

The geography of the political party: Lessons from the British Labour Party's experiment with community organising, 2010 to 2015



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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the geographical contributions made to academic debate about democracy, representation and the role of the political party. It argues that while geographers have made important arguments in relation to the structure and operation of representative democracy, there is scope for paying greater attention to the internal spatial dynamics of the political party. A successful political party requires a balance between the national party machine and its local membership base. This paper draws on research to explore the way in which the British Labour Party sought to renew its local membership base by adopting community organising techniques and establishing a new arms-length organisation, Movement for Change (M4C), between 2010 and 2015. It uses this research material to highlight the importance of the internal balance of power within any political party, and the need for a multi-scalar approach to understanding the successful operation of any political party.

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1. Introduction

In the after-shock of Donald Trump winning the American Election, coming so soon after the British people voted to leave the European Union (EU) in June 2016, political commentators and academics are asking themselves big questions about the operation of representative democracy. In a number of countries in Europe and North America, insurgent populist parties, movements and leaders have been successful in winning elections and influencing public opinion. Long-established political parties have been left on the side-lines as new voices enter the stage and win over the people. The five-star movement in Italy, Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, the Front National in France, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Donald Trump's success are all manifestations of new movement-oriented and populist forms of political organisation that now threaten established political parties (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Taggart, 2004). Moreover, these insurgents are often breaking down established partisan divides and capturing voters and supporters from across the political spectrum, posing a threat to mainstream parties on both the left and the right. They have made a point of challenging the established elite and much of their appeal rests upon their 'outsider' status. Many longer established political

parties have been losing members, influence and partisan support for some time (Mair, 2013) and it is not yet clear if – and how – these older parties will be able to renew themselves for the future.

While many bemoan the threats posed to the political system and its established order by such insurgent political movements, there are others who argue that these developments represent an important democratic corrective, forcing the political elite and the mainstream parties to mount an effective response (Chawalisz, 2015; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). As such, the contemporary situation raises important questions about the continued dominance of established political parties, the evolution of political culture, the relationship between political parties and social movements and the future of political representation. Traditionally, 'the people' have been represented by politicians who belong to different political parties and who, if in government, can then legislate and shape the future of the polity. Political parties have been the key mediating institutions that facilitate representative democracy and in his seminal book on the political party, Schattschneider (1975, 1) famously argued that "modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties". If traditional political parties are now much weaker and less able to play this role, they either need to renew themselves and their relationships with voters, or other political movements, parties and practices are likely to grow in their place.

In this regard, it is worth remembering that forms of representative democracy that incorporate all adult citizens are still relatively new (Arblaster, 2002; Held, 2006). In a country like the

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United Kingdom (UK), the institutions of democracy have their origins in forms of government that pre-date the advent of universal suffrage and this aristocratic history has tended to mute expectations associated with citizenship (Jefferys, 2007; Whiteley, 2012). In many other places, democracy has developed only after periods of war, and/or the experience of fascism, communism and colonialism, and this too leaves its mark on political practice today (see Buchanan & Conway, 2002; Müller, 2011; Tilly, 2007). The differential sedimentation of political institutions and associated practices is an important backdrop to debates about the challenges facing political representation today (Fukuyama, 2014). While there is no certainty about the future of any particular political party, it is also clear that any party has the potential to change its fortunes through its leadership style and message, its propaganda, its policy profile, its attention to its own membership and its connection to the wider society. Political parties are organisations that can make their own history albeit in conditions that are not of their choosing.

In the UK, the three mainstream parties – Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats – have been experimenting with new forms of party organisation, recruitment and mobilisation ever since they were founded (Bale, 2016; Jefferys, 2007; Seyd & Whiteley, 1992, 1996). Political parties have sought to retain and increase their membership, develop leadership, and secure sufficient local support to campaign effectively during elections. Moreover, although the ‘spaces of interaction’ between voters and their representatives have changed with the increasing role of the media and new technology (Clarke, Jennings, Moss, & Stoker, 2017), elections still provide an important opportunity for political parties to engage with the public. Without sufficient local activists, political parties are less able to make a personal appeal to voters during elections (Johnston, 1987). It is thus imperative that political parties retain a local base of supporters who will turn out to campaign for their candidates during elections. While such an activist base is not sufficient to winning, and the wider context and campaign plays a major part in determining the appeal of any party, there is evidence that local activity still makes a significant difference to election results (Field, Johnston, Cutts, Pattie, & Fieldhouse, 2014; Field, Fieldhouse, Johnston, Pattie, & Cutts, 2016).

This paper looks at the way in which between 2010 and 2015, the British Labour Party tried to use community organising techniques in order to prosecute renewal and reform. The experiment was pitched as a way to improve the internal culture of the party, to reconnect with movements for change, to use campaigns to foster political leadership and develop policy ideas, as well as improve the ability of the party to win at elections (see Stears, 2015). The bulk of this paper outlines this experiment and looks at the extent to which it succeeded on the ground in two very different areas of the country: Cardiff in South Wales and Southampton in Hampshire, England. In so doing, the paper is designed to explore this experiment as a means to consider the wider lessons for political parties, highlighting the importance of the internal geographical balance of power within the party. While the case is particularly relevant to social democratic parties, it has wider significance across the political spectrum as well as for those exploring party renewal in other parts of the world. It also has relevance for disciplinary debates about the intersections between geography and democracy, as outlined in the next section.

2. Democracy, geography and the role of the political party

Geographical research into the question of democracy has tended to be divided into three rather different but complementary camps. One approach has involved taking a social movement perspective to dismiss representative democracy as an oxymoron whereby representation is understood as necessarily antithetical to

the individual autonomy and political equality required of real democracy. Most clearly represented by the work of Mark Purcell (2008, 2013), this is a vision of democracy rooted in self-organised social movements in which people speak for themselves without representation, driven by an aspiration for political power-sharing and equality rather than a form of political order or government (see also Graeber, 2013; Isin, 2002; Rancière, 2001).

