TWICEASGOOD

RESEARCHING WOMEN'S PATHWAYS TO POLITICAL POWER

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Examining Women's Experiences on the Campaign Trail: Campaign Ethnographies in English Local Elections 2022 & a Parliamentary By-Election A Pilot Study for TWICEASGOOD

SUMMARY

Local elections are an important feature of the electoral calendar. The provide an opportunity for voters to express preferences for local leaders, to hold incumbent councils and councilors accountable and they can also serve as referendums on the national government. To be a candidate in a local election requires a great deal of commitment, long hours of campaigning, contesting a local party selection process and negotiating often fractious local politics. During the campaign leading up to the 2022 English local elections, we conducted a pilot study for our European Commission funded project on women's political leadership. Our objective was to establish whether quick campaign ethnographies (e.g., shadowing candidates, observing campaign events) was feasible, identify challenges and opportunities and assessing whether candidates would engage with our research. This report summarises our methods and initial key findings. We are grateful to our participants as through their engagement we were able to meet our objectives. Additionally, they also lead us to a deeper understanding of the campaign process which we would not have achieved without their participation.

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The main research theme of the TWICEASGOOD research project it to understand women candidates' experiences of navigating sexism in election campaigns. The five-year project will examine these experiences in depth in the UK, Spain, the Netherlands and Türkiye. During the local elections and a parliamentary by-election in the UK in 2022 we conducted a pilot study using "quick campaign ethnographies". Our objective in the pilot study was to identify opportunities and challenges for employing this participatory method to study the everyday experiences of sexism in election campaigns. Because sexism has structural and relational dimensions, examining how candidates' experiences in everyday campaigning should give a more nuanced understanding of its rhythms and dynamics.

1. Quick Campaign Ethnographies

Ethnographic methods have been deployed infrequently in the study of political elites but have revealed important insights about their behaviours and the processes that shape them in real life settings (Crewe, 2015). There is renewed interest in ethnography for the study of political elites because "[p]revailing methods tell us little about how elites practice politics, including the everyday rituals and routines that constitute political life" (Boswell *et al.*, 2019). Participant observation is widely used as part of the suite of methods available to ethnographers and it is particularly helpful to researchers exploring the experiences of harm, discrimination, abuse and violence in politics. In our participant observation with candidates on the campaign trail, we undertook a number of observational activities: attending public meetings and hustings, shadowing candidates as they canvassed and delivered campaign materials to residents; observing candidates' interactions with members of the public in the street and on the doorstep, as well as their interactions with colleagues, volunteers and staff from their respective political parties. We combined these activities with semi-structured interviews with the candidates (often more than one per candidate), as well as more informal, ethnographic interviews with their team members, local MPs, and on one occasion a local journalist covering events. We also observed the social media output of candidates. Of these complementary methods, here we primarily draw on a combination of in-depth interviews with the shadowing and observation notes we took during both the May 2022 local English elections and one of the two by-elections held in England during June 2022. Typically, we began a relationship with a candidate by emailing them requesting an interview. For those who agreed to this, during the interview we asked if they would be willing to be observed and shadowed for some or all their activities over the course of their campaign. For some candidates, we reversed this process and requested to shadow them first, with an interview arranged for later. Whereas ethnographic studies tend to develop over a lengthy period of time, often years, we refer to these as "quick" ethnographies because they took place over a 2-3 week period of campaigning just prior to the election.

In the pilot study, two different English urban regions were selected for the local elections, one in the Southwest and the other in the Midlands. We choose two urban regions with different racialised compositions in terms of both voters and elected councillors. The Midlands council and its region are both significantly more ethnically diverse than the Southwest region, whose voter and political composition is predominantly white. Thirty-nine candidates were approached from the four key political parties (Labour, Conservative, Green and a local party) across the regions. Of this number, eight candidates accepted our invitation to take part in the research -- two from the Conservatives and six from Labour. Recruitment began in early March 2022, with research carried out up until election

day on 5th May 2022, with some interviews held after this (once candidates had more free time). The focus of the parliamentary election was a rural region of the West of England, to contrast with the urban regions we focussed on in the local elections. Women were standing as candidates across all the major political parties in both sets of elections, either as incumbents or as new candidates.

We used several recruitment approaches prior to and during the English local elections and parliamentary by-election. For the English local elections, we approached incumbent candidates via email first, as the Local Authorities stated which seat was up for election prior to political parties releasing information on who was standing for each seat. By approaching incumbents, we could build some relationships early in the campaign process and ask if they knew who planned to stand in their party for other local seats in the election. This approach was successful in snowball sampling and brought several new candidates to our attention. Once other candidate names were released by the parties, we approached all candidates via email. At times we would email first and ask for an interview, then at the end of the interview ask if the participant would be happy to be shadowing. At other times we reversed this, emailing to ask if we could come out on their campaign trail then asking for an interview once we had met in person at a canvassing event. In the by-election, several candidates did not respond to our requests for interviews or shadowing, so we approached and interviewed a local journalist with a slightly amended interview schedule, to gain their perspective. At every interview, a participant would be asked for other contacts who they thought would be relevant e.g., other candidates, campaign staff etc. This helped to snowball the sample of participants. The candidate's official campaign social media accounts were also observed, although these were only sporadically used by some local candidates to present their campaign activities rather than engage with voters or journalises. In addition, the researchers attended public events both as a recruitment strategy and as an event where observational data was collected.

