Is the ‘Local Candidate’ Advantage a Myth?

Analysing the Effects of Localism in the 2015 UK General Election

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Introduction

The idea that 'local' candidates have an electoral advantage has become a major part of the political discourse in the UK. While attention to constituency representation was always an inherent part of British culture, the links between Members of Parliament (MPs) and their local constituency often was rather tenuous. Just a few decades ago, some MPs only visited constituencies only a few times a year, if at all (cf. Norton and Wood 1990, p. 197). Starting in the early 1960s, a massive change in the links between MPs and their local constituencies has taken place, with constituency work now making up a very substantial part of the MPs' role (Rush and Giddings 2011). As part of this process, the view of the primary role of MPs as helping their constituents with their personal problems, as a kind of ombudsman, social worker or welfare officer took hold, with MPs of all political colours regarding it as *de rigueur* to aspire to be a 'good constituency man (or woman)'.

In the context of this major cultural change, the perception has become increasingly influential that MPs should not only focus on providing specific aid to their constituents, but that they should also come from the area that they represent. A series of opinion polls revealed that the general public would like their MP to be local, to come from or at least live in the constituency that they were elected to serve (Johnson and Rosenblatt 2007). A YouGov survey carried out in 1999 as part of a research project led by Professor Philip Cowley showed an overwhelming public demand for more MPs to come from the area they represent, outstripping any other candidate characteristic (Cowley 2013). The key questions arising from these findings were succinctly summarised by Sarah Childs and Philip Cowley in their 2011 article about the 'politics of local presence':

'When voters say that they prefer a local candidate, are they telling the truth? What are the electoral benefits of being local? Given that the majority of British voters continue to vote for the party, not the candidate, does it really matter?' (Childs and Cowley 2011, p. 15)

A number of recent empirical studies have suggested that it actually does matter to voters if the candidate lives locally. Voters living closer to candidates have been shown to be more likely to vote for the candidate (Arzheimer and Evans 2012). And experimental research shows that local candidates were shown to have a major advantage, outstripping the effect of any other candidate trait (Cowley and Campbell 2014). However, the question remains whether the electoral benefits of localism – i.e. increased vote share – actually matters for who is elected? General Elections in the UK are won and lost in a fairly small number of marginal constituencies. Is it really credible that enough voters would base the choice between two candidates that might decide about the character of the next government of the country, and the identity of the next Prime Minister, on the basis of whether one or the other lives in the constituency or not to affect the outcome

The main aim of this paper to examine whether there actually is a 'local candidate' advantage in British politics that matters for electoral outcomes. Do candidates running in marginal constituencies, competing for a seat in the House of Commons, actually receive a sufficient bonus if they are 'local' to help them across the winning line, or is the phenomenon of a 'local candidate' advantage limited to non-competitive contests and thus essentially a political myth with no real importance of who is elected to Parliament?

We are seeking to examine these questions empirically by looking at the candidates who ran in the 2015 General Election, drawing on a range of original data. We test a new argument with respect to localism and electoral outcomes that focuses on perception. Our key analysis focuses on what determines the perception of local residence. Using mediation analysis, we then model the direct and indirect effects of a range of variables that contribute to the perception of localism and their impact on electoral outcomes. Before we present the results of our analysis, we briefly review the empirical evidence on the 'local candidate' advantage in Britain and elsewhere.

The Electoral Effects of Localism: The Record So Far

The literature seeking to test the hypothesis that 'local' candidates have an electoral advantage can be divided according to a number of criteria. First, there are studies that seek to examine local candidate advantage with cross-sectional data on voters, and studies that are based on the characteristics of candidates. Second, existing studies vary a lot in terms of how the 'local' characteristics of candidates are defined and operationalised. Studies of voters often feature a focus on the 'distance' between voter and candidate. Candidate studies usually rely on information on local residence, but often also include features such as place birth or local government experience. The results of these type of studies often are contradictory: studies based on concepts of 'distance' generally confirm a small electoral advantage; the results of candidate studies, on the other hand, tend to be more diverse in terms of a local candidate advantage.

The starting point of academic writing on electoral 'localism' is generally seen in V.O. Key Jr.'s discussion of the 'friends and neighbours' phenomenon in Southern American politics (Key 1949, pp. 37-41). This concept sparked a literature on 'friends and neighbours' voting in US politics, particularly since the 1980s (cf. Tatalovich 1975; Lewis-Beck and Rice 1983; Rice and Macht 1987; Gimpel *et al.* 2018; Meredith 2013). These analyses have generally supported the basic notion of a 'friends and neighbours' effect, that voters are likely to support local candidates regardless of partisan identity, although there are substantial differences in terms of the importance of any such effects across different electoral contexts.