A second perspective has involved focusing on political deliberation and the extent to which citizens are engaged in discussions about shared concerns. This work is most developed in relation to the practices of planning (Healey, 2006 [1997], 2012) and development studies (Chambers, 1994) but there has also been growing interest in the work of the American pragmatists and their ideas about the processes of public-formation and popular problem-solving (Barnett & Bridge, 2013; Barnett, 2014; Lake, 2017a, 2017b), as well as the politics of knowledge-creation (Harney, McCurry, Scott, & Wills, 2016). As a whole, this body of scholarship is concerned with the ways in which citizens can engage in the deliberation that underpins good decision-making, and the role of space and place in this process (Howell, 2003; Iveson, 2007).

A third focus for geographical research has involved exploring the structures and practices that underpin the operation of representative democracy. Geographers have been alert to the way in which geographical territory (constituencies or districts) and the location of boundaries between them can determine who ends up with political power (Bunge, 1966; Morrill, 2004; Sauer, 1918; Taylor, 1973). Using examples of the franchise in Iraq, South Africa and the USA, Forest (2008, p. 386, see also, Robinson, 1998) rightly argues that “the study of political representation ... must involve not only how ‘the people’ vote but also how ‘the people’ are imagined and how their votes are transformed (or not) into political power”.

It is also important to recognise the geographical division of power that underpins the jurisdiction of representative government at different spatial scales. The differences between unitary, federal and confederate forms of government have a profound effect on the spaces available for political organisation and action, but so too, the differential powers afforded to parish/neighbourhood, local, urban and regional government can also be critical in determining political opportunity structures for citizens and their representatives (Berry, 1987; Clark, 1984; Maas, 1959). As such, the geo-constitutional underpinning of government provides an important backdrop for political organisation and decision-making within any state (Frug, 1999, 2000, 2014; Wills, 2016). Citizens are embedded in a multi-scalar polity that affords them the opportunity to select their representatives and call them to account for a range of different decisions taken at a variety of overlapping scales such as the city, region and the pan-national scale in the case of the EU (Painter, 2008).

In addition, there is a strong tradition of electoral geography that focuses on mapping the outcome of elections, the distribution of votes across space, and the extent to which geography then shapes the formation and outlook of government (Agnew, 1987, 1996, 2014; Johnston & Pattie, 2004, 2006, 2008; Cupples, 2009; Warf & Leib, 2011). Geographers have highlighted the way in which parties both reflect and augment social, economic and cultural cleavages within any polity and its franchise. Moreover, as political parties win support in particular places they can start to shift the local political culture. Most obviously demonstrated in relation to the distribution of the Labour vote in elections in the United Kingdom (UK), several generations of voters living in what were once coal mining and heavy industrial areas have proved most likely to remain Labour voters despite dramatic shifts in the nature of work and associated societal change (Dorling & Henning, 2015; and for the early history of these trends see also; Pelling, 1967). While there

is nothing inevitable about the persistence of political traditions over time, the map of voting patterns and political support has often been slower to change than societal changes would predict.

For Johnston and Pattie (2008, 365) “a party and its belief systems become part of the local culture ... and those areas of strengths become core to its continued quest for votes”. They argue that neighbours shape each other’s voting preferences through ‘conversion by conversation’ such that people are more likely to support the dominant party in their constituency regardless of their social position (Johnston & Pattie, 2008, p. 366). This research suggests that local “social networks, many of which are spatially clustered within households, families and neighbourhoods, are the locales within which there is much discussion of political and related issues and through which, intentionally or serendipitously, some people may be convinced to change their views and the party that they support” (2008, 366; see also Books & Prysby, 1991; Johnston et al., 2005). Such local embedding obviously helps to secure electoral support for a political party but it may also allow a party to better connect with the wider community by aiding the two-way flow of experiences and ideas between voters and their representatives. Moreover, historically at least, local party membership and activity has provided the means for political parties to identify and develop leadership talent to sustain their own organisation (Duverger, 1959).

However, there is more to the geography of the political party than developing and sustaining local support and leadership, and national political parties generally concentrate their election resources on the places in which they are most likely to win *additional* seats (known as ‘marginals’). While heartland areas have often been taken for granted, more marginal areas generally attract much greater attention during campaigns, potentially changing the way that voters make their choices during elections with longer term implications for local politics and culture (Johnston & Pattie, 2003, 2006, 2008). In this context, there is also a body of work that highlights the role of local political activism in shaping election results. Despite the growing importance of national campaigns and the role of social media, email and telephone canvassing (Clarke et al., 2017), research indicates that face-to-face encounters remains critical to turnout and the choices made at elections (Cutts, Webber, Widdup, Johnston, & Pattie, 2014; Field et al., 2014, 2016; Johnston, Pattie, Rossiter, & Dorling, 2001; Whiteley & Seyd, 2003). Without sufficient electoral activity at the local scale, political parties either have no-one to engage with the voters or they have to ‘bus in’ activists from outside the locality and/or they have to rely solely on other forms of communication.

Thus, any party interested in winning elections needs to think about ways to: (1) shore up its political heartlands and build from its geo-historical base; (2) appeal more widely in order to win additional seats (targeting marginal seats); and (3) link the work of the local party with developments in the national arena, ensuring that the balance of power within the party works in the interests of winning campaigns. A successful political party needs to retain a strong base as well as being able to reach out to new audiences, and to do it in a way that sustains meaningful local organisation alongside the work of the party at a national scale. Indeed, winning elections demands that political parties have a convincing programme and team for national government while also having effective local ‘machines’ that can turn out the vote at elections (and for more on the range of materials and activities that are assembled by parties during elections see Page & Dittmer, 2015).

