

Gender, politics and the tweeted campaign: tweeting about issues during the UK's 2017 General Election campaign

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Abstract

Studies of political news and gender suggest that women and men are interested in different political issues, so we explore the extent to which politicians demonstrate such issue preferences in their tweet content. We captured 82,890 tweets sent by Labour and Conservative politicians during the 2017 British General Election campaign, analysed 38,255 *original* tweets and using an automated content analysis, identified 7,651 tweets which mentioned an issue with a policy focus, eg education, health, transport and so on. We also explored a sub-sample of tweets (210) in some depth in order to better understand content, tone and orientation of tweet content. We suggest that gender and party, both together and separately, and in different ways, exert some influence on which issues politicians choose to tweet about. However, we also suggest that the particular interests of individual politicians play a role in determining the focus of their issue-based tweets.

Key words: *Gender, political party, Twitter, political issues, general election*

Introduction

This article explores the content of women and men politicians' Twitter discourse and focuses on the extent to which gender and party influence tweets about policy issues. There is a global trend which sees politicians incorporating social media elements into their communication repertoires (Bystrom, Banwart, Kaid, & Robertson, 2004), especially during election campaigns (Panagopoulos, 2009). Microblogging sites such as Twitter have provoked a new era of technology-intensive campaigning for politicians and constitute an increasingly popular way for citizens to access political information, complementing more traditional forms of political communication such as party election broadcasts and televised political debates. Social media conversations are now routinely used as source material for journalists and become stories in their own right so that online media platforms now function as a new newsbeat (Broersma & Graham, 2012). The seamless combining of new and old media platforms has produced what Chadwick et al. (2016) and others have described as a 'hybrid' media system.

The upsurge in politicians' use of Twitter has prompted a growing academic interest in exploring the consequences and impact of Twitter for campaigning purposes (Dolezal, 2015) and in particular, to explore its potential for shifting the gender balance in political communication. Any number of studies have demonstrated the tendency of news media to (re)construct politics using traditional frames that are built around the dominance of male actors. Men are not only more visible in political news in general, they are also more likely than women to be sourced in stories focusing on 'masculine' or 'hard' political topics such as the economy and defence, whereas women are more likely to be quoted in stories about 'feminine' or 'soft' topics, such as health or education (Major & Coleman, 2008; Macharia, 2015). This gender-based issue orientation is important because the public often deem 'masculine' topics more important than 'feminine' ones (Meeks & Domke, 2015) and the speakers on those topics to be more politically credible and authoritative. Social media platforms such as Twitter enable women politicians to both have a voice and, potentially, an audience, through which to craft, control and promote their views which is why Twitter provides an interesting vehicle for studying the influence of party and gender on political issue discourse. Most studies of political tweet content focus on aspects such as interactivity and suggest that issue-based tweets are less popular than individual and party campaign tweets (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013). While we not dispute such findings, we suggest that understanding what issues politicians *do* tweet about is interesting, not least because Twitter is at least *perceived* to be a more personal way for politicians to engage with citizens. The issues they choose to tweet about, then, could reveal a personal politics which is different to their party politics, enabling them to present a more authentic political persona. There is a the modest body of work which has explored the salience of politicians' gender in relation to their issue-based tweets, most of which are focused on the US and adopt a more or less exclusively quantitative approach (Evans & Clark, 2015; Just & Crigler, 2014). Our study, on the other hand, considers a British election context and employs a mixed-method approach which combines a quantitative automated content analysis with a qualitative discursive analysis of a sub-sample of tweets.

Context

A key element of the Conservative Party's manifesto for the 2015 General Election campaign was to hold a referendum on whether Britain should remain in the European Union. After their success in that election, the referendum was duly put to the public the following year and 52% of citizens voted to leave, a process now routinely described as 'Brexit'. Once the outcome was announced, David Cameron stepped down as Party Leader, prompting a Leadership election which Theresa May eventually won, unopposed, becoming Prime Minister in July 2016. In 2017, another general election was called, arguably with the hope that the Conservative Party would be returned to Government, giving Theresa May a public mandate to begin Britain's withdrawal from the EU. This 'snap' election (so-called because of its unexpectedness in the middle of the Parliamentary term) is the one which forms the empirical heart of the study on which this article is based. The Conservative Party's campaign focused on May's 'strong and stable' leadership (a phrase which recurred in the discursive analysis of Conservative politicians' tweets and was lampooned in numerous political cartoons published in the left-leaning media), with a promise that she would secure the best Brexit deal for Britain. The Party further promised a free vote on repealing the ban on fox hunting, and supporting the establishment of new grammar schools. The Labour Party focused its campaign on anti-austerity measures such as increasing spending on social and health care and the re-nationalization of key public services (Hobolt, 2017). The Labour Party's manifesto further pledged to abolish university tuition fees, ban zero-hour contracts and raise the minimum wage. All these issues were visible in the tweets of politicians from both parties, to greater and lesser extents, and with different orientations.

Gender and Politics

Gender, party and issues

The focus of our study is on issue-based tweets and we aimed to explore the salience of gender and/or party in the issues which women and men politicians tweet about. Gender issue ownership theory suggests that gender stereotypes frame women and men as competent at dealing with and being interested in different issues (Herrnson, et al., 2003). Congruent with traditional gender roles, women politicians are frequently associated with so-called feminine or 'soft' issues, while men are associated with so-called masculine or 'hard' issues. Though different taxonomies exist in relation to what constitutes 'feminine' and 'masculine' issues, the former usually include social welfare, education, health, poverty and gender-based issues. Topics routinely coded as 'masculine' include defence and law enforcement, national security and the economy, foreign policy, crime and immigration (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993; Brystrom, et al., 2004; Sanbonmatsu & Dolan, 2007; Meeks, 2013). Sanbonmatsu (2002) argues that these apparent preferences are expressions of gender-based traits which associate women and men with inherently different natures and interests. Given that the majority of politicians are men, it could be advantageous for women to project their suitability for political office by demonstrating masculine traits. However, such efforts have not always been effective (and can rarely be sustained if they are merely strategic), as both Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin found to their cost. When they tried being tough, they were deemed

unlikable and when they exhibited female traits, they were deemed incompetent (Jamieson, 1995; McGinley, 2009; Meeks & Domke, 2011). Coupled with normative notions of ‘natural’ preferences and interests is the propensity for parties themselves to replicate those gender scripts in the portfolios given to women. In February 2019, the four women in the 22-strong Cabinet (excluding Theresa May) were the Ministers for Northern Ireland, International Development, Women and Equalities, and Work and Pensions, plus Leader of the House of Lords. The Shadow Cabinet had women in Education, the Environment, Voter Engagement and Youth Affairs, and Mental Health and Social Care. It is thus unsurprising that women politicians are mostly sourced in stories about those issues which generally do not make the front page, further exacerbating the problem of women’s visibility as political actors.

