

MPs' Expenditure and General Election Campaigns: do Incumbents Benefit from Contacting their Constituents?

Ron Johnston
University of Bristol

Charles Pattie
University of Sheffield

*This paper has been submitted
for publication*

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Most studies of the impact of local campaign expenditure on British election results have found that expenditure by incumbents has less of an effect on the outcome than does that by challengers. Some argue that this, in part, reflects an under-estimate of how much is spent by incumbents because it excludes their expenditure under various Parliamentary allowances which facilitates contacts between MPs and their constituents. Data on spending under those allowances are now available and are used here to evaluate its impact at the 2005 general election in England. The analyses show that only expenditure by Conservative MPs had any impact on their re-election chances.

Many studies of the impact of campaign spending on election outcomes, in a range of countries including the UK, have found that incumbents get a smaller return on their expenditure than do challengers (Moon, 2006, discusses this for the US case; for the UK, see Denver and Hands, 1997; Johnston and Pattie, 1997; Pattie and Johnston, 2008). One reason for this difference, it is suggested, is the availability of other campaigning resources to incumbents but not also to their challengers – such as expenditure of public funds by MPs in the course of their Parliamentary duties which involves contact with their constituents; analyses that exclude these therefore understate the intensity and perhaps also the impact of incumbent campaigning (as originally suggested by Jacobson, 1978, 1990). It has not been possible to evaluate this claim in the UK until recently, because data on the amount spent by incumbent MPs associated with their Parliamentary duties have not been available. Such data are now published, and are deployed in this note to explore the argument's validity.

This issue has more than academic interest, because the amount spent by incumbent MPs and their challengers has been a focus of recent debates regarding the regulation of party funding. After the 2005 general election, several defeated Labour MPs claimed that they had lost their seats to Conservative challengers who had received large donations to promote their local campaigns. Analyses suggest that this argument had veracity, and that candidates in receipt of such donations did perform better than others; the additional expenditure brought a greater yield of votes (Johnston and Pattie, 2007). To counter this, members of the Labour party have argued that the amount spent in constituencies should be capped not just, as at present, during the brief campaign period immediately prior to a general election but rather for the complete inter-election period. Against that, Conservatives have responded that their challengers in seats held by MPs from other parties are at a disadvantage because of the generous allowances available to incumbents which, their former treasurer and a continuing substantial donor (Lord Ashcroft) is reported to have said, give them a '£4m-a-year head start'.¹ Indeed, in 2007 MPs voted to extend their available money by up to £10,000 per annum with a 'Communications Allowance' described by the Leader of the House of Commons as a 'reasonable and relatively modest sum' to increase the quality of information given to constituents, refuting claims of some MPs that the money could be used as 'shameless self-promotion' and giving an 'unfair

advantage' to incumbents who could use it for 'political marketing';² the booklet produced by the House of Commons Department of Finance and Administration on the new allowance describes it as being created 'to allow you, as a Member of Parliament, to communicate proactively with your constituents and inform them about your Parliamentary duties'.³

This note explores the implications of the claim that incumbent MPs have a substantial advantage over their challengers because of the allowances provided to enable them to undertake their Parliamentary duties. Do those who make more use of those allowances – i.e. spend more on contacting their constituents – perform better at subsequent elections? There is a substantial body of evidence that the amount spent by parties on their constituency campaigns in Great Britain – i.e. on contacting electors immediately before an election – does have an impact, especially spending by challengers: the more they spend, the more votes they get. (For recent examples, see Cutts and Shrayne, 2007; Pattie and Johnston, 2008.) A similar relationship might hold with regard to MPs' expenditure against their allowances. Not all of this will be involved with contacting and informing their constituents – their Parliamentary duties are much wider – but it seems reasonable to argue, as some politicians clearly do, that the more that an MP spends the greater the potential return in votes counted at the next election.