At any time a political party will have an uneven distribution of existing members, resources and capacity, and it will need to build support in areas where it has less capacity on the ground.

Furthermore, the internal division of power within a party, between the national party leadership and the lay membership, or what might be called its internal geography or power-geometry (Massey, 1993), will also play a significant part in shaping the role of the members and local branches in the wider party machine. More than a hundred years ago Robert Michels (1962) [1911] used the case of the German Social Democratic Party (SDP) to argue that the technical requirements of running large political associations like parties and trade unions, would require hierarchical structures, delegated authority and centralised staff, that would lead party leaders to become distant from the members and social groups in whose interests they were supposed to act. He argued that “the technical specialization that inevitably results from all extensive organisation renders necessary which is called expert leadership ... the leaders, who were at first no more than the executive organs of the collective will, soon emancipate themselves from the mass and become independent of its control. Organisation implies the tendency to oligarchy” (1962, [1911] 70).

From this analysis Michels constructed his ‘Iron Law’ that “it is the organisation which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organisation, says oligarchy” ([1911] 1962, 365). Furthermore, the more complex, unstable and hostile the environment in which parties operate, the more they will require elaborate and complex bureaucracies that create a gap between members, activists and the internal elite (Panebianco, 1988, pp. 55–56). In this regard, political parties always have an internal spatial division of labour and power whereby the local members and activists can find themselves in tension with the hierarchy of the party, and vice versa (and for similar tensions in relation to trade union organisation see Voss and Sherman (2000)). The combined effects of an uneven political base and an internal division of power highlight the importance of geography in shaping the life of the political party and ensuring its success. In what follows, we explore the way in which this internal balance of power can change over time as a party seeks to lead nationally as well as retaining and sustaining local members and supporters by looking at the British Labour Party as an example.

3. Researching the British Labour Party’s experiment with community organising, 2010–2015

The research reported in this paper was conducted as part of Scott’s PhD thesis that considered the future of the political party by reflecting on the British Labour Party’s turn to community organising as a response to declining levels of membership, participation and electoral support (Scott, 2016).¹ The thesis sought to use the Labour Party’s experiment with community organising as a window through which to explore whether a political party can proactively build new linkages to civil society and voters as a way of overcoming decline, and the potential importance of geography in doing this work. The research involved a placement working as a community organiser with a new organisation called Movement for Change (M4C) from September 2012 to September 2013. The first three months were on an ESRC-funded secondment and the following nine months involved a part-time contract to continue the work. This experience allowed Scott to be part of the M4C national team of five organisers, to take part in the training provided, to practice organising (and he led the work in Southampton) and to then reflect on the outcomes achieved with the others involved. While working as an organiser, Scott was able to meet the key

¹ Funding from the ESRC (award ES/J500124/1) is gratefully acknowledged.

protagonists involved in the emerging experiment and he conducted formal interviews with 33 people at both national and local scales. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analysed using computer software. The interviews were conducted with the consent of participants and as requested, quotes have been anonymised in the text presented below.

Scott's immersion in the organisation was critical to accessing an initiative that was always controversial (see for example, Hodges, 2011; Marchant, 2011) and it would have been very difficult to get a full picture of developments from the 'outside', not least because the situation was changing so fast. Being embedded in the organisation allowed Scott to conduct an ethnography of the organisation and its activity. He was able to try and 'understanding the world-views and ways of life of actual people from the 'inside', in the contexts of their everyday, lived experiences' (Cook, 2005, p. 167). Scott made notes to document his experiences and reflections and these provided an important resource in writing up the research, as well as in framing the findings. However, these strengths also posed challenges to the research. Being immersed in the organisation made it difficult to stand-back and reflect on what was being done. In being a good community organiser it proved very challenging to take a critical perspective and reflect on what was being done.

Such challenges have been documented by other researchers who have struggled to manage the complicated relationships involved in research that involves full immersion in the activity being researched (Fuller, 1999; Taylor, 2014). While activism and scholarly labour in support of social movements is now often seen as a healthy component of critical research in social and cultural geography today (Castree, 1999; Pickerell & Chatterton, 2006), it is still rather unusual to be employed by the organisation about which the research is being done. There is a stronger tradition of this kind of research in industrial relations, and during the 1980s a number of high-profile books were written on the basis of long periods of factory employment (Burawoy, 1979; Westwood, 1984). It would, of course, have been more straight-forward to conduct the research from the vantage point of the academy but it would have likely proved impossible to secure the level of access that was possible through direct employment.

This paper draws on some of the interviews as well as Scott's ethnographic work to focus on two case studies of local organising activity that were undertaken as part of the PhD research. Following Scott's own observations of the work of the organisation and its strengths and weaknesses, Cardiff (Wales) and Southampton (England) were selected for more in-depth research. The former as it was the most developed of M4C's organising projects, as well as being an area of long-standing strength for the party, and the latter as Scott had direct experience of the work being done, and could document the development of M4C's work in the city from scratch. In what follows, we are presenting Cardiff as a *paradigmatic* case of the emerging community organising reform agenda within the Labour Party and Southampton provides a further exemplification as well as a potential contrast to the work being practised in Cardiff (and we draw from Flyvbjerg, 2001 in making this case). While the aim was not to conduct a 'comparative study', the two cases facilitated an exploration of the way that a set of social practices were being developed and then applied in

different locations. Indeed, the case studies identified the way in which M4C's organising strategy necessarily unfolded in different ways in different locations.² Moreover, as it turned out, the cases highlighted a number of important factors in determining the progress and outcome of M4C's work that wouldn't have been so obvious without the two-case approach. Rather surprisingly, there was no official evaluation of the experiment conducted by M4C or the Labour Party, and as such, the PhD thesis and this paper represent the only publicly available accounts of what was done and the wider implications of the experiment or the future of this and other parties.