Gender, citizens and issues

If women and men politicians are supposed to be interested in different issues, does the same hold true for citizens? Some theorists have noted what they refer to as the ‘gender gap’ which demonstrates a divergence in ideology, electoral preferences, and public opinion, between women and men (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). In Britain, a ‘gender-generation’ gap has recently been noted, so that the ‘traditional’ gender gap where women were more likely than men to vote Conservative, has been reversed by the baby-boomer generation who are now more likely to vote Labour than men (Campbell, 2004; Norris, 1999). Some research also suggests a gender gap in issue priorities, with women prioritising education and healthcare and men considering the economy as the most important political issue (Campbell, 2004). Another recent study argues that women are generally more supportive of equality, redistribution and state intervention than men (Shorrocks, 2018). There is thus a certain consonance between the issue priorities of women and those of Labour, although generation is also an important feature of the recent political landscape as witnessed by the surge in young women and men who joined and voted for Labour in the last two general elections (Goodfellow, 2017). What this suggests is that gender matters in relation to issues but so does party and generation.

Gender and political issues on Twitter

Recent studies suggest that women politicians are using Twitter as a way to circumvent the media agenda and reach out directly to citizens (Fountaine, 2017; Fountaine, Ross, & Comrie, 2019). Fountaine (2017) undertook a thematic analysis of tweets sent by Nikki Kaye and Jacinda Ardern during New Zealand’s 2014 general election and suggests that they promoted themselves as likable, busy, and relatable politicians. Further, in a comparative qualitative study, Fountaine et al. (2019) examined the tone and substance of tweets sent by women MPs during recent elections (New Zealand, 2014; UK 2015) and found that their tweet focus and issue topics were significantly different to those promoted by the mainstream media during the respective campaigns. Evans, Ovale, and Green (2015) found that women House candidates during the 2012 US election, were more likely than men to tweet on political issues, but no such differences were evident in tweets sent after the election. However, their study focused on volume rather than content and studies

which have looked specifically at issue content have produced mixed results, with some studies finding no difference in issue emphasis (Just & Crigler, 2014; Meeks, 2013) and others finding the exact opposite (Evans & Clark, 2015; Lee & Lim, 2016). Just and Crigler (2014) analysed candidates' use of Twitter and Facebook during the 2012 US Senate races and found that women did not highlight so-called women's issues or focus on different topics, more than men. Notably, all candidates concentrated on the campaign process, such as get out the vote (GOTV) efforts, staged debates, and fundraising, rather than on campaign issues. Another study of the same election scrutinized the Twitter styles of candidates and concluded that women and men do not devote attention to different political issues in their messages (Meeks, 2013). Interestingly, in a follow-up study, Meeks (2017) argued that both women and men politicians focused on 'masculine' issues. On the other hand, Evans and Clark (2015) looked at tweets sent by congressional candidates leading up to the 2012 US House election and found that women candidates discussed more policy issues and placed a heavier focus on 'women's issues' than men. Possible reasons why research findings are so different despite focusing on the same election could be because of differences in methodological approach, differences in how and which tweets were captured, differences in definitions of 'issues', and differences in how tweets were recorded as issue-based. Lee and Lim (2016) also reported gender differences in issue emphasis on Twitter in their comparative study of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaigns. Lee and Lim found that Clinton gave more weight to 'soft' issues such as human rights and LGBT issues, whilst Trump emphasized 'hard' issues, such as border control and tax reforms.

Methodology

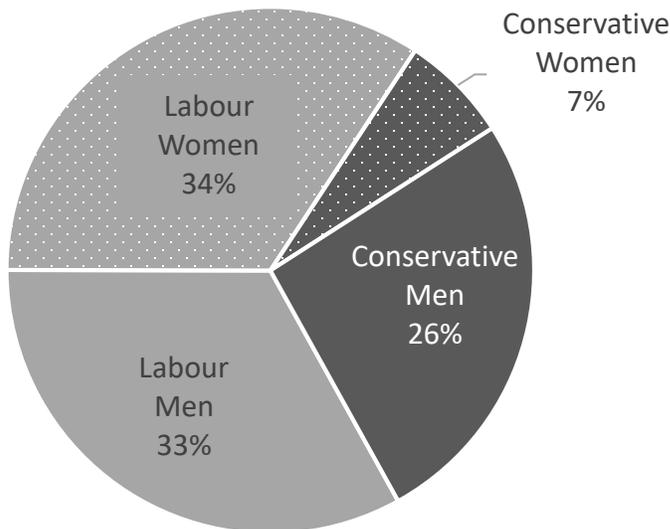
Most of the studies which look at the relationship between gender and twitter are US-based, so our study aimed to explore the British context and thus offer something new to our understanding of the nexus of gender, politics and issue preference. As we see from the literature review, women and men are supposed to be interested in different issues, so our primary aim was to explore the extent to which politicians themselves conform to or challenge such notions through an examination of their issue-focused tweets. We captured all the tweets (82,890 comprising both tweets and retweets) sent by sitting Labour and Conservative politicians with a Twitter account during the weeks running up to the 2017 General Election - between 8 May-8 June – which comprised 96 Labour women, 64 Conservative women, 111 Labour men and 205 Conservative men. We chose this period because it captured the majority of tweets sent during the election campaign, given that the campaign period was extremely short. We decided to focus only on politicians from the two main parties to avoid the potential skew of high-volume tweeting from minor party politicians, an issue identified in other recent studies which only looked at gender differences and did not account for the different population sizes of major and minor parties (author's own, 2018). Two research methods were employed to analyse the data: a quantitative, automated content analysis of the corpus of 38,255 *original* tweets and a qualitative, discursive analysis of a sub-sample of 210 tweets. For the automated content analysis, we constructed a stratified random sample of 4,000 tweets (1,000 from each of our four groups) from the corpus of 38,255 original tweets. The 4,000 tweets were then

manually coded for main topic and 29% were coded as containing some issue-related content. Through this iterative process, we developed a long list of issues (and associated key words) which we then grouped under 12 broad issue categories to enable a comparative analysis: Brexit, economy, education, environment, health, housing, immigration, legal/criminal, transport/infrastructure, war/peace, welfare and gender-related. We then used the list of key words as the basis of an automated content analysis and we also drew a sub-sample of tweets to analyse in more depth. We provide a more elaborated account of our methods in Appendix A. Note: A very small number of issue-related tweets (1%) could not be accommodated within one of our 12 broad issue areas and we did not use their key words in the automated search.

