

VIRTUALLY MEMBERS: THE FACEBOOK AND TWITTER FOLLOWERS OF UK POLITICAL PARTIES

A CASM BRIEFING PAPER

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SUMMARY

The internet and social media are having a profound effect on British politics: it will re-shape the way elections are won and lost, how policy is made, and how people get involved in formal and informal politics.

In this series of short briefing papers, the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM) will be looking at how the changing ways we communicate and coordinate will alter politics, including the importance of social media campaigning in marginal seats and whether Twitter can predict elections. Authors will include Alberto Nardelli (Tweetminster), Angus Bankes (JustAddRed) and Matthew Cain (Trufflenet).

In this paper, we review the social media support – Facebook likes and Twitter followers – for the main political parties and consider some of the implications of this new virtual membership. Various measures of offline political activism appear to be falling, but young people in particular remain interested in politics, and appear to be using social media to find new ways to get involved.

Based on new research, we find that both Facebook and Twitter are extremely important new arenas for political activism. We measured the unique number of users that follow MPs belonging to a party – excluding any user that follows MPs from more than one party – and found there are now significantly more Twitter followers for both the Conservatives (430,893) and Labour (316,237) than formal party members (under 200,000 for each).

Even when removing the Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party, Ed Miliband MP, this remains the case. Similarly, in respect of Facebook, there are significantly more Facebook likes for the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Party than formal party members, although significantly fewer for the Labour party. This virtual support is part of a wider transformation of what it means to belong to a party, from a formal hierarchical model to a more networked, ephemeral, conditional support.

Quite how far this virtual membership is now a reliable replacement for the current political party membership system – for raising funds, volunteering, campaigning, attending events – remains an open question. That said, these virtual members are a younger demographic, and our research also finds that around two in three Twitter followers are ‘loyal’ – meaning they only follow someone from one party.

It is our view that these virtual members will be increasingly important activists in political campaigns and elections. However, this shift to online political activity also brings potential problems, and may exacerbate the growing socio-economic divide between those who are politically active and those who are not.

FALLING CONFIDENCE IN FORMAL POLITICS

Confidence and trust in formal politics is declining. Electoral turnout in the UK has been on a downward trend since 1950, when 84 per cent of the population turned out to vote, compared to 65 per cent in the last general election in 2010.¹ The three most recent electoral turnouts have been the three lowest since the beginning of universal suffrage (although there has been a slight increase since 2001).²

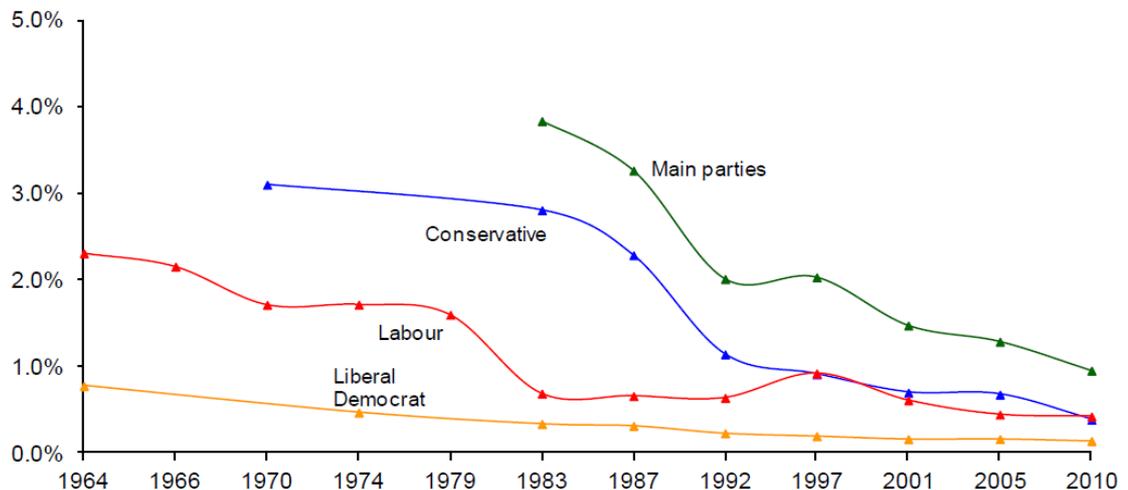
Significantly, the youngest voters have the lowest turnout as a percentage of the available electorate: in the 2010 general election, only 44 per cent of 18-24 year olds voted.³ Some research suggests this downward trend extends to other types of political activism as well: other measures of political engagement, like the frequency of donating money, or signing a petition, reached their lowest levels in a decade in 2012.⁵