4. The Labour Party's experiment with community organising 2010–2015

The British Labour Party was established in 1900 by 65 trade unions, 3 socialist parties and a number of cooperative societies in order to extend their political influence and represent working peoples' interests via legislation and government action in parliament (Pelling, 1954; Williams, 1949). As such, the historic appeal of the party has always been to the organised working class and this group has always been concentrated in particular parts of the country (Martin, Sunley, & Wills, 1996). While the party has also built up support in metropolitan areas due to winning allegiance from social liberals, public sector workers and immigrants, Labour's vote has always been at least partially reliant on its old industrial heartland support (Dorling & Henning, 2015; Johnston & Pattie, 2006).

However, while labour was a rising social movement during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, this is no longer the case (Clark, Lipset, & Rempel, 1993; Crouch, 2004). Since 1979, trade union membership has been in steady decline and in 2014, just 14% of private sector workers belonged to a trade union (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). Moreover, even though the Labour Party managed to appeal well beyond its historic social base in order to win national office between 1997 and 2010, this period of government was not associated with any reversal in the decline of organised labour or the political party (see Fig. 1). Indeed, the reverse was the case as membership of *both* the party and the trade unions continued to fall. Between 1997 and 2010 membership of the Labour Party fell from 405,000 to 167,000 members (and for international examples of similar trends see Cronin, Ross, & Shoch, 2011).

After losing the General Election in 2010, leading party activists began to consider fundamental questions about how the party could continue to play a transformative role in the lives of those citizens and communities it sought to represent, as well as rebuilding its base for future success. A number of leading party activists started to look at the tradition of community organising, first developed in the United States, as a possible way to proceed (Baskerville & Stears, 2010; Glasman, Rutherford, Stears, & White, 2011). In part, this was a response to Barack Obama's much publicised and debated professional background as a community organiser, and his apparent application of organising techniques during his successful presidential campaign in 2008. In addition, however, a number of people had direct experience of working with the organisation Citizens UK (CUK) that seeks to apply community organising in Britain, and which has had striking success in relation to the campaign for a living wage (Wills, 2009; Wills & Linneker, 2014). There were also a handful of constituencies where activists had experimented with more community-oriented approaches to campaigning during the 2010 general election, and they reported having some success in this work. As a result, some Labour Party leaders and activists began to feel that their party could use community organising techniques to rebuild relationships with their members, the public and civil society

² Southampton has had two Labour MPs representing the city for much of the recent past and at the time of writing, the council was still controlled by the Labour Party. However, one of the two parliamentary constituencies (Itchen) was won by the Conservative Party from Labour in May 2015. Although Cardiff is located in an area of strong Labour support – South Wales – the city has a Conservative MP in one of the four constituencies covering the city (Cardiff North) and the Liberal Democrats have also controlled the City Council in the relatively recent past.

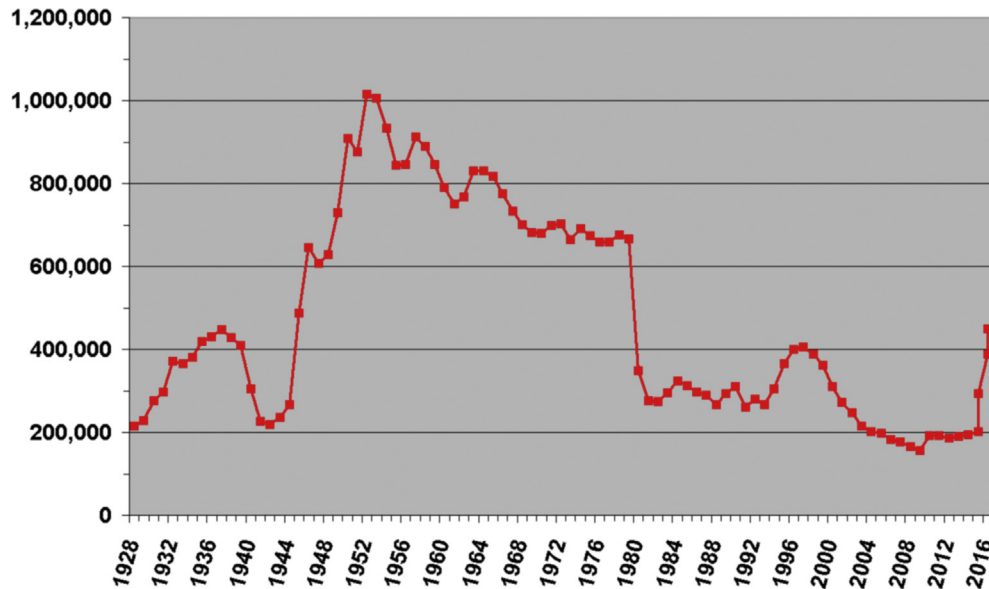


Fig. 1. Labour Party individual membership, excluding affiliated members and supporters, 1928 to June 2016. Source: Official data from the House of Commons.

in order to grow and reconnect with the voters.³

This project was largely initiated by the emergence of a group of thinkers around Maurice Glasman that came to be known as 'Blue Labour' (Davis, 2011; Geary & Pabst, 2015; Glasman et al., 2011). This group argued that the party needed to go back to its roots as a broad-based movement, made up of trade unions, cooperatives, faith groups and migrant communities, founded on the principles of subsidiarity, mutualism and reciprocity (Glasman, 2011). By going 'back to the future', people in the Blue Labour group argued that the party would be able to focus less on the machinery of state in order to create social change. They advocated reinventing the party by rebuilding links with civil society such that the party returned to its roots as more of a movement. To this end, the party was urged to experiment by using the techniques of community organising in order to rebuild the party from the bottom-up. Community organising was seen as a way to unleash the

potential of local party branches to act as vehicles for local political campaigns that would reconnect the party to the public and local civil society organisations through pursuit of local social activism and by achieving genuine change. In some ways, this was about the party trying to recreate the social movement from which it was born, albeit with the perspective that new times required new organising techniques.