Findings - quantitative analysis

The politicians in our sample sent a total of 38,255 original tweets (LabW:13,095, LabM: 12,658, ConM: 9,956; ConW: 2,546) and 44,635 retweets (LabW: 16,898; LabM: 14,022; ConM: 11,375; ConW: 2,340). **Error! Reference source not found.** shows that Labour politicians’ tweets accounted for around two-thirds of all tweets which were sent during the monitoring period. This reflects other studies which suggest that parties in opposition have to try harder to gain a competitive advantage, than the incumbent party (Gainous & Wagner, 2014).

Figure 1. Share of original tweets sent by Conservative and Labour politicians between 8 May and 8 June 2017



Of the 476 politicians in our sample, 357 (75%) sent at least one tweet or retweet (LabW: 96%; LabM: 92%; ConsW: 69%; ConsM: 58%). This suggests that Labour politicians are more active

than Conservatives, at least during this election campaign, and that more women politicians were active than their male counterparts. As we were primarily interested in how politicians tweet in their own words, the substantive analysis and discussion below is based only on the corpus of 38,255 original tweets sent by Labour and Conservative politicians.

Political issues

Most studies examining politicians’ tweet content during elections suggest that a majority focus on their own campaign, their party’s campaign and the horse-race, with political issues comprising a much more modest proportion of tweets (Evans et al., 2014). Our study is therefore both in line with the extant literature, since it found 20% of tweets included issue commentary on a major policy topic (although 20% is not insignificant), but also extends it by focusing specifically on those tweets which *did* have an issue focus. In order to explore our primary aim of considering the salience of gender and party affiliation in terms of issue preference, we first looked at tweets using the individual *tweet* as the unit of analysis, and then looked at the politicians who tweeted on the issues, using the individual *politician* as the unit of analysis.

Figure 2. Tweets per issue, ordered from largest to smallest in terms of tweet volume

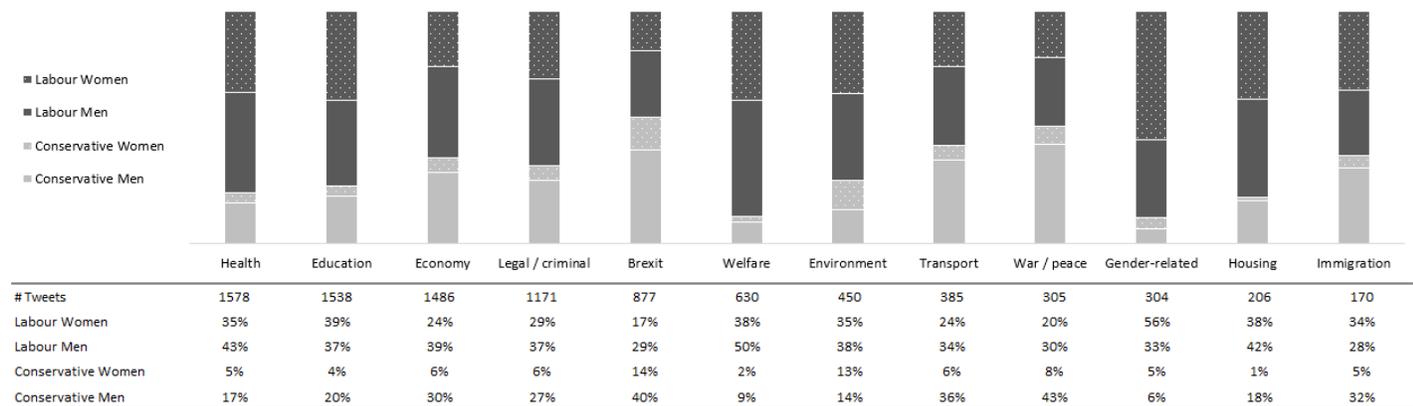


Figure 2 shows the differences in sending issue tweets between women and men and between the two parties. To some extent this reflects the relative proportions of each of the four groups: LabW: 34%; LabM: 33%; ConsM: 26% and ConsW: 7%), but it also reveals something interesting where particular groups are over- or under-represented in relation to their overall presence. For example, Brexit was a more popular topic for Conservative than Labour politicians, and especially for Conservative women, and both were considerably over-represented in the number of tweets on the topic. On the other hand, welfare topics were more popular for Labour than Conservative politicians and especially for Labour men. Traditional notions of so-called hard/masculine and soft/feminine topics have always relied on perception rather than reality, as is clear when we consider the topics on which politicians actually tweet. For example, Figure 2 shows that on a ‘hard’ topic such as immigration, the percentage of tweets by women is 39%, compared with their overall inclusion in the sample (41%), with little party difference. On a ‘soft’ topic such as health, the percentage of

tweets by men is 60% compared with their overall inclusion in the sample (59%) although here, the influence of party is also evident. It is perhaps unsurprising that issues with a gender focus attracted more tweets from women than men but again, party is a qualifying feature, since more tweets on such issues were sent by Labour MPs.

While Figure 2 provides a useful overview of the issue tweet landscape, it aggregates tweets to each of our four groups, but does not differentiate between the individual politicians who constitute the groups and thus cannot reveal if hundreds of tweets were sent by one or two politicians or a few tweets were sent by many politicians. We therefore explored the data at the level of the politician which allows us to look at individual politicians and their tweets. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of individual politicians who tweeted at least once on each issue, thus compensating for the different sizes of each of group as a proportion of the total.

Table 1. Number and percentage of individual politicians tweeting at least once on an issue