MPs' Allowances

UK Members of Parliament can claim expenses in order to undertake their Parliamentary duties under a number of headings, which are identified (along with the maxima for 2004-2005) in Table 1.⁴ The average amounts spent by each party's MPs during the 2004-2005 financial year are in Table 2; these refer to English MPs only.⁵ The means show little variation across the three parties, although the standard deviations indicate considerable variation around those values.

The guidance notes provided to MPs regarding these allowances stress that the money is to be used for the conduct of their Parliamentary duties only, and not for party political purposes, including electioneering.⁶ This was clarified in a report of the House of Commons Committee on Standards and Privileges into the conduct of one MP, on two grounds.⁷ On the first, he used House of Commons stationery and pre-paid envelopes to send letters to 562 constituents informing them of a change of address for his constituency office. The Committee – on the advice of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards – decided that it was inappropriate for the MP to use the free stationery and postage provision for this task; he should have used the 'Incidental expenses premium' (IEP). The second was a claim that an annual report which the MP sent out using IEP funds included party political material, and therefore should not have been charged to the allowances for his Parliamentary duties. In both cases, it was concluded that the MP had misinterpreted the rules, which state that House stationery and pre-paid envelopes can be used when making a solicited reply to a communication from a constituent (either a letter or other form of direct contact) but such replies should not also include unsolicited material. House stationery can be used for other – non-party – purposes, if the MP meets the postal costs.

Expenditure under all of the headings except the 'Additional costs allowance' might be deployed in contact between MPs and individual constituents, even though this must be done on a non-partisan basis. Furthermore, it can be argued that any contact between an MP and a constituent, whatever its proximal cause, may assist the MP in winning that constituent's vote at a forthcoming election. Many forms of contact – such as responding to a query though the post or at a meeting during an MP's visit to the constituency (whether at a timetabled 'surgery', at another event, or just serendipitously) with that visit paid for from the travel allowance – could help the constituent form a positive impression of the MP and improve the chances of the constituent voting for the MP's re-election. MPs will see the non-partisan conduct of their Parliamentary duties as potentially aiding their re-election cause, therefore, believing that the more assiduous they are in that conduct the better their electoral prospects. (See, for example, Cain et al, 1987; Wood and Norton, 1992; Norton and Wood, 1993: in some cases, the personal vote may be linked to an MP's legislative activity – Pattie et al, 1994; Spirling, 2007.)

Of the various items, those regarding stationery and postage might be taken as representative of the amount of MP-constituent contact. The more assiduous MPs are in seeking re-election, the more stationery they are likely to use and the greater their deployment of the free postal facility in responding to their constituents' concerns and contacts, even though none of that response can involve direct electioneering, let alone mass mailings. That this is almost certainly the case is illustrated by the data in Table 3, which compares the average spending on those two items by MPs who sought re-election in 2005 with those who did not. In each party, the mean amount spent by an MP who stood again in 2005 was much larger than that by one who was retiring:⁸ indeed, Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs seeking re-election spent on average twice as much on stationery and postage as their retiring colleagues. The prospects of an election campaign at the end of the financial year clearly stimulated those wanting to be returned to Westminster (it was very widely anticipated that there would be a general election in spring 2005) to spend more contacting their constituents than those who were retiring from Parliament.⁹

Fuller details on the amounts spent during the financial year 2004-2005 by MPs on stationery and postage combined, by party and by whether they were seeking re-election, are given by the frequency distributions in Table 4. The distributions for those seeking re-election are clearly skewed: in each party a small number of MPs spent a very large amount – as much as £52,038 by one Labour MP, for example, compared to the mean for those seeking re-election of £6,789 (and a median of only £4,488; note that because of the small number of observations for the Liberal Democrats who did not stand for re-election, some of the percentile values are the same).

The Pattern of Spending and the Electoral Return

Among MPs who sought re-election in 2005, those facing the hardest fights to retain their seats might be expected to spend more using the Westminster postal system to contact their constituents – just as in general those facing the hardest fights spent more on their constituency campaigns during the designated election period itself. (Before the 2001 election, Labour MPs representing marginal seats spent more time in their constituencies than did their counterparts from safer seats: Johnston et al, 2002.)