These ideas were first tested during the contest to select a new party leader after the General Election defeat in May 2010. The team of people running David Miliband's campaign established a new body called Movement for Change (M4C) as a vehicle for using community organising to support his bid to become the new leader. Miliband's team seconded two experienced organisers from CUK (Jonathan Cox and Sophie Stephens) and trained Labour Party activists in the techniques of community organising to develop new talent in the party by building campaigns around local concerns. The idea was to build the party at the same time as winning support for David's election campaign, providing a way of demonstrating David's vision for the future of the party under his leadership.

Although David Miliband actually lost the leadership campaign to his brother, Ed Miliband, those involved in M4C subsequently decided to continue in their efforts to develop community organising as a means of renewing the Labour Party. In January 2011, three months after the leadership contest, M4C was formally established as an independent organisation that sought to foster community organising in the Labour Party. In addition, the national party, under the leadership of Ed Miliband and advised by Blue Labour's Maurice Glasman, hired Arnie Graf, an experienced community organiser from the USA, to work with the party (Davis, 2011, 2012). While M4C employed up to five organisers who developed activities with party branches in different parts of the country, Arnie Graf was hired to focus on rethinking the culture and practices of the national party. In a somewhat chaotic division of labour, Graf was working through the national structures of the party machine while M4C worked at the grassroots as an independent – but partisan – organisation. Both initiatives were designed to ensure that the party adopted the key insights and techniques of community organising (see Perera, 2013).

Although the Labour Party had won three elections between 1997 and 2010, internal reforms had eroded the power of the

³ Community organising is a tradition of political organisation that has its origins in efforts to organise communities around shared interests at the neighbourhood scale in the city of Chicago, USA, during the 1930s (Harney et al., 2016; Horwitt, 1992; Schutz & Miller, 2015; Wills, 2016). Working under the tutelage of sociologists at the University of Chicago, organisers were sent to work in poor neighbourhoods in order to identify leaders, develop a common agenda for collective organisation (often based on community-led research), and develop the means to realise social reform. The founding meeting of the Back of Yards Neighbourhood Council in 1939 was accompanied by the strap-line 'we the people will control our own destiny' (Horwitt, 1992). The community organiser behind this first broad-based alliance, Saul Alinsky, went on to publish a number of books that helped to promote the approach and its associated techniques (Alinsky, 1941, 1946, 1971; see also, Fisher, 1994; Walls, 2014; Warren, 1998, 2001). This model of organising was only established in the UK in 1989 and it has since evolved into the network of local alliances that operates through Citizens UK (CUK). The UK alliances – in Birmingham, Cardiff, Leeds, London, Nottingham and Milton Keynes – have relied heavily on religious organisations to provide the bulk of the membership but schools, university departments, trade union branches and charities have also engaged. Local campaigns are used as a vehicle to teach civic capacities and skills as well as fostering social relationships in order to shift the local balance of power (Bretherton, 2015; Wills, 2010, 2012, 2016). In line with other forms of broad-based community organising in the USA, CUK uses non-partisan political campaigns as the means to achieve its goals. The most successful campaigns prosecuted in the UK so far have been to support the demand for a living wage, affordable housing and immigrant rights and these have involved targeting politicians from the left and right of the political spectrum (Bunce, 2015).

membership and strengthened the centre (Coates, 2013; Minkin, 2014; Pemberton & Wickham-Jones, 2001; Pugh, 2011; Rawnsley, 2010; Seyd, 1999; Seyd & Whiteley, 2002; Whiteley & Seyd, 1998). Indeed, following their long period of defeat during the 1980s when the Party's left-wing was in the ascendancy, the rising generation of political leaders (most notably Neil Kinnock, John Smith, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair) came to view their activists as something of a liability. Even though the national leadership depended upon party activists to keep the branches functioning, to fill Councillor seats in local town halls and to mobilise voters in the build up to elections, they were also seen as a potentially de-stabilising force within the party and eroding its ability to win. During the 1990s, a series of internal party reforms changed the role of party activists in relation to the election of parliamentary candidates, the party leadership, representatives on the National Executive Committee (NEC) and the policy agenda (by reducing the role of the national conference and creating a policy forum). The national leadership sought to discipline the party with a view to winning political power and as Seyd (1987, 401) notes: “vertical, internal communications between members from the leadership and Headquarters to the member at home replace horizontal communications within areas, regions and constituencies”. The Labour Party altered its internal division of power such that the centre had more power over the local branches with a particular focus on reducing the role of party activists and limiting their ability to disrupt the national agenda.

While this was very effective in securing a national mandate, and keeping the party ‘on message’, it also tended to demobilise the grassroots of the party making it increasingly difficult to maintain local organisation and turnout the vote (Pemberton & Wickham-Jones, 2001; Whiteley & Seyd, 1998). In the wake of electoral defeat in 2010, it was thus no surprise that the leading candidates for the party leadership sought to re-engage party members and rebuild grassroots support for the party. In the period we focus on here, it was David Miliband who pioneered the use of community organising techniques that were later taken up, to at least some extent, by Ed Miliband when he became party leader. Ed also widened and equalised the party franchise to reduce the role of party representatives and incorporate individual trade unionists and supporters (Ferguson, 2014). These reforms helped to provide the ground for the rise of the labour left following Ed Miliband's electoral defeat in 2015 and Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters have similarly argued for a renewed and empowered membership as the way to win in the future.