2. Initial Key Findings & Observations

Our quick campaign ethnographies yielded important insights about how candidates viewed their roles, their everyday experiences and how they explained these experiences. The initial analysis we present here emerged from our observation work as part of the pilot ethnographies. We approached this research by examining the kinds of work women politicians were doing during their campaigns and encountered some of the extra work they were having to do to navigate injustice and inequality in relation to entering into a sphere of work that tends to be dominated by masculine norms. Our initial hypotheses were that women candidates might anticipate negative experiences in some situations and navigate these by finding alternative activities or avoiding the activities all together. However, the picture was more complex. Though it varied across participants, some candidates did opt out of particular activities (e.g., social media campaigning). However, more than making behavioural or scheduling changes, candidates expended mental and emotional work in order to deal with instances of sexism or in spaces or interactions where they were not comfortable. This additional emotional political work is not recognised and is also unevenly distributed among political women according to existing racialised or class-based patterns of inequality and marginality. Below we provide some additional detail on our observations.

- Everyday sexism within political organisations: Relationships with colleagues within their party – and, if they were already an incumbent, then within the wider council structure – was central to their negotiation of inequality and injustice. The everyday experiences highlighted the sometimes fraught interpersonal relations with colleagues which could not then provide the 'safe harbours' of support and encouragement women needed when encountering sexism or racism from voters. Participant observation revealed that candidates, particularly those who had ambitions for moving up the political career ladder, felt frustrated with a lack of

mentoring and the competition for mentors, as well as opaque rules for deciding these mentors. There were examples of both Labour and Conservative candidates being told that it was not 'their time' to stand.

- On the doorstep with voters: Another category of experiences focused on the representational relationships on the campaign trail and how it is shaped by the presence – and, for some, the absence – of sexism, racism and other forms of injustice and inequity. Identifying moments of injustice on the campaign trail was not always straightforward or clear cut. Participants expressed more ambivalent understandings of how sexism or racism shaped their experiences of campaigning. Some altered their routes or campaign activities while others did not. Often in their accounts, candidates would identify voter hostility being a result of a more generalised frustration with politicians or the political landscape. Candidates pointed to this as an explanation of the complexity of the representational relationship, arguing they could not identify voter hostility as sexist or racist as it was frequently entangled with, or overshadowed by, other discourses and practices. Participants instead pointed to how voters would 'vent' or exhibit aggression because of general antipathy towards politics and politicians, or because of frustrations with local and national issues, such as the cost of living. One candidate , for example, thought voter anger was a "*symptom of something deeper [...] a general apathy and angst*

- Very few of our participants had experienced antagonism or harassment via sustained social or traditional media, largely because they were primarily operating at local levels and their social media output, if any, avoided controversial national political conversations, only focussing on publicising local issues or their local activities.

3. Methodological Reflections

In the final section, we consider how some of these observations were afforded via ethnographic methods and reflect on the opportunities and challenges which these methods offered. The participatory nature of the combination of observation, shadowing, and interview methods we used enabled the researchers to go beyond passively witnessing and recording experiences. For future quick campaign ethnographies this raised several considerations.

- Building Trust vs. Maintaining Distance: For several candidates, the relationship with the researcher developed into one more akin to a trusted confidant, such that candidates were able to make use of the relationship to reflect on experiences on the campaign trail. Usually, these spaces of reflection occurred when walking together whilst out canvassing; when the candidate and researcher would hang back from the rest of the group to afford some privacy for the candidate to speak openly about something that had just happened. Occasionally, these conversations were recorded (with the candidates' consent).

- Theory Building and Contested definitions of sexism: We observed that it is important to allow women to articulate their own experiences and for us as researchers to not limit their experiences to the categorical "sexist" or "not sexist". When one candidate was asked about any experiences of sexism, harassment or abuse on the campaign trail, she described being shouted at, but suggested that "*it's possible this might have happened whatever gender I'd been and whatever party I'd been representing*". Similarly, when another candidate was asked the same question, she explained that she had not, but that she would first "*have to be able to identify abuse and I haven't been able to identify it. Perhaps I've been in politics too long, maybe it goes over my head*". A white woman Conservative candidate found the researcher's questions about whether she had encountered sexism on the campaign trail particularly confusing. Looking surprised at the question about whether she adopted any safety measures for campaigning – such as avoiding canvassing at night or going in a group rather than solo – she explained she would only avoid going out late at night if there were certain television programmes on that she wanted to watch. This particular insight was useful

in constructing a question about experiences of sexism for candidate survey that will plan to distribute to all candidates after an election.

- Maintaining Relationships with Candidates: We benefitted greatly from the generosity of our participants. We feel it is beneficial to maintain these relationships to co-produce knowledge about women's political leadership and campaigning. These brief summaries are one way of maintaining contact and we are seeking advice on how to further strengthen our participatory methods.

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