The causes of this decline have been widely discussed and debated – and falling trust in the way politics is conducted is certainly an important part of the story.⁶ Polls show that a growing number of people do not trust the political institutions that govern our lives, or the parties and politicians that we elect: a 2008 survey found that 68 per cent of British respondents were either ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ satisfied with democracy overall, 81 per cent had no confidence in government, and 87 per cent either had ‘not very much’ confidence in political parties or ‘none at all’.⁷

In 2012, 82 per cent of UK citizens said they ‘tend not to trust’ political parties.⁸ Public confidence in MPs fell steeply between 2008 and 2010: the percentage of people in England who think MPs are dedicated to working well for the public dropped from 46 per cent to 26 per cent.⁹ This is not a result of declining reach of election campaigning: political parties are reaching a greater proportion of the electorate than ever before, through advertising, leafleting, and television broadcasts.¹⁰

This general trend is perhaps best illustrated by the rapid decline in party membership of the main parties. According to the House of Commons Library, Labour now has about 193,000 members, the Conservatives between 130,000 and 170,000 and the Liberal Democrats 49,000.¹¹ By contrast, peak membership was seen in the early 1950s with the Conservatives claiming nearly three million members and Labour more than one million members. Younger people are not only less likely to be members of political parties,¹² they also display a comparatively weaker commitment to these parties than older Britons.¹³

Figure 1: UK political party membership as a percentage of the electorate



Source: House of Commons Library

New forms of political activism

However, declining confidence in the political system and falling levels of formal political involvement should not be mistaken for political apathy. Research shows young people are interested in politics, but perhaps not the way it is done at present. A recent national survey of 18 year olds found that many respondents did express an interest in political affairs when broadly defined, and many said they were keen to play a more active role in the political process.¹⁴ Even though young people have a fairly strong aversion to formal politics and professional politicians, they are relatively active in alternative modes of political participation.¹⁵

The internet and social media are an important new way to express political preferences and get involved. Analysts have long argued that mass communication through the web would facilitate collective action by bringing groups together around single issues, lowering barriers to entry and thereby fundamentally changing the nature of political movements.¹⁶ Changes in communication also change the way in which politicians can get their message out to the electorate – and indeed listen to potential voters.¹⁷

Social media – sometimes called Web 2.0 – is now at the forefront of this change. Certainly, the size, diversity and dynamism of social media platforms allow people to connect and form social movements outside the existing political channels far more quickly and easily than ever before. New social movements are emerging using social media, and challenging existing parties in a way unthinkable a decade ago. The English Defence League in the UK, the Tea Party in the US, Beppe Grillo's Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, and the Occupy movement are all examples of movements that have employed social media to grow rapidly and create a significant political and social impact – all in the last three years.

The Oxford Internet Survey shows a very definite shift toward online political activism. The percentage of people who signed an online petition doubled to 14 per cent between 2007 and 2011; while those doing this offline fell from 20 per cent to 18 per cent between 2009 and 2011. In 2011, for the first time, people were more likely to contact a politician or a political party online (8 per cent) than offline (7 per cent). In 2011, two new exclusively online political activities also appeared: 9 per cent of people sent an electronic message supporting a political cause, and the same number commented on politics in social media.¹⁸

PARTY MEMBERSHIP ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Facebook

Facebook is a social media networking site that, among other functions, allows groups and individuals to set up pages dedicated to certain subjects which other users can contribute to, including by expressing a 'like' for it. All the main political parties have had official Facebook pages for several years: the Greens were the first to join the social network in late 2007, the Conservatives joined in February 2008, Labour in August of the same year. The leaders of these parties also have official Facebook pages.

Currently, the official page of the Conservative Party has 159,044 likes on Facebook, compared to 143,244 likes for Labour, 92,078 for the Liberal Democrats, 25,906 for UKIP and 19,165 for the Green Party.¹⁹

However, Facebook also allows anyone to set up their own pages; and there are several dozen other official or unofficial Facebook pages dedicated to each party, their leaders, and local and regional branches. To get a better sense of the unique likes for this broader group, we used the Facebook advertising tool to calculate the number of individuals that have liked either the official page or the leader's page, based on the UK and a number of countries with known large British expat communities. This provides approximate figures, and relies on Facebook's proprietary advertising targeting algorithm, which is not public and therefore cannot be examined, although the administrators of pages would be able to provide more accurate figures.²⁰

Using this method, the number of likes for the Conservatives and David Cameron jumps up to 217,900, while Labour and Ed Miliband have 132,840²¹, and the LibDems and Nick Clegg 129,340.