Studies of the electoral effect of the 'friends and neighbors' voting have occasionally also been conducted also outside the USA. Blais *et al.* (2003) provide a sophisticated analysis of local candidate effects in the 2000 federal elections in Canada. The study relies on a preference of voters for a 'local candidate' expressed in a survey which, controlling for party and leader evaluations, made a decisive difference for 5% of Canadian voters. This finding is thus consistent with a positive, if minor, 'local candidate' advantage, but it is not clear to what extent candidates who resided in their constituencies benefited from this effect and whether it actually made a difference for electoral outcomes.

In the Republic of Ireland, a number of studies have shown strong evidence of 'friends and neighbors'. In the Single Transferable Vote (STV) vote system with multi-member constituencies, the larger parties usually fielding more than one candidate per constituency, and thus choosing a combination of candidates that appeal to different communities within the constituencies could be one way to maximise the party vote. The analysis has focused mainly on contextual factors and

changes over time (Górecki and Marsh 2011, 2014). The discussion of any 'localism' effect is thus mainly concerned with phenomena within constituencies rather than between constituencies.

In the UK, electoral studies until recently have not sought to identify a 'local candidate' effect. To a major extent, this reflects the consensus view over many decades that individual candidate traits do not really matter in British elections. This view was consistently expressed in the influential series of British Election studies directed by David Butler (cf. Butler 1952, p. 4; Butler and Kavanagh 1974, p. 201). It was only in the early 2010s that empirical analyses seeking to test the localism thesis were published. The first study followed the 'distance model' pioneered by the 'friends and neighbors' literature and compiled data on the actual distance between candidates and voters. Arzheimer and Evans (2012) could show conclusively that voters living closer to the candidates were more likely to vote for him or her, controlling for party allegiance and other variables potentially impacting on vote choice. One problem with this approach is that some of the effect will essentially be an 'intra-constituency' effect and bear no direct relation to constituency residence. Depending on the geographical distribution of likely voters in the constituency, this evidence might lead to a candidate strategy of optimising the choice of residence within a constituency. Nevertheless, it does imply that candidates living further away from voters are likely to be affected negatively, and thus the 'friends and neighbours' approach would provide some *prima facie* expectations that an analysis based on constituency residence might lead to similar conclusions. However, it remains to be seen whether such a localism effect would actually change outcomes. Arzheimer and Evans (2012, p. 308) consider it 'risky' for outsiders to be chosen as candidates for marginal seats, but their analysis does not allow a conclusion as to whether the small distance effect they detect would actually matter for outcomes. In a second paper Arzheimer and Evans (2014) seek to provide a further test of their distance model and found stronger localism effects than in General Elections.

The balance of evidence from analyses of surveys of voters thus tends to suggest a small but statistically significant localism effect. What are the results of surveys based on candidate data?

Perhaps the first published analysis of 'localism effect' based on candidate traits was provided by John Meisel in his study of the 1957 Federal Elections in Canada. He found that Conservative Party candidates born in the constituency (41%) were more likely to be electorally successful than candidates born elsewhere. For Liberal Party candidates, those born in the province had an electoral advantage over those born in a different province (Meisel 1962, p. 145).

Canada is one country where it has been fairly common to find candidates standing in constituencies despite not having any local connections, as like the UK there is no residency requirement. The share of candidates who do not reside in their constituency appears to be relatively stable over time, ranging from around 25% in the 1988 and 1993, Federal Elections, 31% in the 2000 elections (Massicote and Blais 2003, p. 270.) to 28% in the 2008 Federal Elections (Cross and Young 2015, p. 312). Systematic analyses of the electoral effects of not fielding local but 'parachuted in' candidates are rare, however. Massicote and Blais (2003) distinguish between non-local candidates fielded by minor parties and in constituencies in which the party has no realistic chance of winning, and prominent party candidates such as cabinet members and party leaders, that are 'parachuted in' as the result of elite intervention. While the former tend to do worse in terms of vote share, there is substantial historical evidence that the latter do very well despite not being 'local' candidates.

This finding is confirmed in an analysis of the electoral fortunes of 'star candidates' (Koop and Bittner 2011). They contrast candidates that have been 'appointed' by the party leaders with locally selected candidates and find that 'appointed' candidates achieved a higher level of electoral success (vote share) than locally selected candidates. These findings tend to contradict the notion of a 'localism' advantage.

Turning to another Westminster style electoral system using single member constituencies, Australia, the importance of 'parachuted in' candidates appears to be even weaker. According to a series of candidates studies conducted between 1996 and 2010, 81-83% of major party candidates in General Elections lived in the constituency they contested; in 2001, it was even higher with 93% (McAllister 2015, p. 341). Seeking to explain the impact of various measures of local connections on the share of the vote, the "living in the constituency" variable had a positive effect on vote share in 1996, 2007, and 2010, but a negative effect in 2001 and 2004 – but only the negative effect in 2004 was statistically significant (against expectations) (McAllister 2015, p. 342.) In the Australian case, there thus does not appear to be strong evidence that a significant 'localism' advantage exists.