In advocating for the adoption of community organising techniques in the Labour Party, its supporters were hoping to shift the culture, practices and purposes of the party back towards its roots, and thereby, towards being more like a movement. However, they wanted to do this without losing the ability to win in national elections. As Marc Stears (2011, 70) put it, the Labour Party “must get back into position so that it can fight effectively at the next election and it must be a force for immediate good in Britain today, fighting the Coalition across the country and building new possibilities where it can”. Thus the architects of community organising in the party saw it as a way to boost *both* representative democracy and direct participation. They developed a five-fold rationale for this approach that suggested community organising would: (1) help the party to change its internal culture, to become more relational, and thereby better able to attract and retain members; (2) help the party to become a vehicle for the pursuit of social justice in the locality through running local campaigns that would attract more interest and increase legitimacy; (3) provide the means to develop new leadership in the party, identify talent and teach civic and political skills through local campaigns; (4) feed local experiences into national and local policy making, and ensure that the party became closer to the interests of the people in

relation to their programme for government; and (5) increase their effectiveness in winning elections.

M4C employed up to 5 community organisers who were assigned to work with different local party branches in places to which they were invited to begin organising by local representatives, officials and members. As stated in their vision statement, their aim was to ‘build a movement of people who use the power of community organising to make change happen’ (M4C, 2013). The M4C organisers were trained in the techniques of community organising (initially by people from CUK but later through their own team) and they were expected to run local campaigns that were relevant to local people. This represented a major departure for the Labour Party and it required a leap of faith that such campaigns could strengthen the party as well as bolster its electoral results. M4C activities took place in places as diverse as Cardiff, Brighton, Manchester, Southampton and Walthamstow (London). In each case, the organisers would find local people who were keen to engage in political activity, explore local concerns, and build a campaign team to work around those concerns. Through this work, local campaigns were developed, and some of these subsequently attracted national interest from the party, MPs and the media.

Pitched as an experiment, there was no way of knowing what the outcomes of these local organising initiatives would be. While some people highlighted the complementarity between supporting local campaigns and winning elections, this was less than straightforward in practice. There was an obvious concern that local campaigns might expose the role of the Labour Party in office – particularly in the local town hall – and there was no certainty that the campaigns would translate into additional support for the party. Indeed, as it evolved, it was not clear whether community organising was more about trying to set up local campaigns than it was about trying to (re)build the party. There was also an ongoing question about the relationship between the work being done at the local scale and the work of national leadership team of the party. While M4Cs organisers were tasked with local organising work, this took place in the context of national political debate, media coverage and campaigning that was generally more important in determining national election results. Indeed, after the defeat of the 2015 General Election, M4C was disbanded and a new party leader elected.⁴ While the party has subsequently tried to collate intelligence about why it lost and what might be done about it (Beckett, 2016; Cruddas, 2015; Diamond, 2016; Hunter, 2015; Rutherford, 2015), there is little evidence that the party is reflecting on its experience with community organising in any great depth. In what follows, we report on the work that was done by M4C in Cardiff and Southampton and we use the five-point agenda outlined above to evaluate the activity before rounding off with some broader conclusions.

5. Organising in Cardiff

M4C was active in Cardiff between 2010 and 2015. A number of activities were organised there as part of David Miliband's leadership campaign, and from 2011, at the time of local elections and a constituency by-election, M4C employed an organiser – Stewart Owadally – to build local support for the party. As a result of the

⁴ Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, Jeremy Corbyn has seen a surge in party membership by taking a more radical, left-wing position over political issues (see also Fig. 1). His supporters have set up a grassroots movement called Momentum that works in tandem with the party but holds its own activities and is able to turnout large numbers of people for events and campaigns. This provides a very different approach to the one being reported in the bulk of this paper although both initiatives represent efforts to rebuild the local base of the party and develop a sense of being a movement.

M4C organiser's support for recent electoral activity, increasing numbers of party members came to value community organising techniques as a way to increase local engagement and interest in the work of the party. Indeed, the newly elected MP – Stephen Doughty MP – appreciated the way that M4C could help organise things at 'arms-length' from the official party, and engage people without putting them off. He told Scott that if MPs took too much of a lead in local campaigns, people would think it was just about their self-interest and their need for votes. For Doughty, M4C provided a way to generate political activity without it being too directly associated with the party itself.

Moreover, Doughty argued that taking a different approach might allow the Labour Party to avoid getting into conflict with the community over issues like cuts in the council budget or problems with local services. Rather than the 'traditional' form of political campaign that pitted the community against the council (and therefore the local Labour party), he hoped that M4C would play a positive role by anticipating conflict and finding a way to engage people before the barriers went up. While facilities were often closed at relatively short notice, making it difficult to engage the community in a positive way, he argued that M4C might be able to find a way for the party to work *with* the community rather than being pitched *against* them as is so often the case.

In practice, however, it proved much easier for Owadally to work on new campaigns than to try and intervene in ongoing conflict between the council and the people of Cardiff. He worked with a number of local activists to develop campaigns that were of interest to them and others around them, and the main focus of this became the Home Sweet Home campaign that later became of national importance. This campaign emerged to try and tackle the state of privately rented homes in the city, and it facilitated the engagement of a wide range of people who were in private rented accommodation and then brought the party and local stakeholders (such as Cardiff University Housing Services) together to agree a plan to improve the conditions of the private rented housing market in the city-at-large.