Table 1: Formal membership and Facebook following for main UK parties

	Formal party members²²	Facebook likes of official party account²³	Unique Facebook likes of official party or leader pages²⁴
Conservative	130,000-170,000	159,044	217,900
Labour	193,000	143,244	132,840
Liberal Democrats	49,000	92,078	129,340

Interestingly, the demographic of this group is young, even when taking into account that young people are overrepresented on the social networking site. Overall, 33 per cent of British Facebook users are under 25, while 46 per cent of those liking Labour/Miliband, 54 per cent of Tory/Cameron fans, and 64 per cent of LibDem/Clegg fans are under 25. Full results of our demographic analysis of Facebook fans of the three parties are included in Annex I.

Twitter

Twitter is an online social networking site and micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and read text-based messages of up to 140 characters in length known as 'tweets'. MPs are increasingly utilising this platform for direct communication with each other, their constituents, and as a tool for instant response to breaking news.

According to Tweetminster, a total of 401 MPs (from the three main Parties) have Twitter feeds. At the time of this report, that was comprised of 176 Conservative MPs, 182 Labour MPs and 43 Liberal Democrat MPs. There are also official accounts for the parties. For example, the Conservative party account is followed by 81,972 people. The total cumulative number of followers of all MPs is 3,628,982, and there are 1,224,902 unique individuals following at least one MP from any party.

However, some of these followers will follow multiple accounts across parties. Therefore, in order to determine a more accurate count, we ran a script to find the number of unique people that follow at least one MP from each party (and therefore are not double counted). This method found that there are 614,719 unique users on Twitter that follow at least one Conservative MP on Twitter; 503,881 that follow at least one Labour MP; and 173,184 that follow at least one Liberal Democrat.²⁵

However, we felt that it is likely that there may be a significant number of Twitter users who follow a large number of MPs from across the parties, and therefore might be less accurately described as ‘supporters’. Therefore, we ran a second script in order to calculate the number of users that followed at least one MP from each party *and did not follow any other MP from any of the other parties*.

Interestingly, there is not as much overlap across the parties – the majority of Twitter users tend to be loyal, with the exception of those who follow Liberal Democrat MPs. Our research shows that, of the total of 614,719 unique followers of any of the Conservative MPs Twitter accounts, 70 per cent are not also following the accounts of MPs of other parties. For Labour MPs, this is about 63 per cent, and for Lib Dem MPs it is 40 per cent. This is visualised in Annex II. In total, there were 430,893 unique Twitter users that follow at least one MP from the Conservative Party and no other party; 316,237 for the Labour Party; and 68,335 for the Liberal Democrats.

One final exploration involved removing any individuals who followed only the party leader and no other MP from the analysis. We felt it likely that the party leaders – as Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, and Deputy Prime Minister - may have a large number of followers who follow them by virtue of their position rather than as members of the party. This final analysis gives the Conservative Party 272,356 Followers, the Labour Party 280,834 Followers, and the Liberal Democrats 35,255 Followers.

Table 2: Formal membership and Twitter following of main UK parties

	Formal party members ²⁶	Twitter followers of official party account ²⁷	Unique Twitter followers of all MPs (minus leader) ²⁸	Unique Twitter follower of all MPs unique to party (minus leader) ²⁹
Conservative	130,000-170,000	82,311	614,719 (401,882)	430,893 (272,356)
Labour	193,000	80,752	503,881 (413,691)	316,237 (280,834)
Lib Dem	49,000	41,073	173,184 (88,604)	68,335 (35,255)

DOES SOCIAL MEDIA MATTER?

This preliminary study suggests that the social media support for the main political parties in the UK is a significant force. When taking the most restrictive method of calculating Twitter followers (unique users who the only follow MPs from one party not including the leader), there are significantly more Twitter followers than formal party members for both the Conservative and Labour Party, and slightly fewer for the Liberal Democrats.

In respect of Facebook, there are significantly more Facebook likes for the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Party than formal party members, although significantly fewer for the Labour party. Given the falling numbers of formal party members – and the fact that these users are likely to be a younger demographic – this is likely to be an important group.