One of the very few studies that actually have tested the influence of localism on electoral outcomes based on candidate data rather than voters' preferences concerns elections in Estonia. Tavits (2010) analyses the effect of localism in terms of place of birth and local government experience, as proposed as pertinent indicators of 'personal vote-earning attributes' by Shugart et al. (2005, p. 441). Based on data collected on successful and unsuccessful candidates standing in national elections in 2003, she finds that local political experience has an effect on vote share but place of birth has not. Neither variable has an impact on the candidate's success in being elected. A further recent study analysing the impact of localism on electoral success in open-list local elections in Hamburg, Germany, is presented by Jankowski (2016) who finds a very sizeable local candidate advantage helped by clear indications on the ballot paper allowing voters to distinguish local from non-local candidates.

By comparison with other European countries, the UK should provide a very useful case study of the potential electoral risks of not fielding local candidates. Looking at the range of experiences in Europe, a comparative overview of the practise of parties fielding 'parachuted in' candidates revealed the UK as the country with the highest share of non-local candidates, estimated at 35-40% (Pedersen et al. 2007, p 169). However, there appears to have been no systematic study of whether 'local candidates' enjoy an electoral bonus significant enough to make a difference for electoral outcomes.

There is a large British literature on the constituency connections of candidates and MPs. Major studies of candidate selection conducted in the 1960s (Ranney 1965; Rush 1969) analysed the constituency links of candidates as well as party debates about the desirability of choosing a local candidate. Different definitions of what constitutes a 'constituency connection' make it difficult to establish a reliable time series. Most of the evidence available also refers to MPs rather than candidates.

In terms of constituency residence, less than one third of MPs listed a home address within their constituencies between 1959 and 1964 (Norton and Wood 1993, p. 40). Based on the first survey of General Election candidates conducted by Dennis Kavanagh and Richard Rose in 1966, it was reported that 53% of all candidates had a 'constituency connection', defined in terms of the

candidate having been born, resided or worked in the constituency (Kavanagh 1970, p 41, 116). There were differences between parties, with 62% of Liberals, 55% of Labour and 45% of Conservative candidates having constituency connections. Richard S. Katz reports the results of a survey of candidates standing in the 1970 General Election, with 72% of candidates not living in the constituency they were contesting (Katz 1980, p. 97). Katz provides no information on differences between the major parties. Unfortunately, there is no reliable evidence on the constituency residence of General Election candidate for later years.

The only reliable evidence on the historical development of constituency connections of MPs is provided by Michael Rush. Analysing data on constituency connections from 1968 to 1997, Rush found that only through most of the 20th century, less than a third of MPs had 'direct' constituency connections', falling to a quarter in 1979 (Rush 2001, p. 204). However, Rush found a reversal of this trend after 1979 and also major differences between the parties. The share of Conservative MPs with direct constituency connections fell steadily throughout the 20th century, reaching an all-time low of 9.1% in 1997. For Labour, the trend went into exactly the opposite direction, with the share Labour MPs having direct constituency connections rising from 30.7 in 1945 to 56.9% by 1997. Also Liberal / Liberal Democrat MPs displayed an increasing tendency to strong constituency links, increasing from 25% in 1945 to 65.2% in 1997 (Rush 2001, p. 204).

However, the most recent up-date of Rush's analysis, with added data for elections from 2001 to 2015 o, suggests that the move away from localism among the Conservatives has been reversed (see Figure 1).

---- Figure 1 about here ---

The figure quite clearly shows that, while the share of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs with constituency connection has stabilised at a fairly high level, there is major reversal in the trend for Conservative MPs. Since the 1997 General Election, the share of Conservative MPs with constituency connection has steadily increased. Also according to these data, the General Elections of 2015 see a continuing trend towards an increasing importance of localism.

This provides at least indirect evidence that the 'localism' factor appeared to rise in importance over the last 20 years, with either political parties selecting more local candidates or, indeed, local candidates having a greater chance of winning. The belief among candidates and campaigners in the existence of 'local' candidate advantage seems to be strong. The seminal studies by Arzheimer and Evans (2012) and Cowley and Campbell (2014) had some substantial resonance beyond the academic world. Popular accounts were presented in the form of book chapters, magazine articles, and blog entries (Berry 2013, Campbell and Cowley 2013, Evans 2014, Scott 2014). However, while voter studies suggest a 'local candidate' effect, the international literature based on candidate studies reveals some contradictory findings, and there has never been a reliable study comparing different candidates and the influence of their 'localness' on their probability of being elected MPs.

Incumbency, Electoral Marginality, and the Politics of Presence

In search for a deeper understanding of the factors that may determine a 'local candidate advantage' and help us to formulate some testable hypotheses, one area of the literature that is rather well developed and might generate some additional insights is incumbency. In many ways, the discussion about the 'local candidate' advantage has some important parallels with earlier discussions about the effect of incumbency and the so-called 'personal vote'. Until the late 1970s and early 1980s, the dominant view of British politics was that British elections were determined by the fortunes of political parties at national level. While party allegiance based on class and ideology first was thought to be dominant, the arrival of the mass media enhanced the importance of national party leaders and their campaigns. Elections were fought, and won and lost, by leaders and national parties. What happened in individual constituencies was thought to be irrelevant or of marginal importance.

