

# “Go back to your student politics”? Momentum, the digital campaign, and what comes next

The dust has barely settled on the 2019 General Election, and the post mortem on the Labour Party’s lowest number of seats since 1935 has well and truly begun. Jeremy Corbyn has focused on the polarising impact of Brexit, and how the offer of a second referendum failed to resonate with Leave supporters. Research from Datapraxis and Opinium suggests that the leadership was partially to blame. Described as “unelectable”, “too old”, and “too far to the left” by voters interviewed by the Financial Times, Corbyn was a dealbreaker for some. Further, this unpopularity was consistently fuelled by the negative media coverage that the Labour Party received in the press.

But what about Momentum, the political activist group founded in the wake of Jeremy Corbyn’s rise to leader of the Labour Party? With 40,000 members, 200,000 supporters, and over 170 local groups, the organisation was described as a significant factor in the surprise result in the 2017 General Election. Momentum built upon this blueprint in 2019, focusing their efforts on three aims: (1) mobilising supporters to canvass in marginal constituencies using My Campaign Map, with access to WhatsApp groups to quickly create networks amongst local campaigners; (2) crowd-funding over £200,000 for micro-targeted adverts on social media, aimed at driving voter registration and youth turnout; (3) sharing memes and video content with an increased focus on personalisation through “Videos By The Many”, where supporters filmed and shared their own personal experiences on key policy issues.

While successful in mobilising supporters on the ground, the canvassing failed to make a difference in key marginals. Now, Momentum is at a crossroads, facing a time of re-definition. Firstly, who will they endorse in the upcoming leadership election for the Labour Party? In interviews Dennis (2019) conducted with members, there was notable frustration for not being consulted on the selection of the candidates backed by Momentum in the National Executive Committee elections in 2018. Supporters, however, were willing to overlook this in the name of a Corbyn-led government. With Corbyn due to step down imminently, the organisation faces a leadership election without him on the ballot paper. This is significant for a group whose very existence is entwined with Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership.

Momentum’s leadership and the National Co-ordinating Group now face a choice on whether to consult supporters, risking division, or make a recommendation and instruct members to lend their support to the preferred candidate, contradicting their commitment to member-driven decision making.

A potential dividing line here is Brexit. In a consultation in November 2018, 82% of members who responded felt that “Brexit will make things

worse” and the majority supported a public vote. With the UK due to leave the EU by January 31, this may seem insignificant. The trade negotiations that follow, however, will see the question of Europe firmly in the minds of the public. As the Labour Party considers how to win back seats lost in Leave-supporting constituencies, Momentum must consider how much of a sticking point this could be when evaluating the likely frontrunners. During the campaign, both Angela Rayner and Rebecca Long-Bailey suggested they could support Leave in a hypothetical second referendum, with a Labour-negotiated deal. This could be problematic for a membership that adopts a pro-Remain position.

Secondly, Momentum needs to consider how it is perceived outside of the Labour Party. During the election night coverage on ITV, former home secretary Alan Johnson described Momentum as a “cult”, stating that its’ members should “go back to your student politics”. Further described as a “cancer” in modern politics by Iain Duncan Smith MP and a “disaster” by Nina Myskow on *Jeremy Vine* on 5, the organisation has been presented as a radical fringe with nefarious intentions in the immediate aftermath of the election. This is not new - in the past Momentum has chosen to lean into this criticism to foster the group’s identity and deepen the connections between supporters.

While this is an effective form of mobilisation, this obfuscates their activism between elections. In Portsmouth, Dennis (2019) found examples of community-focused projects, such as an event commemorating the first anniversary of the 72 people killed in the Grenfell Tower fire. “The Organiser”, a monthly email digest to Momentum supporters, shares similar updates from local groups across the country: debates about the future of social housing in Manchester, training events on local democracy in Liverpool, campaigning against transphobia in Southampton. This is a far cry from the representation in post-election coverage.

Momentum’s latest email to supporters calls for a period of reflection. Looking inwards, the organisation must contemplate if the narrative of “people power” can be realised. Looking outwards, it must consider how it engages with the public, and whether the mobilising benefits of its provocative communication outweigh potential reputational damage.



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