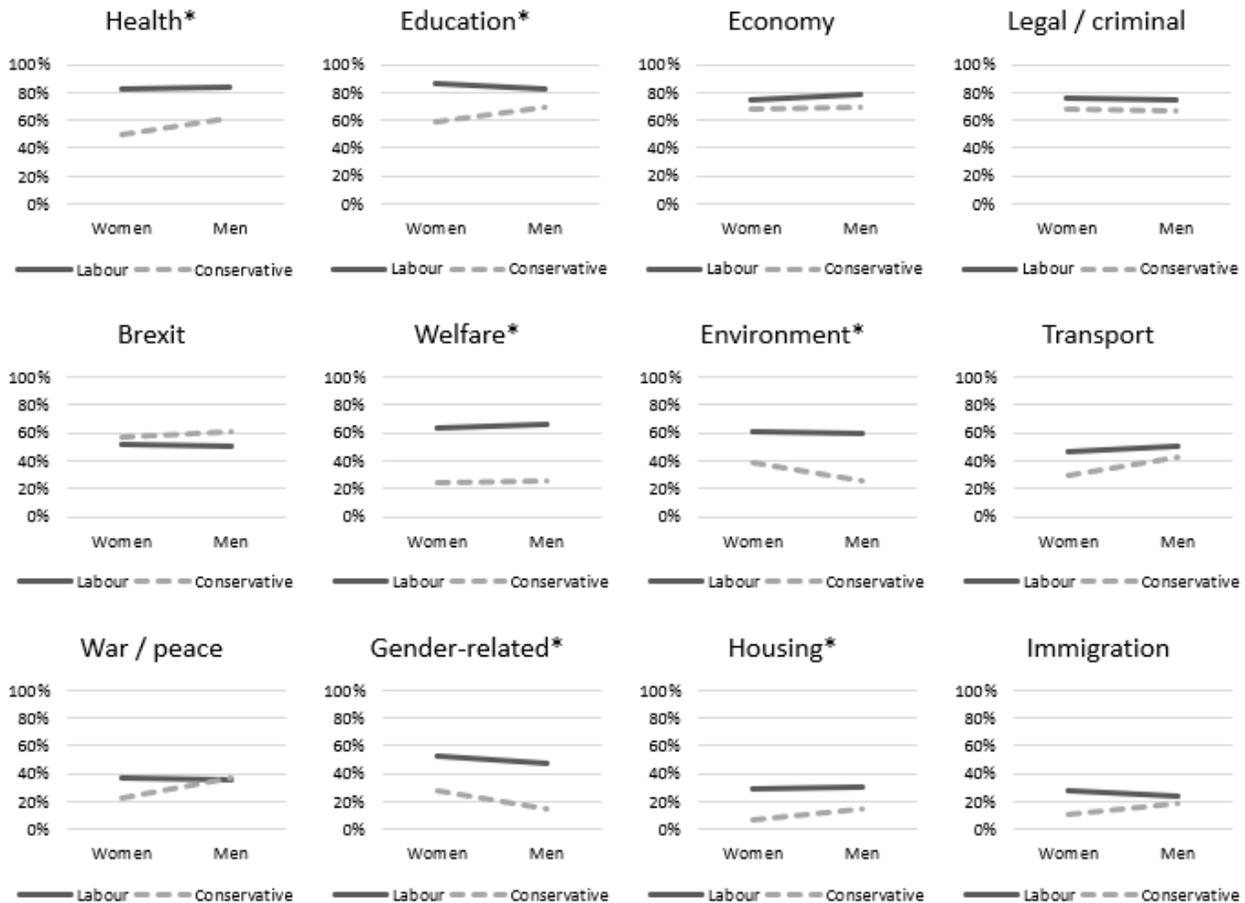
Topic	Labour Women		Labour Men		Conservative Women		Conservative Men		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Health	77	12%	86	12%	22	11%	74	12%	259	12%
Education	79	12%	84	12%	26	13%	82	14%	271	13%
Economy	69	11%	80	11%	30	15%	83	14%	262	12%
Legal / criminal	70	11%	77	11%	30	15%	79	13%	256	12%
Brexit	48	8%	51	7%	25	12%	73	12%	197	9%
Welfare	58	9%	68	10%	11	5%	30	5%	167	8%
Environment	56	9%	62	9%	17	8%	30	5%	165	8%
Transport	43	7%	51	7%	13	6%	51	8%	158	7%
War / peace	34	5%	36	5%	10	5%	44	7%	124	6%
Gender-related	49	8%	49	7%	12	6%	17	3%	127	6%
Housing	27	4%	31	4%	3	1%	18	3%	79	4%
Immigration	26	4%	24	3%	5	2%	22	4%	77	4%
Total	636	100%	699	100%	204	100%	603	100%	2142	100%

Table 1 shows the popularity of topics amongst individual politicians and the top two topics demonstrate a similar level of interest from all groups. While there are small party and gender-focused differences on the majority of topics, Brexit (+Cons) and welfare (+Lab), show the largest differences for both party and gender. There was considerable consistency in topic preference within each party with only the Conservatives showing gender-based differences on gender-related issues and immigration, but the numbers are too small to be meaningful. Looking at topic preference by politician *and* tweet volume together, we do not see patterns of multiple tweeting by a small number of politicians from either party. This suggests that they are all more or less interested in the 12 broad issue topics to the same extent, notwithstanding the two exceptions mentioned. However, there are examples of a disproportionate number of tweets being sent by relatively few politicians on *some* topics which are: gender-related (+LabW), environment (+ConsW), welfare (+LabM) and war/peace (+ConsM). As with our other findings, these variations challenge the literature on gender- and party-based issue preferences and instead show the complex interconnectedness of gender *and* party *and* individual issue interest.

We also used the aggregated data to explore differences in tweet topic between our four groups of politicians. Figure 3 shows the percentage of politicians from each group who tweeted on the topic at least once. A more or less horizontal line shows no or almost no difference between

women and men *within* a party. A descending line shows that women tweeted about a topic more often than their male party colleagues and an upward line shows the opposite. The line that is plotted higher signifies the party for whom the topic is more popular and lines which are not parallel to each other indicate differences in topic frequency between party and gender.

Figure 3. Proportion of politician that sent one or more tweets about a topic per group (gender – party combination)



* denotes a significant difference between the four groups based on Kruskal Wallis test

To determine if differences between the four groups are significant, we performed Kruskal-Wallis tests. By using this non-parametric approach, we look at the rank order of the number of times a politician mentioned a issue, while also taking the skewed distribution of the data into account (most of the time politicians mention a topic only once or twice). The Kruskal-Wallis tests yielded significant results for housing ($H(3) = 17.082, p < .01$), welfare ($H(3) = 69.37, p < .001$), health ($H(3) = 47.314, p < .001$), education ($H(3) = 36.388, p < .001$), environment ($H(3) = 42.241, p < .001$), and gender-related/($H(3) = 52.364, p < .001$). The Kruskal-Wallis tests did not indicate a significant difference between the groups for Brexit ($H(3) = 2.905, p = .407$),

legal/criminal ($H(3) = 7.808, p = .050$), economy ($H(3) = 4.998, p = .172$), war/peace ($H(3) = 2.822, p = 0.42$); immigration ($H(3) = 5.876, p = .118$), or transport ($H(3) = 5.367, p = .147$).

From Figure 3 and the Kruskal-Wallis tests we can conclude that differences in issue preference do seem to be influenced by party and gender, to different degrees and in relation to different issues. However, party seems to have a stronger influence than gender, since the continuous dark line (Labour) is higher than the dotted horizontal line (Conservatives) for 11 of the 12 topics we considered. This suggests that Labour politicians were more likely than Conservative politicians to tweet on *all* the issues we identified with the exception of Brexit and for six issues, there was also a clear gender difference. However, as Figure 3 also shows, gender differences *within* a party were much more discernible for Conservative politicians than Labour and across a range of issues. The only topic where we see a clear gender difference *across* party lines are the ones coded as gender-related and here we find that Labour women (53%) tweet more than Labour men (48%), and Conservative women (27%) tweet much more frequently than Conservative men (14%). However, Labour men still tweet more frequently about gender issues than all Conservative politicians.