One challenge against this dominant came from a discussion of incumbency effects. Writing about the 1979 General Election, Curtice and Steed (1980) diagnosed an incumbency effect which they thought was due to the ability of the incumbent to reach a higher media visibility and impress voters through constituency services. Incumbent candidates were doing better than challengers and candidates defending a majority in an open seat after the previous MP had retired. Bruce E. Cain and his colleagues analysed the possible sources and impacts of incumbency effects in British politics in some detail. If 'constituency services' were at the heart of this effect, then the public perception of the constituency role of MPs played an important role. Based on interviews with British MPs and a post-election survey in 1979, Cain et al. (1979, 1984, 1987) analysed different attitudes of MPs to the importance of constituency work and the emergence of the aim, virtually universally shared by the late 1970s, of being a 'good constituency man'. Cain (1983) could show that a high level of constituency activity, operationalised as a combined measure of actual constituency related activities undertaken by the incumbent MP (such as the number of surgeries held and the amount of casework undertaken), had a positive effect on the probability of re-election. Cain et al. (1984) extend this analysis and provide an estimate of the actual impact of good constituency work, amounting to a bonus of 1.5 to 2% for Conservatives and 3 to 3.5% to Labour incumbents.

Apart from actual constituency activities, what also matters for the incumbency effect are reputations. Cain et al. (1987) focus on factors predicting a high job rating and general likeness of the candidates. In the UK, frequent surgeries and personal contacts are positively related to reputation (Cain et al. 1987, pp. 151- 161). A positive job rating is directly related to electoral success for incumbent MPs, but actual constituency activity is not (Cain et al. 1987, p. 170).

Although they do not explicitly highlight the element of 'perception', the various models produced by Cain et al (1987) focus strongly on the way voters perceive the constituency efforts of their MPs. Also Norton and Wood (1993, pp. 104-125) include a focus on constituents' perception of MP's work in their analysis, although they do not assess its effect on electoral success. Actual differences in constituency services have also been found to have at best a modest electoral effect, if at all, in other study (Norris *et al* (1992, p. 507), but is it the perceived action, rather than the action actually performed, that is decisive here? We take this focus on perception in studies of incumbency advantage to apply it to an analysis of a 'local candidate' advantage. In terms of 'localism', any

advantage the local candidate might have obviously depends on voters being able to recognise the candidate as the 'local' candidate.

One weakness of the previous work on localism in the UK is that it remains fairly unclear what 'local' actually means. Definitions of 'constituency connections' of MPs included a variety of elements that were often very different from study to study. What leads voters to regard a candidate as the 'local' candidate? The operationalisation of 'localness' generates a number of possible challenges.

In this paper, we take a two-pronged approach. One element that should be part any model of localism is local residence. Does the candidate actually live in the constituency, in a neighbouring constituency, in the general region of the constituency, or further away? However, living in the constituency and being perceived by voters to live in the constituency are two different things. To what extent are voters able to recognise whether a candidate lives in the constituency or not? A localism effect is unlikely to occur if voters do not know about the residency status of candidates. A central focus of the analysis should thus be the link between actual and perceived constituency residency.

As we have discussed above, any local advantage could only be expected to be relevant if voters actually perceive the candidate to live locally. Our first hypothesis is thus about the link between perception and outcomes.

H1 Candidates who are perceived by voters to live in the constituency are more likely to win

In the second part of our analysis, we thus have to explain what determines whether a candidate is perceived as living locally. The initial question is to what extent having a residence in the constituency influences the voters' perception of the candidate's local residence status.

H2. Living in the constituency will have a positive effect on being perceived as being resident in the constituency.

The question of perception also brings us back to the incumbency question in a different way. A high level of visibility is thought to be one of the reasons for the incumbency advantage. Holding regular surgeries was found to be one way to establish this local visibility. From a perception perspective, the incumbent candidate should thus also have an advantage in terms of his/her local credentials. Are incumbents, irrespective of where they actually live, more likely to be perceived as 'local' compared with challengers? If that should be so, and localism is one way of attracting voters, then localism could be one further element of the incumbency advantage.

H3. Incumbent MPs are more likely to be perceived as being resident in the constituency, independent of their actual residence status.

Beyond incumbency, if we assume that a 'local candidate' advantage actually exists, this raises some interesting questions about a possible combination between localism and other candidate characteristics that in the past have been associated with a lower probability of being elected. Among these groups are female, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and black and minority ethnic (BME) candidates. In particular conflicts over Labour All-Women Short Lists have seen local party activists use the notion of a preference for 'local' candidates to oppose such measures. This has led to fears that a greater focus on 'localism' could be used by local elites to

rebuff efforts to increase the number of female candidates, accusing parties of ‘parachuting in’ outsiders (Nugent and Krook 2016, p. 124).