This campaign successfully engaged about 50 people who comprised private tenants, party members and local community leaders and they developed a 'tenant's charter' of standards for local landlords in the city. In line with the practice of community organising, these standards were developed after a series of door-knocking sessions and street-stalls that were used to listen to peoples' concerns as well as identify new people who might get involved. The charter was put to the representatives of the private rented sector at a public event to which the community and local media were invited. For the leading activist in the campaign – Ewan Moor – who had joined the Labour Party in 2011, this experience provided a means for him to work with the organiser to learn new skills and create local change. Rather than simply attending meetings at which party business was reported, he was able to get actively involved. Moreover, the history of the Labour Party in South Wales provided the grounds for some of the new activists to connect to the past. When asked about why he had got involved, Ewan Moor talked about changing the area where he grew up saying, "if people aren't in the labour party, how can we hope to actually improve the area and offer those communities more power and help to rebalance the chronic economic and social problems ... So community organising is not sufficient but it's necessary. It's not going to solve the whole thing but it's a means by which you can make people think that what is happening around them is political". Rather than relying on the local council or the party to act on their behalf as had been done in the past, M4C were trying to support local people to organise themselves to make change.

Indeed, the Home Sweet Home campaign demonstrated that it was possible for M4C to create the space for activity that operated

at arms-length from the Labour Party machine. The campaign provided a vehicle for identifying and developing talent, teaching skills and getting things done. Moreover, it demonstrated the potential complementarity between the political party and community organising; it improved relationships between the local party, local people and key organisations, as well as developing a number of people who went on to play a greater role in the local party machine. However, it also exposed a major tension in the divergent models of political agency being deployed by the party and M4C on the ground. At one of the Home Sweet Home public meetings a local student gave powerful testimony about the problems of renting a home with damp only to be told by the local Labour councillor that the council had new plans to take action over housing concerns. Whereas M4C was about building campaigns to engage people in solving their own problems, many people in the Labour Party had a mission to tell people to vote for them in order to achieve social change on the peoples' behalf. It is easy to see how the distinct organisational culture encouraged by M4C – in which partisan obedience was discouraged in favour of a pragmatic appeal to collaboration across and beyond civil society – could be seen as competing with, rather than complementing, the Labour Party's mission in Cardiff and this was even more evident in the work in Southampton.

6. Organising in Southampton

In Southampton, M4Cs organising activity also focused on building an arms-length campaign, but this time, the focus was on pay day lending with a link to the emergent Sharkstoppers campaign that was also being developed by M4C in other locations. When getting started, in September 2012, Scott was supported by a local MP who recommended people for him to meet. The MP was keen to deploy community organising in order to bring in a new tranche of activists who had the time and energy to support future election campaigns. He also thought it might be a way to reconnect with core labour voters who were increasingly disengaged from the party.

On the ground, however, it soon became clear some local party members were much less convinced about the potential benefits of community organising for the local party machine. A number of leading party members saw the role of the party as being about winning control of the city council and the constituency, rather than organising local people. Moreover, their experience of working with the community comprised rather fraught consultations with the small number of people who always turned up to complain. The mission of the party was in part about insulating itself from the community, and certainly not about mobilising people to campaign for change and/or fostering civic capacity beyond the party itself.

In this context, finding people who might be interested in organising was rather more difficult than might be expected. While the party did have a number of new, younger councillors who had only recently been elected, and who were more open to working with the community, they were often too busy to engage in additional work. However, one of these councillors had expressed an interest in working on financial exclusion as part of his role, and he identified five people who were interested in doing something about money and debt. While none of them had direct experience of pay day loans, they were all keen to support credit unions as an alternative source of finance, and they were willing to organise themselves to get something done.

This group started by using their contacts in the Labour Party to get people to sign a letter that asked the Labour leader of the council to implement a pay roll deduction system that supported a local credit union. In keeping with the aim of leadership

development, Scott encouraged the activists to take the lead in drafting this letter and asking people to sign it. Moreover, once the council had agreed to the plan (to be implemented from May 2013), the group then took on the task of finding out more about the pay day loans industry by spending some time ‘mystery shopping’ at local companies. They also spent time identifying a credit union with which they could collaborate and they subsequently proposed that for every two new savers recruited to the credit union through the payroll deductions scheme, the credit union would offer one additional loan to someone earning less than £15,000 a year who lived in Southampton. By leveraging the power of the council’s payroll budget, they secured the power to improve the situation facing low-income people in the city. True to the spirit of community organising, the team achieved success as a result of their own efforts, and they developed new skills in the process. Moreover, they were challenging the party to do things differently as well as leading a campaign. As two of the activists put it in a blog: “We are challenging ourselves and the labour movement in Southampton to organise their money, to join the credit union, and to make a difference locally. It is only by organising our money that we will have the power necessary to take on the pay day lending industry”.

Although it was a relatively low-level campaign, this activity did receive positive coverage in the local media for the local Labour Party. It also demonstrated the creative power of the group to identify ways to challenge the impact of pay day loans on people living in the city. As such, the campaign provided a glimpse of a different kind of Labour Party and in this respect at least, the party became a vehicle for collective action and getting things done. However, unlike Cardiff where M4C had created a campaign that stretched beyond party members, the campaign in Southampton was focused on people who already belonged. As such, its contribution was to internal party development and capacity building rather than increasing its appeal to a new cohort of people.

This focus on the internal party branch was further reinforced by the work that Arnie Graf did in Southampton during 2013. Graf ran a training session for local party members and he advocated re-focusing the party on relationship-building and local activity. However, while M4C had up to 5 organisers who could work in the field, Graf’s intervention was not backed up with the resources to follow up on the work. When Scott interviewed him in April 2013, he laid out a vision to build capacity to: “campaign on the local issues that people are raising, be in the community, [and] be seen as people who care about the things that people care about” and as such, this chimed exactly with the work that M4C was trying to do. However, as Scott and the other organisers could attest, this was difficult work. It required the input of trained organisers and it needed to be funded and supported; it was unlikely to happen as a result of exhortation alone.