During the official campaign period they are legally constrained in how much can be spent – with the maximum allowed a function of the constituency’s electorate and whether it is designated as a borough (i.e. urban, high density) or county (i.e. lower density, more rural) seat. In 2005, the maximum permitted spending in a borough constituency was £5,483 plus 4.6p for each elector on the constituency register, while in county constituencies it was £5,483 plus 6.2p per elector, so that no more than £8,703 could be spent in an average borough constituency with 70,000 registered electors whereas in county constituencies it was £9,823.

Table 5 shows – in the column headed CS – the average amount spent by incumbent MPs seeking re-election on their constituency campaigns, as percentages of the maximum allowed, according to the margin of victory there at the last election in 2001. In each case, the more marginal the seat (i.e. the smaller the margin of victory then and the closer the expected contest in 2005) the larger the expenditure. Conservative MPs in ‘safe’ seats (won by 20 percentage points or more of the votes cast in 2001) spent on average only 78 per cent of the allowed total, for example, whereas those contesting the most marginal seats (those won by less than 5 percentage points in 2001) spent on average 89 per cent; the gap was even larger among incumbent Labour MPs seeking re-election.

There was, however, no similar clear relationship between seat marginality and the amount spent on stationery and postage; in general incumbent MPs representing safe seats, especially Labour MPs, spent less on those items than their contemporaries who sought re-election from marginal seats, but the differences were not large and some of the highest levels of spending were in constituencies in the intermediate marginality categories. Spending on stationery and postage was thus not a consistent addition across all incumbent MPs to that spent on the campaign itself: indeed, the correlation between the percentage spent on the campaign and the amount spent on stationery and postage was only 0.15 for Conservative MPs, 0.36 for Labour, and -0.14 for Liberal Democrats. It may be, therefore, that those incumbents who did spend more on stationery and postage than others benefited at the polls.

Did the amount spent on stationery and postage help the candidates’ re-election chances by winning her/him more votes? A variety of ways of answering this question has been explored, with all producing the same conclusions, so just one set of analyses is reported here, in Table 6. These are based on a simple model (I) employed in earlier research, in which each party’s percentage share of the votes cast in 2005 is regressed against its share in 2001, reflecting the well-attested finding that the geography of each party’s relative strength across the constituencies varies very little between a pair of elections. Three other variables are included at this first step – the amount spent by each party on the 2005 constituency campaign, as a percentage of the allowed maximum. There might be a significant and positive link between how much each party spent and its own share of the vote although, as noted above, many studies have found that incumbents (especially those representing the governing party) get a smaller return on their campaign spending than challengers (as shown in Pattie and Johnston, 2008) and it may be that in this study – which focuses entirely on incumbents – there is no relationship between a candidate’s spending and her/his vote tally. On the other hand, in line with previous research we expect that the more that each of a candidate’s opponents spent the worse her/his performance should be, which would be indicated by significant negative regression coefficients. Finally, to see if

expenditure by incumbent MPs seeking re-election on stationery and postage had any impact – the more that was spent, the better the performance – this sum was included at a second stage (Model II), in £00s.

The results in Table 6 provide only slight support for the argument that the free stationery and postage available to incumbent MPs give them an advantage in the contest for re-election. Only for the Conservatives (who were in opposition) is there a positive and significant regression coefficient for stationery and postage expenditure – the more that their incumbent MPs spent in the seats that they were defending, the better their performance in the 2005 election. Labour and Liberal Democrat incumbent MPs who spent relatively large amounts on contacting their constituents in the year prior to the election got no apparent return for this, however, although, in line with other research findings, incumbent Labour MPs did see their vote shares reduced, relative to 2001, the more than each of their opponents spent on the official constituency campaign.¹⁰