The concept of a ‘localism’ agenda has also been attacked as being inherently disadvantageous to migrant communities (cf. Parvin 2009). With the basic idea of ‘localism’ being focused on giving preference and power to local people, does localism bear within it a potential link to nativist positions? Could ‘localism’ thus be used as a way to exclude people who are not seen to conform to the established identity of ‘local’ people? In this case, we might expect women, LGBT and/or BME candidates to be less likely to be perceived as ‘local candidates’, independent of their actual local residence.

H4. Female, LGBT and BME candidates are less likely to be perceived as living in the constituency, independent of their actual residence status.

On the other hand, there is the possibility that female, LGBT and BME candidates might improve their chances of being elected by becoming ‘local candidates’, for example by moving into the constituency or contesting constituencies with which they have long-standing ties. Some qualitative work in Ireland has shown how election candidates representing immigrant communities used the ‘local candidate’ tag in an effort to overcome any disadvantage as BME candidates (Fanning et al. 2010; O’Boyle 2012). Could we expect such effects of localism mediating barriers based on gender, sexual orientation and ethnic identity also in the UK? As a first step, female, LGBT and BME candidates would have to be perceived as living locally as a precondition to benefit from any local candidate advantage.

With perception part of the equation, there remains the question whether any the factors that might influence perception would have also a direct effect on electoral success. This would indicate that other factors unrelated to perception would have an effect on the probability of being elected.

For incumbency, a direct local effect could be expected as localism might be an important part of any incumbency effect but there may be many other factors that might give an incumbent an advantage. Also for candidates traits such as gender, LGBT and BME status, direct effects could be expected indicating that any positive or negative effect is independent of localism. For constituency residence, on the other hand, there is no theoretical reason to expect an independent effect as localism could only be relevant as long as voters perceive a candidate to be local.

Data

The core variable in our model is voters’ perception of a candidate’s residence status. The source of this data is the British Election Study 2015 (Fieldhouse et al. 2015a) which in the fourth wave of its panel survey, fielded in March 2015, asked the following question: “Thinking about the candidates of the major political parties that are standing in your constituency, do any of them live in the constituency? Voters were invited to say whether the Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat and UKIP candidates lived in the constituency or not. The response categories were “Yes”, “No”, and “Don’t Know”, and we created a dummy variable coding the affirmative response as one and the other two categories as zero.

The sample size from the BES (N=7,869), along with their sampling method, does not produce representative samples at the constituency level. Thus, we need to use other processes to obtain a constituency level metric from this particular question. We rely on the work by Hanretty and Vivyan (2015) and use Multilevel Regression with Poststratification (MrP) to estimate a vector of values containing the proportion of people on every constituency that believed that the candidate of each of the above mentioned parties lived in the local constituency. The process uses a Conditional Autoregressive Model (CAM) to generate a posterior distribution per constituency. We take the posterior median as the value for each candidate in each constituency. We used these values as an operationalisation of the perception that a given candidate is local, measured at the constituency level. The descriptive distribution of this variable shows that proportion goes from 0.01% to 78% depending on the constituency and the party of the candidate. The lowest average is for UKIP, with 6.5%, while the highest is for Conservatives, with 28.5%.

The second important variable concerns the actual residence of candidates. The source of this data is the Statements of Persons Nominated (SOPNs) that are published by Returning Officers after candidates have been validly nominated. SOPNs were published on 9 April 2015. Historically, candidates have been required to state their home address on the nomination paper but since 2010, publication is optional. In 2015, 34.5% of major party candidates decided not to publish their home address. If a candidate makes use of the right not to publish his or her home address, the SOPN will show the name of the constituency in which the candidate resides. This information is also printed on the ballot paper. After collecting this information for all constituencies, mainly from local authority websites, the data was processed to generate data on the constituency in which each candidate claims to reside. For those cases where the addresses were provided, we matched their postcodes to the corresponding Westminster constituency using data from the Office of National Statistics. With that information, we then compared their home constituencies with the constituencies in which they were running. When there is a match, we coded it as 1, otherwise a zero.

Taking the information on the constituency of candidates, we also constructed a more complex variable in which candidates not resident in the constituency were classified according to whether they claimed to reside in the neighbouring constituency, a constituency bordering the neighbouring constituency, a constituency in the region of the constituency contested, or a constituency outside that region.

Data on the sex, BME status, incumbency, political party, and other related variables are drawn from the project Britain's New Political Class: The Changing Socio-Demographic Profile of Candidates and MPs, 1945-2015, funded by the Leverhulme Trust and directed by Jennifer vanHeerde-Hudson and Rosie Campbell.² Data on the LGBT status of candidates is taken from the list of LGBT MPs and candidates published by Professor Andrew Reynolds of the University of North Carolina published in May 2015 (Roberts 2015). We also use electoral data on vote share, marginality, as well constituency data drawn from the 2011 Census as control variables provided by the British Election Study (British Election Study 2015).