Qualitative analysis: drilling down the characters

The quantitative analysis suggested that the frequency with which key issues were discussed on Twitter demonstrated some variation between our four groups, but not necessarily in ways which always reflect the issue preferences which are ascribed to women and men as discussed earlier. In addition, counting things can only show certain aggregated aspects of Twitter behaviour so in order to get a better sense of any differences in terms of tweet focus and orientation, we also undertook a more discursive analysis of a sub-sample of tweets. We generated this sub-sample from the dataset of 4,000 manually-coded tweets which we had used to identify the issue tweets. For this part of the analysis, we selected topics which are considered ‘hard’, ‘soft’ and ‘neutral’ in order to better understand if women and men tweet about these topics with different emphases or nuances, so we looked at tweets about the economy (57), health (73) and the environment (59). We also included tweets which we had coded as gender-related (21), given that this was the issue topic which showed the most variation between our four groups. This selection process generated a sample of 210 tweets which focused on these four issue topics; the remaining eight of our major issue-based tweets generated a sample of 218 tweets which together constituted 10% of the 4,000 manually-coded tweets. This is a considerably smaller percentage of issue-based tweets than we saw in the larger corpus (20%), because we only focused on tweets we had coded as ‘political issue’ tweets as opposed to tweets which contained political issues as part of a wider narrative.

Health

Of the topics we looked at, health-related tweets were the most frequent and unsurprisingly, Labour tweets were more likely to attack the Government’s record on funding the National Health Service (NHS) and supporting vulnerable people, while Conservative tweets identified hospitals which were going to receive funding and promoted their approach to social and mental health support.

Politicians from both parties claimed that their party had the best record on supporting the NHS: *Between 2015 and 2020 we will spend half a trillion pounds on the NHS. I know, I did the Spending Review* (Greg Hands, ConsM, 2 June); *The NHS is one of Labour's proudest achievements. Join us and @JonAshworth on Wednesday to help save it!* (Lou Haigh, LabW, 21 May). The NHS has been a political touchstone of numerous general elections and across mainstream media, both parties once again made set-piece pledges of what they would do for the NHS if they won, for example, this headline from 26 April, "General election 2017: Labour promises pay rises for NHS staff" (accessed 19.2.2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-39711133>). Women politicians from both parties were much more likely than men to mention particular groups of people who would be affected by health and social policies rather than tweeting about policy in the abstract, with Labour politicians stressing the negative and Conservative politicians stressing the positive: *Tory Triple Whammy for pensioners: XNo triple lock XNo winter fuel allowance XPay for social care using your home.* (Kate Hollern, Lab, 19 May); *Thousands of children's operations cancelled each year, NHS figures show via @guardian new govt needed!* (Catherine West, LabW, 6 June); *Our policy means social care will be better funded - so sick/elderly people in social housing should benefit, but do email for more detail* (Helen Whately, Cons, 22 May); *Gr8 re:carers rights news for elderly relatives. Was Dep chair of all party group & met with many to get progress on this-ace news* (Mims Davies, ConsW, 15 May). Such tactical manoeuvrings are scarcely unique to Twitter but demonstrate the ways in which new media platforms serve old political purposes such as using propaganda (see Zamora Medina & Zurutuza Munoz (2014) and highly selective cases which attempt to proxy in individual examples as indicative of a wider policy commitment or lack thereof. Amongst the six politicians who name-checked Theresa May (in 13 tweets), five were Conservative men and one was a Conservative woman: *TM v clear why we cannot continue to duck long term challenge of social care funding, and how our proposals are fairer [sic]* (Jeremy Hunt, ConsM, 29 May), and one Conservative woman mentioned Theresa May's performance in a *Question Time* debate: *#bbcqt TM: Mental Heath [sic] to be given parity with physical health - a top priority for us....* (Andrea Leadsom, ConsW, 2 June). None of the Labour politicians mentioned Jeremy Corbyn although five tweets referenced the health and social care aspects of the Labour Party's manifesto (three women and two men).

Economy

On this topic, politicians from both parties tweeted about the importance of a strong economy and job creation, with, for example, Labour politicians promoting their plans for economic growth and Conservative politicians mentioning their record on employment: *Our industrial strategy is a plan to invest & unlock Britain's potential...* (Chi Onwurah, LabW, 2 June); *Unemployment has fallen to its lowest level in 42 years. Some people ask me about this Government's achievements. That's an achievement* (Chris Pincher, ConsM, 17 May). As with the health-related tweets, attack tweets by Labour politicians focused on people's lives in terms of unemployment and income: *Scotland and the North East – have lost 22 per cent of manufacturing jobs...* (Lyn Brown, LabW, 6 June); *Pretty shocking forecasts from Bank of England with a sharp fall in real wage growth. Terrible for family*

finances (Rachel Reeves, LabW, 11 May) Attack tweets from Conservative MPs were focused on the impact of Labour's tax policies: *PM right to point out that raising taxes will not help those just about managing* (Liz Truss, ConsW, 29 May); *banning zero hours contracts altogether would deny this option to both the 2.8% of employees who use them & employers & put jobs at risk* (Sarah Wollaston, ConsW, 3 June). Similar to the health-related tweets, women politicians from both parties were more likely to show empathy with potential voters by mentioning *people*, whereas men were more likely to talk about taxes or jobs in more *abstract* terms. Interestingly, Labour politicians were keen to respond to historical criticisms that Labour supports employees (the workers) rather than employers (the bosses) through focusing tweets on supporting small businesses in different ways: *I have taken the challenges of Business Rates right to the heart of Government. Labour will invest in businesses and support them to grow* (Rachael Maskell, LabW, 5 June); *...Work with local businesses to attract investment and create jobs* (Frank Field, LabM, 11 May). Conservative politicians were more likely to mention the importance of a strong economy which they had already begun to deliver: *A strong economy under @Conservatives = world-class public services* (Sajid David, ConsM, 29 May). Of all the tweets on the economy, only Conservative men brought the issue down to a local level by mentioning their constituencies: *Having well-skilled, trained & motivated staff is vital for organisations & companies across the Lincoln Constituency* (Karl McCartney, ConsM, 7 June); *I've pursued every opportunity to secure an aviation future for #Manston. It is the best chance to bring jobs & investment to East Kent* (Craig Mackinlay, ConsM, 6 June).