Social media politics vary greatly, from single-issue campaigns to established political party Facebook accounts with strict control over the content. But they have in common the idea of a 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.

In recent years there has been considerable debate about the extent to which the internet is transforming politics, with some commentators, such as Malcolm Gladwell, suggesting that ‘clicktivism’ remains far less transformative than feet on the ground politics. However, evidence is beginning to suggest the internet might not be transformative on its own, but is better viewed as a way to allow movements to form, organise, fundraise, and mobilise.³⁰

It is still not clear exactly what it means to ‘follow’ or to ‘like’ a party or an individual. The strength of these ties, and how it might evolve, is an open research question. Given the very low barriers to entry to join various social media groups, many followers could of course not be considered supporters in any meaningful sense. High profile individuals are followed for a wide variety of reasons. However, as noted above many Twitter followers are loyal – only following someone from their one party, with a relatively low degree of overlap.

Moreover, our recent research into Facebook groups of radical right-wing parties found their online supporters to be particularly active: around two in three Facebook fans had voted for the party they liked at the last general election, and around one in four had been involved in a demonstration or strike in the previous 12 months, markedly higher than the national average.³¹ Similarly, our recent work on Beppe Grillo and the Movimento 5 Stelle found his Facebook supporters were highly mobilised – his one million Facebook friends included 200,000 volunteers who were active campaigners during the recent Italian election – and vital in the effort to get the vote out.³²

The success of Beppe Grillo also revealed another important change. Grillo refused to speak with any of the Italian news or broadcast media, preferring instead to communicate directly with

his supporters via social media. As Douglas Carswell has argued in *The End of Politics and the Birth of iDemocracy*, the ability to communicate directly to constituents rather than indirectly through established media is likely to have a dramatic effect on the ability of parties to maintain message discipline, making elections more about candidates than parties; and making MPs more responsive to their constituents once elected.³³

Bringing in a new wave of activists, without increasing democratic deficit

Electoral turnout is known to rise with age, income and level of education, and these gaps have been increasing in recent years.³⁴ Research has consistently found that there is a class difference in voter turnout, with middle and upper middle class voters turning out in significantly higher numbers than lower middle and working class voters.³⁵ The contrast in participation levels between different social groups is even greater when it comes to other forms of political activity, and social media may exacerbate the trend by widening rather than narrowing the breadth of political involvement.

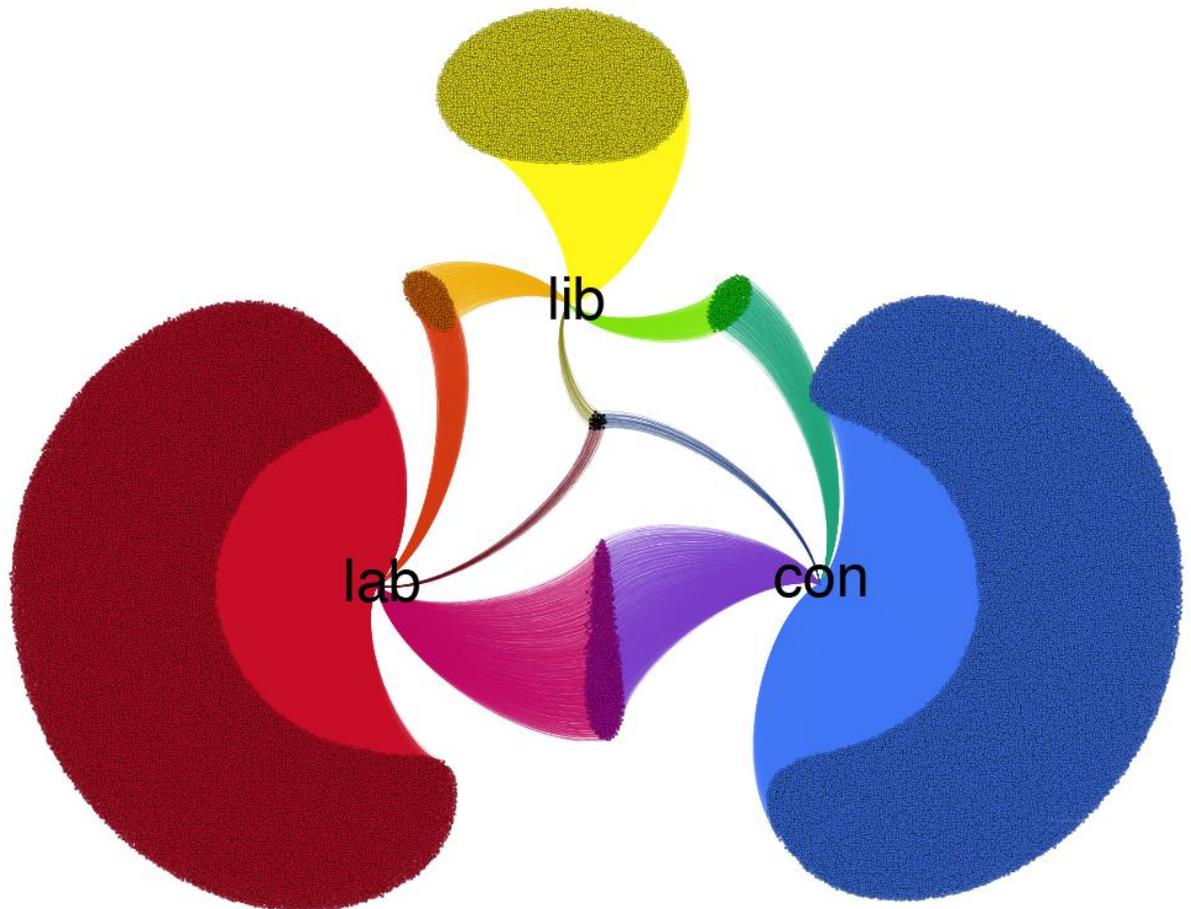
The demographic of social media users shows that the so-called 'next-generation' internet users, those who use multiple and portable devices to access the internet and are more active producers of internet content, tend to have both higher levels of education and income and be more involved in politics.³⁶