² see <http://parliamentarycandidates.org/project/britains-new-political-class/>

In order to control for the campaign intensity, we took advantage of the data collected by the Electoral Commission on campaign spending. In particular, we use the amount of money that candidates spent as a proportion of the legal limit in the short and the long campaign periods. Candidates are legally obliged to provide this information to the Returning Officers at their constituencies which are then reported to the Electoral Commission.

Methodology

Based on the previous literature on the topic, we can expect that localism has a small, yet measurable effect on a candidate's vote share. However, given the constraints of a majoritarian electoral system such as the UK's, only a few candidates can actually obtain a real benefit from being local. That is, only candidates that have a small projected difference in vote share compared to their competitors can actually gain something from being local.

In order to test this particular proposition, we focus our analysis on a particular set of cases. The largest majority overturned in the 2015 General Election was 25.2% in Bath where the Liberal Democrat MP Don Foster retired. Based on this result, we restricted our analysis to constituencies where the difference between the first and second place in 2010 was less than 26 per cent. Within those constituencies, we only look at the candidates coming from the parties that ended in the top two positions in the last elections. In England, in all but one single case, the party winning the seat in 2015 had either been placed first or second in 2010. Excluding this single constituency – Cambridge - where a Labour candidate narrowly placed third in 2010 had won the seat, and concentrated only on contests involving the three major UK parties (Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrats), this left us with 401 constituencies and 802 candidates to analyses. We call these cases the “two-horse races”. By isolating these particular races, we aim to observe if localism does produce a significant effect on those cases where it might actually make a difference.

Unlike previous research, we hypothesise that the relationship between living locally and electoral success is not simply a direct one. Instead, we propose that the potential effect of living locally on electoral success is, in turn, related to the how much voters perceive the candidates to live locally. The particular approach we take that fits this particular framework is mediation analysis. Multiple mediation analyses show the total effects of predictors, decomposed into direct effects and mediated effects (Mackinnon 2008). It also allows for inconsistent mediation (Zhao *et al.* 2010; Hayes 2009; Baron and Kenny 1986) where we may (not) observe direct effects of X on Y, but significant mediation or indirect effects (X on M on Y). For our model here, this means that we may (not) observe direct effects of living in the constituency on the probability of success, but via the mediator – perception of living in the constituency.

Mediation analysis consists in two simultaneous equations. The first one estimates the effect of the key independent variables (i.e. living in the constituency, if the candidate is identified as BME, and whether candidate was born within the constituency or near it) on the mediator, which in this case is the perception of localism. This step is intended to test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. The corresponding equation can be expressed as follows:

$$M = \alpha + \delta_1 x_1 + \delta_2 x_2 + \delta_3 x_3 + \varepsilon_1,$$

where δ_1, δ_2 and δ_3 correspond to the linear coefficients of the independent variables whose effect is mediated by the perception of localism (M). Simultaneously, we estimate the direct effects of those variables by using a logistic regression. In this case, the dependent variable is binary, with 1 if the candidate got elected, and zero otherwise. The regression can be expressed as,

$$\Pr(Y) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\alpha + \beta_1 M_1 + BX + \varepsilon_1)}}$$

where Y is the binary variable measuring if a candidate got elected, β_1 is the coefficient for the effect of the mediator M_1 , and B represents a vector of coefficients for each of the independent variables of our model, including the three independent variable from the first equation and other controls, both at individual and constituency levels. For the three key independent variables that go through mediation, we call those coefficients the Average Direct Effect (ADE). X represents a matrix for each independent variable and the different observations.

In order to distinguish between the Average Mediated Effect (AME), that is, the amount of change in the probability of getting elected that is mediated by the perception of localism, from the ADE of living in the constituency, being born there, and being categorised as BME, we could add the effects from both equations for each variable (i.e. $AME = \delta + \beta$). However, since the two equations have different link functions (one is a linear model and the other logistic), we cannot do that directly. We follow the strategy proposed by Tingley et al. (2014) to estimate the effects using the *mediation* package for R. They propose the transformation of the marginal effects of the logistic coefficients in order to add them to the linear estimates. Furthermore, in order to obtain a confidence interval around our estimates, we rely on pseudo-Bayesian simulations (Imai et al. 2010) with 1,000 simulations per variable.

Finally, as we are interested in the practical interpretation of the coefficients, we estimate the change in the predicted probabilities of getting elected at different levels of the perception variables. We define different profiles according to our theoretical expectations, and then estimate the predicted probabilities at each one of them. In order to account for the statistical significance of the change, we again use pseudo-Bayesian simulations (n=10,000).