One possibility is that the expected relationship between incumbent spending and election outcome applies only to those MPs who are seeking re-election for the first-time; other studies (e.g. Wood and Norton, 1992; Curtice and Steed, 1992, 2002) have suggested that such incumbents do benefit from a personal vote the first time they seek re-election, but that this does not get larger the longer they remain in Parliament. Certainly Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs seeking re-election for the first time in 2005 spent more on stationery and postage than their contemporaries who were initially returned to the House of Commons for their constituency in 1997 or earlier, but this was not the case with Labour MPs.¹¹ However, there is no evidence that this additional spending brought any significant electoral rewards. Because there were only small numbers of MPs seeking re-election for the first time (35 Conservative, 25 Labour and 7 Liberal Democrat), it was not feasible to test models for each party separately, so a pooled model was deployed. This showed that MPs first elected in 2001 did apparently get a ‘personal bonus’ in 2005 – on average, they obtained an additional 2 percentage points of the votes cast then, relative to the overall change – but there was no link between the size of this bonus and how much they spent on stationery and postage in the year preceding the election.¹²

Conclusions

There is considerable acceptance that the regulation of party funding in the UK should be extended, but a major report into the subject – commissioned by the Prime Minister in 2006 – made no firm recommendations, arguing instead that any extension should be based on cross-party agreement, which has not been forthcoming.¹³ One focus of the inter-party debate has been the apparent advantage that incumbent MPs have over their challengers because of the allowances made available to enable them to undertake their Parliamentary duties. Deployment of those monies, it has been claimed, allows them to maintain a level of contact with constituents that challengers can only counter if they are able to raise substantial sums themselves to be spent in the constituency over a longer period than the short official general election campaign.

The money made available to MPs cannot be used, according to House of Commons Rules, for party political purposes and thus explicitly to promote a member’s re-

election prospects. Nevertheless, MPs can use various items in their allowances to promote their cause indirectly, by responding to constituents' interests and concerns – not least by writing to them individually (unsolicited mass mailings being prohibited). Just as expenditure on constituency campaigns is used successfully to promote a candidate's cause – especially a challenger's cause – so expenditure on promoting MP-constituent contact could assist an incumbent's search for continued electoral support, giving the incumbent a clear advantage since the money for that contact is freely available and, unlike that for local campaigns, does not have to be raised from supporters.

There is however little evidence from the analyses reported here that greater expenditure of money available to MPs through their Parliamentary allowances to sustain contacts with their constituents – specifically through free stationery and postage – does bring substantial and significant electoral returns. Only incumbent Conservative MPs seeking re-election in 2005 got a better electoral outcome than, relative to 2001, the more that they spent on these two items in the year preceding the 2005 contest; neither Labour nor Liberal Democrat incumbents did so. In part this is in line with other recent research findings regarding constituency campaigns, which show that incumbent MPs from the governing party get less return from their campaign expenditure than do challengers from parties out of power.

Incumbent MPs are now able to spend a further £10,000 each year on contact with their constituents.¹⁴ There is growing evidence that those defending marginal seats are, following the claims made after the 2005 general election and the large sums that the Conservative party began spending in 2007 in such seats held by Labour MPs. Money does matter in some circumstances in local campaigns, and it may well be that this extra injection of funds into local campaigning (indirect if not direct) has a significant impact on the result of the next election, the results of the analyses reported here notwithstanding.

Notes

¹ This claim was reported in *The Financial Times*, 22 October 2007, p. 3. There was a Labour response to a similar claim in *The Guardian*: <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,330964786-110642.00.html> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,331063831-103677.00.html>

² The quotes are taken from the ePolitix.com website, at <http://www.epolitix.com/EN/News/200703/5c2760b0-db87-46f4-9ae1-240e03b6bc6b.htm>. More detail is available from a House of Commons Library document *Parliamentary pay and allowances – update* published on 10 October 2007: www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/notes/snpc-04192.pdf.