The Oxford Internet Institute has found a strong correlation between online political participation and 'political efficacy', the confidence people have that they can influence politics. Those with low political efficacy are less likely to participate overall, and when they do participate in politics it is entirely offline (10 per cent offline to 0 per cent online), while 60 per cent of internet users with high political efficacy participate politically online.³⁷ Although social media has the potential to involve more, and especially younger, people in political activism, the shift to online activism may thus exacerbate the existing social and economic gap between those who participate in politics and those who do not.

It appears to us that virtual support of this type may be transforming what it means to belong to a party, changing affiliation from a formal hierarchical model to a more networked, ephemeral, conditional support. Political parties may have to become comfortable with this more layered melange of different depths of affiliations – and find new ways of mobilising and involving these new activists.

ANNEX I

The diagram below visualises the data on unique and overlapping Twitter followers of the three main parties.



- Follow only Labour MPs
- Follow only Conservative MPs
- Follow only Lib Dem MPs
- Follow both Labour and Conservative MPs
- Follow both Conservative and Lib Dem MPs
- Follow both Labour and Lib Dem MPs
- Follow at least one MP from all three major parties
Followers of party leaders have been removed

ANNEX II

Facebook Ads analysis of the supporters of the three main parties

Labour Party + Ed Miliband			Conservative Party + David Cameron			Liberal Democrats + Nick Clegg		
Unique UK likes	112,560		Unique UK likes	166,880		Unique UK likes	108,460	
Men	69,040	61%	Men	105,980	64%	Men	62,840	58%
Women	42,680	38%	Women	59,920	36%	Women	45,140	42%
13-24	52,180	46%	13-24	90,400	54%	13-24	69,720	64%
25-34	21,140	19%	25-34	32,660	20%	25-34	19,960	18%
35-49	23,000	20%	35-49	27,660	17%	35-49	12,020	11%
50 or over	16,240	14%	50 or over	16,140	10%	50 or over	6,760	6%
Unique UK+* likes	132,840		Unique UK+ likes	217,900		Unique UK+ likes	129,340	

*includes a number of countries with significant expat populations: United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Russia, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, India, Pakistan, South Africa, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina

NOTES

- ¹ UK Political Info, *General election turnout 1945-2010*, <http://www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout45.htm>, accessed 11/04/2013
- ² UK Political Info, *General election turnout 1945-2010*, <http://www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout45.htm>, accessed 11/04/2013
- ³ Ipsos MORI, *How Britain Voted in 2010*, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2613> accessed 11/04/2013
- ⁴ Electoral Commission, Turnout at recent UK general elections, <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/faq/elections/turnout-general-elections>, accessed 11/04/2013.
- ⁵ Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 9*, 2012, <http://hansardsociety.org.uk/files/folders/3344/download.aspx>, accessed 11/04/2013
- ⁶ Carswell, D, *The End of Politics*, London, 2012
- ⁷ European Values Study, 2008, Q63: Please look at this card and tell me, for each item listed (political parties, government), how much confidence you have in them, is it a great deal, quite a lot, not very much or none at all?
- ⁸ Eurobarometer 2012, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/showchart_column.cfm?keyID=2189&nationID=15,&startdate=2003.11&enddate=2012.05, accessed 11/04/2012
- ⁹ McGuinness, F, *Membership of UK political parties*, House of Commons Library, 2012, <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05125>, accessed 11/04/2013
- ¹⁰ Ipsos MORI, *Election Campaign Penetration 1979-2005*, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2405&view=wide>, accessed 11/04/2013
- ¹¹ McGuinness, F, *Membership of UK political parties*, House of Commons Library, 2012, <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05125>, accessed 11/04/2013
- ¹² Sloam, J (2007) 'Rebooting Democracy: Youth Participation in Politics in the UK', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 60.
- ¹³ Clarke, H, Sanders, D, Stewart, M and Whitely P (2004) *Political Choice in Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ¹⁴ Henn, M and Foard, N (2012) 'Young People, Political Participation and Trust in Britain', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65: 56.
- ¹⁵ E.g. Sloam, J (2007) 'Rebooting Democracy: Youth Participation in Politics in the UK', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 60.
- ¹⁶ Postmes, T and Brunsting, S (2002) 'Collective action in the age of the internet: mass communication and online mobilization', *Social Science Computer Review* 20, issue 3; M Castells, 'The mobile civil society: social movements, political power and communication networks' in M Castells et al (2007) *Mobile Communication and Society: A global perspective*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press,.
- ¹⁷ Creasey, S (2011) *LSE: Polis*
- ¹⁸ Dutton, W and Blank, G, *Oxford Internet Survey 2011 Report*, http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/publications/oxis2011_report.pdf, accessed 03/04/2013
- ¹⁹ As of 15/04/2013. These figures are simply taken from the official pages themselves.
- ²⁰ <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-pages/politics/united-kingdom/> See Bartlett, J *et al* *The New Face of Digital Populism* for further discussion of Facebook targeting.
- ²¹ The discrepancy is caused by the limited the advertising tool to target a small number of countries, while the Labour Party's official page includes people drawn from Facebook's entire user base.
- ²² McGuinness, F, *Membership of UK political parties*, House of Commons Library, 2012, <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05125> (accessed 3/4/13)
- ²³ As of 15/04/2013.
- ²⁴ These figures are calculated using the Facebook advertising tool, which allows one to calculate the number of unique Facebook users in a specific set of countries that have expressed a like for one or more specific interests. For this analysis, we looked at the Facebook users in the UK and a number of countries with significant British expat populations, including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Russia, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, India, Pakistan,

South Africa, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, who expressed an interest in either the official party page or that of the party leader as of 15/04/2013.

²⁵ Our data collection and analysis at CASM calculated unique followers of MPs representing the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. Using Twitter's API we compared lists of the followers of each parties MP's, provided by Tweetminster, against each other, the number of unique followers for that collection of screen names was recorded. Accounts that are private, such as of Adrian Bailey's, or have been removed, like Chris Huhne's, returned a zero count. The number of unique followers of each political party were also calculated excluding the party leaders. This we feel goes some way to removing the influence of the individual dominant personality in the parties, and gives a truer reflection of each party's base level of support.

²⁶ McGuinness, F, *Membership of UK political parties*, House of Commons Library, 2012, <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05125> (accessed 3/4/13)

²⁷ As of 15/04/2013

²⁸ See note 23

²⁹ See note 23

³⁰ Karpf, D (2010) *The MoveOn Effect*, Harvard University Press

³¹ Bartlett, J, Birdwell, J & Littler, M (2011) *The New Face of Digital Populism*, Demos

³² Bartlett *et al* (2013) *New Political Movements in Europe: Beppe Grillo and the M5S*, Demos

³³ Carswell, D (2012) *The End of Politics*, London, p. 183

³⁴ Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement* 9, 2012,

<http://hansardsociety.org.uk/files/folders/3344/download.aspx>, accessed 11/04/2013

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³⁷ Dutton, W and Blank, G, *Oxford Internet Survey 2011 Report*, http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/publications/oxis2011_report.pdf, accessed 03/04/2013