Results

How does the perception of local residence relate to actual residence, incumbency status, and sex, LGBT and BME status? In Table 1, we compare the mean perception score for these groups, limited to the 401 most marginal constituencies involving contests between the three major parties. The results mainly go into the expected direction. Candidates who live in the constituency, or in the neighbouring constituency, have a higher share of constituents recognising their residence, although

a majority is not aware of this. The strongest relation is with incumbency. BME, LGBT and female candidate all are seen as less 'local' than others- the difference is particularly strong for BME candidates. Interestingly, BME candidates have a lower perception of being local than non-BME candidates in all residence categories.

--- Table 1 about here ---

We now move on to estimate the simultaneous equations to obtain the different effects mentioned above. Table 2 shows the two models we run. Model 1 estimates the relationship between living in the constituency, BME status, and incumbency. Model 2 is the more complete model that uses a binary outcome variable: getting elected in 2015 or not. As expressed before, we include a set of control variables that are theoretically related to a candidate's probability of getting elected. In particular, we add their party, sex, campaign spending (long and short), the marginality of the constituency, and some key demographics from the 2011 Census (% of white people in the constituency, % of House Owners in the constituency, and % of unemployed residents in the constituency).

---- Table 2 about here ----

Model 1 shows that, according to our expectations in H2 and H3, both living in the constituency and being an incumbent has a positive and significant relationship with being perceived as living locally. Living in the constituency is associated with an average increase in 4.3 points in the proportion of voters that think that the candidate lives locally. Moreover, being an incumbent leads to an average increase of 14 points.

H4, on the other hand, is partially confirmed. As it can be observed, only being a BME candidate has a significant relationship with the perception of living locally. The coefficient is negative and represents a decrease of 4 points. However, being a LGBT candidate does not have a significant relationship with perception. The same happens with the sex of the candidates. We don't observe a significant difference between men and women.

Moving on to the direct effects, we need to look at the results from Model 2. In this case, we also estimated the relationship between the variables from Model 1 and getting elected. We also added relevant control variables at the candidate and constituency levels. We do confirm H1, that is, that controlling for a range of theoretically relevant characteristics, perceptions of living local are in fact associated with the probability that a candidate gets elected.

---- Figure 2 about here ---

As a way to estimate the different effects, Figure 2 shows the ADEs and AMEs for the different independent variables in Model 1. As we can observe, neither BME nor living in the constituency show a direct effect with the probability of getting elected. However, they do seem to have a relationship through their effect on the perception of local residence. The AME for living in the constituency shows a statistically significant marginal change of nearly 4%. In the case of BME, the AME is about -3% in the probability of getting elected.

As we discussed above, incumbents do have an advantage, and it manifests itself both as a direct effect and as a mediated effect through the perception of localism. The AME for incumbents is

around a 15% increase in the probabilities of getting elected, while the ADE is even higher, close to 23%.

--- Figure 3 about here ---

Figure 3 shows the change in predicted probabilities for the perception of local residence variable. In the 2015 UK General Election, most of the incumbent Liberal Democrat MPs lost their seats, which makes a relevant difference from the other two main parties. Therefore, we decided to estimate the change in predicted probabilities for challengers and incumbents in all three parties. This produced 6 different profiles (2 incumbency categories x 3 parties) for which we obtained the predicted probabilities and their corresponding confidence intervals.

As shown, although the change for each profile follows the same direction, there are striking differences between parties, particularly between Liberal Democrats and other parties. Liberal Democrats' starting point is much lower than the other parties, and they only start to benefit from the perception of local residence when they reach over 40% (which is far away from the party average of 23%). Moreover, Liberal Democrat challengers' predicted probabilities do not go above 0.4 at the highest point of the scale, which means that perceptions do not make a difference in terms of their chances of getting elected (i.e. they don't go over 0.5).

Incumbents, on the other hand, receive a bigger benefit of an increase in perception than challengers. This is the same pattern for all parties, with no statistical difference between incumbent Conservatives and Labour candidates, and between Conservative challenger and Labour candidates.

Conclusions

The results presented in this paper could be summarised as follows. First, it is perception of local residency that matters most and not actual residence per se. Second, incumbency helps candidates tremendously in being perceived as local and this may be one of the reasons for an incumbency effect. Thirdly, BME candidates have a problem being perceived as locally resident candidates, adding a further aspect to the explanation why they are doing worse than other candidates.

The results presented built on the previous studies of Arzheimer and Evans (2012) and Cowley and Campbell (2014) in confirming that being 'local' does matter, not just for vote share or choice in experimental settings, but it makes a difference also in marginal constituencies for two-horse races. However, localness matters in perhaps rather more complex ways than had previously been assumed. The key variable, we argue, is perception. Actually living in the constituency has a positive effect on perceptions, but it is dwarfed by the influence of incumbency. Many voters appear to see incumbency as a sign of localness, irrespective of whether the MP actually lives in the constituency or not. Our results thus suggest that this localism effect may actually be an important reason for the electoral advantage that incumbents enjoy.