At his first training session in Southampton, held on 26th January 2013, as many as 80 party members attended. Graf asked each member to go out and have a conversation with their neighbours to identify issues around which a campaign might be built, and then communicate their findings back to the wider membership at a follow-up meeting. At the follow-up, a number of issues were identified and people volunteered to start up campaigns, but these were not sustained by the party. There was no capacity to support the organising activity that would be necessary to see this work through to success. Moreover, in some quarters at least, community organising was seen as a ‘fad’ that was being imposed on the party from the national HQ. Without the resources to follow up on Graf’s training sessions, expectations were raised but never realized in practice. There was not the capacity to realise the vision at the heart of the plan.

7. Reckoning with the experiment

Table 1 summarises the extent to which the activity explored in this research realized the goals envisaged by those promoting community organising as a means to renewal. As is evident, M4C enabled new campaigns to be built, and these had positive effects on the people who engaged, on their skills, and their ability to lead. The campaigns to improve the rights of private rental tenants and to provide alternatives to pay day loan companies were both successful in achieving local reform. The media coverage they generated also provided an opportunity to improve the profile of the Labour Party in each locality and they featured in the national policy agenda developed by the party in the build up to the general election in 2015. Although it is impossible to attribute causality to the work of M4C, the party performed very well in this election in Cardiff, winning an additional seat and increasing its share of the vote in another. However, in Southampton, a new candidate just failed to secure the constituency of Itchen, despite retaining Labour’s share of the vote. The research also found mixed evidence about any change in the internal culture of the party, and this was particularly true in Southampton.

Our research thus suggests that the community organising experiment did have some positive benefits for the local party branches but this required financial investment and support for organisers in order to happen. In addition, the local activity was far too limited in scale to impact on the national results of the election in 2015. There were only 5 full time organisers working across the country, and even though Arnie Graf was also working with the national party HQ, this investment and associated activity was not on the scale that would be needed to transform the party-at-large. Moreover, it is not clear how something on a larger scale could ever be sustained without changing the culture of the party itself, and our research suggested that this was the hardest thing to achieve. A

Table 1
Evaluating the impact of the M4C activity researched in Cardiff and Southampton.

Goal	Cardiff	Southampton
Change the internal culture of the party	Partially successful but not complete	No, the activity was marginal to the party
Secure social justice and attract support	Success in organising around private renters and for a new charter of housing standards	Success in organising around pay-day loans and for a credit union
Identify and develop new talent and potential leadership	Yes inside and beyond the party	Yes but only inside the party
Fed ideas into national policy agendas	Yes around housing	Yes around debt and finance
Win the election (data here for 2015)	Yes Cardiff Central gained from Lib Dems with 40% of the vote (swing +11.2%) Cardiff South and Penarth held with 43% of the vote (swing +3.9%) Cardiff West held with 48% of the vote (swing –0.6%)	Mixed Southampton Test held with 41% of the vote (swing +3%) Southampton Itchen narrowly lost to Conservatives, 36.5% of the vote (swing –0.2%)

more coherent multi-scalar and nationally-coordinated approach to organising was envisaged by David Miliband and his advisors when they began the experiment in 2010 but when the path to his leadership did not go according to plan, community organising was developed via M4C and the work of Arnie Graf, both of which became rather marginal to the work of the national party machine in the lead up to the general election in 2015.

8. Concluding comments

This paper has highlighted the ways in which the institutions and activities associated with representative democracy are geographically mediated; citizens are represented on the basis of place; their opportunities to influence the polity are further differentiated by the geographical balance of power within any polity; local society, traditions and culture shape the prospects for different parties albeit that local activism can make a difference to electoral success; and the internal division of power within any party will shape the role of the local membership and their ability to mobilise to turnout the vote. There is a long-standing body of research that has highlighted the extent to which geographical context shapes the political behaviour that is so critical to representation including party membership, turnout rates, local activism and electoral choice (Agnew, 1987, 1996; Books & Prysby, 1991; Johnston & Pattie, 2006). Going forward, however, there are critical questions to be addressed about the ways in which established geographical patterns of behaviour can change and the role of parties in making this change. It is not yet clear if the political parties that dominated the twentieth century will be able to renew themselves for the twenty-first.

In this paper we looked at the way in which the British Labour Party has sought to re-connect with its members, potential members and voters by using the techniques of community organising. In so doing, the party was able to generate new activity and develop new leadership at the local scale, but this was always unlikely to be sustained on the scale required to make a dramatic difference to the fortunes of the party-at-large. While the effort to rebalance the internal power-geometry of the party was about shifting attention to the grassroots, the research highlighted the way in which the party needed a multi-scalar operation to connect local branches and associated activity with the work of the national party leaders and staff at HQ; a difficult thing to achieve.

As such, the research also highlighted the continued relevance of Michels (1962 [1911]) arguments about the process of oligarchization for understanding the internal dynamic of political parties, and the inevitable tensions between the pursuit of political power and the need to retain a genuine role for party members, local organisation and a connection to place. The community organising experiment was developed in response to the erosion of lay involvement, local membership and activism that took place during the years in which the Labour Party was focused on winning control of parliament during the 1990s and 2000s. Community organising represented an attempt to shift the power-geometry of the party back towards its members and from them, to the wider society. However, having taken its members for granted, and undermined their role in the party, it proved very difficult to re-establish lost ground. Moreover, local activity was clearly necessary but not sufficient to winning political power at an election. Shifting the geography of party management and activity is very difficult to do and it requires a coordinated and multi-scalar approach for any success.

Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest in this work.

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