³ *The Communications Allowance and the use of House stationery*: <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/HofCCommunicationsAllowanceBooklet.pdf>

⁴ All of the data on MPs expenditure used here are taken from tabulations on the House of Commons website: http://www.parliament.uk/about_commons/hocallowances/hocallowances06.cfm.

⁵ Scottish and Welsh MPs are omitted from these analyses because of the four-party systems there and because of the change in the number of constituencies in Scotland (from 72 to 59) between the 2001 and 2005 general elections.

⁶ As the analyses here refer to financial year 2004-2005, the allowances are as described in the House of Commons Research Paper 04/40, *Parliamentary Pay and Allowances*, published 18 May, 2004: http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_publications_and_archives/research_papers/research_papers_2004.cfm

⁷ House of Commons, Committee on Standards and Privileges *Conduct of Mr Michael Foster (Worcester)* Tenth Report of Session 2005-06, 13 June 2006, HC1223: available at www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmstnprv/1223/122302.htm.

⁸ There were no similar differences between MPs seeking re-election and retiring in the other heads of expenditure.

⁹ When the spending data for the financial year 2006-2007 were released in October 2007, media coverage stressed that some of the biggest spenders were MPs representing marginal constituencies: see <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article2740546.ece>.

¹⁰ In one other model explored, there was a marginally significant relationship between a Labour MP's total expenditure under all of the allowance headings (other than additional costs) and her/his vote in 2005, but this was not replicated for the other parties. It provides very weak evidence to sustain Lord Ashcroft's case.

¹¹ Conservative first-time seekers of re-election spent on average £3,951 on stationery and postage, compared to £3,036 by those who were re-elected in 2001; the comparable figures for Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs were £6,557/£6,416 and £5,371/£4,766 respectively.

¹² The full output from this analysis can be obtained from the authors.

¹³ A preliminary report (available at <http://www.partyfundingreview.gov.uk/htmls/download.htm>) was published in October 2006. The final report appeared in March 2007 and is available at the same website. A press release placed on the site on 30 October 2007 announced that the inter-party talks had collapsed without agreement.

¹⁴ With the introduction of this additional Communications Allowance, use of House stationery and pre-paid envelopes is limited to a total expenditure of £7,000 per annum.

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**Table 1. The Parliamentary Duties Allowances Available to Mps
and their Value in Financial Year 2004-2005**

Staffing costs allowance

A maximum sum to cover the costs of staff employed to enable MPs to conduct their Parliamentary business (2004-2005: £66,458-£77,534)*.

Travel allowances

An unlimited sum for travel involved in Parliamentary business

MPs' staff travel

The cost of up to 24 single journeys per year between Westminster and the MP's constituency, shared across all staff.

Stationery, postage and telephone calls

MPs are entitled to free House of Commons stationery, inland telephone calls and use of the postal service from Westminster in direct connection with their Parliamentary duties. The stationery items are ordered from a central supplier (and include items with pre-paid postage which costs is included in the total costs of postage)

Central IT provision

MPs are loaned equipment (up to one laptop, four other computers and two printers), with the value of the equipment loaned in any on year being recorded.

Additional Costs Allowance

A maximum of £21,634 for the additional expenses involved in staying away from their main home while performing Parliamentary duties.

Incidental expenses premium

A maximum sum to cover other expenditure incurred during the conduct of the MPs Parliamentary business, including office accommodation and equipment costs and costs related to security, health and safety and disabled access (2004-2005: £19,325)*.

Other

This includes temporary secretarial costs to cover sickness, maternity leave etc., central contributions to office security costs, exceptional needs and a 'winding-up allowance' for defeated and retiring MPs.

* MPs are allowed to vire funds between these two heads.

