Shy Tories don’t Tweet

Aleksandra Wisniewska  May 12 10:03  18 comments

If on Friday morning, you found yourself tweeting this:

You weren’t the only one.

Everything before the election seemed to be pointing to a Labour lead. Even pollsters got it wrong.

But a network analysis of the Twitter conversations about the general election highlights just how much hype there was around Labour in the run-up to the big day. Marco Ruediger and his colleagues at the department of public policy analysis at the Fundação Getulio Vargas in Rio de Janeiro analysed and visualised millions of tweets during the campaign.

Their results are summarised in these three graphs. It is important to note that the size of clusters does not translate directly into political support for the parties; they illustrate how much attention the twittersphere gave to particular groups at the indicated time.
What do the graphs tell us?

First, that there is no such thing as a ‘Twitter election’. The Conservatives won despite the limited attention they received on Twitter relative to Labour and the SNP. In March and April, they were hardly mentioned separately from UKIP, while in early May Labour and the SNP dwarfed them even more.

Secondly, everyone was fretting about the SNP’s impact on the results. Not only were almost a third of all tweets about the general election in April also about the SNP, throughout those two months tweets about the Scottish Nationalists were only about that party — there were very few overlapping points and links to other parties on the graphs.
Finally, the entire debate – at first chaotic and unfocused in March – crystallised into clear-cut clusters as the vote approached. In early May, Twitter users seemed to concentrate on specific parties rather than engage in a debate about a couple of them at once – you can see how the points stick tighter together on the last graph.

Clearly, it is not enough to ‘win Twitter’ to sweep to victory. We might be overestimating the impact social media have on voters’ political choices, especially intense yet short-lived initiatives like #Milifandom, which made Ed Miliband into (almost) a paragon of geek cool.

Over the past couple of years, social media became yet another battleground in which parties compete for voters’ attention. But Twitter stands a poor chance of ever becoming a credible proxy for an election result, even as the number of its users grows.

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*Tweets used for the analysis were sampled over three days at the beginning of March, April and May. The sample sizes vary between roughly 750,000 and 2mln as the debate intensified in the run-up to the vote on 7th May.*

Tags: Twitter, UK general election

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