small number of men were particularly heavy users of @messages and hashtags and if their contributions were excluded, the gender-based differences were considerably lessened although not entirely removed. Women were more likely to discuss issues social policy issues than men but again, Party was a significant factor in tweets with policy content. However, the proportion of tweets which focused on any kind of policy issue was relatively modest for both women and men. Conservative women were much more likely than women from any of the other parties, to include negative content, but this finding is as likely to be the consequence of individual personalities as indicating either a gender or a Party factor. Where women and men behaved in broadly similar ways was in relation to levels of personalisation, both in terms of their Twitter profiles but also in relation to tweet content about non-political issues of a personal and/or sociable nature. When we consider the multiplier effect, we noted that this was not much in evidence for any politician and most tweets had very modest levels of retweets and favouriting, although politicians from the smaller parties were rather more successful in generating retweets than other politicians in our sample. As elsewhere, there was little evidence of dialoguing with the public, most politicians preferring to broadcast their messages in the more traditional mode of one-way flow. We suggest this is a significant missed opportunity as the interactivity afforded by social media such as Twitter presents politicians with

relatively quick and easy ways to promote their more authentic selves, wresting some control from the Whips and the ventriloquizing of their messages by mainstream media.

The stratified nature of our sample and the number of politicians we have included means that our findings are rather tentative but they do suggest that gender is insufficient on its own to act as a predictor of particular Twitter behaviour since party seems just as important as a distinguishing feature. Future research with larger samples may move closer to determining the salience of gender and party on politicians' Twitter or indeed other social media behaviour but these findings hopefully provide a small piece in this larger jigsaw of political communication 2.0.

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## Appendix 1. MP SAMPLE

WOMEN		MEN	
Name	Party	Name	Party
Alison Seabeck	Labour	Alec Shelbrooke	Conservative
Caroline Flint	Labour	Andrew Gwynne	Labour
Barbara Keeley	Labour	Andrew Percy	Conservative
Charlotte Leslie	Cons	Angus MacNeil	SNP
Dr Caroline Lucas	Green	Chris Bryant	Labour
Anne Milton	Cons	Dr Julian Huppert	Lib Dem
Dr Stella Creasy	Labour	Ed Vaizey	Conservative
Dr Thérèse Coffey	Conservative	George Freeman	Conservative
Emily Thornberry	Labour	George Galloway	Respect
Harriet Harman	Labour	Jack Dromey	Labour
Helen Goodman	Labour	Guy Opperman	Conservative
Jenny Willott	Lib Dem	Jamie Reed	Labour
Jo Swinson	Lib Dem	Jason McCartney	Conservative
Karen Buck	Labour	Michael Dugher	Labour
Lynne Featherstone	Lib Dem	Mike Gapes	Labour
Nadine Dorries	Conservative	Michael Fabricant	Conservative
Naomi Long	Alliance Party of NI	Paul Burstow	Lib Dem
Rachel Reeves	Labour	Peter Wishart	SNP
Sarah Champion	Labour	Steve Reed	Labour
Teresa Pearce	Labour	Tim Farron	Lib Dem