Environment

While tweets about health and the economy were very differently oriented between the parties, all politicians tweeted their support for popular environmental concerns. For example, during the campaign period, the possibility of reversing legislation which banned fox-hunting was mooted and of the 16 politicians who tweeted about the ban (7 Lab, 9 Cons; 11 women, 5 men), all of them were committed to its maintenance: *I have had a number of enquiries about fox hunting. To be clear I am strongly against it. Read my record here* (Andrea Jenkyns, ConsW, 11 May). However, for Labour politicians, they seemed to consider that this issue was potentially a game-changer and mentioned upholding the ban 'if elected': *I was proud to vote for an end to fox hunting with dogs. If reelected I will vote against any attempts to reverse the ban* (David Crausby, LabM, 9 May); *I oppose fox hunting and have pledged to vote against it if I am re-elected* (Barbara Keeley, LabW, 12 May). The political congruence on this particular issue is interesting. We could expect Labour MPs to be staunchly opposed as it is mostly considered to be a past-time of the wealthy, so support for the ban from Conservative MPs could suggest either that only the 'antis' were minded to take a stand or else a more pragmatic strategy intended to chime with popular opinion. This was one of the few issues where there was a clear gender-skew which crossed party lines with twice as many tweets from women as from men, whereas a number of issues were mentioned by all politicians, attempting to demonstrate their enthusiasm and support for global and local environmental issues: *Share if you agree! Climate change is one of the greatest challenges we face...* (Stella Creasy,

LabW, 3 June); *There were no plans for #trees in the station forecourt until I intervened. I will keep fighting for more planting* (Ben Gummer, ConsM, 27 May). Tweets from both parties linked environmental issues with Brexit in both directions while at the same time, supporting their own party's policy: *The Labour Manifesto commits to putting the UK back on track to meet our commitments under the Paris Agreement* (Barry Gardiner, LabM, 16 May); *Grt to have DEFRA SecState @andrealeadsom in #NorthNorfolk to discuss needs of Norfolk in post-Brexit Farming Policy* (George Freeman, ConsM, 30 May). Compared with the health and economy tweets, politicians tweeting on environmental issues were more likely to relate them explicitly to their constituency and also mentioned taking further action if re-elected: *If re-elected as MP for Hammersmith I'll work with @SadiqKhan to tackle poor air quality in London* (Andy Slaughter, LabM, 17 May); *I have fought many battles to protect our green spaces and if re-elected will continue to do so* (Caroline Spelman, ConsW, 1 June).

Gender-related

Tweets coded as gender, sexism or equality-focused were the least popular of the 12 issue topics found in our stratified sample of 4,000 tweets (21 tweets), and showed the greatest variation along both gender and party axes, both in the qualitative analysis here but also in the larger corpus discussed earlier. In terms of specific content, Labour women were particularly concerned with pension disparities and consistently mentioned the WASPI campaign (Women Against State Pension Inequality): *I led the first debate on issues for 1950s-born women like Denise & I have spoken up for them since & will continue to fight for them* (Barbara Keeley, LabW, 1 June); *Amazing to join @WelshLabour colleagues in support of the @WASPI_Campaign @WASPIpledge this afternoon in #CardiffBay – no Tory turned up* (Stephen Doughty, LabM, 26 May). One possible reason for the particular visibility of the WASPI campaign in tweet content could be because the WASPIs organised a national day of local action on 26 May and garnered support from their local MPs. What is a little surprising, however, is that none of the Conservative politicians mentioned this, even though the campaign has cross-party support in Parliament. Other tweets on this topic mentioned violence against women and equality for girls and sexual minorities: *Challenging inequalities for young women! Labour is the party of fairness which is committed to young people!* (Naz Shah, LabW, 3 June); *Attitudes to women and girls promote a culture in which it is ok to trade women like commodities and blame victims* (Lucy Allan, ConsW, 17 May); *Today is #IDAHOBIT #IDAHOBIT2017 - a reminder to stand against hate based on gender or sexual orientation - not just today but every day* (Caroline Dinéage, ConsW, 17 May). No tweets on this issue were captured in the sub-sample from Conservative men.

Discussion

Although the number of tweets we looked at in this part of the analysis is small (210), we believe that their analysis prompts some interesting reflections on the interplay between gender, party and issues, some of which are unsurprising, but others of which are more intriguing. For example, although slightly more Labour (11) than Conservative (8) politicians specifically mentioned their

party in their tweets, Conservative politicians mentioned their Leader in 15 tweets (7 women and 8 men), compared to one mention of the Labour leader by a Labour (woman) politician. In a political context which is increasingly personalized (McAllister, 2007), Labour politicians' reluctance to name their leader as a guiding force stands in stark contrast to the Conservative approach where the word 'strong' was associated with Theresa May and/or her Government in more than half the tweets from Conservative politicians in which she was mentioned. We suggest that possible reasons for the difference in party support for their respective leader is that for the Tories, the election represented the first opportunity for the public to give May their vote of confidence, so MPs were keen to do the same. On the other hand, Jeremy Corbyn had lost a no-confidence vote the year before the election, with 80% of Labour MPs voting against him with a 95% turnout, so his invisibility in Labour posts was unsurprising. Conservative men were more likely than any of the other groups to bring policy issues down to the constituency level but overall, given that politicians might assume that a significant proportion of their followers will be their own constituents, it is surprising that so few of them actually mention their constituents or constituency in their tweets.

While (offline) theories about gender and language are largely polarised between those which suggest gender (as culture) is a basis for difference (eg Tannen, 1990) and those which suggest that context is more relevant (eg Cameron, 2007), there is rather less work on linguistic differences between women and men politicians on social media. What the few extant studies do mostly show, however, is that women are more likely to send attack tweets (Evans et al., 2014; Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018). From our, albeit limited, analysis of issue tweets, we argue that women's discursive style on Twitter tends towards the empathic and men's style tends towards the impersonal. This finds a clear resonance with work undertaken by Park et al. (2016) on the Facebook posts of more than 15,000 citizens, which suggests that women are 'warmer' than men in their messages and that men are more likely to talk about objects and women to talk about people (see also Newman et al. 2008). Both Labour and Conservative women were more likely to use empathic discursive strategies in their tweets, for example, by mentioning people, even if only as groups, such as older people, women, children or unemployed people who are (or would become) the victims or beneficiaries of particular policy decisions, rather than tweeting in the abstract about issues and outcomes. While we can only speculate if women's strategies are pragmatically employed to imply rather than reflect a genuine emotional response, it is still interesting that women seem to be 'doing gender' (following Butler, 1990) through these 'softer' discursive flourishes, either consciously or otherwise, while men are not.