Table 2. The Amount Spent by English MPs under the Various Allowance Headings in Financial Year 2004-2005: Means and Standard Deviations (in £s)

MPs	All	Conservative	Labour	LibDem
Staffing	71,004 (7,107)	70,677 (8,164)	71,067 (6,865)	71,583 (3,353)
Travel	9,452 (5,459)	8,521 (4,024)	9,872 (6,019)	9,911 (5,510)
Staff Travel	617 (848)	243 (483)	812 (941)	586 (717)
Stationery	1,386 (1,507)	829 (674)	1,684 (1,783)	1,285 (671)
Postage	3,920 (4,383)	2,402 (1,812)	4,737 (5,240)	3,590 (1,896)
IT	1,811 (266)	1,764 (294)	1,823 (260)	1,925 (74)
Additional	16,300 (6,543)	17,939 (5,206)	15,548 (6,998)	15,570 (6,631)
Incidental	16,622 (3,728)	16,040 (3,869)	16,628 (3,766)	18,838 (1,058)
Other	720 (2,315)	681 (2,432)	683 (2,132)	1,190 (3,143)
N	523	164	320	39

Table 3. Mean Expenditure by English MPs on Stationery and Postage in the Financial Year 2004-2005 (In £), According to Whether they Stood for Re-Election at the 2005 General Election

	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
	NS	S	NS	S	NS	S
Stationery	543	869	813	1,794	657	1,398
Postage	1,646	2,507	2,594	5,009	1,710	3,931

S – stood for re-election in 2005; NS – did not stand for re-election

Table 4. Frequency Distributions for Spending by English MPs on Stationery and Postage Combined (In £) in the 2004-2005 Financial Year

Percentile	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
	NS	S	NS	S	NS	S
0	51	0	118	210	696	2,025
10	184	1,448	708	1,733	696	2,688
25	719	2,009	1,242	2,671	959	3,214
50	2,011	2,793	2,908	4,488	2,441	5,408
75	2,799	3,937	4,718	7,921	4,708	6,657
90	3,418	5,539	8,225	13,539	5,890	7,865
100	3,476	16,399	10,041	52,038	5,890	11,965
Mean	1,811	3,396	3,432	6,789	2,871	5,313
SD	1,176	2,447	2,707	7,217	1,932	2,426
N	17	147	35	285	7	32

S – stood for re-election in 2005; NS – did not stand for re-election

Table 5. Mean Expenditure by English MPs on their Constituency Campaigns at the 2005 General Election (as a Percentage of the Maximum Allowed) and on Stationery and Postage (in £) in the Financial Year 2004-2005, According to the Marginality of their Constituency

Party Margin	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
	CS	P	CS	P	CS	P
0 – 4.9%	89	3,615	89	6,448	95	4,315
5 – 9.9%	83	3,348	91	10,098	96	6,642
10 – 14.9%	75	3,784	85	8,717	88	6,481
15 – 19.9%	79	3,088	79	5,921	85	5,354
20% +	78	3,292	69	5,926	87	4,719
N	147		287		33	

CS – constituency campaign spending (as percentage of total)

P – spending on stationery and postage (£)

Table 6. Results of Regressions of the Result of the 2005 General Election in England, in Seats Held by the Three Parties, where the Incumbent MP was Seeking Re-Election

Model	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
	I	II	I	II	I	II
Constant	8.96	8.85	10.23	10.37	17.05	14.90
Vote 2001 (%)	0.82***	0.81***	0.76***	0.76***	0.57***	0.57***
Campaign spend 2005 (%)						
Conservative	0.01	0.01	-0.03**	-0.03**	-0.01	-0.01
Labour	0.02	0.02	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02	-0.03
LibDem	-0.01	-0.01	-0.05***	-0.05***	0.04	0.06
PS spend (£00)		0.03***		0.03		0.02
R ²	0.50	0.54	0.83	0.83	0.32	0.30
N	147		287		33	

*** - coefficient significant at the 0.001 level; ** - coefficient significant at the 0.01 level; * - coefficient at the 0.05 level.

Key to models: I – including constituency campaigns spending only; II – with spending on stationery and postage added.