Nevertheless, there are limits to our study and there are a number of open questions. Perhaps the most important one remains what it actually means to be perceived as the 'local candidate'. We could prove that actual local residence plays a role, but only a minor one. What other aspects of candidates would contribute such a perception? The limitations of our paper are two-fold. First,

we are limited in terms of data on candidate traits. Are candidates born in the constituency, who grew up in the constituency, have family links to the constituency, have served as local councillors in the constituency perceived as local? We need to take into account a larger variety of candidate traits to come closer to an answer of what constitutes a perception as the 'local candidate'.

Furthermore, our analysis was limited by the timing of the question on local residence. The perception variable was measured in March 2015 before the start of the 'hot phase' of the 2015 General Election campaign had started, about 6-8 weeks before the elections in May 2015. This timing would give incumbent candidates an advantage as local constituents are more likely to associate them with the constituency, while knowledge about the local connections of the challenger may be less developed. As we only concentrate on the two top candidates in marginal constituencies, it can be assumed that also the challengers start their campaign quite early. However, it remains that we cannot measure the effect of candidates' efforts to highlight their 'local' character during the election campaign. Further work would need to include measurements of the perception of localness at the time of the election.

Perhaps the most unexpected result was that there is negative correlation between BME status and perception of local residence, irrespective of actual residence. The effects are not very strong, but this may provide a pointer to analysing this connection carefully. It does suggest that a preference for the 'local candidates' may have different connotations than a preference for other groups in society that may be under-represented in parliament. The question thus arises whether an increased focus on localism will have a regressive impact on other efforts to increase the representativeness of parliament.

This links with another argument, placing the rise of localism within the context of the crisis of democracy based on political parties. As Searing (1985) has pointed out, the notion of the role of MPs as attending to the personal concerns of constituents harks back to concepts of parliamentary representation as practised over centuries before the introduction of universal suffrage and advent of modern political parties. The question could thus be asked whether the rise of localism amounts to a return to pre-(party)political forms of representation. In a Parliament dominated by MPs elected as a result of the 'localism' agenda, how important will be those who see themselves as, to use the famous Burkean phrase, as the 'member for Bristol' rather than 'a member of parliament' (Burke 1774). This could be linked to recent results that rebellion against the party line and demonstrations of political independence of party politics enhances an MP's reputation in the eyes of voters (Campbell *et al.* 2016). While it remains to be seen whether such attitudes also have an actual electoral benefit, both localism and rebellion against the party line create the concept of a successful MP grounded in his or her distance from party politics and political representation based on the choice between two or more political parties presenting a programme of government.

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Figure 1: Share of MPs with local constituency connections, 1868-2015³

Source: Professor Michael Rush (University of Exeter). We are most grateful to Professor Rush for making this data available.

³ The figures include both 'direct' and 'area' constituency connections as candidates in both these categories have constituency connections of one sort or another.

Figure 2: Average Mediated (AME), Average Direct (ADE), and Total effects for living in the constituency, incumbency, and BME.

Figure 3: Predicted Probabilities of Success for Incumbents and Challengers in relation to Perception of Constituency Residence Status

Table 1: Perceived constituency residence

	Mean Percentage of Constituents believing the candidate lives locally
Residence Status	
- Lives outside the region	21.6
- Live in region but not close to constituency	21.3
- Lives in a constituency next to a neighbouring constituency	22.7
- Lives in a neighbouring constituency	26.4
- Lives in the constituency	31.7
Incumbent	37.7
BME candidate	22.7
LGBT candidate	27.3
Female candidate	27.1
All candidates	29.3
N	802

Table 2: Results of Mediation Analysis

	Model 1: Mediation	Model 2: Direct Effects
(Intercept)	20.30 ^{***} -0.84	-0.21 -1.48
Lives in constituency	4.28 ^{***} -0.79	0.35 -0.3
BME status	-2.73 [*] -1.36	0.11 -0.47
Incumbent	13.91 ^{***} -0.75	2.93 ^{***} -0.33
LGBT status	-1.26 -1.5	-0.47 0.52
Male	0.57 -0.78	-0.45 -0.27
Public Perception of Constituency Residence Status		0.15 ^{***} -0.02
Labour Party		-0.21 -0.27
Liberal Democrats		-7.97 ^{***} -0.84
Census: HouseOwned		-0.03 [*] -0.02
Census EthnicityWhite		-0.01 -0.01
Census: Unemployed		-0.06 -0.13
Long Campaign spending		0.00 -0.01

Short campaign spending		-0.01
		-0.01
2010 majority 15-20%		0.09
		0.54
2010 majority 10-15%		-0.15
		-0.46
2010 majority 5-10%		-0.64
		-0.46
2010 majority < 5%		-0.43
		-0.47
<hr/>		
R2	0.37	
Adjusted R2	0.37	
AIC	5987.21	443.65
BIC	6020	509.31
Log Likelihood	-2986.606	-204.78
Num. obs.	800	800
*** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05		