All politicians were keen to distance themselves from policies which they believe to be unpopular with the public such as repealing the ban on fox-hunting and to show support for uncontroversial issues such as combating violence against women and girls. These are relatively easy wins and demonstrate a more nuanced use of Twitter as a means to indicate a personal interest and support for issues which may not always be party political priorities. Such tactics acknowledge the affordances of Twitter as a mechanism for promoting the agentic self, enabling the ethical and authentic human to rise above the noise of party politics. In a related attempt to

subvert expectations, this time of issue orientation, Labour politicians were particularly keen to appear friendly to business and Conservative politicians were keen to promote their support of the NHS. Arguably, these constitute attempts to challenge public perceptions about ‘traditional’ political priorities so as to show that their parties *can* be trusted to deliver across a range of issues, not just those historically associated with the left or the right. Interestingly, given that Twitter is often considered to promote an uncivil and combative style of discourse (Ott, 2017), we saw very few hostile tweets. On the contrary, the opposite tendency was more visible, and even those which could be described as attack tweets were considerably more measured in their choice of terms than the barbs and insults which are routinely traded across the floor of the House during Parliamentary debate.

Overall, we found relatively few examples of gender as a singular determinant of issue orientation, with the exception of tweets which were explicitly gender-related (see also Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018 for a similar conclusion). Instead, we found rather more examples showing the influence of party and especially the dual influence of gender *and* party. As is clear from the quantitative analysis, women and men politicians from both parties often challenged the gender and party stereotypes of expected issue preference by tweeting across a range of topics, not just Labour women tweeting about housing, not just Conservative men tweeting about industry (see also Evans, 2016).

Conclusions

The scale, scope and spread of Twitter and the relative ease of capturing very large sets of data mean that a majority of studies undertaken so far have used quantitative approaches to interrogate tweets and produce findings (Jungherr, 2014). This tendency can also be seen in most of the, albeit still modest, studies which explore the nexus of gender and politics on social media platforms. While counting things can tell us something about frequency and relationships, it cannot tell us about perspective, language or tone. Our mixed-methods approach therefore offers a more nuanced understanding of how the multiple influences of personal preference, party ideology and gender shape the content and style of politicians’ tweets. There are several interesting conclusions to draw from this analysis. Labour politicians are more likely to tweet than Conservative politicians, with Labour women being the most prolific and Conservative men the least, and women tweet more than men. These findings reflect those of many others which show that parties in opposition are more likely to use social media such as Twitter and Facebook, than parties in government (Gainous & Wagner, 2014; Lassen & Brown, 2011). There are several reasons for this including opposition parties needing to try harder to reach more people, being more likely to be tweeting themselves and not relying on their campaign teams, and parties on the left often have a younger demographic who are more comfortable with social media use (Larsson & Kalsnes 2014). Karpf (2012) also suggests that opposition parties are always looking for ways to increase their competitive advantage and are thus more likely to innovate, a process he describes as the innovation incentive for ‘outparties’. Age could also be a factor in women’s more frequent tweeting behaviour or perhaps it is simply that in a context where women politicians find it difficult to leverage mainstream visibility, social media

platforms provide the means through which they finally get to speak. Evans, Ovalle & Green (2016) also suggest that women's minority status in politics also encourages them to use every avenue possible to promote themselves.

Looking at the smaller sample of issue-focused tweets, Labour politicians sent more tweets than Conservatives on the 12 issues we identified, from welfare to immigration to the environment, with the exception of Brexit. However, if we look at issue tweet volume, we see that some topics are more popular among certain groups, where the percentage of tweets exceeded the relative proportion of a particular group of politicians in the sample. For example, Conservative women were considerably over-represented in tweets on Brexit and the environment; Labour women were slightly over-represented in tweets about education, housing and welfare and considerably over-represented in tweets about gender/sexism; Labour men were over-represented in tweets about health, housing and welfare; and Conservative men were over-represented in tweets about Brexit, war/peace, transport and immigration. Looking at gender differences, Labour politicians were much more similar in their issue topic preferences, both in terms of tweet volume and between individual politicians but there was considerably more variance between Conservative women and men. The only topic where we found a clear gender difference *across* party lines was on gender-related issues. When we went beyond counting things and drilled down to explore the tone and orientation of individual tweets in the qualitative analysis, we found party and gender differences. These differences were often in terms of emphasis and support which was unsurprising at the party level but women and men also frame issues differently, with women more likely to bring an empathic element into play in terms of policy impact and men more likely to tweet about issues in the abstract.

Issue ownership theory suggests that women and left-wing politicians are perceived as more interested in, and competent dealing with, so-called 'feminine' or 'soft' issues, whereas men and conservative politicians are considered to better understand 'masculine' or 'hard' issues: news media perpetuate and reinforce these alleged interests through their representation of gender and party politics (Hayes, 2008; Major & Coleman, 2008). In addition, some research suggests that women politicians can gain a strategic advantage when they promote issues which are seen as 'appropriate' for their gender (for example, Herrnson, et al., 2003), although the opposite is also true as witnessed by both the public and the media response to Hillary Clinton's efforts to act tough. More recent scholarship has nuanced those assumptions and show that while some issues are more frequently mentioned by one or other gender or by parties on the left or the right, this does not mean that they focus *only* on those issues (Evans, 2016). Indeed, in our analysis we did not find that issue preferences were quite so gender-specific as some theorists argue and we suggest instead that not only are gender and party influential in different ways, both together and separately, but that politicians use Twitter to demonstrate their personal interests in and support for particular issues. We suggest that this extends our understanding of personalisation theory in relation to Twitter behaviour, where issue interest should be considered as a relevant feature of a politician's representational claim for authenticity. Analysing the data at the level of the politician as well as the tweet has allowed us to make this more granular analysis which highlights the differential

influences of the personal and the ideological, on the political. Our findings therefore challenge the orthodoxies of gender-based issue preference as mooted by mainstream media. Left to their devices to promote their own political interests, women and men politicians show an interest in a range of issues. Like many others, our study focused on Twitter and elections in a particular national context, so future studies which investigate gender and party influences on tweeting behaviour in other nations, or during non-election environments (*pace* Evans et al., 2016) could provide interesting comparative data.

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Appendix A – Methods and limitations

Methods

We used a combination of the online tool IfThisThenThat (IFTTT) and Google Docs to gather the tweets in real time. IFTTT is a free web-based service that enables users to create chains of conditional statements, called applets, to connect numerous services. An applet is triggered by changes occurring within other web services, in this case when a politician of our sample sends a tweet. Firstly, the account names of all politicians were identified and checked. We then created search queries for the politicians' accounts and each query was entered into the IFTTT applet called 'New tweet from search'. The trigger fired every time a new tweet matched the search query (when one of our politicians sent a tweet). A single row was then automatically added to the Google worksheet. Each row contained the username, the tweet text, a link to the tweet and a time stamp. We turned the applets on at midnight on 7 May 2017 and turned them off just after midnight on 8 June, 2017.

A manual check was conducted to ensure that all tweets from the selected politicians were collected by taking a stratified, random sample of 40 politicians (10 from each of our four groups, LabW; LabM; ConsM; ConsW), and comparing their original tweets as displayed on their Twitter page during our selected timeframe with the tweets in the dataset. The two sources matched completely, which suggested that all tweets from our sample of politicians during the time had indeed been gathered. This resulted in a corpus of 82,890 tweets (29,993 from Labour women; 26,680 from Labour men; 21,331 from Conservative men; and 4,886 from Conservative women). We filtered out all retweets (44,635) and focused our analysis on the 38,255 original tweets. Two research methods were employed to analyse the data: a quantitative, automated content analysis of the corpus of 38,255 tweets and a qualitative, discursive analysis of a sub-sample of 210 tweets. For the automated content analysis, we first constructed a stratified random sample of 4,000 tweets (1,000 from each of our four groups) from the corpus of 38,255 original tweets. The 4,000 tweets were then manually coded for main topic and 29% were coded as 'issue' tweets. We then aggregated the numerous individual issues identified into 12 broad issue categories: Brexit, Economy, Education, Environment, Health, Housing, Immigration, Legal/Criminal, Transport/Infrastructure, War/Peace, Welfare and Gender-related. Appendix B provides a breakdown of the 12 issue topics and their constituent keywords. A very small number (1%) of 'issue' tweets could not be accommodated within one of the 12 broad policy areas and they therefore constitute a 'miscellaneous' category and topics in this category included mobile phone coverage, supporting the music industry, protecting rural crafts and postal charges. To check that the automated assignment of tweets to topic areas had an acceptable tolerance of accuracy, we then double-checked 100 randomly-selected tweets to ensure that the tweets were both accurately assigned but also actually focused on the issue. In the vast majority of cases, they were accurately and appropriately coded, giving us confidence that our approach was legitimate.

Limitations

No study is without its limitations and we acknowledge them here. With the exception of politicians' live performance, the authenticity of anything that is written under the hand of a politician is always open to question. Most politicians tweet in the first person to *imply* authorship while a very few, like Barack Obama, make it very clear that tweets signed with their initials are their personal messages and the rest come from their campaign office. In our study, tweets *felt* personal and the discursive style seemed genuine but we cannot say with complete certainty that the tweets were keyed by the politicians themselves (see also Zamora Medina & Zurutuza Muñoz, 2014; Adams and McCorkindale, 2013). In addition, the process of coding and then allocating tweets based on their major topic issue was a subjective one, although an intercoder reliability of 95% on a sample of tweets suggests that this was a rigorous and reliable approach. Appendix B lists a large number of key words associated with each of our 12 issue topics which ran the risk of identifying tweets which included only a passing or incidental reference to a topic. However, our random checking process gives us confidence that the approach we took was rigorous and within an acceptable margin of error. We also assume that any incorrectly identified tweets were distributed randomly across our 12 topic areas and therefore do not undermine our analysis or the conclusions we draw therefrom: the same observation applies to tweets that were not identified as issue-related but should have been. Lastly, although the number of tweets (210) we subjected to in-depth analysis was relatively modest, our inclusion of these data and their analysis is to elaborate upon and help to better understand the findings from the quantitative analysis and should thus be seen as illustrative rather than conclusive.

Appendix B - List of search words for 12 issue topics

Brexit: bad deal, bargaining chips, brexit, brexiteers, customs union, customsunion, divorce bill, eu, eu membership, eu referendum, great repeal bill, leave campaign, leave vote, negotiat, no deal, nodeal, remain campaign, remainers, remainiac, remain vote, remoan, remoaners, single market, singlemarket, vote leave, vote remain and withdrawal from eu

Legal/Criminal: child sexual exploitation, crime, drug, human traffic, humantrafficking, illegal, justice, law and order, legal system, modern slavery, modernslavery, moped, police, police cuts, policing, prisons, protectors, safety, secure, security, shoplifting, theft and apprentices

Economy: apprenticeships, budget, business, capital gains, corporat, economy, employment, gdp, income, industrial strategy, industrialstrategy, jobs, national debt, national insurance, productivity, sme, tax, taxes, vat , wage, workers, zero hours,

Education: academies, academy, curriculum, education, exams, free breakfast, free lunch, free school meals, grammar school, maintenance allowance, maintenance grants, pupil, school, student, teacher, teaching, t level, uni and univers

Environment: animal, badger cull, clean air act, climate, climate change, climatechange, electric cars, emission, environment, fly tip, fox hunting, foxhunting, frack, green space, hunting act, huntingact, ivory, keep the ban, keeptheban, litter, littering, paris agreement, parisagreement, plastic waste, pollution, recyclable packaging, recycling and runway

War/peace: armed forces, armedforces, arms sales, army, commonwealth, defence, foreign aid, foreign policy, free trade, g20, g7, good friday agreement, goodfridayagreement, homes for heroes, international aid, military, nato, nuclear deterrent, nuclear weapon, oda, overseas aid, overseas development aid, trade deal, trident, un and wto

Health: a&e, alzheimer, care at home, care bills, dementia, doctor, health, health care, health visitor, home care, hospital, medic, mental health, nhs, nurse, operation, patient, prescriptions, primary care, rcn, social care, social care, waiting list and x ray x-ray

Housing: affordable homes, council flats, council homes, council hous, home ownership, house building, housing, property ladder, rent, right to buy, righttobuy, social housing,

Immigration: asylum, border control, border police, calais, deportation, detention centre, freedom of movement, home office, migration, refugee and visa

Transport/Infrastructure: a1, a27, airport, airway, congestion, cycling policy, fuel tax, heathrow, high speed link, highway, infrastructure, link rd, link road, logistic, parking charges, railway, road repairs, speed limit, traffic jam, tolls, train and transport

Welfare: austerity, bedroom tax, benefits, breathing space, breathingspace, carer s allowance, child benefit, council tax benefit, disability living allowance, free bus pass, fuel allowance, homeless, housing benefit, incapacity benefit, income support, job centre, jobseeker's allowance, low income benefit, pension, pension age, personal allowance, poverty, rip off britain / rip-off britain, scroungers, support allowance, uc, universal credit, welfare and winter fuel

Gender/Sexism: Women 1950s born women, abortion, domestic violence, equality act, equal pay, feminist, forced marriage, gender, maternity, metoo, my pledge her choice, mypledgeherchoice,

patriarch, period poverty, rape, right to choose, righttochoose, safe at home, safeathome, sexist, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual violence, shared parental leave, tampons, transgender, trustallwomen and waspi